

**Citers' use of citees' names: findings from a qualitative interview-based study**

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**Abstract**

This article focuses on why academic writers in computer science and sociology sometimes supply the reader with more details of citees' names than they need to: why citers name citees when using the Footnote System, and why citers include citees' first names when using the Harvard System. These questions were investigated as part of a qualitative interview-based study of citation behaviour. A number of motivations were advanced by informants, including the desire for stylistic elegance, for informality, to make the text accessible to less informed readers, to mark a close relationship between citer and citee, to alert readers to a little known citee, and to acknowledge seminal sources. In a number of cases, however, informants were unable to offer any motivation, reporting that their behaviour had been unconscious or accidental. The study underlines Cronin's (1984, 2005) argument that citation is a private and subjective process, and shows that interview-based studies afford the analyst insights into writers' citing practices which alternative methodologies cannot.

**Introduction**

Why do academic writers who are following Footnote System conventions sometimes name citees (e.g. "Smith [2] has developed the method we adopt") when they can avoid doing so ("[2] has developed the method we adopt", or "We follow the method developed by [2]")? And why do writers following Harvard System conventions sometimes include citees' first names as well as surnames (e.g. "John Smith (1980) has developed the method we adopt")? These questions may not be the first which come to mind when

conducting an investigation into citing behaviour, but they arose nevertheless during 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, under review). The semi-structured interview format I was using enabled me to ask about these issues involving citees' names, and the responses are reported here, including, where appropriate, anonymized excerpts from informants' texts. A number of motivations are advanced, and the study underlines Cronin's (1984, 2005) argument that citation is a private and subjective process, and that authors' motivations cannot straightforwardly be read off by the researcher using a context/content analytic method.

### **Methodology and Procedure**

Rather than try to interpret citation motivations from an etic perspective, that is, through the eyes of the analyst, this study provides an emic account of authors' motivations, that is, seeing things through the informants' eyes, attempting to "catch the subjective meanings placed on situations by participants" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000: 139) rather than by the interviewer. The study was designed in this way to circumvent the limitations of content/context analysis, which tends to attribute citation motivations to informants which derive from the literature and/or from the researcher's intuitions rather than from the citers themselves (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 et 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 (under review) involved an analysis of texts from two contrasting disciplines, computer science and sociology, because one of its aims was to analyze 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 which struck me as potentially significant, either as I read their texts in advance or as a result of their responses during our discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> All computer science informants were male, as were four of the sociologists (SOC1, 2, 4, and 6).

## Findings<sup>2</sup>

### *Stylistic Elegance*

At times the computer scientists named citees because they felt their sentences read better by doing so. Hence CS5 wrote “The method proposed by Smith [8]<sup>3</sup> used...modelling..., with 72%-80% success” and “Jones [9] proposed a method using...modelling...to identify individuals...”, as he made clear:

“...it was the way I’ve written the sentence. I felt “The method proposed by [8]” would not be so nice. So I just mentioned the name there. [...] It’s more like the way that I actually wrote the sentence, rather than for any other specific reason.”

CS1 expresses similar sentiments. The first sentence of his article reads “In their seminal article, Smith & Jones [1] developed...”, and he says it would have been grammatically “rather awkward” to have written this in such a way that the citees’ names were omitted (e.g. “In their seminal article [1] developed...”).<sup>4</sup>

### *Stylistic Variation and Informality*

CS2’s co-authored Footnote System article features self-citations which include the authors’ names, as well as those which do not, referring only to “they” and “the authors”. A desire for stylistic variation and informality lies behind these choices. CS2 writes:

To avoid x, Smith & Jones [1] made use of... First, they assumed that [...] Second, they argued that [...] A further development was made by the authors in [2], where they....

He explains:

“I know that a lot of people will keep on saying, “Smith & Jones” [i.e. CS2’s name/his co-author’s name] but I just like to introduce things like “they” or “authors” and so on to give a little bit of variety. I think if [the names] kept on coming like that, specially within the space of half a page, one might say from a literacy point of view it’s not overly impressive, and I’m not overly keen on keeping blowing the trumpet of this pair of names. I’d rather just write in a slightly more informal way.”

Although CS2 wishes to avoid what he sees as an excessively self-promotional tenor (“I just have a personal problem about keeping on mentioning my name in a paper I’ve written”), naming the authors varies the style of the self-citations. And as we shall see below, CS2 has an additional motivation for naming his co-author.

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<sup>2</sup> What follows is an account of all noteworthy extracts centring on citers’ use of citees’ names, rather than a few illustrative examples.

