

Constructing Identity in Higher Education Prospectuses. Approach to the Rhetoric of *Excellence*

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Abstract

Taking a discursive approach to prospectuses of higher education institutions, this paper explores the way identity is constructed in this type of discourse envisaged as an instance of promotional discourse that displays a carefully weighed self-promotion strategy meant to build an image of academic excellence and professionalism for the institution. The study details the characteristics of this discourse genre using data from French, British, and American prospectuses. The findings shed light on the interactional, and argumentative devices which count as identity-building strategies meant to create and ensure the reception of the image intended by the institution. Means of referring, devices used to outline worth against competitors and argumentative practices employed to promote prestige and value of the institution are investigated.

Key words: *promotional discourse, prospectuses, identity, interactional devices, argumentative devices*

Introduction

In recent years, under the effect of globalisation, the higher education system has undergone a massive process of marketisation resulting into the adoption and implementation of strategies and policies based on competitiveness and competition. As a consequence, as Drori, Delmestri and Oberg (2013: 149) point out, higher education institutions mimic the promotional behaviour of companies to an unprecedented degree, as a result of the redefinition of the social role of the university and of higher education: universities are currently defined as organizations and higher education is defined as a product or commodity (Drori, Delmestri and Oberg 2013: 137). Functioning therefore according to the same fundamental marketing principles, higher education institutions will seek to promote their image and build up their reputation so as to enhance customers'

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confidence in the quality of the products and services advertised and to increase sales. Except that, in the case of higher education institutions, increasing sales revolves around “increasing knowledge for knowledge’s sake” (2013: 149).

The marketisation process referred to above implies, among other things, the emergence of corporational communication practice that basically aims at promoting products and modifying consumers’ dispositions and, consequently, behaviour. In other words, as Gaspard (2013: 54) states, communication in the higher education system has lately involved, besides the university personnel and current students (internal communication), the prospective students and their parents, the external partners, stakeholders, the alumni (external communication), which has contributed to branding the institution and enhancing its visibility. Therefore, the higher education discourse that used to address the few initiated ones has been lately meant to reach the wider public especially through the internet-related advertising means (Gaspard 2013: 54). In this context, building the identity of the higher education institution and preserving its profile on the market against competitors is a priority and, in this respect, universities are engaged in promotional campaigns including releasing personalized prints (brochures, flyers, leaflets, posters, roller ups, etc.), audio and video commercials, participation in university fairs, organisation of university open days. In the promotional process, discourse is a means to an end. Imbued with rhetorical strategies, the discourse that speaks about the university has a central role in the process of building identity.

1. The concept of identity

Starting from Ron Scollon’s statement, according to which in discourse you are expected to be the person you present yourself to be (1996: 2), the present paper includes an analysis of the discourse strategies used in constructing identity in university prospectuses. The concept of identity is referred to here as an organisational concept. In the theory of the organisation, identity is viewed as the sum of those features of the organisation that are purposefully employed to project and portray the organization in a specific (desired) manner to various stakeholders, predominantly through planned and persuasive visual means (Van Tonder 2006: 13). In fewer words, albeit resuming the same idea, Bendixen and Abratt (2007: 69) consider that corporate identity can be defined as the way

in which a company makes itself known to the world. Identity appears therefore to refer to the entirety of the corporation's attributes, which are, according to Balmer and Wilson (1998), rooted in the behaviour of the corporation. For Stuart Albert and David Whetten (2003: 80), the attributes encapsulated in the notion of identity pertain to three categories: the claimed central character, the claimed distinctiveness, and the claimed temporal continuity. Therefore, the core central features of the corporation, the ones that offer distinctiveness as well as those ensuring continuity make up the entity that the corporation puts forward on the market.

Corporational identity is also viewed as a continuously evolving process taking place in concrete and specific interactional occasions (de Fina, Schiffrin and Bamberg 2006: 2). In the same way, Hall (1994: 392) considers that identity is not an "already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent", but should be thought of as "a production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation". Korver and van Ruler (2003) identify three most relevant indicators of identity, namely behaviour, communication and symbols. This emphasizes De Fina, Schiffrin and Bamberg's view referred to above since interaction arches behaviour, communication and symbols: the behaviour of the corporation may be seen as a form of communication with the public, and communication, either verbal or visual, is basic for interaction. The corporation's interactions may involve owners, shareholders, employees, partners, suppliers, customers, competitors. For each of them, the corporation projects a different image of itself since the context of interaction is different every time. This plurality is consistent with the concept of human multiple identity: an individual may have a different professional, cultural, ethnic, sexual identity and in different interactional contexts he/she will "put on" the suitable one.

