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## According to Which Source? An Analysis of the Use of Attribution in American, Spanish, and Mexican Newspaper Editorials

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ACCORDING TO WHICH SOURCE?  
AN ANALYSIS OF THE USE OF ATTRIBUTION  
IN AMERICAN, SPANISH, AND MEXICAN  
NEWSPAPER EDITORIALS

INTRODUCTION

*According to nearly every careful study, family caps do nothing to discourage childbirth but they do victimize innocent children. ("The Harm in Family Welfare Caps," The New York Times 9 June 1994)*

Newspapers, cheap and available authentic texts, have been useful resources for various profession and foreign language classes. Foreign newspapers provide valuable cultural information via their reports on current events, business, advertisement, entertainment, sports, opinion columns, and so forth. Among the various text types in a newspaper, the editorial is considered to be among the most "prestigious forms" of writing (Gunsekera) that play a vital role for the newspaper as an institution as well as for the reading public (Hynds). It is written carefully to inform and to influence the reading public of the opinion of the newspaper on current events. In fact, editorials are considered highly valued texts that are carefully crafted discourses representative of "the political and ideological attitudes of the newspapers and their regional and national backgrounds" (van Dijk). In this respect, editorials of different cultures constitute useful opinion sources for global professionals and foreign language/international relations students.

As evaluative texts that present the voice of the newspaper, editorials employ devices of argumentation to convince their particular readers. This article will examine one important device of argumentation—the use of attribution (i.e., attributing ideas/statements to sources). The importance of attributing ideas/statements to sources in journalistic as well as in academic texts is a well-known phenomenon. In the case of news-

*Global Business Languages (1997)*

paper genres, the chief thrust of attributing ideas to sources is to appear to build a case for evidence, which strengthens the credibility of the arguments and thus the evaluation offered by the newspaper (Hulteng). Attribution can be a necessary element for maintaining the truth value of the statements as well as enhancing the comprehension of information (Secanella 93). Similarly, the credibility of texts like the newspaper may depend on “which forces it gives expression to, or more formally, which organizations and institutions and public figures it takes as valuable sources of information and comment” (Trew 140). In this sense, an analysis of the types of these “valuable sources of information” across different cultures can provide useful information for global professionals and advanced foreign language students. By examining the use of attribution, one may be able to assess better which types of sources play an important role in shaping the opinions of a particular culture.

The present article investigates and compares the use of attribution in American, Peninsular Spanish, and Mexican cultures as represented by newspaper editorials from a quality newspaper from each culture: *The New York Times*, *El País* (Madrid), and *El Universal* (Mexico City). The frequency of attributed statements, the typical source of attribution, and the function of the attribution in the editorials of each newspaper are examined. The study reveals that while the American newspaper places high value on specialists and scientific/statistical reports, the Mexican and Spanish newspapers rely on other sources, such as political figures, to convince their readers.

#### DATA

The study is based on a sample of thirty editorials from each of the three newspapers during the month of June, 1994. *The New York Times*, *El País*, and *El Universal* were selected based on their comparable quality and circulation sizes. Salwen and Garrison characterize elite/prestigious newspapers as those that “represent the serious, informed, and influential journalism of their respective nations” (103). All three dailies are considered quality newspapers with wide circulation: according to the 1993 statistics presented in *Editor & Publisher's International Year Book 1994: The Encyclopedia of the Newspaper Industry*, *The New York Times* ranked third in the US in terms of the circulation number (*The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* were ranked first and second respectively). For Spain, *El País* ranked as first in the country

followed by *ABC*. For Mexico, *El Universal* is one of the oldest leading newspapers of the nation. Although there are about a half dozen newspapers that have greater circulation, according to Salwen and Garrison's *Latin American Journalism*, *El Universal* is considered one of the leading "prestigious" newspapers of Mexico along with *El Excelsior*. The journalism culture among the three newspapers, however, appears to manifest certain differences (Pak 68). First, there are cultural variations in the perspective on what constitutes the genre of editorials. While the American newspaper strongly emphasizes the argumentative nature of editorials (i.e., clear presentation of the position of the paper), the Spanish and Mexican newspapers hold that the explanatory and informative functions of the editorial are as important as the argumentative function. Furthermore, these newspapers aim at different groups of readers. While the American editorials address a diverse audience of general readers, the editorials written in Spanish direct themselves toward smaller groups of elite readers (Pak 69). Furthermore, in the case of the Mexican press, censorship has been a well-documented practice (Alisky; Checa Gordoy; Leslie; Salwen and Garrison; Secanella).

