The art of attribution in academic writing at university level: A case study of Great Zimbabwe University.

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ABSTRACT: *The need for quality teaching and learning for sustainable development in higher education is an issue of sustained concern at all levels of students' academic pursuit. As a lecturer in Communication Studies/Skills and Business Communication at this university, the realisation of the importance of attributive verbs in communicating and acknowledging intellectual property has spurred the researcher to carry out an investigation into the frequency of the use and misuse of attributive verbs in 100 assignments from the 2012 and 2013 first year intakes. In this study, it is argued that academic writing is an art which can be perfected through practice. The paper has unearthed, through content analysis of the 100 assignments, that students have serious challenges in either over-using some attributive verbs, to the extent of monotony, while avoiding others, or not using any at all, showing serious failure to understand basic meanings of such and in what contexts they may be used correctly. In many instances, students failed to establish correct subject-verb agreement or completely failed to use the appropriate attributive terms. Such mistakes tended to compromise quality of work for tertiary assessment. The researcher recommends that, during the 60+ hours contact with students, the relevant lecturers need to focus and emphasise more on this important aspect of communication because it has far-reaching consequences as it impacts negatively on their other courses. There is dire need by students concerned to use dictionaries which help them understand the basic meanings of attributive verbs before employing them in their assignments. With increased Internet access, the researcher feels that access to Online Dictionary is quite possible when students are advised accordingly on the benefits of this endeavour.*

KEY WORDS: *attributive verbs, academic writing, intellectual property, sustainable development.*

I.   INTRODUCTION

This study, which is largely qualitative in nature, was carried out at Great Zimbabwe University (GZU) in 2012 and 2013 where 100 first year students' assignments were subjected to content analysis with the view to finding out how attributive verbs were used. The research emanated from a discovery by this researcher, who is also a lecturer in Communication Studies/Skills and Business Communication (compulsory courses for all undergraduate students at this university and others across the country), that students misuse and overuse certain attributive verbs to the extent that their work became repetitive and monotonous and this grossly compromised the quality of work which they would have submitted for assessment by their respective lecturers. It is the researcher's contention that this literature would be quite useful in guiding the students concerned in their endeavour to produce quality presentations suitable for assessment at tertiary level. Moreover, when some of these students qualify, they get employment in the education sector and find themselves compelled to teach the English Language at various levels in the school system. Without the skill of referencing and attribution, the teacher would pass the errors to the next generation, making this a vicious cycle of intellectual poverty. With such a background, the study briefly reviews relevant literature, with the view to revealing to what extent authors and scholars the world over value the art of attribution and how it helps enhance the quality of communicating ideas in students' work.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

It is important to realise that when presenting the work of others, the writer should relate them, in some way, to one another. The writer should assist the reader see such dis/agreement by using words/phrases like, 'Moyo *supports* Gurajena's work (2010) . . .' or 'Greenberg (2005) *refutes* the view of communication as a one-way process . . .' It is such a link that the researcher found missing in students' work, which has become a cause for concern, leading to the birth of this project.

Cleary (2005: 237) contends that "Presentation is very important. A neat presentation creates a favourable impression on the marker and reader in the same way that one's personal appearance and non-verbal behaviour usually influence the outcome of an interview session. Marks may be lost for untidy, sloppy presentation." It is clear, from the above, that neat and properly referenced work has a psychological advantage

which suggests that critical thinking skills, organisational ability and control of language are considered for any academic piece of writing to be successful. It is the failure or lack of concern of such by students which the researcher finds worrisome. The students' plight is exacerbated by the fact that, even though the mis/use of attributive verbs by students may not be the sole issue in the assessment of their assignments, it compromises the holistic impression that the assessor has of that particular work. The student's knowledge of this art puts him/her at an advantage hence the researcher's concern with these important aspects of communication.

Research, especially in academic writing, abound and most authors and scholars are more concerned with academic writing in general, particularly the qualities of and the steps followed in the successful presentation of an academic paper. These include Clanchy and Ballard (19830, Carey (1992), Little (1996), Seyler (2008), Miller (2006), Callarman (2002), Dietsch (2003), Muller (2008), DeVito (2005), Cleary (2005) and Gonye et al (2012). What is apparent in these researches can be summarised in Muller's (2008) contention that effective written arguments are carefully and logically planned, organised, researched and revised. However, as far as it can be ascertained, these projects are rather 'silent' on the issue of attribution which is the subject of this paper, the findings of which attempt to augment the relevant efforts made by some of the authors/scholars mentioned above by conscientising the learner on the impact, on assessment, that errors in attribution may have on the whole presentation. It should be understood, from the outset, that English Language is a second language to most, if not all, undergraduate students at Great Zimbabwe University (GZU) but it is the language of instruction from Grade Three upwards (in Zimbabwe). The researchers found students' challenges with some aspects of their English particularly compelling, hence the study.

