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The role of ‘that’ in managing averrals and attributions in post-graduate academic legal texts



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ABSTRACT

This study examines how post-graduate law students use the node ‘that’ in managing attributions and averrals in academic legal writing. Studies in this field have tended to concentrate on either averral or attribution, but less on how student writers formulate the two when writing in a discipline. Understanding the roles students take when dealing with both aspects provides an important insight into the epistemology of writing at this academic level. The results showed it was possible to identify the generic categories of attributions and their frequencies. In addition, it was possible to describe the constructions favoured by students when making averrals, along with the rhetorical functions such constructions achieved. These features revealed varying degrees of critical stance, depending on which generic external source was being reported, or which language construction was being used for the students’ own propositions. The students’ use of syntax also followed distinct patterns, depending on whether an attribution or averral was being made. Awareness of such behaviours should help students, and in particular graduates of non-Common Law legal systems, to better understand how to manage the reporting of facts and opinions when writing in English.

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1. Introduction

One of the key requisites and challenges for students of academic writing is the management of both external authorities and the students’ own views in a text. [Sinclair \(1986, 1988\)](#) referred to these phenomena as *attribution* and *averral*, the former being a proposition from another source or author (e.g. *Elbow (1981) pointed out that ...*), and the latter being a proposition of the writer of the text (e.g. *another related reason may be that ...*). The importance of communicating personal views, and the work or views of others, is reflected in the interest in the topic shown by researchers. [Thompson and Ye \(1991\)](#), [Hyland \(2000\)](#), [Becher and Trowler \(2001\)](#), [Hyland and Tse \(2005\)](#), [Shaw and Vassileva \(2009\)](#) and [Molino \(2010\)](#) explored and defined the conventions of attribution and averral in the context of academic writing. A common view which emerged from this research was the necessity to frame one’s arguments in an objective and impersonal style, which was derived both from a disciplinary community’s epistemological beliefs and academic writing traditions. This style sounds very similar to [Geertz’s \(1988\)](#) author-evacuated texts, which perhaps indicates a constancy in academic writing relative to other changes in writing brought about by the electronic age. This last point was most recently highlighted by [Pérez-Llantada \(2013\)](#), when she noted that the linguistic profile of the online “Article of the Future” (p.233) genre resembles that of the more traditional journal

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research article genre. However, constancy does not mean uniformity. Reporting on what others have said or done and maintaining a personal distance when expressing one's own views manifests itself differently for each discipline.

That disciplinary differences exist for reporting sources and establishing personal stance has been well documented (Ädel & Garretson, 2006; Charles, 2003; Holmes & Nesi, 2009; Hyland, 2000; Thompson, 2005). The rhetorical functions of citations have been highlighted by Petrić and Harwood (2013) for post-graduate management texts, and Samraj (2013) for ecology Master's theses and journal articles. Differences have been sought between expert and novice writers, though the degrees of difference can vary: Samraj's study found citation practices to be largely similar between Master's theses and journal articles, while Mansourizadeh and Ahmad's (2011) engineering students displayed a less sophisticated use when compared to published authors. The issue of citation according to genre has been addressed by Thompson (2005) for PhD theses, by Charles (2006) and Samraj (2008) for Master's theses, Lee (2010) for undergraduate essays, and Myers (1990), Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) and Hyland (2000) for research articles. Even genre part variation has been identified by Thompson (2005), who noted a higher level of citation activity in the introduction and discussion sections of PhD theses, a finding echoed by Basturkmen's (2009) study of the results section in Master's dissertations, in which she found that students foregrounded articulations and findings from the literature far more prominently than what the students themselves had produced. With regard to averral, Pérez-Llantada (2009) identified three main constructions by which writers are able to bring their own propositions to a text, 'I' subject patterns, 'we' subject patterns, and agentless constructions. The distance between the writer and the proposition is at a minimum with the 'I' pattern and greatest when agentless patterns are used. Agentless patterns include the use of the passive form, inanimate subjects and anticipatory 'it' constructions, which best give the impression of Molino's objectivity and impersonal style. Indeed, Fløttum, Dahl, and Kinn (2006) were of the view that the personification of inanimate nouns enabled the writer to adopt a weaker presence in the text and hence conform to the norms of scientific language (e.g. 'I have identified' v. 'this study has identified'). For Hunston and Sinclair (2000), the pattern 'it + linking verb + adjective + clause' (e.g. it is interesting that) was typically used to evaluate; Thompson (2009) also investigated the use of this same pattern in history and engineering undergraduate assignments and found that, while both disciplines used the pattern to evaluate different processes, its increased use by students over time implied a growing ability to express judgements in an authoritative manner. Groom's (2005) analysis of the 'it' pattern led to the conclusion that it enabled a writer to comment on the adequacy, desirability, difficulty, expectation, importance or validity of a proposition. Molino (2010) also analyzed passive forms (e.g. 'the data was divided into four periods'), noting their role in allowing the student writer to enter the text.