#### ANALYSIS

##### *Frequency of Attributed Statements*

An attributed statement is that which contains a reference to the source of information as in the following examples:

In all, *Mr. Holder says*, Mr. Rostenkowski embezzled more than \$500,000 from the public treasury. ("The Rostenkowski Indictment," *The New York Times* 1 June 1994)<sup>1</sup>

*La ex mujer de Roldán declaraba hace algunas semanas que los altos mandos de Interior tenían que mirar por su futuro cuando estaban en el cargo porque tras abandonarlo no podrían encontrar otro trabajo.* [The *ex-wife of Roldán declared* a few weeks ago that. . .] ("Limpieza interior," *El País* 16 June 1994)<sup>2</sup>

"Ha sido una valiente visita . . ." *sentenció Fidel Castro.*  
("Inteligencia y valentía en Chiapas," *El Universal* 14 June 1994)

<sup>1</sup>All emphasis, here and in other quoted material, is added.

<sup>2</sup>All translations are mine.

After all possible attributed statements were collected from the corpus of ninety editorials, the frequency for each newspaper was determined. The frequency count is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1  
The Frequency of Attributed Statements

	<i>El País</i>	<i>El Universal</i>	<i>The New York Times</i>
Total Number of Attributed Statements in the Corpus	15	58	43
Average Number of Attributed Statements in an Editorial	0.5	1.9	1.4

Among the three newspapers, the Peninsular Spanish editorials show the least concern for attributing statements to specific sources. That is, the total number of attributed statements in *El País* is about one third of the figures for the American and Mexican newspapers. The low frequency of attribution in the Spanish editorials can be explained by the special nature of editorial readership of *El País*. For the Peninsular Spanish newspaper editorials, making attributions to a special source is thought to be unnecessary since the editorials are intended for a selected elite group of well-informed readers (Pak 68–69).

The Mexican editorials, on the other hand, employed the highest number of attributions, frequently attributing statements to political sources. The American newspaper also employed a high number of attributions in its editorials but with a different preference for the types of sources, as will be shown in the next section.

#### *Source of Attribution*

After attributed statements were collected from the corpus, the types of sources were identified. Two noticeable sources were observable: attribution made to political figures and to experts in particular fields. All three newspapers made frequent attribution to individuals or organizations related to politics. Especially common was the tendency to quote

statements from the leaders of the country. Other frequent sources of attribution included experts in a relevant field (e.g., lawyers, scientists, and so forth). Table 2 presents a classification of the types of attributed sources used in the editorials in the corpus.

Table 2  
Types of Attributed Sources and Examples

POLITICAL FIGURES
Individuals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• el Presidente de la República dijo que. . . [the President of the Republic said that. . .] (<i>El Universal</i>)</li> <li>• Mr. Carter says he won Mr. Kim's consent. . . (<i>NYT</i>)</li> </ul>
Parties <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Democrats say their timid agenda results from. . . (<i>NYT</i>)</li> <li>• la Union Social demandó. . . (<i>El País</i>)</li> </ul>
Others <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tokio, Seúl y hasta Pekín opinan que hay un margen de negociación. . . [Tokyo, Seoul and even Peking think that there is a negotiation window. . .] (<i>El País</i>)</li> </ul>
EXPERTS/STUDIES
Individuals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "the cost of such misconduct," says Mr. Holder (US Attorney). . . (<i>NYT</i>)</li> </ul>
Studies/Comments by Organizations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyses by the CBC have shown that. . . (<i>NYT</i>)</li> <li>• Colegio de Abogados de Madrid denunció. . . [The School of Lawyers of Madrid denounced. . .] (<i>El País</i>)</li> </ul>
OTHERS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• La ex-mujer de Roldán declaraba que. . . [Roldán's ex-wife declared that. . .] (<i>El País</i>)</li> <li>• Rep. Dan Rostenkowski supporters stress. . . (<i>NYT</i>)</li> </ul>

Although all three newspapers frequently employed political and expert sources, the composition of their sources vary slightly. Table 3 presents the distribution of different types of attributed sources for each newspaper.

