THE INTERFACE BETWEEN GENDER AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN VISUAL ART AT TEACHER EDUCATION LEVEL

Dairai Darlington Dziwa

Great Zimbabwe University, Zimbabwe

Abstract: *This qualitative study used discourse analysis as a semantic strategy to analyse the significance, relevance and influence of gender in symbolic interpretation and visual semantics. Whether the artist or viewer is man or woman, does it provide additional information that can certainly affect our understanding of works of art. The study in particular was aimed at discovering social, cultural, historical and biological implications related to the application of literary theory in deciphering content and symbolic meaning in visual texts. A total of 49 teacher education art students (24 females + 25 males) were selected for the study. Participants made individual interpretations to visual texts (paintings, drawings, installations, stone sculptures and public art structures- photographs). Interviews and observations were used to support and validate the interpretations written. Results indicated that females' interpretations were impregnated with feminine reactions with themes of motherhood, sympathetic, care and love emerging common. Contrary and interestingly the males reflected masculine interpretations of authority, dominance, protectiveness and non-sympathetic attitudes on the same paintings. The reactions were in some instances diverse in meaning because they were a reflection of other factors like socio- cultural backgrounds, levels of education, biographical circumstances and personality departing from specific objective contextual meaning imbedded in visual texts.*

Introduction

Literary criticism is an activity that attempt to analyse, interpret and evaluate a work of art. Matthew Arnold in Bressler (1994) states that it is a "disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought about a work art. However, the way we make known the world differs from individual, culture, gender, economic, social class, age and religious grouping. Thus Bressler laments that how we as readers make meaning out of or from the text will depend upon the mental framework that each of us has developed concerning the nature of reality. This framework or world views consists of the assumptions or presuppositions we all hold either consciously or unconsciously concerning the basic make up of our world. Gender stereotyping, role socialization and sex genetic makeup interferes with the assumptions and suppositions we all hold about the world hence the interpretations we all make. This paper therefore examines the extent to which gender affect visual discourse analysis at teacher education level in Zimbabwe, Masvingo province. That is, is, how and to what extent is the meaning making process or visual interpretation by teacher education students influenced by gender.

Background

The term "gender" has been for a long time been misused or construed to at one time refer to "women" and another to "sex". "Gender and women" are not synonymous much the same as "gender and sex", but are related in one way or the other. Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, responsibilities, identities and expectations assigned to men and women. It is different with physical sex characteristics though the societal expectations of women and men are communicated through sex role stereotyping. Thus stereotypes limit gender appropriate behaviour and expectations to a range of roles assigned to women and men on the basis of sex. These role expectations are subtle but engraved. However, there are exceptional cases of "transgender" where gender identity and physical sex are not coherent. Not all women fit in the stereotypical expectations of femininity, not all men fit all qualities associated with masculinity. Gender roles differ between cultures, communities and overtime.

Therefore gender is not so much of what one is but what one does (Battler; 1990). That is, performing the acquired or learnt societal expected roles, responsibilities, ways of thinking and identities defines ones gender. Gender socialization underscores that boys are different and are put into different learning environments. They develop different needs, wants, desires, skills, attitudes and temperaments. Thus, they become different types of people, men and women who continue to exhibit these different traits even in aesthetic judgment and criticism. The goal for feminist artists all along has been the gender-blind interpretation of art, allowing women equal opportunity for success. Feminists have long cried for museum curators and art collectors to see more than just "male" or "female" in a work of art.

Spain (1929) in Sinclair (2004) postulates that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe unless their backgrounds are similar or in some way can be calibrated. The meanings we all can derive from looking at the same visual text are varied according to our backgrounds, culture, context, gender and style. Bressler acknowledges that a reader is not passive in creating meaning, he /she brings personal experiences, private emotions and past literary experiences. Meaning making from text or work of art depends upon mental framework that each of us has developed concerning the nature of world reality.

Discourse according to Sinclair (2004) has two planes of operation, autonomous and interaction. The interactive plane is the interface between the real world and the inner language signs therefore, a discourse exhibit its meaning from the referent in the real world or the subject in the text. The autonomous plane is the linguistic meaning in the text itself. While the signs and symbols in the text can generate meaning in themselves the suppositions, assumptions, realities of the world as conceptualized by an individual viewer are critical in meaning making. Therefore the thrust of this paper is to examine the extent to which gender polarization influences visual discourse analysis. While discourse analysis has many literal criticism theories, viewing a work of art using gender lenses can generate remarkable variability of interpretations.

Theoretical framework

There are three types of theories that explain gender socialization, that is, psychoanalytical, social and cognitive development.