In the context of the marketisation of higher education, university identity may be therefore assimilated to an organisational concept shaped within interactional contexts. In this paper, the higher education promotional communication, more precisely the university prospectuses, will be placed under the lens. Playing a central role in institution marketing, these prints are paramount to the shaping of identity since they speak about what is central, distinctive and persistent in the life of the institution and they do it through discourse. They set up a virtual interaction with internal and external addressees with a view to portraying a positive self-image to the targeted audience. The chapter below deals in detail with the discursive characteristics of higher education prospectuses.

2. Higher education prospectuses (HEP) - a discursive approach

HEP are documents produced by academic institutions, which give details about their life and activity. They are pervasively used in external communication in order to provide key facts about the institution that would help potential customers make an informed decision. In the case of HEP, making an informed decision means “purchasing” values and worth associated with academic education (knowledge, prestige, tradition, etc.), which can be achieved through attending academic programmes. Therefore, becoming a member of the academia as an undergraduate is the means to achieve the goal.

The basic format of HEP is the same. They usually commence with a welcome message from the chancellor or the president of the institution and provide information with respect to academic programmes, research activity, services and facilities offered for students (accommodation, campus, etc.), infrastructure, location, surroundings, job opportunities, rate of graduates’ employability. In special rubrics, ample mention is made of the moral and ethical values that guide the university activity, and of its history. This mention fundamentally contributes to building legitimacy and strengthening credibility. Similarly, references to the graduates’ achievements (prize winners, top jobs occupants, internationally recognized personalities who are graduates of the school) reinforce the positive image of the institution. Self-promotion is also framed in the pictures that come along with all this information, all meant to communicate the students’ satisfaction, the outstanding quality of the infrastructure and of the equipment, the excellent location. The elements of identification are also prominent in HEP and, since acting as elements that singularise the institution, they are meant not only to map identity but also to enact the sense of belonging.

The scope of HEP is twofold: they are meant to inform in order to persuade (cf. Ganea, under press). The informative locution has priority in this type of writing. The plethora of information to be found within HEP concern all segments related to the academic activity and this with a view to informing and popularising the academic programmes in order to attract the largest number of potential customers. In order to achieve that goal, the discourse will wrap the informational content in a persuasive format that will help present the institution so as to resonate with the expectations of the audience. As any other organisations, each university will seek to bring

forward the element that makes the difference so as to set itself out on the market and to present itself as the worthiest, not only for future students, but also for parents, investors, partners, etc.

Temporal references cover the whole temporal paradigm in HEP: there are references made to the past in the sections referring to the history and tradition of the institutions, to the present in the description of the current activities, and to the future through making prospective projections for the graduates. The lexical choice operated to refer to the institution life and history pertains to the superlative tenor. The pervasive superlative tonality is also supported by figures and facts that act as watertight arguments in the rhetorical action. There are plenty of numerical references to the world-wide acknowledged prize winners and innovations, to the rate of employability as proof of the excellence of the academic programmes. There are also numerous personal accounts of the current and former students who speak about their unique experience as undergraduates. The following chapter will look closely into the discourse strategies used to build identity and reputation in HEP.

3. Method and corpus

Adopting a discursive approach, an empirical web-based research has been conducted on American, British and French university prospectuses and brochures with a view to investigating the discourse practices used in building identity in HEP. The choice of the corpus is motivated by the fact that analysing materials coming from different backgrounds is supposed to provide an accurate insight in the rhetoric of building identity in HEP.

According to De Fina (2003: 23), the linguistic elements involved in building identity pertain to three different levels:

- the lexical level, which refers to the use of specific words or expressions;
- the textual pragmatic level, which refers to textual logical and argumentative relationships both explicit and implicit
- the interactional level, which refers to the devices and strategies used by narrators to index their stances and attitudes both towards their own texts and other interlocutors.

