Publication outlets and their effect on academic writers' citations

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This article focuses on how and why the publication outlets in which academic writers' work appears can impact on their citations, as part of a qualitative interview-based study of computer scientists' and sociologists' citing behaviour. Informants spoke of how they cited differently when writing in outlets aimed at a less knowledgeable audience, and for audiences from different disciplines and in different parts of the world. Citation behaviour can also be affected when writing for journals which favour different research paradigms, and the word limits journals impose led some informants to cite more selectively than they would have wished. The implications of the findings and the strengths and weaknesses of the interview-based method of investigation are also discussed.

Introduction

What effect does the publication outlet in which an academic writer's text appears have on the writer's citations? How do writers cite differently when writing journal articles, book chapters, and introductory textbooks? How would they cite differently if writing for journal X instead of journal Y? While there will be obvious differences associated with the outlet's adherence to Harvard, Footnote, and other stylistic conventions, the findings reported here show that the influence the outlet exerts can be more profound.

Some time ago, CHUBIN & MOITRA [1975] suggested that different publication outlets may require different citing behaviour. And MURUGESAN & MORAVCSIK [1978] identified the publication outlet as a potential explanation for differences in citation frequency and function in high energy physics articles published in American and Russian journals. More recently, WANG & WHITE'S [1999] innovative interview-based study of the factors influencing agricultural economists' reading and citing decisions also found the outlet sometimes played a role: one of the possible influences informants spoke of was the choice of journal they intended to submit their work to, considering its "characteristics, level, and demands" (p.105). The findings reported here add to this body of work, emerging as part of a qualitative interview-based study of the rhetorical functions of citations I conducted, where informants re-read one of their own publications and accounted for each of the citations it featured in turn [HARWOOD, IN PRESS]. Informants' responses are reported alongside, where appropriate, anonymized excerpts from their texts.

Methodology & procedure

The interview-based methodology employed here aimed to provide an emic account of authors' motivations, an attempt to "uncover the unseen" (see [CRONIN, 2005: 75]), since "the concern is to catch the subjective meanings placed on situations by participants" [COHEN & AL., 2000: 139] rather than by the interviewer. This approach was preferred over content/context analysis, a method whereby the textual analyst attempts to determine citation functions and motivations without consulting the writer (see [SMALL, 1982] for a wide selection of examples). This lack of consultation has been criticized, however, since the author's motivations may not be apparent to the analyst (e.g. [BORGMAN & FURNER, 2002]). Hence qualitative, semi-structured interviews were used, where writers discuss their citations while re-reading one of their own texts (journal articles or book chapters). This method is known as the discourse-based interview approach [ODELL & AL., 1983] among applied linguist writing researchers. I had used this approach in an earlier study of academic writers' pronoun use [HARWOOD, 2006, 2007], and adopted a similar procedure here.

The larger study reported in [HARWOOD, IN PRESS] involved an analysis of texts from two contrasting fields, computer science and sociology, because one of its aims was to investigate disciplinary differences in citing behaviour. The study was limited to six informants from each discipline working at a British university, identified as CS1–6 in the case of the computer scientists and SOC1–6 in the case of the sociologists. CS4, CS6, and SOC3 discuss book chapters. All other informants discuss journal articles. Given the semi-structured format, both interviewer and interviewee were free to develop the ongoing conversation (see [HOLSTEIN & GUBRIUM, 1995]), meaning that I was able to ask the informants about issues connected with their citation patterns in

general and with publication outlets in particular which struck me as potentially significant, either as I read their texts in advance or as a result of their responses during our discussion. Hence, prior to interview, I noticed that although most citees in SOC4's text were referred to by surname only, some first names were also included. As I report below, SOC4's explanation revealed that the outlet accounted for this. And during interview, unbidden by me, CS6 made it plain he was citing sources in his book chapter he would not have cited if he had been writing a journal article. The semi-structured interview format enabled me to ask for further detail and clarification.