Table 3  
The Preference for the Type of Attributed Sources

Type	<i>El País</i>	<i>El Universal</i>	<i>The New York Times</i>
POLITICAL FIGURES	11 (73%)	40 (69%)	16 (37%)
Individuals	6	38	13
Parties	0	1	3
Others	5	1	0
EXPERTS/STUDIES	3 (20%)	18 (31%)	23 (53%)
Individuals	0	18*	9
Studies/Comments by Organizations	3	0	14
OTHERS	1	0	4
Total Number of Attributed Statements	15 (100%)	58 (100%)	43 (100%)

\* These are lawyers, businessmen, and religious figures.

The editorials written in Spanish placed more emphasis on the sources related to politics: over two thirds of the attributions in the sample consisted of political figures (i.e., 73% for *El País* and 69% for *El Universal*). The source type that had the highest figure for the Spanish and Mexican editorials was that of political individuals:

*Anguita* reiteró ayer que quien quiera pactar con IU tendrá que aceptar . . . [=> Anguita, the president of the leftist party, IU]. (“Paisaje andaluz,” *El País* 14 June 1994)

*El primer ministro británico* . . . considera que Dahaene “no es la persona adecuada . . .” [=> the British Prime Minister]. (“Uno contra once,” *El País* 26 June 1994)

*Ernesto Zedillo*, sostuvo que su partido está preparado. . . . “No aceptaremos . . .” [=> the presidential candidate, Zedillo]. (“No a la cultura del recelo,” *El Universal* 1 June 1994)

*el Pontífice* señala que “urge la reconciliación entre los mexicanos . . .” [=> the Pope]. (“Mensaje en pro de la concordancia,” *El Universal* 22 June 1994)

The editorials in *The New York Times* also have many examples of statements that are attributed to individual political figures but the most frequently attributed source type is that of specialist/experts/reports from various fields that are relevant to the specific topic of the editorial:

*The special counsel investigating Whitewater, Robert Fiske*, has likewise shown little interest. (“Running for Cover on Whitewater,” 17 June 1994)

A 1991 report by the Consumer Affairs Department found that the poor routinely pay more. . . . (“Attention, Gotham Shoppers,” 3 June 1994)

. . . *experienced labor analysts* say that past L.I.R.R. settlements have not set a bargaining pattern. . . . (“A Strike Wisely Ended,” 21 June 1994)

A scientist who worked on chemical arms for many years, *Vil Mirzayanov*, has accused Russia of. . . . (“Ratify the Chemical Arms Ban,” 29 June 1994)

*Public health authorities* have issued soothing statements that. . . . (“Same Old Strep?” 10 June 1994)

The specialist category for the Mexican editorials consists of different types of specialists. Unlike the scientific nature of the above sources employed in the American editorials, the specialists in the Mexican editorials include businessmen, influential lawyers/prosecutors, and high-ranking religious leaders of the country. Many of these individuals can also belong in the political category of attributed sources:

*Los obispos Ramón Godínez y Manuel Talamás* declararon que . . . [=> the bishops]. (“Los mexicanos exigen la verdad,” 4 June 1994)

*el licenciado Juan Francisco Ealy Ortiz, Presidente y Director General del Grupo Editorial El Universal* advirtió que Mexico vive momentos de peligro . . . [=> the president of the newspaper, a figure of authority in Mexican press] (“Guiar con honradez, la tarea,” 8 June 1994)

*los hombres de negocios* que se reunieron en el Salon del Empresario en México con motivo de la introducción en él de *Raúl*