Following De Fina's view, special focus has been laid on the analysis of three sets of elements that we consider relevant for the approach.

Firstly, the discourse means of presenting the self have been analysed and, at this level, the use of referring means has been studied. The interest lies in the fact that they contribute to mapping identity since they

are a means to position oneself towards the interlocutor in point of either distance or proximity. Secondly, the discourse means used to delineate the facts that distinguish I from the others have been analysed. Revolving again around the question of the relationship towards the other, this investigation has pointed to the techniques used to make prominent the institution distinctiveness against competitors and, therefore, all the means of contrasting with a view to self-promotion have been looked into. Finally, the types of arguments used in depicting oneself as the worthiest (outline of values, quality, prestige) have been studied and the various forms of expressing self-worth have been investigated. This analysis will also enable the identification of the lexical paradigm contributing to shaping identity and academic excellence in HEP. Previous studies (Touveron 2013: 121) have already pointed to the emergence of a rhetoric of excellence based on the extensive use of the word *excellence* and other lexical compounds using it in texts on the European academic system. This study will also delineate the most important lexical paradigms that are semantically overarched by the term *excellence*.

4. Findings

4.1 Presenting the self

The analysis of the referring means has led to the identification of two choices. The institution is designed using the whole denomination, e.g. *The Sussex University*. As alternatives, the generic noun *university* may occur or the name of the location, e.g. *Sussex* may be metonymically employed to designate the institution.

(1) Choosing the right university is an important decision. Our prospectus describes the opportunities available and gives you an idea of what life is like at the *University of Sussex* [1]. (University of Sussex, Undergraduate Prospectus 2015)

The mention of the institution name may be often accompanied by modifiers which refer to professionalism, extraordinary achievements, recognition.

(2) Join a research-led university with *award-winning teachers*. (University of Sussex, Undergraduate Prospectus 2015)

(3) Sussex is an *internationally renowned research-led university, attracting significant levels of funding from industry, research organisations and Government agencies, and has strong links with business.* (University of Sussex, Undergraduate Prospectus 2015)

(4) Over 90 per cent of Sussex research activity was rated as world leading, internationally excellent or internationally recognised, confirming Sussex as *one of the leading 30 research universities in the UK.* (University of Sussex, Undergraduate Prospectus 2015)

The modifiers are involved in constructing the professional identity of the institution, which positions itself as one of the top institutions. Besides the impersonal designators mentioned above, the inclusive pronoun *we* and the related forms (*us, our*) are highly used in HEP. They are meant to render the idea of collectivity and to communicate the idea of solidarity among all the university staff.

(5) *We* are proud of our reputation for research across a broad range of disciplines, with many of *our* academic staff working at the cutting edge of their fields in both the arts and the sciences.
(University of Sussex, Undergraduate Prospectus 2015)

The pronoun *we* also personalises the discourse by introducing a human instance as representative of the institution. The distance created by the use of the impersonal designators built around the term *university* is balanced by the use of the pronoun *we* which creates an effect of proximity.

4.2 Means used to delineate the facts that distinguish I from the others

The strategies used in order to make oneself distinctive rely on explicit or implicit comparisons to the other competitors. The discourse effect achieved suggests competitiveness and uniqueness of the institution. The strategies identified are mentioned below.

- use of the comparative degree with a superlative meaning, as in the example below, where the University of Manchester is singularised *among all the other universities in UK*

(6) We have more Nobel laureates on our staff than any other UK university. (The University of Manchester, Undergraduate Prospectus 2015)

The following excerpt allows for a similar interpretation: although based on a comparative degree (*more than...*), Manchester's recruiting results are in fact contrasted against several renowned institutions. The advantage is that the apparent understatement has a reversed effect, given the multiple comparative instances reunited under the same *comparandum* (*any other UK university* in the excerpt above and *Oxford, Cambridge, University College London, Imperial College, and London School of Economics* in the excerpt below):

(7) We recruit 400 new students from neighbourhoods with the UK's lowest participation in higher education – more than *Oxford, Cambridge, UCL, Imperial, and LSE combined*. (The University of Manchester, Undergraduate Prospectus 2015)

