

Dimensions of Reference Accuracy and Citation Errors: A Review of Literature

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Abstract

The consequences of the findings from the concerned literature on reference accuracy, citation error and other related sub-topics for the use of reference accuracy in scientific studies are discussed. Worse, this literature is highly scattered outside the library and information science field. Unquestionably, the list of references appended at the end of a scholarly article is a most important part of a publication. Referencing correctly according to a given citation style guide is a prime responsibility of authors, since it protects them from charges of academic theft and plagiarism as well as it enhance the quality and maintain the credibility of both authors and journals. Various burning issues of the citation errors, a decades-long problem in scholarly communication, are discussed.

Keywords: Reference Accuracy; Citation Errors; Reference Lists; Scholarly Communication.

Introduction

References, which support comments and theories of authors and help readers to search the topic comprehensively, are the very important attachment of a scientific paper. *Reference* is an individual entry found in a reference list, while *reference list* means the list of information sources given at the end of a scholarly communication. Most scientific research, if not all, is motivated by earlier research studies. Subsequently, no researcher can claim that his/her research study has been completed independently, without reference to other scholars' study. Amazingly, the important facet of the system of scholarly communication is sloppy and inaccurate [1].

Writing scientific article based on empirical research is a very difficult task, since it consists reporting with accuracy, brevity, clarity, and precision in a strong shape or layout giving no room

for flexibility [2-4]. A manuscript is written and then rewritten many times and, ideally revised by intellectually sound subject experts and/or experienced colleagues prior submitting to the selected journal [4]. Once a manuscript has been sent to the scholarly journal, it should essentially be a responsibility of editors and peer reviewers to examine the inaccuracies and enhance its quality, and if needed consecutive process of peer reviews can be adopted [2,5-6]. Nevertheless, peer review may be an anxiety-creating process for some young and new-comer scholars [5,7-8]. It is no exaggeration that peer review is the best known method for maintaining the quality and uncompromising in scientific publishing. Albeit, many walls established by the scientific publishing system give no guarantee at all times that published papers are free from faults, omissions and inaccuracies [7,9].

References or citations fulfil many objectives. They link the present study to the structure of research that has completed earlier. Frank Place, Jr. (1916, p. 697) commented on good references in relation to the scientific method, "substantiate your statement by proof, either of your own or by the work that others have done before you" [10]. Citations also permit the reader to confirm or refute the author's claims.

Reference accuracy and citation error is not a new phenomenon in academic world. Reference accuracy

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is important in scholarly communication and scientific progress. Erroneous, incomplete, and inaccurate references make it complicated and time-consuming to the researcher to retrieve references and verify the concerned information to which the text of the scholarly article refers. In the words of Garfield (1969, p. 40), who is deemed as the Guru of Citation indexing, "shoddy citations cost everyone time, money, and energy. In the average library and research lab, an incredible percentage of staff time is expended in completing incomplete citations at the expense of more productive tasks for professional librarians and technicians who are in increasingly short supply" [11]. Garfield's views were later tested and confirmed by many authorities. According to Azadeh and Vaez (2013), wrong citations create dilemma, mistrust in the accuracy of a research, wastage of time and unwanted financial charges for information centres, libraries and researchers [12].

Sometimes, authors read the original papers but later they copy and paste the inaccurate references from an online source or bibliographic database. According to an investigation, which is based on a stochastic modeling of the citation process that explains empirical studies of misprint distributions in citations, conducted by Simkin and Roychowdhury (2003), about 80% of authors cited the papers but not read them. Only 20% of authors cited an article had really read it [13].

Reference accuracy and citation errors are the two opposite sides of a coin. They both are reciprocal in nature, means if one decreases then other increases. A hundred percent accurate reference list contains zero citation error, i.e. no citation error.

Citation Errors

A study entitled as "Citation Errors in Library Literature," and carried out by Pandit (1993, p. 185) shows that "errors focus on the citations themselves and exclude the extent to which authors correctly quoted a text or acknowledged an intellectual debt" [14]. On the basis of the ranked list of journals in *ISI's Journal Citation Reports* and selected studies that have identified core journals, Pandit chose the five library science journals including the *Library Trends* for analysis [14]. Doms (1989, p. 442) illustrated an accurate, or correct reference as "one in which all included elements are identical to the source" [15]. Yankauer (1990, p. 38) also described citation errors as, "errors of commission or omission in the printing of the reference" [16].

In general, omissions and mistakenly transcriptions of various elements of citation in

reference lists, viz. names of author(s) and/or editor(s), book title, journal title, article's name, volume number, year, pagination etc. can cause serious bibliographical problems, and such errors often exist in published reports, indexing and abstracting sources for a long time. It is a very common phenomenon, existed in scholarly communication. Citation error can create problems in scholarly communication, and becomes self-perpetuate, and later makes embarrassing situations. As such, miscitations or citation errors not only raise questions and create doubts about the credibility and integrity of the author; they also badly influence both the validity of the important research outputs and the trustworthiness of the cited documents [17-19].