Findings

Less specialized outlets: Making work accessible

CS6 is conscious of the fact that the type of publication in which his work appears has influenced his citation patterns. The editor of the book asked CS6 for a broad, accessible range of references ("the editor meant to make it accessible for people in science in general. […] He just said let's try to have this as general as possible."). The audience's knowledge – or rather, the lack of it – means he cites differently to the way he would cite in a journal article. Here is CS6's explanation for the inclusion in his piece of one of these "broad references":

(1)

…this [reference] was one of those attempts to address the general audience. This is actually a book for people who are scientifically knowledgeable but not necessarily researchers, you don't even need a degree in science to read this. So this is an attempt to give people references they can look up that are fairly general. There are a few references of that kind here. […] It's just a very broad book that talks about x in general in non-scientific terms.

I:

So this is one of these references that you wouldn't have included if it had been in a journal article?

CS6:

Oh definitely, yes. Absolutely. Yes. This is more like the kind of book I tell my students to read in the beginning, it's general reading to become more interested, know about the main questions in the area.[1]

In the following extract we see how CS6 feels it necessary to explain basic terminology and acknowledge its originator. He writes:

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[1] Repetitions and hesitations have been removed from the transcripts. Dots (…) indicate part of the dialogue has been omitted, and square brackets indicate that I have added information for the sake of clarity. Textual excerpts are anonymized by substituting letters like x, y, and z for salient information which would make identifying the author easier.

(2)

There are two basic types of x that can be generated by means of y: (1) …, and (2) … [reference]. While he makes it clear in his interview that this explanation and accompanying citation will be superfluous for certain sections of the readership, the breadth of his anticipated audience means it is necessary to include them:

(3)

For my basic audience in [name of subfield], people won't need this reference, because it's just one of those things that is so well accepted […] But people from outside the area would say ok, where are you getting these names from? So again for the broader audience this is, might be useful. For the specific audience they will say, why are you even mentioning [laughs] this? Similarly, CS6 feels obliged to cite sources for algorithms which he says he would not bother to do if he was writing a journal article targeted at this specific community. In other words, when writing for a narrower readership of specialists, these citations can be obliterated [MERTON, 1968].

Given that CS6 anticipates that readers from a number of disciplines will read his chapter, he says that he cites with these diverse audiences in mind, including references to works which one community knows well for the sake of another community, "bridging" the knowledge gap:

(4)

…people in [discipline x], for example, would be entirely familiar with this reference, I think everyone in [discipline x] has read this one. Not in [discipline y]. So this is one of those [references] trying to make a bridge….

CS6 also makes it clear that if he were writing for a more specialized audience, there would be a greater number of references included, and he would be more willing to reference those studies he sees as less "solid", more open to question regarding their findings and the way they were conducted:

(5)

because this is for a broad audience, I also felt that I needed to choose something that they can trust […]

I:

So you'd cite lots more [if you were writing for specialists]?

CS6:

Exactly. But because the audience was also fairly broad I figure well there's no need. […] If people are not from the field, they'll never even look at those other references. Presumably, then, CS6 feels a more knowledgeable audience has the ability to assess the worth of these contestable studies for themselves, making it less necessary for him to act as quality controller.

Although the journal article written by SOC1 is a lengthy piece of original research which appears in a prestigious international outlet, he has also done a considerable amount of introductory textbook writing, and he talks about the difference between

writing – and citing – in these two very different outlets. Whereas textbooks are written with undergraduates in mind, SOC1 jokes that journal articles are written "for the great and the good, and probably about five people". Thus, like CS6 above, SOC1 estimates the amount of background knowledge his readers are in possession of: in the case of his article, he presumes this is considerable; hence the citations can serve as "shorthand", in that it is not necessary to go into as much detail regarding the source's argument as he would if he were writing a textbook. He would also cite different sources:

(6)

… it would probably be Marx and Engels [who were cited in a textbook]. […] Or Aristotle or something. It would be people who the [undergraduate] reader may well have heard of. You know, it certainly wouldn't be [name of citee]. The citee SOC1 refers to at the end of this extract is in fact one of two key sources he engages with in his article. Hence purposes and citation patterns would differ markedly in a textbook. SOC1 also says that introductory textbooks and dictionaries[2] can place considerable constraints on the quantity of citees authors are permitted. In the case of dictionary entries, authors may be asked to cite no more than two people for students' ease of use ("they want to find the meaning of a concept very quickly. And the thinking is that they'll be put off by having this long list of references and people talking about other people's work".)