- use of ungradable adjectives expressing uniqueness: *first, only, unique, outstanding, the largest multidisciplinary, excellent*

(8) College of Arts and Media

First of its kind in the state, CAM focuses on the intersection of arts, technology and business, with programs in digital animation (including medical animation), performance, singer/songwriter, and recording arts. (University of Colorado Prospectus)

(9) *One of America's largest colleges* of architecture and design, CAP [College of Architecture and Planning] offers a unique brand of integrative design with areas of prominence and distinction in emerging practices in design, sustainable urbanism, healthy environments, and cultural heritage. (University of Colorado Prospectus)

(10) These include *outstanding sports facilities*, supported community volunteering, study abroad pathways, skills-development programmes, mentoring and much more... (Manchester)

(11) UPEC is *the largest multidisciplinary and professional university* in the Paris region. (University Paris-Est Créteil Val de Marne)

(12) At SIUE, you will receive an *excellent* education in your chosen field. (Southern Illinois University, Undergraduate Catalog 2013-2014)

- mention of top positions the university holds in rankings

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(13) *We're on the way to becoming one of the world's top 25 universities...* (University of Manchester, Undergraduate Prospectus 2015)

(14) *Over 90 per cent of Sussex research activity was rated as world leading, internationally excellent or internationally recognised, confirming Sussex as one of the leading 30 research universities in the UK.* (University of Sussex, Undergraduate Prospectus 2015)

As can be noticed, in presenting the top positions in rankings, mention is made of the level of classification (national, international) and of the instance that is responsible for the assessment and listing of universities based on criteria of quality and performance. This indication acts as an appeal to authority (cf. 4.3 below) and provides legitimacy to the claims made in HEP discourse.

(15) School of Education and Human Development
Ranked in the top 100 schools of education by U.S. News and World Report, SEHD prepares students... (University of Colorado Prospectus)

(16) *Listed for the third consecutive year as one of 46 "up-and-coming schools" by U. S. News & World Report, SIUE (Southern Illinois University Edwardsville) has so much to offer – from quality faculty and academic programs to a wide variety of extracurricular activities and special events.* (Southern Illinois University, Undergraduate Catalog 2013-2014)

(17) *Also for the third straight year, the University is listed on the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll, in the Distinction category, for giving back to the Southern Illinois region and the greater community.* (Southern Illinois University, Undergraduate Catalog 2013-2014)

- mention of the outstanding breakthrough discoveries made by university researchers, which makes the institution incomparable to any other university

(18) *We've been accomplishing feats of global significance for more than 180 years, from inventing the modern computer to splitting the atom, from founding present-day economics to giving the world graphene – the two-dimensional wonder material that is one atom thick yet 200 times stronger than steel.* (The University of Manchester, Undergraduate Prospectus 2015)

- use of superlatives

(19) Our ambitious plans are backed by *the biggest* investment programme ever seen in UK higher education... (The University of Manchester, Undergraduate Prospectus 2015)

In the example above, the superlative also serves as a means to express the university's commitment to accomplishing visionary targets.

(20) At Manchester you'll find *the broadest range* of opportunities outside... (The University of Manchester, Undergraduate Prospectus 2015)

- mention of the investors' recognition of the quality and results of the university activity

(21) In 2011-2012 the faculty received *more than \$39 million in externally sponsored research and public service awards*. (The University of Manchester, Undergraduate Prospectus 2015)

- use of positive terms to evaluate the quality of the services the university offers

(22) SIUE offers a broad range of quality educational experiences at affordable tuition rates, an architecturally distinguished campus, the tranquility of suburban life, and access to the excitement of a major American city. All these factors contribute to the quality of educational opportunities at SIUE and make student experiences here everything education should be. (Southern Illinois University, Undergraduate Catalog 2013-2014)

In (22), an accumulation of terms positively marked at the semantic level may be noticed: *quality, affordable, distinguished, tranquility, opportunities*.

- extensive use of numerical expressions meant to overstate the quality and diversity of the programmes, infrastructure, staff, research, etc.

(23) Enter the University of Colorado Denver and become part of *a lively academic environment that has welcomed international students from 130 countries*. (University of Colorado Prospectus)

The numerical expressions may refer to the number of countries providing foreign incoming students as above, to the number of research projects carried out in the institutions, or the number of apprenticeships and lifelong learning programmes – as in the examples below. Any aspect

related to university activity that is suitable for hyperbolic presentation is exploited in the discourse of HEP and presented as an advantage that enables the institution to build an image of academic success.