Furthermore, it is important that the researchers put the reader into perspective by briefly defining the central term of attribution before engaging into methodology and findings. "Verbs of attribution, also known as lead-in verbs, signal that the writer is quoting, paraphrasing or referring to another source . . . Often, these verbs show whether or not the source author agrees with the cited material" (Undergraduate Writing Center, 2003). According to Seyler (2008: 287), attribution is ". . . becoming skilled in ways to include source material in your writing while (still) making your indebtedness to source absolutely clear to your readers . . . These introductory tags or signal phrases give readers a context for the borrowed material, as well as serving as part of documentation of sources."

A number of terms could be synonymous to 'attribute': ascribe, assign to source, accredit, associate, connect and refer (Roget's 21st Century Thesaurus, 2012). Attributive verbs are also referred to as lead-in verbs or signal words/phrases which show that you are citing someone else's opinion or information (www.csuohio.edu/.../verbattribute.html). Seyler (2008: 287) concurs by saying that "These introductory tags or signal phrases give readers a context for the borrowed material, as well as serving as part of the required documentation of source." In view of the above observations, writers need to establish some kind of association between an author and his/her material or show the relationship that exists between citations made in any piece of discourse in order to keep the reader well informed with regards to the progression of a presentation. When an attributive verb is used correctly, effective communication obtains. On the other hand, failure to use the appropriate term is a sure way to mislead one's reader because meaning is lost, together with the coherence that comes together with references to other authors. In addition, the relationship between authors' views may not be realised by the reader when a wrong attributive verb is used. For example, when a writer uses 'state' instead of 'refute', the reader may fail to see the difference in the relevant authors' views on a given concept. Many authors have provided a general list of attributive verbs but it is not the objective of this study to provide such.

There are quite a number of hints which various authors give in an attempt to assist students use attributive verbs correctly. Seyler (2008) advises writers to make sure that each tag clarifies rather than distorts an author's relationship to his or her ideas and to other sources. Seyler further gives guidelines to follow in order to avoid misrepresenting borrowed material, one of which is to pay attention to verb choice tags. "When you vary such standard wording as 'Smith *says*' or Jones *states*', be careful that you do not select verbs that misrepresent authors' attitudes toward his/her work . . . select the term that most accurately conveys the writer's relationship to his/her material . . . not all words are synonymous" (Seyler, 2008: 324). Little (1996: 35) concurs that "Many words are treated as synonyms, by those unskilled in language, that are so different in meaning that it is questionable whether they can be called synonyms at all." Often, these verbs show whether or not the writer or the source author agrees with the cited material. While some verbs of attribution are relatively objective, others carry emotional weight and many authors advise that they should be avoided. Continually using certain verbs e.g. 'says/argues/states' to link quotes throughout a paper can give it a monotonous tone (www.csuohio.edu/.../verbattribute.html). In agreement, Little (1996: 41) argues, "Synonyms should not be

looked upon as merely a device for avoiding the same word used several times . . . it is a matter of familiarising yourself with the contexts in which these words appear and deciding for yourself what makes one word fit a context better than the other." Several studies have shown the commonest verbs of attribution which include 'says, states, argues, according to and views' (Cleary, 2005; Seyler, 2008; Miller, 2008; www.csuohio.edu/.../verbattribute.html). Indeed, writing presents its unique demands on every student (Gonye et al, 2012), especially in our case (GZU) where English is a second language to most, if not all, undergraduate students. Academic excellence is assessed not only on content (presented) by the student but also on how effectively that information is presented. This confirms the observation by Gonye et al (2012) that formulating the study essay is but a very demanding exercise. Little (1996: 35) affirms the need for careful choice of tags, "If you . . . are in any doubt about a word you propose to use, you can – and should – check it in a dictionary – not to find out its 'correct meaning' but to find out, approximately, what meaning or meanings the receiver is likely to attach to it." This literature suggests that academic writing presents a plethora of challenges, which include attribution currently under study, to the undergraduate student, especially where s/he speaks English as a Second Language. Addressing the full extent to which attributive verbs are used in English in general is beyond the scope of this paper. The main focus is students' handling of the links between authors/scholars and their work.

Objectives
The study sought to:
(a)   establish to what extent undergraduate students mis/use attributive verbs;
(b)   identify some commonly used tags;
(c)   suggest reasons why this scenario obtains and
(d)   make recommendations on how students can navigate their way in presenting, clearly, their ideas through attribution.

