



## The UKZN Griot: Of Jumping and Jabbering

BY:

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The 1992 film, *White Men Can't Jump*, got it wrong. Hey, man, I know this 'cos I got the College award last year for doing the best research on indigenous knowledge systems (IKS). Similarly, 'academics can write'. I know this 'cos *The Mercury's* occasional column, 'Academic Voices', is authored by academics. These columns make sense to ordinary newspaper readers, though *The Mercury's* readership is the educated business sector. A content analysis of this column suggests that Big Words are not always needed except in the financial pages where economics-speak is found. Usually, the jargon is parked at the door to the newsroom.

Complicated theories can be usually expressed in ordinary language. Now, that's progress, that's communication and that's also entertainment. If reading is not pleasurable, then folks won't read – except as a chore in preparing to write exams. That's punishment. In the film industry where I once worked, producers only read scripts and contracts – they never read books or articles on film. They left the creative reading to directors.

It can take a lifetime to learn to write properly, let alone accessibly. But academics are not rewarded for accessibility, relevance and usefulness. We are often entrapped in our own prison-house of language. This is our citation currency.

When we do finally learn how to write accessibly, our own peers sometimes turn on us. Some of my IKS manuscripts and books have drawn scathing reviewer responses. 'Good for the local newspaper', or a travel mag, was what one wit wrote. He was really enjoying himself in wrecking IKS considerations by complaining about my manuscript's easy reading. I know who he is. Discourse analysis, impenetrable as it is, can indeed be useful. By being "critical", Eurocentric and denying home grown theory and methods, he was able to ignore the innovative critical indigenous methodologies developed by me and my multiethnic, multigendered, multiracial, multilingual, multinational, multidisciplinary team in our work amongst first peoples. Indeed, our subjects appreciate our methodology more than do some reviewers. But the book got published anyway and talks on it have been invited by colleagues in many countries. Write a book and see the world.

Our indigenous hosts are the ones who argue the most for writing that they can understand. They want inclusion, participation and recognition. They want to know that they are part of the academic value chain. Jargon cuts them out.

When writing is accessible, the cry is 'Not academic!' Academics can't write like this, we are told by reviewers (but not by publishers) who are held hostage by assessors who use decidedly unacademic language in making their points.

Rather, we must jabber for each other in obscure code, or our so-called peers will try to ensure that we don't get published. Even when I do write obscurely (as may be necessitated in taking on obscurantism as I recently did in an article on the (ir-)relevance of post-Freudian, post-Lacanian, and contemporary Žižekian psychoanalysis in the study of African films, this too, gets the goat of critics who recognise imported theories only.

Then, ironically, I get *donnered* by an NRF rating referee who complains about my "difficult writing"! Difficult writing is what normally gets rewarded and cited. Clearly, this referee is out of his/her depth. Western post-theory offers a one-size-fits-all academic grand narrative, nowhere better articulated than by social theorists who ensure that all the usual suspects get cited. It's very difficult for those on the theoretical margins (or with different approaches) to get cited in this august company that speaks a different language. I can speak both languages when necessary.

If our Kalahari and Khoisan sources have taught us anything, it is this: academics work in imaginary frameworks that work for them rather than axiomatically also working for their subjects/objects of study; they argue that Afrikaans is an indigenous language, and that land reform is based on a misreading of history. Our approach to IKS is to examine the researcher-researched relationship and to re-articulate it from an observer-observed gaze where the power lies with the academic to draw the line around Them. We want to find out how our hosts draw the line around Us. And, then, what is happening in the negotiation? Who is doing the jumping?

Why do academics write so posh? Big words, incomprehensible sentences, complex statistics to the nth decimal point presented as self-evident explanation, and the like abound. Once, a vice-chancellor asked me to sub-edit her opposite-editorial (that's the right-hand page in the middle of a newspaper facing the editorial column) think-piece invited by local a newspaper. In journalism, the conclusion or findings start the articles. The most important information is provided first. The semi waffle follows, followed by the real waffle, eventually petering out at the end. This enables the sub-editor to cut off the story without compromising its information with regard to column inch considerations. This is known as the inverted triangle. Nowadays, sub-editors seem to be language graduates who think the inverted triangle is archaic geometry. The result is repetition, redundancy, the story's object getting lost, and lack of focus. Sometimes whole stories are published without an object. I can think of some PhDs I have marked that read like this. Five hundred pages later, one is still searching for the research question.

Come to think of it, this is often how academics write also, or what real journalists think of academic writing. Journalists often write in sub-clauses, starting their sentences with 'Which ...'

Which brings me to a close. My intention in the previous sentence was to write a sub-clause as a main clause, and to limit each word to less than six letters. I'll pick up my \$200 as I jump past go.

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*Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.*