Notwithstanding the diversity of tools one can use to fashion an averral or attribution, Biber (2006) simplified the averral-attribution divide by proposing that in most cases, if there is no explicit attribution, then it can be assumed that the view expressed is that of the writer. Nevertheless, even when dealing with explicit attributions, if one considers the roles the writer can take when reporting, such as Leech's (1983) factive, non-factive and counter-factive stances¹ and also Hunston's (2010) list of means by which responsibility for a proposition can be taken (*via* reporting verbs, but also adverbs, adverbials, modal auxiliaries and evidentials), then such an active role required of the writer would lend credence to Sinclair's (1986) view that all attributions were fundamentally embedded in averrals. Indeed, this 'writer as conductor' role fits with Fløttum, Kinn, Dahl, et al.'s (2006: 205) "polyphonic drama" which takes place in a text; writers not only interact with readers through a variety of roles, but may assign different roles to other sources in the text, too. With regard to the use of other sources, Hyland (2009) pointed out that attribution is not simply a case of reproduction of previous texts; on the contrary, the author must decide on the degree of alignment that he or she wishes to adopt toward these texts. While one might separate attribution from averral as the division between the writer's voice and those of others, ultimately it is the writer that has to synthesise attributions to create a perspective that satisfies the requirements of the disciplinary community, while at the same time developing a personal perspective. Therefore, for the disciplinary neophyte, and indeed for the applied linguist as well who must act as tutor, it is fundamental to understand and manage this aspect of student writing.

Relatively few studies have investigated both averral and attribution in the same texts. Hyland (2000) looked at how metadiscoursal features manifested themselves in textbooks, though attribution and averral were illustrated according to categories of hard- and soft-knowledge disciplines, rather than describing the typical practices of an individual discipline. Thompson (2005) looked at averral and attribution in PhD theses in three disciplines, but focused on interpreting given passages from the corpus with a view to identifying the types of citations and averrals being used, along with their frequency according to each chapter. Hyland and Tse (2005) also investigated the evaluative function of 'that' in a multi-disciplinary study of expert and student written abstracts, though the results focus was on the types of evaluation being made. Given an abstract's short length and role as only a small part of a bigger genre, the results of their study could not be said to represent a more generalised attribution and averral activity in those disciplines. Dessen-Hammouda (2014) also included attribution among disciplinary indexes used to measure voice, though again, the category of 'citation of other sources' was not illustrated in the article's sample case study.

¹ Factive stance: the writer accepts the source's proposition by reporting it with verbs such as *confirm/demonstrate/establish*

Non-factive stance: the writer shows neutrality regarding the correctness of the source's proposition by reporting it with verbs such as *propose/observe/describe*

Counter-factive stance: the writer does not agree with the source's proposition by reporting it with verbs such as *overlook/confuse/misunderstand*.

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