SOC1 has also been encouraged by textbook and dictionary publishers to include citees' first names. The publishers' rationale is to try to make the textbook/dictionary entries "less intimidating" and "more personal" for the undergraduate reader:

(7)

So for a textbook it would be, 'the sociologist Michel Foucault argues…'. So you're always trying to add a gloss to whoever's being introduced. So 'European philosopher Jacques Derrida'….

SOC1 prefers this practice anyway, even when writing journal articles, since he feels it helps to "personalize people". In the case of the article we are discussing, however, one of the reviewers said they found the use of first names an "annoying tic". Hence citees are normally referred to only by their surnames in the article.[3] In all of these outlets, then, SOC1's use/omission of sources' first names has been influenced by publishers and gatekeepers.

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[2] The type of dictionary SOC1 has in mind here provides less knowledgeable readers with an overview of important disciplinary concepts and terminology, e.g. *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology* [ABERCROMBIE & AL., 2006].

[3] See HARWOOD [2008] for more on authors' motivations for naming citees when using Footnote System conventions, and including citees' first names when using Harvard System conventions.

The effect of co-contributors' citations

SOC3 explains her chapter formed part of an edited collection in which every contributor was working with the same dataset. As one of the volume's editors, she intentionally omitted certain sources cited by other contributors:

(8)

So I knew in some other parts of the book other people were citing work that was important…. But it didn't need to be referenced in every chapter. So there were some things that we'd reference in the introduction or in some other chapters…that I didn't need to go into there, because it was somewhere else.

However, SOC3 feels one influential researcher has been under-cited in the volume, and seeks to rectify this:

(9)

So [name of citee] there, she wrote a book and a couple of articles that were really significant for me in the whole project, and I felt like there wasn't enough acknowledgement of the influence of her work in the whole book that we produced. And so I just wanted to give her more of a place, in a way.

Parsimonious citing policy

SOC3 reports that she and her co-editors agreed they "wanted the book to go easy on citations", to ensure authors devoted the space available to reporting and discussing their own research and original data, rather than the literature. Hence she makes it clear there are places where she only cites one person where many others could have been cited also, and that other contributors' citations were reduced/omitted for the same reason during the editorial process.

Because CS6's work straddles a number of disciplines, he publishes in outlets in a number of different fields, and says he has observed disciplinary differences in citation styles, with some disciplines customarily citing more than others. Hence certain outlets and communities require him to be more parsimonious than others:

(10)

Usually people in [discipline X] – and because I wander from various fields within the sciences I can see the difference there – tend to cite less references. …they don't mention who is the author of the idea or the terminology, and things like that. People in [discipline Y] tend to be a bit more rigorous about mentioning pieces of work. And in my case it's always tricky because I try to be as rigorous as I can, but sometimes a lot of what I publish is for the [discipline X] audiences. So I have to be economical as well because basically they won't bother to read it, they won't bother to look. So to me there's always a bit of a problem.

Festschrifts

SOC4 says his article, and the citation patterns it features, are "slightly special". This is because the article will form part of a special issue festschrift, with the unsurprising result that the honoree of the volume figures very prominently in SOC4's piece and is cited "more often than he would normally be".

The festschrift outlet also explains a request from the publishers for SOC4 to "go easy" on his criticisms of another contributor to the volume:

(11)

…they didn't actually censor it but they said 'go easy'. Because the whole idea is to be rather sort of friendly…And since it wasn't directly related to the theme of the paper, then I did modify. But I still made the point, but in gentler language.