Need of the Study

With the dawn of World Wide Web (WWW), Information and Communication Technology (ICT), bibliographic database programs- viz. RefWorks, online bibliographic databases- viz. Web of Science (originally produced by the ISI, now maintained by Clarivate Analytics), Elsevier's Scopus, etc., and rapid growth in online reference management tools and services- viz. Zotero, Mendeley, CiteULike, Citation Machine, ResearchIndex (formerly CiteSeer), etc., a new kind of problem in citation-linking has taken birth. Citation-linking means linking from a citation or reference in an online article to the item cited. If references are incorrect, citation-linking is not possible [20]. The prime responsibility of reference accuracy in scientific articles rests on the authors. They ensure that their articles are "honest, clear, accurate, complete and balanced, and should avoid misleading, selective or ambiguous reporting" [21]. But it is felt that the authors of scientific articles consider reference accuracy as a trivial matter. In this matter, the views of June E. Goodrich and Charles G. Roland (1977, p. 19) are as follows: "The question of relative responsibility of author and of journal is moot. Both parties should have vested interests in ensuring optimal accuracy" [22].

Making scientific journals acceptable for application and indexing in international databases, and maintaining long-term existence, they should adhere to qualitative as well as quantitative standards for their acceptance by the scientific fraternity.

Empirical knowledge about *reference accuracy* and *citation errors* is sparse and difficult to access to the majority of researcher and author who might benefit from it. Many scholars, however, are exposed to articles on such topic in non-library and information

science journals, namely *Indian Journal of Otolaryngology and Head & Neck Surgery*, *Complex Systems*, *Burns*, *Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association*, *Anaesthesia*, *Canadian Journal of Anaesthesia*, *Research in the Schools*, *World Journal of Surgery*, *Journal of Bone & Joint Surgery*, *Journal of the Korean Medical Sciences*, *Emergency Medicine Australasia*, *British Medical Journal*, *Journal of Nematology*, *Journal of Dental Research*, *American Journal of Public Health*, *Editors' Bulletin*, *Clinical Otolaryngology*, *Lancet*, *Nature*, *Science*, and much more. Most of the articles on *reference accuracy* and *citation errors* are appeared in different disciplines like health and medical sciences and its sub-fields, but very less in library and information science discipline.

Literature in the field of library and information science is flooded with few areas such as bibliometrics and citation analysis, information seeking behaviour and user studied, and applications of ICT. Articles on reference accuracy and citation errors in Indian LIS journals are scarce. There is, therefore, need for the new literature in the hidden subfield of reference accuracy and citation errors in library and information science. Hence, the present study attempts to fill this long-standing gap.

Reference Management

For a young researcher, reference management is one of the most difficult tasks, because of the tedium of compiling references on the basis of a given citation style guide (for example APA, MLA, Chicago, Turabian style, etc.). This boring process leads researchers towards online and web-based reference management tools, which help them at all levels of referencing. A wide range of online reference management tools, viz. Citation Machine, Research Index, Zotero, RefWorks, Mendeley, CiteULike etc. are available on internet. Some of them are free and some are subscription based. These tools are well known among the scientific community [23-24].

What We Know About Surnames?

An old quotation, famed in Hollywood, is "I don't care what you say about me- just be sure to spell my name right" truly fits here in the context of the topic. Educated individuals are generally very sensitive about the method their names are voiced, as well as how they are penned on paper. In the same line, some people could feel it an insult or dishonour to their heritage when someone abbreviates their names for his/her comfort [25].

The terms, *surname* and *compound surname*, as used here repeatedly contain "any name that is used as a family name (except in the case of Romans of classical times)" and "two or more proper names," respectively [26].

Change and variation is the supreme law of nature, but this law does not fit into the surnames of authors at all. All reference citations to an author should come under a fixed "standardized" surname so that readers could not miss their desired papers which generally listed under variant spellings. The spelling variation in surnames is a source of pain and anxiety among readers, bibliometricians, librarians, as well as compilers of citation indexes. Citation counts of a scientific author's articles for numerous objectives (such as promotional, award fellowships, appraisal and evaluative), citation indexes are used as the basic tools. Many grammatical and spelling errors observed in translated contents pages published by non-English literature.

Compound surnames although consist only nearly 5% of all the names processed in formation of citation indexes. Various compound surnames indicate clan or family roots, and they are usually prefixed by foreign articles and/or prepositions that translate into English as "of" or "from"- for example (presented in alphabetical order), George de la Tours, John Dos Passos, Louis de Broglie, and Wernher von Braun. Hyphenated surnames also represent the coupling the two different family lines, such as Albert Szent-Györgyi, Cecil Day-Lewis, Hans Lykke-Seest, and Solange Chaput-Rolland. Patronymic surnames show father or family relationships- for example, Douglas MacArthur, Gene McCarthy, and Pat O'Brien [25].

