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**JOURNALISTIC USE OF WORD COLLECTIVES VIOLATE
THE LOGIC OF WRITING**

By

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It goes without saying that human language is unique in being a symbolic communication system that is learned instead of biologically inherited. A major advantage of human language being a learned symbolic communication system is that it is infinitely flexible. This is evidenced by the fact that new words are invented daily and the meaning of old ones change. For example, the English word "nice" now generally means "pleasing". In the 15th century, it meant "foolish". Now and in the following, I write why word choice is as important as its elementary meaning.

News writers, despite their cherished notions of objectivity, still find themselves constrained to using language. If general semanticists agree on anything, they agree that language intertwines with the culture and experience of its users and becomes inherently biased by that culture and experience. This bias of language becomes most apparent when journalists use such collective formations as "the *National Union of Namibian Workers* said today", "the *office of the prime minister* has decided to" or worst still "*statistics* say". I refer to such formations in this article as *word collectives*. I view word collectives as concepts which exist mainly in their encryption as language terms and not as symbols of truly tangible entities.

I understand why journalists use attribution to tell us *who* said what. It is an essential ingredient of almost every news story. It occupies this central role in journalistic writing for at least three reasons: First, the majority of news stories represent second-hand accounts since reporters rarely witness bank robberies or car accidents. Reporters therefore have to rely on outside sources for much of their information. Second, journalistic practice requires that reporters must not comment or give the appearance of commenting on news events, but, instead,

must act as a conduit for others who do. Journalists use attribution to help news consumers accurately determine on *whose* authority they say something. Third, *who* says something may amount to an important story element in and of itself. My quarrel is that when journalists attribute to *word collectives*, they attempt to walk on thin semantic water. Terms such as "*The National Union of Namibian Workers*" and "*The Office of the Prime Minister*" refer to entities that do not exist in the same way as you and I. It is here that language enters to work its magic. As such terms enter the language, they begin to gain the same status as other terms similarly used that refer to more tangible, unitary entities. Along the way, they also pick up other qualities and attributes that generalise from the contexts in which they usually appear.

I believe that the attribution used in this manner becomes a Trojan horse for connotations that compromise journalistic objectivity. When reporters attribute decisions to "The Office of the Prime Minister", undiscerning readers may perceive these entities as omnipotent, immutable, immortal or monolithic. Such an attribution as omnipotence, for example, may attach itself to "The Office of the Prime Minister" when civil servants appear on the streets because of a decision "The Office of the Prime Minister" has made. Surely somebody at the Office of the Prime Minister took the decision - perhaps the Prime Minister himself? Likewise, a reader may perceive the judges as immortal when a reporter cites a decision of *the high Court* from a decade ago.

At the simplest level of analysis, we violate logic by writing that "the University of Namibia plans to", "the Namibian police said" or "the city of Windhoek has condemned" How can a university, a creation of an Act of Parliament and a collection of buildings, "plan" any action? This argument sound simplistic. But for a student of rhetoric, it is important to state such a mutable fact.

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