

‘Credibility’ through Attribution to Sources in Newspaper Opinion Discourse across Cultures

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Abstract

The discourse of newspaper editorials is meant for opinion building in the readers through the use of argumentation. The act of convincing audience requires the provision of opinions with factual data often carried out by attributing ideas to various sources for building credibility. This cross-cultural research looks at the strategy of attribution to sources for argument building in Pakistani, Malaysian and American newspaper editorials. Various forms and functions of attribution are uncovered. Attribution is found to play a significant role in fulfilling argumentation goals in opinion discourse. The findings of the study are interesting when interpreted in light of the prevailing extra-linguistic factors in the selected cultures.

Keywords: Attribution; Sources; Credibility; Newspaper editorials; Written Argumentation; Opinion Discourse

Introduction

Argumentation concerns the desire of community member/s to convince others of their opinions. It is defined as a social and verbal activity aimed at safeguarding or criticizing a point of view through the use of logic (van Emmeren et al, 2002). Newspaper discourse especially opinion discourse is an excellent example of written argumentation (Belmonte, 2008; Greenberg, 2000) where both facts and opinions are used to convey a standpoint (Masroor, 2013).

Opinions in argumentative discourse, to be reasonable and plausible, require the support of facts and background information since “[r]easoning is a process of drawing conclusions from facts, and the proposition that has too few or no facts to support it will hardly be worth discussing” (Huber and Snider, 2006:17). The huge amount of evidence, as compared to doubt and uncertainty due to lack of it, is instrumental for the strength of argument and a prerequisite to gain beliefs (Huber and Snider, 2006). The argument without any backing is weak (Wangerin, 1993), but there is no concept of argument without evidence (Toulmin, 1964).

The statements of authorities are crucial instruments of evidence in argument building since words of the people of authority on a certain case are readily accepted (Huber and Snider, 2006) and relied upon in arguments. The objective mode of evidence provision through subjective views of ‘credible’ people is the most sophisticated

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forms of audience manipulation. The sources relied upon for opinions and facts include 'credible' authorities, well-researched individuals, institutions and organizations, national government bureaus, private institutions, presidents, impartial observers, people engaged in a cause such as environmental activists, spokes-people for industry, college professors, and other organizations working towards publishing facts (Huber and Snider, 2006).

Newspaper editorials for argumentation are explored in various contexts and cultures (Ansari and Babaii, 2005; Bonyadi, 2010; Masroor, 2013; Masroor, 2016; Masroor and Ahmad, 2017; Masroor, Khan and Ali, 2020; So, 2005; Zarza and Tan, 2016). It is established that attribution or reported speech is used for audience manipulation in opinion discourse especially in newspaper editorials (see Pak, 1997; Le, 2003; Smirnova, 2009). However, research on this function of attribution in editorials is limited especially from Asian contexts. It is an interesting research goal to uncover the role of attribution for argument building in opinion discourse of editorials.

Data

Ninety editorials (30 each) were selected to study attribution to sources in newspapers of Pakistan, Malaysia and America from *Dawn*, *News Strait Times* and *The New York Times* respectively. To reduce bias in selection, the stratified random sampling technique was adopted and the first editorial from each newspaper was collected every third day for three months.

Analysis

The occurrence, functions and sources of attributive statements were analyzed to see its role in argument building in opinion discourse.

Occurrence of Attributive Statements

Table 1 shows the frequency of attributive statements in data.
Table 1 Total instances of attribution in each newspaper

Newspaper Editorials	Total no. of instances of attribution	Ave. no. of attributions per editorial
<i>Dawn</i>	73	2.43
<i>NYT</i>	118	3.93
<i>NST</i>	72	2.40

Table 1 reflects *NYT's* effort to provide attributions to strengthen arguments (3.93 instances per editorial) followed by nearly similar ratio of attributions in *Dawn* and *NST* (2.43 and 2.40 instances respectively). *NYT* higher usage could be reflective of its awareness of

status as a global opinion leader in a move to satisfy a diverse audience across the globe.

Functions of Attributive Statements

The persuasive goals of newspapers across cultures in editorial structure can be uncovered through functional analysis of attributions. Pak (1997) has defined three basic functions of attributions in newspaper editorials: to strengthen the credibility of arguments, to maintain the truth value of statements, and to enhance the comprehension of information. Meanwhile, Smirnova (2009) identified their role as increasing credibility of claims, shifting the responsibility of claims, and providing counter-arguments in persuasion. The data analysis of this study has revealed the following four types of functions.