<sup>3</sup> “Smith” and “Jones” are used to anonymize the extracts. Numbers in square brackets [1] denote the superscript numbering used to refer to citees in the Footnote System.

<sup>4</sup> A reviewer noted that when writing for a journal which uses the Footnote System, s/he sometimes includes citees’ names. However, when citing “a string of references”, s/he omitted names altogether. Presumably this is another instance of an author’s citing patterns being influenced by the desire for stylistic elegance. As the reviewer points out, the issue of how citing single versus multiple references affects naming practices is not addressed by informants, but is another avenue which could be explored.

### *Other Stylistic Preferences: Integral and Non-Integral Citations*

SOC3 explains she uses her citees' first names in her Harvard System piece "when they're in the sentence.... Most people don't [get their first names mentioned] because [the citees are] just referenced in brackets.". SOC3 therefore includes first names when she uses *integral* citations, those which include the citee in the sentence and play an explicit grammatical role (e.g. *Pierre Brie (1988) showed that the moon is made of cheese*), while sticking to surnames only when using *non-integral* citations, those where the citee appears in parentheses and plays no grammatical role (e.g. *It has been shown that the moon is made of cheese (Brie 1988)*) (Swales, 1990: 148-151. For more on integral and non-integral citations, see Charles, 2006; Hyland, 1999; Thompson, 2005). The following are some relevant extracts from SOC3's chapter which demonstrate she does in fact practise what she preaches:

Indeed, in John Smith's description...

Clearly there is evidence here of what John Smith calls...

Indeed, one of the most self-evident ways in which [concept x] is talked about is in terms of y (Smith) [i.e. citee's family name only].

### *Making the Text Accessible*

SOC1's tendency to include first names in his Harvard System articles has developed out of writing undergraduate textbooks. He says some of these textbook publishers like authors to include citees' first names to make the writing less intimidating for the undergraduate readership. However, he feels it is appropriate to use the same style when writing journal articles because he hopes undergraduates will read these pieces, too ("it's not just going to be highbrow scholars...who are going to be reading these things. You would hope undergraduates would read them as well and that they should be accessible"). SOC1 feels referring to citees by surname only is an "arcane academic practice [which] actually mystifies the whole process to people who are outside it". Furthermore, he likes the way first names "personalize" the citees. And SOC3 also feels the use of first names makes academic prose "less remote":

"...I quite like it, it just sounds a bit more informal as well...I like it generally when people talk or write about someone else's work, and engage with that person rather than just write it in a sort of more remote way, just a surname...".

However, one of SOC1's reviewers said they found his use of first names an "annoying tic", causing him to omit them from his revised manuscript. Although one citee's first name is retained, SOC1 explains

that this was not intentional, and that it must have “slipped through” unnoticed by the copy editor.<sup>5</sup> As we shall see, other informants also reported accidental use of citees’ first names.

### *Revealing the Citer’s Politics*

SOC3 says first names can provide useful information about the citees’ gender:

“...usually it shows the [citee’s] sex...and it also lets the reader know if there’s any...kind of skewing of all the literature you’re reading. Say you’re writing a piece about gender..., and all the literature you’re citing is from men. If you use the first name and you see that, the reader then thinks “That’s interesting, I wonder why they didn’t use any of the material on gender more broadly, written by women”.... So I like that as a general sort of policy.”

Hence SOC3 feels the use of citees’ first names can reveal something of “the politics” of the citing author.

### *Marking the Relationship between the Citer and Citee*

The fact that SOC4’s piece is to be part of a festschrift has affected the way in which he refers to his citees. The person at the centre of the festschrift is referred to by his first name as well as his surname. Indeed, his first name is written in a diminutive form because this is what colleagues call him, and is also “a gesture of affectionate friendship”. And in another case, a source’s first name is mentioned because she is a close associate of SOC4’s, having co-authored a number of pieces with him: referring to her by her surname only would feel “odd”. However, most citees in SOC4’s article are referred to by their surnames only.

### *Alerting Readers to (Unknown) Source*

We saw previously how CS2 named himself and his co-author in his text despite not being “keen on blowing his own trumpet”. At the same time, however, CS2 wished “to bring [his co-author’s] name to the forefront, so that he gets recognition”:

“There is also another thought in the back of my mind, and that is that my co-author here needs all the publicity that he can get. Because of situations like promotion where he is and so on, he needs to get publications, he needs to get recognized in the community.”