In addition, SOC4 says citations help him criticise the honoree of the festschrift "tactfully". While he wants to avoid being "dishonest" by failing to acknowledge the weaknesses of the honoree's work, he speaks of the "affection" in which this figure is held by the community. Hence SOC4 uses other people's critical citations to project his own disquiet:

(12)

…rather than me put the boot in I can quote somebody else and say 'well whether this [critic of the honoree's work] is right or wrong, this is what they said'. …that is the tactfulness of citation, really.[4]

Lastly, the festschrift outlet has also affected the way in which SOC4 refers to his citees. Although most citees are referred to by their surnames only, the honoree's first name is also included. Indeed, his first name is referred to in a diminutive form because this is the way people knew him, being a "gesture of affectionate friendship".

Outlet's favoured research paradigm

Both SOC2 and SOC4 distinguish between outlets which predominantly favour quantitative or qualitative work, saying this would affect their selection of sources. Here is SOC2 describing the "sophisticated" quantitative work favoured by certain American journals:

(13)

…with major journals in the US…if I went for something like *The American Journal of Sociology*, *The American Sociological Review*, they lean towards quantitative work…. And the quantitative work is far more sophisticated, I think, and far more mathematical than we publish in Britain. So I would be conscious of that substantively, I think. Alternatively, for a journal that focuses perhaps more on qualitative work, social

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[4] All of this ties in well with the reasons MACROBERTS & MACROBERTS [1984] put forward for the "toning down" of the negational reference.

problems, I would perhaps lean more towards the direction of that kind of article, where I am using qualitative data to illustrate the arguments much more.

Audience location

SOC2 is clear he chose to cite one of the sources in his article because he anticipated it would be familiar to his (predominantly American) audience:

(14)

…I know that was a prominent source used on qualitative research in the United States and in training graduate students. And so this had the American readership in mind for that. I think if I was writing for this for a British journal I might have used something else. And so it was to try to speak some of the same language as the American readers. Before we started looking at his article, SOC2 had begun the interview adamant that the outlet had had "absolutely no bearing at all" on his citation selection. He has therefore changed his tune, and is conscious he has done so. Later on in the interview, he again notices he has cited an American source:

(15)

…citing the US Department of Justice, I think in this case here, I'm contradicting now what I said to you earlier [laughs] but I guess because I never thought consciously about this, but I did have an American readership in mind for this journal. So not that the journal specifically influenced my citing, but the location of the journal and the readership of the journal…clearly did in that case

I:

Right. The fact that you cited something American? […] Rather than, say, an authoritative British source?

SOC2:

Yeah, yeah, very much so. Similarly, SOC6 chose to cite a certain researcher because he anticipates the readers of the journal will be familiar with this figure, since he is from the same part of the world as most of the audience. Interestingly, SOC6 is explicit that this citee is "less influential" than some of the other citees, and that his work "doesn't fit neatly" into the classifications used by other cited authors. However, these considerations are apparently overridden:

(16)

…he's a less influential figure than the others, and his classification doesn't fit neatly…. But he's a [geographical region] writer, and it's a [geographical region] journal. And so I thought it was important to contextualize what I'm saying in terms of writers who would be particularly familiar to readers of this journal.
SOC6 later mentions other authors cited partly for the same reason.