*Bailleres Chávez, junto con Adolfo Autrey, Manuel Clouthier del Rincón y Salvador Chávez, al señalarse que . . .* [= > well-known businessmen] (“Inteligencia y diálogo con EZLN,” 11 June 1994)

*El cardenal primado de México, Ernesto Corripio Ahumada, en su calidad de máximo representante de la Iglesia católica mexicana, opinó que . . .* [= > The Primate Cardinal of Mexico] (“Fomento al respeto y a la tolerancia,” 29 June 1994)

*Luis Germán Cárcoba, presidente del Consejo Coordinador Empresarial, en nombre del empresariado nacional, habló del complejo panorama. . . .* “La economía está consolidada . . .” [= > the President of the Managerial Coordinating Advisory Board] (“Futuro económico sin alteraciones,” 29 June 1994)

The above individuals are viewed positively by the Mexican newspaper. It seems, then, that the Mexican editorials rely on influential individuals with strong political affiliations to support and present the opinion of the newspaper.

#### *The Function of the Attributed Statements*

In order to investigate the contexts in which attributed statements are embedded, the function of these statements in the editorial was examined. For example, an attributed statement may serve to provide additional background information:

Las medidas a las que aludió Salinas de Gortari son la reducción de 35% en el precio del diesel que utilice en dicho sector, la disminución en 18% en los precios del amoniaco. . . . [The measures which Salinas de Gotari mentioned are 35% reduction in the price of diesel used in such sector (agriculture), 18% decrease in the prices of ammonia. . . .] (“Apoyo al agro, permanente y vigilado,” *El Universal* 4 June 1994)

Attributed statements are also used to support the thesis statement in the editorial:

According to nearly every careful study, family caps do nothing to discourage childbirth but they do victimize innocent children. (“The Harm in Family Welfare Caps,” 9 June 1994)

In this editorial, the newspaper supports its position against the family welfare caps based on the results from “nearly every careful study.” Oc-

asionally, attributed statements themselves serve as the thesis statement of the editorial. That is, the newspaper presents its position on the particular issue via the voice of other sources:

Sé de qué hablo, aseguró el mandatario cubano, porque yo he estado en los dos lados: “Ante el conflicto en Chiapas, el presidente Carlos Salinas tomó la solución más inteligente y más valiente. . . .” [I know what I am talking about, assured the Cuban leader, because I have been on both sides: With regards to the conflict in Chiapas, President Carlos Salinas took the bravest and the most intelligent decision. . . .] (“Inteligencia y valentía en Chiapas,” *El Universal* 14 June 1994)

This editorial approves the President Salinas’s handling of the situation in Chiapas via the speech given by Fidel Castro. At times, the editorial writers use attributed statements to present a counterview:

Representative Dan Rostenkowski’s supporters stress his remarkable legislative skills and his important role in the current health care debate. (“The Rostenkowski Indictment,” *The New York Times* 1 June 1994)

In the sentence that follows, the editorial refutes this positive view of Rostenkowski by presenting evidence that “offers a much less flattering portrait of the Illinois Congressman.”

All three newspaper editorials in the sample employed attributed statements to support theses, to provide additional background information, and to present counterviews. In particular, the editorials typically used attribution to support their thesis statements. That is, attribution was employed to strengthen the credibility of their arguments. However, other uses of attribution varied among the three newspapers. For example, the American editorials in the corpus frequently used attributed statements to present positions that were rejected by the newspaper:

In naming both women as appointees, Mayor Giuliani insisted that his choices had been made on the basis of merit. But aside from political calculations, neither woman has been a standout. (“Bad Choices for the School Board,” 1 June 1994)

Even so, the Mayor complains that the Legislature, in a separate bill, would require that the school aid be used to aid schools—not diverted, as the Mayor wants, to reduce the budget gap or finance

other programs. The Mayor is on weak ground here. (“A Budget Delayed and Deficient,” 9 June 1994)

The people who make foreign policy in the Clinton Administration say that the “enlargement” of freedom is what America is all about. But there is a big black hole only 90 miles from Florida where Americans are forbidden to travel, on penalty of 10 years in jail, and \$250,000 in fines. (“The Black Hole Called Cuba,” 25 June 1994)