Table 2 Functions of attribution in Dawn, NYT and NST

No	Function of Attributions	Dawn (n=73)		NYT (n=118)		NST (n=72)	
		<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>F</i>	%
1.	As a source of information	29	39.7	57	48.3	28	38.8
2.	As a means to put forward arguments	14	19.2	23	19.5	22	30.5
3.	As a means to ridicule sources	20	27.4	13	11	15	20.8
4.	As a means to present counter-views	10	13.7	25	21.2	7	9.7

The first type of function (see Table 2) corresponds to the neutral usage of attribution, functioning mostly to impart information when arguing. Example 1 from *NYT* explains this function:

Example 1

“I’ve been doing this for over 30 years, and I’ve never seen it like this,” Ms. Lassandro of Nassau County said. “Nobody’s exempt from it.” (*NYT1*)

The attribution in Example 1 acts to provide information as a source of backing on the issue of worsening economic conditions. The second function involves attributive statements to put forward an argument by sharing the attitude with the attributive source. This type is realized through the use of forms like “as asserted by”, “has rightly stressed” etc. Example 2 from *NST* illustrates this function:

Example 2

As Raja Muda of Perak, Raja Dr Nazrin Shah, rightly put it, as the head of state, the ruler needs to be neutral, non-partisan and free of personal interest. (*NST11*)

The writer above shifts the burden of responsibility in putting forth claims to credible sources. The remaining two types function as refutations in the form of direct attack to adversary’s arguments by

limiting their value and influence on the audience (Huber and Snider, 2006). The third type of function is realized in this study when the writer uses the words of the sources to ridicule or criticize their concepts or statements, mostly by placing a word or a phrase by the source in quotation marks. Smirnova (2009) identified similar kind of function where neutral words from sources are given emphasis and thus meaning, mostly ironical, by placing them in quotes, thus highlighting their strangeness. The following Example 3 from *Dawn* illustrates this type of attribution.

Example 3

New Delhi has handed over a dossier of 'information' or 'evidence' and it is in the fitness of things that Islamabad peruses the same to verify the Indian 'findings'. (D3)

Here *Dawn*, on the issue of Mumbai assault, ridiculed the concepts of what its neighbouring country India calls as "information", "evidence" or "findings" thus highlighting the insufficiency of the investigation carried out by them and pointing towards the unreliability of their reports to the readers. Lastly, data analysis revealed the use of attributions to present counter-views or antithesis (see also Smirnova, 2009). In terms of Huber and Snider (2006), it is presented to adopt opposing arguments or 'Turning the Tables'. This type of function first presents the views of the adversary only to refute them later on through the writer's arguments. The following Example 4 from *NYT* illustrates this attributive function.

Example 4

And last week, Attorney General Michael Mukasey, in an appalling last-minute ruling, declared that immigrants do not have the constitutional right to a lawyer in a deportation hearing and thus have no right to appeal on the grounds of bad legal representation. Mr. Mukasey overturned a decades-old practice designed to ensure robust constitutional protection for immigrants — one needed now more than ever in the days of the Bush administration's assembly-line prosecutions. (NYT5)

On immigration campaign of former President Bush's administration, the newspaper first presents above the declaration by the Attorney General before providing counter-claim that the ruling for denying the right of appeal to immigrants is not right.

The results from Table 2 reveal the highest percentage of attributive statements is used for providing information. The equally high percentage among all newspapers reflects the main purpose of attributions in editorials is providing facts. However, not all attributions provide facts as evident through the existence of other

functions. The existence of other functions questions the perceived objective status of the factual data, especially attributions. It shows that though perceived as objective propositions, even facts could act to enhance the desired manipulative effects of the opinion discourse and especially attributions can be exploited to develop a certain kind of the desired attitude in readers.

The highest, i.e., 48.3% of informative function is present in *NYT* in comparison to 39.7% of *Dawn*, and 38.8% of *NST*. This corresponds well with *NYT*'s persona as a newspaper with a worldwide readership, and therefore, its preoccupation with providing ample evidence to sound convincing. However, *NST* is found to be arguing more by utilizing other voices to put forward its claims (30.5%) in comparison to *Dawn* (19.2%) and *NYT* (19.5%). *Dawn* contrastively uses attributions mostly to refute claims by sources either by ridiculing or presenting counter views. In *Dawn*, refutation through ridiculing is more common, i.e., 27.4% which is the highest, followed by *NST* (20.8%) and lastly by *NYT* (11%). *NYT*, however, refutes claims by counter-claims, the highest among all (21.2%) followed by *Dawn* (13.7%) and *NST* being the lowest (9.7%). Refutation altogether is the highest in *Dawn* (41.1%), followed by *NYT* (32.2%) and the least frequent in *NST* (30.5%). The results show *Dawn*'s more critical approach towards attributive statements as evident through refutation of sources instead of using them to put forth claims. This strategy could be an indicator of the long-time critical situation of Pakistan in its struggle to revive democracy and the failure of the democracy to fulfil promises. These and other contextual factors, such as increased tensions with India, are visible in the argumentative moves about attribution in *Dawn*'s editorials. This is in contrast to the less critical and more conciliatory approach of *NST*, which although utilizes attribution to put forth claim as well to refute them, but as compared to *Dawn*'s uses them to further its arguments. The comparative peaceful times and closer ties the government of the time can be the reason for this. *NYT* uses them for imparting information though mostly uses them for the refutation of claims.