Methodology
         100 student assignments from the four faculties of Arts, Education, Commerce and Sciences for the 2012 and 2013 intakes at GZU were subjected to content analysis in the research study. In design, the project is a case study which allowed deep probing into the interrelationships of concepts in students' essays, leading to the construction of a "comprehensive, integrated picture of the unit (under study) as it functions..." (Sidhu, 1984: 225)). While the study assumes a qualitative paradigm, it does not suggest that numerical measures are never used, but that "other means of description are emphasised... and the difference (between qualitative and quantitative) is not absolute, but one of emphasis" (Sidhu, 1984:248).

Population
         All first year undergraduate students at GZU in 2012 and 2013 intakes in the faculties named above comprised the population of this study.

Sample
         100 student assignments from first year undergraduate students in the Communication Skills/Studies and Business Communication were subjected to content analysis, with the view to gaining insights into their ability to effectively handle the art of attribution in academic writing. In each of the assignments, the researcher focused on grammatical and semantic aspects of students' presentation of work which they had handed in for assessment purposes. It should be understood that students at GZU are given assignment topics at least two weeks before they finally hand them in for assessment. Therefore, it is argued in this paper, that they have ample time to 'fine-tune' them by subjecting them to rigorous editing before they are handed in for assessment. Therefore, students have ample time to perfect the art of attribution, if they so wish.

Findings

         From the outset, it should be made clear that though the findings can be generalised in contexts where students learn English as a second language, this study does not claim to universalise such findings but emphasises the validity of the trend observed in 2012 and 2013.Through content analysis, this study revealed that students had considerable challenges in using attributive verbs to the extent that they tended to use some correctly, some incorrectly and overused others. They sometimes disregarded the use of these introductory tags, making the relationship between an author and their work or their attitude towards such unclear. The research identifies the nature of the mistake or error and gives possible alternatives which are not, as such, exhaustive. Table 1 below shows some of the commonest tags extracted from the sample's assignments, the frequencies in their use/misuse and some excerpts taken verbatim from these texts:

Word	Frequency (n)	Frequency of misuse (%)	Excerpts
Says	153	11	According to Miller (2008), *he says*....(grammar)
according to	63	17.5	According to Steinberg (2005), *he says* communication is . . . (grammatical)
Argues	44	9	Berko, Wolvin & Wolvin (1998) *argues* that... (no subject-verb agreement)
States	78	17.9	Fielding (1997:117) *states* that, "Non-verbal communication is a more effective way of showing emotions and attitudes than spoken communication" (*concurs* was more suitable in the context).
Claims	19	26	Steinberg (2005) *claims that* "Communication is ....." (*defines* was the more appropriate in the context)
Reviews	50	22	Sillars (1998) *reviews* communication as ... (where *views* could have been the appropriate term).
Agrees	20	30	Knapp and Daly (2003) *agrees* that . . . (grammar)
Assert	65	33.8	DeVito (2005) *assert that* models are representations or theories which tend to simplify complex processes like communication (lack of subject-verb agreement).
Believe	05	20	Fielding (2010) *believes* communication as an exchange . . . (*views* is a better term)
absence of tag	09	n/a	Knapp and Daly (2003:244) "... looking someone in the eye suggests openness, honest, confidence and comfort"
Concur	11	44	Mawonera and Lee 1995) *concur* non-verbal cues as communication without words. (*define* could have been a more appropriate term).

Examine	11	72.7	Mackay 2006:54) *examines* that, "The mood and the tenor for the day instinctively assess how they should act..." (*observes* is the more suitable).
Advocate	07	72.7	Mawonera and Lee (1995) advocate communication as . . .(*view* is more appropriate)
Allude	15	40	DeVito (2005:118) *alludes* an interview as "...a conversation between two or more people with a goal in mind." (*defines* is the appropriate)
Connote	05	100	Greenberg (1998) *connote* that communication is the exchange of messages... (*observe* was the more appropriate).
Echoes	08	100	Gillies (1994:188) *echoes that* communication is the transmission of information....(*define* is the appropriate word)
Observes	04	28.6	Dimbleby and Burton (1998) *observes* that... (Subject-verb agreement error).
Stress	15	75	Pearson et al (1998) *stress* that . . . (misused in the introduction)
Portray	33	15.2	Cleary (2005) *portrays* communication as an exchange (views is a better alternative)
Support	03	0	Gillies (1994) *supports* that . . . (there is no support in the context)
Postulate	19	84.2	Lin (2000) *postulates* that meanings and interpretation of non-verbal behaviours often are on a shaky ground..." (*argues* was a better option).
Propound	08	62.5	Raymond et al (2009:522) *propounds* that "We build up our impressions, our status, interest and our personalities by the way we dress" (*observes* is more suitable).