That reflects poorly on a President who claims Nafta and the Marrakesh accord as hallmarks of his first term. (“Protectionism, Alive in Washington,” 27 June 1994)

Such practice may present the American paper’s concern for presenting arguments on all sides (Pak 45–48). The editorials in the Mexican newspapers, however, rarely presented counterviews and thus may reflect a tendency to avoid confrontation. Furthermore, one particular feature of the use of attribution in *El Universal* is that many attributed statements function as the thesis of the editorials. That is, the Mexican newspaper frequently used a voice other than its own to call for action and to present its point of view by employing the statements attributed to influential political figures:

. . . el Presidente de la República dijo que si bien se han logrado el saneamiento de las finanzas públicas, el abatimiento de la inflación y otros logros tangibles en materia macroeconómica, *es indispensable continuar con el esfuerzo por mejorar las economías familiares y el bienestar de los mexicanos*. Estas honoradas palabras del jefe del Poder Ejecutivo son. . . . [. . . the President of the Republic said that although the remedy of public finances, the demolition of inflation and other tangible successes in the matters of macroeconomy have been attained, *it is indispensable to continue the effort to improve the household economies and the well-being of the Mexicans*. These honorable words from the chief of the Executive Power are. . . .] (“Ahora el desafío es doble,” 11 June 1994)

Pero el Santo Padre no se contenta con dar testimonio de los efectos, sino que señala la causa profunda que los ha provocado: *el debilitamiento de los valores éticos y morales, y llama a todos*

*a fortalecerlos, como verdadera base del progreso social.* [But the Pope is not satisfied with giving evidence as to the effects but points to the profound cause that has provoked them (the social problems): *the weakening of ethical and moral values, and he urges everyone to strengthen them as the true foundation of social progress.* (“Mensaje en pro de la concordia,” 22 June 1994)

In these editorials, the voice of the political figures became the voice of the Mexican newspaper.

In summary, while the editorials from Peninsular Spain are not very concerned with attribution, the American and Mexican editorials frequently attribute statements/ideas to specific sources. Both *The New York Times* and *El Universal* utilize this device of argumentation to convince readers with evidence and authority. However, authority is evaluated differently in these newspapers: while the editorials written in Spanish place value statements made by political figures, the American editorials clearly manifest a preference for specialists/reports from “scientific” studies.

#### CONCLUSION

In his advice to young American editorial writers, T. Prentice argues that

[c]redibility is a commodity that is earned when the opinion is backed up with fact, statistics, authoritative data, evidence, defensible hypothesis, and other information knit together by the twin strands of logic and reason. (5)

Indeed, in the editorials of *The New York Times*, thesis statements are often supported by statements made by specialists/experts of various fields. In this respect, the American newspaper places high value on specialist and scientific opinion and other types of evidence to support its arguments. The Mexican editorials, on the other hand, place importance on presenting the opinions of the leading political figures of the country in order to gain support for its position or even to provide the main thesis statement. A possible explanation of this difference is that the editorials of the Mexican newspaper principally target elite groups of influential professionals, while the American editorials address a more general public, thus having an extra burden to convince their readers with facts or to “blind them with science” (Pak 48–50). The results of these findings,

however, must be evaluated within the context of the cultures that produce these editorials. Background information of the editorial genre within each culture may explain such a tendency (62–70). For example, in the case of the Mexican newspaper, the targeted audience for the editorials (i.e., readers with a high profile in Mexican society), the particular journalistic culture (i.e., history of press control), the political orientation of the newspaper (i.e., pro-PRI, the ruling party), and the social and political situation of the period during which the editorials were selected (i.e., unrest in Chiapas, presidential campaign, and so forth), may well have affected the communicative purpose(s) and possibly influenced its choice of sources and the function of attribution statements. Nevertheless, the results of the study have valuable implications for those who teach and study cross-cultural communication. By examining what/who constitutes the credibility-building source in the target cultures within the particular context of useful genres such as editorials of quality/representative newspapers, global professionals and foreign language students can obtain beneficial cultural information as well as enhance their critical reading of these texts.

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