Sources of Attribution

In editorials analyzed for the present study, statements of authorities come from several sources including authentic newspapers, legal experts, national government bureaus, private organizations and field experts. The choice of sources is not at random but a deliberate effort to further persuasive intentions of an author (Smirnova, 2009). The source type, as well as its perception by audience, is predetermined by the author, who guides the audience's interpretation by his attitude towards it (Smirnova, 2009). As observed in this study and attested by Smirnova (2009), a greater persuasive value is attached

to the sources holding a prestigious professional position either due to their authority, position or competence. The use of sources due to their personal characteristics such as their race, nationality, sex, age, family ties, is highly rare and not much valued, and mostly used to increase the emotional appeal of arguments (Smirnova, 2009). Such types of sources are placed under the category of "Others" in the present study (see the table below). Table 3 below presents source types in *Dawn*.

Table 3 Source types of attribution for Dawn according to their functions

Source Type	Classification	Functions of Attributive Statements (n=73)								Total %
		A		B		C		D		
		F	%	f	%	F	%	f	%	
Political	Individuals	8	11	4	5.5	11	15.1	7	9.6	68.5
	Parties/agencies/unions	2	2.7	3	4.1	3	4.1	1	1.4	
	Governments	3	4.1	3	4.1	5	6.8	-	-	
	Sub-Total	13	17.8	10	13.7	19	26	8	11	
Experts / Studies	Polls/reports/comments by organizations/institutions/gr-oups	14	19.2	2	2.7	-	-	1	1.4	24.7
	Individual comments by professionals	-	-	1	1.4	-	-	-	-	
	Sub-Total	14	19.2	3	4.1	-	-	1	1.4	
Others	Anonymous views/general public views/unknown figures or individuals for emotional effects	2	2.7	1	1.4	1	1.4	1	1.4	6.9

(**A**=As a source of information; **B**=As a means to put forward arguments; **C**=As a means to ridicule sources; **D**=As a means to present counter-views)

Table 3 shows greater use of political sources in *Dawn* (68.5%), an indicator of its preoccupation with 'political' themes, followed by 'experts/studies' (2.7%) and the least by 'others' (6.9%). The newspaper, however, cites them to mostly ridicule (26%) instead of putting forward claims (13.7%). In all, almost 37% of attributive statements are used for refutation in comparison to 13.7% for strengthening claims of political figures. For informational function, greater value is given to studies and expert opinion (19.2%) as compared to political sources (17.8%) in *Dawn*. Interestingly, all sources in 'experts/studies' category include polls and reports making them a more reliable source according to the newspaper in comparison to individual professionals. The statistics also reflect a critical approach and lack of trust in political sources mostly cited to refute their claims. Table 4 shows the types of sources in *NYT*.

Table 4 Source types of attribution for *NYT* according to their functions

Source Type	Classification	Functions of Attributive Statements (n=118)								Total %
		A		B		C		D		
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	
Political	Individuals	8	6.8	17	14.4	4	3.4	13	11	50
	Parties/agencies/unions	2	1.7	-	-	2	1.7	2	1.7	
	Governments	5	4.2	2	1.7	2	1.7	2	1.7	
	Sub-Total	15	12.7	19	16.1	8	6.8	17	14.4	
Experts / Studies	Polls/reports/comments by organizations/institutions/groups	26	22	3	2.5	2	1.7	3	2.5	41.8
	Individual comments by professionals	12	10.2	-	-	3	2.5	3	2.5	
	Sub-Total	38	32.2	3	2.5	5	4.2	6	5.1	

Others	Anonymou s views/ general public views/ unknown figures or individuals for emotional effects	4	3.4	1	0.8	-	-	2	1.7	5.9
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(A=As a source of information; B=As a means to put forward arguments; C=As a means to ridicule sources; D=As a means to present counter-views)

Like *Dawn*, *NYT* also makes frequent attributions from political sources (50%) than from experts/studies (41.8%) and other sources (5.9%). The trend points out to the political nature of editorial discourse. Unlike *Dawn*, *NYT* makes comparatively greater use of political sources to put forward its claims, i.e., 16.1% and mostly the political individuals (14.4%). Most significantly, out of a total of 17 statements, 13 come from President Obama. This expresses a lot of hope newspaper places in the newly elected government of President Obama. Probably, the data collection times can be accounted for the support filled with efforts of reforms by the government. The support though is also balanced with some criticism as sources are used for ridiculing (6.8%) but mostly presenting counter-views (14.4%) often aimed at political sources (11%). Overall, *NYT* adopts a more critical and less supportive approach towards political sources. For informational function, *NYT* relies frequently on statements of experts/studies (32.2%), as a comparison to political sources (12.7%), with greater weight given to polls and reports (22%) but unlike *Dawn*, also shows some confidence in professionals' statements (10.2%), a move reflecting newspaper's effort to appear objective and neutral in the presentation of facts. Table 5 presents the type of sources chosen by *NST*.