Space restrictions

Both CS1 and CS2 make it clear they were constrained by the outlet's space limitations. Hence CS1 uses "signposting" citations which direct readers to relevant sources for fuller explanations when "I had an argument to develop and I didn't have enough space" (see [HARWOOD, IN PRESS] for more on signposting citations). The conference proceedings outlet can be particularly problematic in this regard, as CS6 explains in the following extract:

(17)

I do find myself sometimes, especially for conferences, when there's not much room to squeeze in references, I say ok I'll just stick in the more basic ones, and I'll have to leave some stuff uncited. Space constraints were particularly pressing in SOC5's case, because the reviewers of her article asked her to include a number of additional points which she had not made in her initial submission, further reducing her room for manoeuvre. The outlet is very strict about ensuring manuscripts are within word limits, including reference lists in the word count:

(18)

Well I got a 'revise and resubmit', so I think in order to respond to some of the comments and amplify some of the things I therefore lost references in order to make up the words. [...] And also probably if I'm trying to keep words down, it helps to keep citing the same things a little bit [laughs]. Compared to drawing on a completely new source, I might as well use one that's made his arguments powerfully and is already in my word count. [...] So just one reference can add 20 words. Once again, then, here is evidence that the outlet's influence can result in more selective citation than an author may wish for.

Publication speed

CS3 included a section at the end of his piece which described work he planned to carry out in the future, which he justified on the grounds that there is a relatively quick turnaround between submission and publication in the case of this particular outlet:

(19)

...this journal article was published fairly quickly. So we submitted it in June last year, and it has been online since August this year, so it's only a year. So that means that what [we] say here about future work is still relevant. Now if you look at other journal articles where it's sort of two, three, four years then I guess they won't write that.

Unlike CS3, CS6 had to wait a considerable time before his piece was published. Hence CS6 reveals that the fact that his citations are not as up to date as they could be is down to the time lag between his writing the chapter and the publication of the volume:

(20)

…this chapter took three years to actually [appear]. […] So as far as references are concerned, if I was given the time and the chance I would have updated some references here, I would have added quite a few.

Discussion

The data reported here remind us of how important it is for academic writers to consider their audience's needs. Readers may be more or less knowledgeable about the subject matter under discussion, because they are student neophytes, or because they are experts in a different discipline, and writers must attempt to anticipate this level of knowledge, which is likely to vary depending upon the publication outlet. THOMPSON & THETELA [1995] and THOMPSON [2001] see writing as a two-way dialogue between (imagined) reader and writer, whereby writers solicitously attend to the audience. Good writers are said to try to second-guess readers' reactions to the text, anticipating any difficulties in comprehending the message and clearing these up. As NYSTRAND [1989] puts it, rather than consisting of a one-way process where writers simply "act" on readers,

It is more accurate to say that the shape and direction of discourse are configured by the communicative need of writers to balance their own purposes and intentions with the expectations and needs of readers. [NYSTRAND, 1989 : 75]

The skilled writer anticipates potential *trouble sources*, points at which writer-reader communication breakdown may occur, and ensures the dangers are minimized. For instance, new or unexpected information will be accompanied by "an elaboration, perhaps an example or a definition" [NYSTRAND, 1989: 78]. Some of CS6's citations discussed above can be understood in this way, since he provides brief explanations or glosses of terminology or algorithms, before signposting less knowledgeable readers to sources which the writer believes do a good job of explaining a concept or a definition in detail. Hence there is a sense in which citations can be seen as didactic devices, signalling where readers should go for further help should the explanations provided by the author not be sufficient. While the presence of such didactic citations may be unsurprising in SOC1's undergraduate textbooks and dictionaries, however, they may also be necessary in outlets intended for a multi-disciplinary readership, like CS6's book chapter. Informants in BROOKS' [1985, 1986] and WHITE & WANG'S [1997] studies similarly alluded to this didactic function of citations.

Authors met their anticipated audience's needs in other ways, too, SOC6 citing figures from the same part of the world as his readers, and SOC2 citing a source he is aware American readers will be familiar with.