Islamic Surnames

There are *nine* distinguished variety of surnames, a Muslim writer can use, in addition to the order of their presentation changes from country to country. Depending on the land of origin, Islamic or Muslim surnames also create a problem. Anis Khurshid (1977), the former Director of the Islamic Library Information Center at University of Karachi in Pakistan, exhibits the following interesting illustration of an Egyptian Arabic name: "*Fahr-ad-Din Abu Abdullah Muhammad Ibn Umer Ibn al-Hasan Al-Hatib Ar-Razi*." As it reveals, *Fahr-ad-Din* is an honorary title, while *Abu Abdullah* is yet another name indicating descent. *Muhammad* would be denoted his "first" or given name; *Ibn Umer Ibn al-Hasan* his father's or forefather's name; and *Al-Hatib* his genealogical or tribal descent. Lastly, *Ar-Razi* expresses the country or town of origin. [27].

Oriental Surnames

Oriental surnames, in particular, often create confusion among the selection of first, middle and last name. The Chinese authors write the "surname" (means last name) first. While Chinese authors having a non-Chinese "given name", write the "given name" first. There are no more than 200 familiar Chinese surnames, which pose a compounded problem. The similar pattern is followed by Korean authors. Albeit, there are only about 300 familiar Korean surnames, out of which only three, viz. *Kim*, *Pak*, and *Yi*, hold by the majority of population [28].

Clearly, because of a majority of oriental surnames hold by a less fraction of familiar surnames, which creates a crucial problem of homographs. This problem may be solved by using two or more initials along with authors' surnames [29].

Hungarian Surnames

The authors of Hungary write the "surname" (means "last" name) first when publishing in own country's publications. But the same authors publishing in foreign (out of Hungary) journals will write the "first" name first.

Game of Numbers- Year, Volume and Page Number

As Robert N. Broadus (1983) opined that a mistake in date or year of publication is very serious since it may create misconception about how historic or current a specific research is. Major errors, such as year, volume, and page number make access to the journal difficult; while minor errors, like as author's name impact negatively on the academic profiles of the authors. To prevent perpetual errors of reporting historical errors in the literature, a critical and scientific attitude regarding the use of historical data is necessary [30].

In this connection, E. Garfield pointed out that volume and page numbers, since both are the key elements of bibliographic information, most frequently omitted. He further stated: "The volume number is an added degree of redundancy which reduces the possibility of error or offsets the effect of errors, which are especially frequent in the cited year" [11].

Simple mathematical probability makes it scarce that two or more uniformly abbreviated journal names have the same volume number in the same year. The volume-year combination balances the impact of an unclear abbreviated journal names. For example, the abbreviated journal AUST J PHYS 1999, 2007 could indicate the Austrian Journal of Physics,

page 1999, year 2007, or Austrian Journal of Physiology, page 2007, year 1999, or Australian Journal of Physics, page 1999, year 2007, or Australian Journal of Physiology, page 2007, year 1999, and much more. This type of abbreviated citation creates a bibliographic chaos [11].

Causes of Criticism

In 2006, D. Henige, an editor and historian, critically commented that scientists are least accurate in referencing among the all academicians [31]. Later on Stephen K. Donovan (2006) tried to save the prestige of whole scientific fraternity, especially paleontologists, but could not be completely successful. The palaeontologists generally contained references to page and figure number of cited references [32].

Ingelfinger (1976) also advised that maybe all reference lists should be "cut in half" to weed out inaccurate, invalid, irrelevant or misleading citations [33]. Garfield (1991, p. 14) emphasized that "acknowledging prior research and intellectual debts is of crucial ethical importance," [34] and he used the term "citation amnesia" for omission of relevant and pertinent references, considering it an important form of bibliographic misbehaviour. The enormous waste in the form of time, money, man power, etc. is only caused by the journal publishers, as they show high degree of irresponsibility [11].

Generally, it is assumed that it is best not to converse too much in public about one's shortcomings, inadequacies, failings, etc. Most publications as well as institutions, do best, as Napoleon recommended, "to wash their dirty linen at home" [35].

Gupta (2017) also critically reviewed and evaluated the literature on citation errors in scholarly communication, focusing solutions provided by the various authorities [36]. The quantity of reference errors occurred is inversely related to the diligence of the research scholars and the time span consumed by them in compiling and rectifying the bibliographical references.

Author name ambiguity may lead to irrelevant retrieval results in a query from the database. Due to the lack of universal standards for name information, this critical problem occurs. With the rapid growth of scientific literature, author name ambiguity has become a critical issue in managing information at the individual level. The variations in the name of authors, use of special symbols and characters in standard citation styles are some genuine factors affecting the verification process of the reference errors.