(24) Thanks to the high quality of the research carried out by UPEC, *it was involved in 125 projects in 2011, 34 of which were supported by the French National Research Agency, and 15 by the European Commission.* (University Paris-Est Créteil Val de Marne Prospectus)

(25) One of the features that distinguishes UPEC is the high number of students carrying out apprenticeships or adults who have gone back to studying. This has long been a key aspect of the University and is more and more evidence every year; the number of people carrying out apprenticeships rose from 1165 in 2006-2007 to 1569 in 2010-2011, and the number of people registered on continuing education programmes leading to qualifications rose from 2430 to 2817 over the same period. (University Paris-Est Créteil Val de Marne Prospectus)

Another way of bolstering the image of the institution using numerical expressions consists in using them as evidence for the development strategy. This is the case of the following excerpt, where reference is made to the past and future infrastructure development of the University of Manchester:

(26) ... we've already invested £750 million in buildings and facilities since 2004 and we're now putting another £1 billion into further teaching and student facilities. (The University of Manchester, Undergraduate Prospectus 2015)

- use of adjective modifiers which express affective evaluations related to the institution staff or assumingly produced by competitors

(27) Our *enviable* reputation for research attracts outstanding academic staff and provides firm foundations for our teaching excellence. Add to this our *proud* history of innovative learning approaches and you have a recipe for outstanding success. (University of Sussex, Undergraduate Prospectus 2015)

In the excerpt above, *enviable* is competitor-oriented, while *proud* is self-oriented and expresses self-esteem and self-conceit.

4.3 Arguments used in promoting worth and prestige

At the argumentative level, two main types of arguments have been identified in the corpus: arguments built on the concept of value, and arguments based on facts. The first category comprises arguments which are meant to stress the value, prestige and worth of the institution in the eyes of the speaker, whose positive emotions are triggered. This type of argumentation is pervasive in HEP; incidentally, Burke states that pathos persuades more often than any other type of proof since it appears to be human nature to “process information ‘mindlessly’, peripherally, unthinkingly”. (2014: 22)

These arguments basically contribute to building the positive image of the institution, which leads to a transfer of positive value on the consumer, the prospect student. Different elements can be put forward in the attempt at outlining the value of the institution: the outstanding results, the employability rate, the economic, social, cultural, historical and geographical background of the institution. Implicitly, becoming a student of the university implies taking advantage of its value, and contributing to preserving it. The following excerpt clearly states what the student might benefit from, once an undergraduate at Manchester University.

(28) Are you a Manchester student?

- You want to meet the world at the *UK's biggest and most diverse university community, mixing with students from 154 countries and making friends for life at a place that prides itself on nurturing responsible global citizens.*
- You want to get to know and love *Manchester, a vibrant, friendly and creative place with an enduring energy for progress and change.* (The University of Manchester, Undergraduate Prospectus 2015)

The reasoning relies on an enthymemic pattern, where the major premise, assumed as accepted, is omitted: *A is B, therefore A is C, since it is generally accepted that B is C.* In the case of the following example

(29) Study in Denver, Colorado, a thriving city centrally located in the United States. Home to one of the nation's best international airports and one of its strongest city economies, Denver is a great place to gain an exceptional education.

(University of Colorado Prospectus)

the enthymemic schema is

Any student wants to gain an exceptional education (suppressed major premise)

Denver is a great place to gain an exceptional education (minor premise)

Go to Denver to gain an exceptional education. (conclusion)

According to Burke (2014: 22), the ellipted main premise in an enthymeme is responsible for the persuasion act since “people infer what is not there and fill it in themselves”. In Burke’s opinion, it is a case of self-persuasion since the act of providing the answer not only makes people feel good about themselves, but it also persuades them.