Table 5 Source types of attribution for *NST* according to their functions

Source Type	Classificatio n	Functions of Attributive Statements (n=72)								Tot al %
		A		B		C		D		
		<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>F</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	
Political	Individuals	5	7	13	18	2	2.8	6	8.3	48.6 %
	Parties/ agencies/ unions	4	5.5	-	-	2	2.8	-	-	

	Government s	2	2.8	-	-	1	1.4	-	-	
	Sub-Total	11	15.3	13	18	5	7	6	8.3	
Experts/ Studies	Polls/ reports/ comments by organization s/ institutions/ groups	11	15.3	2	2.8	1	1.4	-	-	34.9 %
	Individual comments by professional s	4	5.5	4	5.5	2	2.8	1	1.4	
	Sub-Total	15	21	6	8.3	3	4.2	1	1.4	
Others	Anonymous views/ general public views/ unknown figures or individuals for emotional effects	2	2.8	3	4.2	7	9.7	-	-	16.7 %

(**A**=As a source of information; **B**=As a means to put forward arguments; **C**=As a means to ridicule sources; **D**=As a means to present counter-views)

NST, like *Dawn* and *NYT*, makes greater attributions from political sources (48.6%) than from experts/studies (34.9%) and others (16.7%). The political sources, however, are mostly used for supporting claims (18%) where out of 13 instances, 6 come from the then prime minister of the country, along with other political figures. While this is reflective of the hope newspaper has in the new government, interestingly, unlike *NYT*, the criticism against political sources is much lower, with 7% to ridicule and 8.3% to refute the claims of political sources. Together, it is 15.3% in comparison to 18% to put forward claims. The criticism is avoided on ruling party and mostly aimed at political sources in the opposition. This is reflective of the newspaper's affiliation and support for the ruling party. The informational function of attribution is more dependent on experts/studies (21%) than political sources (15.3%) out of which

15.3% come from polls/reports than individual professionals. Surprisingly, the overall ratio of "Other" sources in *NST* is higher (16.7%) and mostly employed to ridicule sources. The attack or criticism then of *NST* is pretty safe and aimed and at unidentified sources, probably due to affiliation with the government and published in a multiethnic and religious country.

In all, political sources are attributed more, the highest being *Dawn* (68.5%), the lowest as *NST* (48.6%) and *NYT* in between (50%). This is reflective of the political nature of this opinion discourse and a pointer towards the important ideological function of the editorial genre as a media discourse.

Conclusion

Facts to support arguments in editorials are an established norm in journalism. Michael G. Gartner, former editor *The Daily Tribune*, Ames, Iowa, confirms this in answer to what makes a good editorial by saying "Facts. You can't do anything without facts" (Simurda, 1997: 48). However, as the results of the study reflect, even facts, the objective sources of information, can in opinion discourse, especially when attributing ideas to sources, be used for propagating subjective views in newspapers (Le, 2003). Newspaper editorials across cultures frequently persuade through attribution or other voices for argument building. The strategies for the use of attributions differ and are meaningful. *NYT* uses more attributions for building credibility. It is noteworthy that editorialists mostly use attributive statements for imparting information. *NST* uses attribution to strengthen claims, *Dawn* to ridicule sources while *NYT* for counterclaiming. *Dawn* is observed to be pre-occupied with political sources, through meant to ridicule political agents as an indicator of the dismal political situation of the country. *NYT*'s reliance on political individuals is also balanced with greater significance to the claims by reports, polls and professionals. *NST*'s use of political sources is meant to endorse their claims instead of refutation. The analysis of linguistic structures reveals the achievement of persuasive goals based on multiple contextual factors. The local constraints and extra-linguistic factors such as the nature of readers, newspaper's affiliations, data collection period and newspaper's social profile and persona seem to have a noticeable influence on the editorial structure in attributions.

Media's persuasive language, telling what is credible, greatly controls the thinking and actions of readers (van Dijk, 1995). The ideological manipulation is fully effective when cautiously selected facts and desired projection of elites are made to appear as a part of objective reality (van Dijk, 1995). Through the strong media of editorials, the newspapers act as well authorized and responsible

institutions not only for presenting public opinions but also for moulding it according to its alignment of political stance.

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