How black youth were painted negatively through misleading words

WORDS such as “riots” and “rioters” were used to negatively characterise the discourse around the 1976 student uprising, and de-legitimise the anti-apartheid movement, experts say.

Stellenbosch University linguist Lauren Monge said that, through censorship, it was easy for the government to control the way students discussed support for the students.

“They would use words like ‘violence’, ‘riot’ and ‘boycott’ because it removed any possibility of white sympathy for the anti-apartheid movement,” Monge said.

Stories were completely devoid of context, and media didn’t talk about what was really going on or why it was happening,” Monge explained.

She said this use of language was designed to hide the fact that schoolchildren were being oppressed and killed by the police.

“This was made into a black-and-white situation, where police stormed in and saved the day. It is one of the oldest strategies used to manipulate the public. The black population was portrayed as unpredictable. They were portrayed as ‘black mass’; increasingly aggressive and violent,”

“These easy-to-understand acts of resistance were characterised as random acts of terrorism. The goal was to make it un-understandable. It was not acknowledged that it was about freedom and rights,” said Monge.

When it came to finding a side to blame, the anti-apartheid movement was always implicated, she said.

“They used strategic language to report events. They would report ‘so many children were killed’, leaving out who had murdered them. If the situation was reversed, it would be reported that 17 schoolchildren killed one police officer.

“It also shows the use of euphemistic language. Instead of ‘terrorism’, they would say police ‘neutralised’ students, taking away that shock value. Police were made to look like heroes through the manipulation of words. And it is in the structure itself, its very difficult to pick up,”

UWC Centre for Humanities Research Director Professor Premesh Laloo said the language used to name and characterise events such as the student uprising affected how we remember and think about these movements.

“One of the movements I was involved in was called the ‘schools boycotts of 1907’. It was anything but a boycott,” said Laloo. “This movement is called the School Students Uprising, but it took hold in Cape Town in many different ways. It was a springboard for people to break the law and protest against apartheid.

“The problem is that the use of language forms a dominant discourse. Laloo said that the language had portrayed students to be acting out in ‘anger’ instead of exploring the intellectual sense behind their actions. “All the words that had given to this movement; all of these words are inadequate to describe the real desires of the students of that period,” he said.

Laloo, a former student activist and senior lecturer at the UCT School of African Languages and Literatures, said students were portrayed as having no core for education, and acting without reason.

“A term used, like ‘riot’, is loaded. It makes you think there is no law and no reason, it implies disorder. Whereas a word like ‘protest’ implies what happens when you have gone through the legitimate avenues,” she explained.

She said tactics of fearmongering, through the use of manipulated language was used to keep people voting for white governance.

“Black was associated with violence. I remember being scared and seeing that people my age are burning things,” she said.

But the information about why this was happening was denied to everyone, we were being hoodwinked, thinking these actions were unreasonable,” she said.