There are instances where, unlike the excerpt above, where the speaker is addressed directly by means of a generic you, the directive locution formulated in the enthymeme is addressee free, which gives a larger and impersonal scope to the argumentation:

(30) The dynamic city of Valenciennes is home to several sporting associations as well as entertainment options (cinema, bowling, ice rink...). Its football team plays in France’s top division. Its cultural hub includes a national fine arts museum, a multimedia library, a music conservatory and a national theatre. The main points of the city - including the university campus, the city centre and the railway station - are linked by a tramway. Hainaut-Cambrésis is known for its green belt, a regional natural park, national forests and water bodies. (The University of Valenciennes and Hainaut-Cambrésis Prospectus)

In (30), all the aspects mentioned, namely the sports life, the public transport network, the entertainment options, the natural environment act as incentives to the potential addressee to whom the implicit directive is addressed.

Reversely, the following excerpt does not refer openly to what the institution offers, but implicitly mentions its strengths by referring to what the client will become after having benefitted from the services offered by the institution. In a strongly personalised address due to the iterative use of *you*, the accumulation of terms referring to the skills the student will acquire (*excellent teaching, intellectual skills, sound research principles, analytical and enquiring mind, ability to reflect critically, identify challenging questions, solve intellectually difficult problems, intellectual skills*) is an indirect way of speaking about the strengths and opportunities offered by the institution:

(31) Whatever your subject at Sussex, you will receive excellent teaching and acquire a range of intellectual skills based on sound research principles. You will develop an analytical and enquiring mind, and the ability to reflect critically on what you have learnt. You will learn to identify challenging questions and to solve intellectually difficult problems. These skills will prove invaluable in a job market that increasingly prizes the intellectual skills that are encouraged at a research-led university. A degree from Sussex will give you the edge. (University of Sussex, Undergraduate Prospectus 2015)

Another way of bolstering the worth of the institution is putting forward the notoriety of the product (cf. Ganea, under press).

(32) We are recognised at a global level for the quality and volume of our pioneering research. In the last Research Assessment Exercise (RAE 2008) an impressive 65% of our research activity was rated 'world-leading' or 'internationally excellent', with most of the remainder judged to be of a quality that is 'recognised internationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour'. (The University of Manchester, Undergraduate Prospectus 2015)

In this case, the argumentation based on value makes use of the appeal to authority, citing the UK higher education funding councils' rankings as a means to establish the evidence of worth. The mention of the instance producing the assessment of research quality, namely the Research Assessment Exercise, acts as an authority instance which guarantees the truth of the claim *We are recognised at a global level for the quality and volume of our pioneering research.*

The arguments based on facts identified in the corpus take the form of inartistic appeals in Aristotle's terms (1991: 15), that is arguments based on 'hard evidence' like percentages, figures, rankings, statistics. The following excerpts illustrate the forms these arguments might take:

- (33) Facts and figures
- 4 campuses in Valenciennes, Cambrai and Maubege
 - More than 10,200 students, including 1,000 international students
 - spread across 55 hectares
 - University community of 1,300 members
 - Budget of 120 million euro
 - 80,000 alumni since its foundation
 - 190 doctorates
 - 8 faculties and 8 research laboratories

- 750 professional guest speakers
- 4 libraries
- 4 university restaurants
- sports facilities: 2 gymnasiums, 1 dance hall, 1 room for martial arts, 1 weights room, 1 stadium and 1 athletics track
- 20 student associations (The University of Valenciennes and Hainaut-Cambrésis Prospectus)

(34) Each year our careers fairs, workshops and presentations attract more than 600 exhibitors. Through our careers service you'll have access to more than 7,000 graduate recruiters, from major multinationals to small and medium-sized enterprises. 91% of our graduates go straight into employment or further study. (The University of Manchester, Undergraduate Prospectus 2015)

Using numbers as evidence is pervasive in HEP and is meant to create an effect of objectivity and produce an abstract, uncluttered, simplifying and reductive image of reality (cf. Bacot, Desmarchelier, Rémi-Giraud 2012: 7). However, against this apparent effect of objectivity, numbers cannot be dismissed in the category of logos appeal since they are involved in expressing value and worth of the institution. In the opinion of Bacot, Desmarchelier, Rémi-Giraud (2012: 7), numbers represent a first level semiotic transformation and they reconfigure the initial linguistic data and, in doing it, they evolve from expressing quantity to expressing value (2012: 10). It is in this respect that we treat this category of proof as belonging to pathos appeal, as it is sooner emotion that is addressed. On the other hand, numbers are also involved in building ethos since they reflect the speaker's rigour, seriousness, control of oneself and of the world (2012: 10). Acting as watertight evidence which can be verified at all times, the authority of the argument is transferred on the speaker, which enhances his/her ethos.