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<sup>5</sup> A reviewer also pointed out that certain journals’ style sheets may stipulate whether sources’ first names can be used. While this could obviously affect naming practices, none of my informants raised this issue. Another reviewer suggested I added a few words about the role of copy editors. It has been noted (Barzun 1986) that some copy editors are more willing to change (grammatically correct) text than others in the interests of appropriate style (as they see it). It is therefore conceivable that even if his reviewers had let SOC1’s use of citees’ first names go unremarked, his copy editor may have omitted them later on. The point is that unless authors are questioned about their texts, it will not be possible for the researcher to ascertain the extent to which it is the author him/herself who is responsible for the way citees are referred to.

CS5 also names two citees in an attempt to bring their work to prominence. Here he writes about the method he employed for his study:

The...signals are recorded from subjects while they are being exposed to a single stimulus, in this case pictures of objects chosen from Smith & Jones' picture set [1].

He explains that this source is from another discipline, and he therefore anticipates it will be unknown to many of his readers. CS5 feels his community should be alerted to this "important" work, and naming the researchers will help foreground it.

#### *Acknowledging Seminal Sources*

CS6 sometimes names the authors of seminal sources. His chapter includes a historical overview of the field he is discussing, and he includes the sentence "...little else was done until the late 1940s, when Smith & Jones applied x...[1].":

I: "...these were the first two examples in the paper of you actually naming people.

CS6: Yes..., this was deliberate, because these are like the popes or the fathers of the area."

Similarly, CS1 reports that he sometimes names sources which are "very central" to his work.

#### *Responding to Reviewers' Requests*

CS5 indicates that he may name sources to show reviewers he has responded to their requests to add a reference: naming the citee makes it more noticeable that the author has taken the reviewer's comments on board. This emerged when I asked CS5 why he had named his source in "it was shown by Smith [1] that arithmetic tasks exhibit a higher power spectrum...":

I: "...was there any reason why you decided to name X?

CS5: I'm not very sure why I did this but perhaps it could be one of the reviewers actually mentioned about this [reference] [...] so just to make it more obvious that I was actually doing what the referee wanted, so maybe I put that name in or something. It could have been that."

Note, however, how CS5 hedges his responses: it may well be that (i) the citee was named unconsciously and/or unintentionally; or (ii) CS5 can no longer recall his motivations.

I now discuss more data which suggests citees are sometimes named unconsciously.

#### *Unconscious, Arbitrary, &/or Inexplicable Motivations: Accident, not Design*

It would be misleading to give the impression that my informants were always able to explain their motivations for naming sources or including citees' first names. CS5 stresses throughout his interview that

his citation practices are largely unconscious, and he puts this down to the disciplinary culture, drawing a distinction between the sciences and the social sciences (including my own field of applied linguistics). He feels researchers in the latter fields are more conscious of the impact their rhetorical choices have on readers:

“...there’s a real difference between the technical people and the language people [...] Sometimes I’ve [given a] paper that we wrote to [a linguist] to go through it. And then she’ll be asking me all these kinds of questions [laughs] “why do you want to put this here? Why do you want to cite it this way? Why are you citing...?” and all that. So I guess you have some standards and methods, ok for this purpose I’m going to do this, for this, for this. Whereas we don’t actually do that, you know, we just want to get the paper published, we want to get the technical information out. So we don’t tend to actually focus so much on the reasons for doing it.

I: Yeah. And so do you think that citing people is often an unconscious thing, or...?

CS5: Yes, that’s what I’m trying to say, yeah. Perhaps it’s not true for everyone, but it’s true for me. It seems to be like it’s a very unconscious kind of thing...”

CS5’s uncertainty is illustrated by the following. I asked him to account for the first time he names citees in his introduction (“Reviews of some of these...developments...are given by Smith & Jones [1] and Jones & Smith [2].”). He begins by confidently providing his motivation—to highlight the influence and importance of the work of the named sources, and to associate his own work with it and shine in its reflected glory (Gilbert 1977):

I: “So in the introduction, you’ve got numbers. However, on the next page you name people and I wondered whether you could comment on that?

CS5: Yes, definitely. Because these two people are the real experts who started this work so many years back. So I thought by mentioning their name that actually gives some weightage [sic] or something to the whole paper. Yeah.”

However, CS5 is at a loss to explain why he has cited the same source earlier on in his introduction *without* naming the citees:

I: [reading] “...the volume and pace of...research has grown tremendously [1,2]”. So my question there is, why did you name them later on when this is the same research?