This study also reminds us of the effects that outlets' editors, reviewers, house styles and space restrictions exert on writers' prose in general and their citations in particular.[5] This is hardly an original observation, but one whose importance can sometimes be forgotten or understated, particularly when citation analyses are carried out using content or context analysis only, where researchers attempt to determine citation functions and motivations without consulting authors. Such consultation is required because interviewees make the researcher aware of factors which would otherwise have remained obscure (e.g. [BROOKS, 1985]). Consider, for instance, SOC5's struggle with the outlet's word limit. While this word limit is public knowledge, the content/context analyst would not appreciate how this limit has impacted on SOC5's citation habits and caused her to rely on a more restricted range of citees than she would have liked.[6] Similarly, if the content analyst was a sociologist him/herself (a big "if": the content analyst cannot reasonably be expected to be well-versed in every discipline s/he wishes to study!), and had examined the other chapters in the edited volume in which SOC3's piece appeared, s/he may have speculated that SOC3 omitted certain obvious sources because other contributors had cited them – but would be unable to dis/confirm this without consulting SOC3. This is why interviews, preferably discourse-based so as to help informants recall details, can shed light on why writing (and citing) ends up the way it does. Indeed, as we have seen in SOC3's case above, interviews can also reveal how authors' writing/citing practices as manifest in the published text do not always match their wishes – recall that SOC1 wanted to include citees' first names, and that CS6 would happily have updated and expanded his list of references had he been given the chance. While questionnaires can be used to consult authors (see, for instance, [CASE & HIGGINS, 2000; SHADISH & AL., 1995; SNYDER & BONZI, 1998; VINKLER, 1987]), the advantage of discourse-based interviews is that they elicit far more lengthy responses about citation behaviour. In addition, by considering each citation in turn, informants are obliged to reflect on an aspect of their behaviour which may have been unconscious. Hence SOC2 begins his interview quite confident that his citations have not been affected by his outlet, but is forced to reconsider when examining his piece. The researcher can also question authors about things in the text that strike him/her as interesting or puzzling either before or during interview.

The interview-based approach I have adopted here inevitably suffers from a number of weaknesses, discussed and (partly) rebutted in [HARWOOD, IN PRESS].

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[5] An anonymous referee pointed out other ways in which reviewers (or potential reviewers) may have an impact on an author's citations. Reviewers may suggest additional works for authors to cite; and in an attempt to secure favourable reviews, authors may cite those people they believe will look favourably on their work, given that journal editors often select reviewers who feature in an author's reference list.
[6] This finding also ties in with VINKLER'S [1987] questionnaire-based study of why authors do not cite certain sources which found that 20% of instances of non-citation in Hungarian chemists' papers were caused by "artificial restriction of the number of references in a paper" (p. 67).

These include the reliability of informant recall: we cannot be sure how accurately writers will recall their citation motivations, despite the fact I asked informants to comment on some of their most recent publications. However, as we saw in the case of SOC2, the advantage of the discourse-based interview format is that it obliges informants to talk about, and reconsider, *specific* instances of citing behaviour, thus discouraging vague generalizations. Despite the limitations of interview-based approaches, then (see also [CASE & HIGGINS, 2000; CHUBIN & MOITRA, 1975; SHADISH & AL., 1995]), it is worth reiterating that other methods of investigation suffer from weaknesses of their own.

Conclusions

In addition to the publication outlet, a host of other factors help account for citing behaviour, including the writer's disciplinary conventions, the type of research s/he is conducting (e.g. empirical/conceptual), and his/her beliefs about (in)appropriate citation behaviour (see [HARWOOD, IN PRESS]). Indeed, White & Wang's agricultural economist informants [WANG & WHITE, 1999; WHITE & WANG, 1997] mentioned 28 different criteria potentially affecting their citation decisions (see also [BONZI & SYNDER, 1991; BROOKS, 1985, 1986; CASE & HIGGINS, 2000; EDGE, 1979; SHADISH & AL., 1995; VINKLER, 1987] for other explanations of citation functions and motivations). The findings reported here emerged from a modest piece of qualitative research, and future, larger scale studies could seek to determine exactly how generalizable or typical my informants' responses are. However, these findings show the outlet can be one of a number of influences helping to account for the non-standard [CRONIN, 1984; CRONIN & SHAW, 2002], "complex and multidimensional" [BORGMAN & FURNER, 2002] nature of citing.

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