The bibliographical references cited in scientific articles are as noteworthy as any other segment of the scientific article, because of their applicability to the scientific and academic community and to indexing and abstracting services and citation databases. But it is unfortunately that references are deemed as a less important part of scientific publications [37]. The higher academic community is in serious trouble. The higher educational institutions, universities, R&D organizations etc. are producing so much research in the form of journal articles, monographs, conference proceedings, theses and dissertations etc. in all over the World. Citation errors, the decades-long problem in scholarly communication, have not disappeared till now.

Author, editor, peer reviewer, and publisher are the four pillars of the system of journal publication in scholarly communication. Any fault by anyone of them will directly affect the readers and damage the culture of scientific scholarship.

Solution of the Problem

Some journals, for example *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, *The New England Journal of Medicine*, and much more carefully verify each and every reference cited in the manuscript with the original sources or journal articles. This verification process requires a sufficient and well skilled staff, but a majority of journal publishers do not have the staff to examine all the cited references. De Lacey, Record & Wade (1985, p. 884) suggested an option examining a fraction or sample of cited references in every manuscript submitted for publication. They suggested for eliminating a high level of errors that articles received for publication with citation errors should be returned to the author and verified totally and a "permanent column specifically for misquotations could be inserted into the journal" [37].

For getting promotion through Academic Performance Indicator (API) the authors especially teachers publish their sub-standard articles abundantly in sub-standard publications in Indian higher education system. These publications neither check the reference accuracy nor force the authors to prepare an accurate reference list. The words of Goodrich and Roland (1977) in this relation fit correctly, as they wrote: "What reliance can readers have in authors and in journals, despite their combined efforts, permit the publication of such slipshod work?" [22]. The reference list is an inseparable part of the article, which embodies the literary manifestation of the research. If the reference

list is significantly inaccurate, what about the data in results and conclusions section? A robust mechanism is needed to develop in which while calculating the API, if citation errors occurred than API points will be reduced according to the number of references cited and citation errors existed. Full reference accuracy counts full API points.

Recently in December 2016, the *International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE)* published a revised set of recommendations, entitled "*Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing, and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals*" focusing the necessity for citing primary sources and ignoring unethical references, which are acceptable to the international scientific fraternity [38]. With the exponential growth and development of literary items and related references, it becomes crucially important to describe tasks of all major stakeholders of scholarly communication for controlling the issue of unethical and irrational references and thereby enhance the quality and indexability of scholarly communication, especially journals [39].

Conclusion

When Frank Place, Jr. (1916, p. 699) penned about citation error as a very old problem almost hundred years ago. He critically indicated that many esteemed scholars take "a reference from another's bibliography as though it were thereby Gospel truth itself" [10]. Most probably, the errors in citations and bibliographical references have appeared since the authors have started citing other authors. Generally, omissions and mistakenly transcriptions of various elements of citation in reference lists, viz. names of author(s) and/or editor(s), book title, journal title, article's name, volume number, year, pagination etc. can cause serious bibliographical problems, and such errors often exist in published reports, indexing and abstracting sources for a long time.

The key function of references in the academic world is as oxygen for human beings on the earth. Furthermore, quality works and their references alive the scholars after death. Editors of the periodical publications in fact are capable enough to enhance the quality of citations and improve the accuracy of the references in their publications through the minor variations in their publication policy. Editors can demand author(s) the first and/or last page of the cited references and can provide proof for the final correction. This process can diminish the "perpetual errors," in which references are copied and pasted from the incorrect or erroneous references of another

paper, since the author(s), at least, should look a copy of the original paper. This publication policy of the *Canadian Journal of Anaesthesia* (CJA) had reduced the citation errors astonishingly in the CJA. Reviewers should also verify a sample of references appended in the submitted paper for publication. Journal publishers should provide the correct citation at the beginning or ending of the article [40-41].

Reference errors are crucial phenomenon in almost all subject fields, such as anaesthesia, biomedical informatics, burn, dental, drugs, educational sciences, emergency medicine, hand surgery, health sciences, library and information science, manual therapy, medical science, nursing, obstetrics and gynecology, ophthalmology, otolaryngology and head & neck surgery, personnel and guidance, psychology, public health, social work, etc, but by the combined efforts of the editors, reviewers and authors, it can be minimized.

Referencing correctly according to a given citation style guide is a prime responsibility of authors, since it protects them from charges of academic theft and plagiarism as well as it enhances the quality and maintains the credibility of both authors and journals. At all times, there is space for betterment in all human endeavours. Journal articles in the all field of knowledge are no exception. As expressed by Asai & Vickers (1995, p. 1063) "humans are born to make mistakes, but should never give up the attempt to conquer this tendency" [42].

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