CS5: [...] it would be difficult for me to answer that question, I guess there’s no specific reason for that. [...] I guess you know that’s why it’s actually very interesting when you talk to someone from a completely different discipline, they actually can pick out something which seems to be so common.... So since you brought all this up you know I should remember all these points when I cite in future... [laughs]”

By this point, then, CS5 is highlighting how his choices are often made unconsciously. Again he is highlighting the differing rhetorical awareness of scientists and social scientists.

Other informants also indicated that some of their naming of citees was more a matter of accident than design. We have seen how SOC3 uses citees' first names when the source is integral. However, she is aware that her key sources are not always cited in this way; hence their first names may not be mentioned whereas other, more peripheral authors' full names *are* mentioned. She re-examines her text, confirming this:

“But then the question would be why did I formulate the sentences in those ways where some people get a name and other people don't. And I don't know if there's really a general answer to that.”

And in fact the source SOC3 describes as “the most important” does not occupy an integral position anywhere, and is therefore never referred to by her first name.

It will be recalled that SOC4 intentionally provides first names for two of his citees. However, in all other cases where SOC4 refers to citees' first names, he says he can state “categorically” that this was unconscious. For instance, a reference to *Clifford Geertz* “just happened: I've no explanation”; and another researcher's first name was included “without any prior thought”.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, while there was only one instance in SOC6's lengthy piece where sources' first names are used, he reports that this was “purely accidental”, and that if he had spotted it, he would have probably omitted the first names.

The final example considered here is similarly accidental. CS6 names a number of citees at the close of his chapter, and says this occurred because he was cutting and pasting from earlier work where he has used the Harvard System, and the source names have (mistakenly) not been reformatted.

## **Discussion**

The findings reported here support Cronin's (1984, 2005) and Borgman & Furner's (2002) claims that individuals' citation habits are private, subjective, and opaque. It is clear that a content analyst would not be able to deduce why the authors in my study named citees in the way that they did with any degree of accuracy or confidence. Accounts of citing behaviour must therefore include input and explanations from authors. While questionnaire-based studies (e.g. Brooks 1985; Shadish et al 1995) solicit such accounts, the advantage of the semi-structured interview-based study is that the interviewer can seek fuller explanations and question authors closely about citing practices which questionnaire respondents may not have thought worth bringing to the researcher's attention, or may not have thought about very much (or at all) themselves.

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<sup>6</sup> The citing of Clifford Geertz is not anonymized here because Geertz is so widely cited in sociological circles that there is no risk of revealing the identity of the citer.

The methodological approach employed here obviously suffers, as do all interview-based studies, from a number of weaknesses (discussed in detail in Harwood (under review)), including the problem of informant recall: although I discussed relatively recent publications with informants, as a reviewer pointed out, time lags between writing, submission and publication are considerable, making recollection difficult. However, the discourse-based interview format at least results in informants discussing citations in a specific text, rather than their citing patterns in general, and obliges them to re-read their writing. This should go some way towards discouraging unreflexive responses.

Another weakness associated with interview-based studies is that some informants may be more willing and/or able to introspect than others. Providing a full account of every citation in their text meant fairly lengthy interviews for the informants (lasting between 45 minutes and two hours). More relevant here, though, is the issue of informants' ability to introspect: it will be recalled that CS5, in particular, found himself at a loss to explain some of his naming practices. Although such data can be used to argue that the interview-based method is an unreliable way of investigating citation behaviour, it illustrates how academic writers often cite unconsciously, and do not think through why they do things in a certain way.

### **Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research**

There is a need for further interview-based studies of this type to enhance our understanding of the range of citation functions and motivations. Such studies could feature larger sample sizes and should examine academic writing in a range of disciplines and across a range of genres (e.g. journal articles, book chapters, conference proceedings) to determine the extent to which there are inter-/intra-disciplinary similarities and differences (see Harwood (under review) for results relating to this issue on the rhetorical functions of citations; and Harwood (forthcoming) for results relating to how citing behaviour is influenced by the type of publication outlet in which their work appears). White and Wang's (1997) longitudinal interview-based design could also be used. An alternative approach, suggested by Cronin (2005), would be to investigate *readers'* responses to authors' citations. For instance, we do not know the extent to which authors' signals to readers are (i) understood; and (ii) acted upon. It will be recalled, for instance, that CS6 intentionally named seminal citees; but how many readers understood his signal? Readers' preferences could also be investigated: do readers prefer (first) names to be included in citations? Do different disciplinary communities have different preferences? Or can any other reader characteristics (e.g. age, gender, experience) offer a partial explanation for such preferences as may become apparent?

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