Suggest	18	33.3	Fielding (2010: 10) *suggest* that non-verbal cues are non-word characteristics of conversations (*argue* could be a better alternative)
Posit	21	80	Peel (1990) *posits* a nod as a non-verbal sign of agreement in many African cultures (*gives* is more appropriate)
Reiterate	17	14.3	Fielding (2010) *reiterate* that . . . (inappropriate for use in the introduction to an essay)
Contends	06	100	Taylor (2005) *contends* communication as the transmission of messages . . . (*defines* is more appropriate)
Concede	38	100	Little (1996*) concedes* communication as . . . (*defines* is more suitable)
Define	61	19.7	Taylor (2005) *defines* the argument on whether the communication process is one way or two way by saying . . . (*concludes* was the more appropriate in the context).

Table 1
Discussion

From the literature review and the findings in this study, it is clear that attributive verbs, also referred to by various tags, are key to students' ability to signal that they are quoting, paraphrasing, or referring to another source. In an attempt to fulfil this intellectual requirement, the 100 assignments assessed indicated that students have serious challenges in either over-using some attributive verbs, to the extent of monotony, or avoiding others, showing their failure to understand basic meanings of lead-in verbs, including those used in lectures as examples. A neat presentation creates a favourable impression on the marker, in this case, the lecturer. Writers need to establish some form of association between the author and his/her material or show the relationship that exists between citations made in any piece of discourse in order to keep the reader well-informed with regards to the progression of a presentation. In Table 1 above, 'Taylor (2005) *defines* instead of *concludes'* and 'Lin (2000) *postulates* instead of *argues'* mislead the reader as far as the general progression of the essay is concerned. Thus Seyler (2008) advises writers to make sure that each tag clarifies rather than distorts an author's relationship to his or her ideas and to other sources. It is not only this which the researcher found worrisome, but also that some verbs were grossly misused, probably due to students' failure to understand their meanings. For example, in Table 1 above, 'Greenberg (1998) *connotes* that communication is the exchange of meanings instead of *states* that' and 'DeVito (2005:118) *alludes* an interview as "...a conversation between two or more people with a goal in mind (where *defines* is the appropriate)' are some of the instances where lead-

in tags were grossly misused. Seyler (2008) further advices writers not to select verbs that misrepresent an author's attitude towards their work.

Table 1 above indicates that there are certain attributive verbs which are more frequently used than others. For example *says*, used 153 times, means that on average, every student used the tag at least once, 11% of which the term was misused. *States* was used 78 times and misused 17.9%. While *assert* was used 65 times, 33.8% of which it was misused, *according to* was used 63 times and misused 17.5%. Of the 61 times that *define* was used, 19.7% of the time, it was misused. Whereas *believe* (4 times), *observe* (5 times) and *support* (3 times) were the least frequently used, *echoes*, *concede*, *connote*, *postulate*, *posit*, *contends*, *advocate*, and *allude* either had very high frequencies of misuse or were completely misconstrued in their use. In most situations, it occurred with those students who tended to overuse attributive verbs like *says* and *argues*, perhaps in an attempt to run away from the imminent monotony created by the continuous use of one or two such tags.

The researcher does not, by any standard, claim that the mistakes/errors are entirely a result of students' language incompetence, but only suggest that as a major contributing factor. Such a view is supported by situations where students did not realise the void created by the absence of a lead-in verb in nine cases as given in Table 1 above. Seyler (2008: 324) advises students to ". . . select the term that most accurately conveys the writer's relationship to his or her material . . . not all words are synonymous." The very high frequencies of misuse for words like propound (62%), examine and advocate (72%), posit (80%), postulate (84%), contends and connote (100%) help validate the importance of this research. The art of attribution is indeed an integral part of a student's language competence which not only assist the reader see the intricate relationships in their academic texts but also show the author's or scholar's attitude towards their work as observed in the literature review in this study. For instance, Seyler (2008: 287) argues that "These introductory tags or signal phrases give readers a context for the borrowed material, as well as serving as part of documentation of sources." Taylor (2005: 47) stresses that ". . . many people make grammatical errors because they do not understand the rules [of English] properly or simply through carelessness. Such errors can lead to misunderstanding and failure in communication."

From the foregoing, it is prudent for the researcher to recommend that lecturers in their various disciplines assist students appreciate the value of attribution as an art that enhances the impression that an assessor may have of a text. As supported by various scholars cited in this study, attributive verbs help the writer establish relationships between scholars/authors and their work so the student should be encouraged to use, rather than avoid, them. As follow-ups to lecturers' efforts, students may also consult dictionaries, some of which are available online, whenever they encounter difficulties with these lead-in tags.

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