Another type of factual argument is the testimonial one, which takes the form of undergraduates' and graduates' accounts of their university experience. It is a frequently used technique, by means of which the students take the floor to speak about the strengths and the worth of the institution.

(35) Choosing an overseas university was far from easy. What appealed to me was the reputation of this institution and the wonderful platform it provided to combine statistical practice with public health and basic science research.

Kian LU, PhD studies, Biostatistics and Bioinformatics

(University of ColoradoProspectus)

(36) "I chose Manchester because it has one of the best RAE rankings and top-class facilities."

Ali Jahran, Biomedical Materials Science (The University of Manchester, Undergraduate Prospectus 2015)

The scope of this type of argument is complex. On the one hand, this argument triggers emotion as the prospect student identifies himself/herself with the author of the testimony and projects himself/herself in the undergraduate's or graduate's position. Moreover, the accounts act as real life examples and provide concreteness to the abstract and formal discourse about the institution. Last but not least, testimonies produce evidence for the truthfulness of the claims made about the institution in HEP, which also contributes to enhancing the ethos: the testimonies confirm the self-stated credibility, which will make the client grant confidence to the speaker.

The efficiency of these argumentative practices is strongly enhanced by the lexical choices made in HEP. Their examination is relevant for building identity, since they appear to play an important role as linguistic devices that intervene in the strategies meant to create the image of institutional worth and prestige. In trying to explore the lexical devices at work in promoting the university positive image, I have examined the semantic isotopies responsible for producing and strengthening this linguistic message. I have chosen to analyse isotopies since they are engaged in constituting meaning by creating a semantic weave of repetitive minimal meaning traits, which provides coherence and unity of meaning in a text, or, in Salvatore Attardo's words (1994: 69), a *totality of meaning*.

The analysis carried out on the prospectus of Sussex University enabled the identification of several pervasive isotopies:

a. the semantic isotopy referring to *excellence: prestigious, invaluable, enviable reputation, outstanding, innovative, success, renowned, work at the cutting edge, world leading, internationally excellent, leading research university, prestigious, Nobel Prize winners, academicians, Crafoord Prize, proud history of innovative learning approaches, world leading research, etc.*

b. the semantic isotopy referring to the *quality of services used or opportunities offered: comprehensive infrastructure, pastoral support, student representative scheme, exciting city, thriving music, flexible social and meeting place, etc.*

c. the semantic isotopy related to *knowledge and skills enhancing: awareness, stretch the mind, inspiring, identify challenging questions, solve intellectually difficult problems, intellectual skills, enhance and hone skills, etc.*

d. the semantic isotopy referring to *sentiments and personal development: passion, flourish, enthusiastic, comprehensive and unique experience, enhanced student experience, leadership, personal initiative, commercial awareness and team working, build your confidence, build academic study skills and employability, develop career awareness about entering professional and career pathways*

It is obvious that *a* and *b* are oriented towards ethos-building, while *c* and *d* are oriented towards the customer and belong to the pathos proofs. This list is far from being exhaustive; the point has only been to demonstrate the way words belonging to different grammatical categories coalesce in a contextual process of meaning-making and contribute to shaping identity.

Conclusion

The analysis of the prospectuses showed that identity construction is at the core of the promotional discourse in university prospectuses. Mimicking the strategies used in corporational promotion, the permanent goal in HEP has been revealed to be the construction of an image of academic excellence and professionalism for the institution. In investigating the discourse, the means used to build identity and communicate worthiness, as well as the interactional and argumentative strategies have been explored with a view to examining the way the institution positions itself against the competitor and outlines its worth and prestige and, equally, the way the meaning of *worth* and *prestige* shaped at the lexical level is engaged in realising these strategies. This study has allowed to point to the emergence of rhetoric associated to the marketisation of higher education and to demonstrate the extent to which the customer is taken into consideration in the promotion of higher education.

Note

[1] All italics in the examples are inserted by the author of this article.

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