Freudian psychoanalytic theory focuses on children observation about their genitals and realization of their physical differences. For instance the castration anxiety and penis envy on early childhood evidence of gender socialization.

Social learning theories are behaviorist theories that rely on larger society reinforcing and modeling expectations of society acceptable behavior. It is the society or environment that socializes people into their gender roles.

Cognitive development theories posit that children learn gender and gender stereotypes through own mental efforts to organize their social world. Barry (2002) has identified three key gender assumptions in social constructionist perspective which is a version of cognitive development. These are, gender polarization, a notion that men and women are different and these differences constitute a central organizing principle of social life. The second assumption is androcentrism, which means males are superior to females. The male experience is the normative standard. Lastly biological essentialism denotes that gender polarization and androcentrism are due to biological differences between sexes.

Social constructionist view gender acquisition as a self fulfilling prophecy. In order to be considered competent members of society. People must learn how to fit in as appropriately gendered individuals. This is because people think boys and girls are supposed to be different, they treat them differently and give them different opportunities for development. This differential treatment promotes certain behaviors and self images that recreate the preconceived cultural stereotypes about gender.

Gender theory

The theory posits that there exists a binary construction of male and female and the correspondingly appropriate masculine and feminine behaviors and roles. There are therefore feminine theories and masculinity theories that aim at re addressing many inequalities and inequities between men and women. The gender inequities not only affect women but also men. More recently a multidisciplinary field of study has emerged that examines the critical representations and the lived experiences of being male and female.

The queer theory

The theory explains the categories of gender and sexuality and challenges the notion of identity and normalizing of such social positions as heterosexuality, masculinity or femininity. Simone de Beauvoir (1982) in Barry (2002) observed that, 'one is not born a woman but becomes one, similarly as alluded to earlier, Battler (1994) says gender is not so much something one is, as something one does. In this theory gender is an embodied discourse. It has no relation to biological truths about the sexed body. Gender goes beyond individual, the whole enacts the roles expected from the category to whom/he has been assigned but the context, culture or society that sets limits of normality and otherness.

Knowledge is socially constructed, that is, that our current ways of understanding the world are determined not by the nature of the world itself but by social process. People are products of social interaction. The ways in which we commonly understand the world are historically and culturally specific to relate to variables such as gender time, race, age and ability.

Gender is a critical consideration in all areas of life. There is no area that impacts on women and men in exactly the same way. The differences and disparities in the roles that women and men play and the power imbalances in their relations impacts on their lives, their needs, constraints, opportunities, esteem/ self concepts, way of thinking and judgment.

Therefore it is imperative as Battler (1994) comments that in literary criticism the individual readers, men or women are not passive in creating meaning and brings personal subjective experiences, private emotions and abilities into discourse analysis.

What is discourse analysis?

Sinclair (2004) says discourse analysis is the construction of meaning from a text (discourse) based on the assumptions people draw on the cultural and inquisitive recourses. It is therefore a disciplined activities that attempt to analyse, interpret and evaluate a work of Art (poem, drama or visual image). Various theoretical orientations can be used to do own analysis (formalist, biographical, historical gender, psychological, sociological etc). Every reader espouses some kind of literary theory in his or her responds to works of art unconscious/ consciously, complete/ incomplete, informed or ill-informed, eclectic or unified.

Formalist Criticism approach regards literature as "a unique form of human knowledge that needs to be examined on its own terms." All the elements necessary for understanding the work are contained within the work itself. Of particular interest to the formalist critic are the elements of *form*, style, structure, tone, imagery, etc. that are found within the text. A primary goal for formalist critics is to determine how such elements work together with the text's content to shape its effects upon readers. A reader therefore regardless of one's sex gender interpretation in this regard is based on formal elements in an artwork.

Biographical Criticism approach begins with the simple but central insight that literature is written by actual people men and women and that understanding an author's life can help readers more thoroughly comprehend the work. Hence, it often affords a practical method by which readers can better understand a text. Male authors and female authors have different orientations. However, a biographical critic must be careful not to take the biographical facts of a writer's life too far in criticizing the works of that writer: the biographical critic focuses on explicating the literary work by using the insight provided by knowledge of the author's life. Biographical data should amplify the meaning of the text, not drown it out with irrelevant material.

Historical Criticism approach seeks to understand a literary work by investigating the social, cultural, and intellectual context that produced it a context that necessarily includes the artist's biography and milieu. A key goal for historical critics is to understand the effect of a literary work upon its original readers.

Gender Criticism approach examines how sexual identity influences the creation and reception of literary works. Originally an offshoot of feminist movements, gender criticism today includes a number of approaches, including the so-called *"masculinity"* approach recently advocated by poet Robert Bly. The bulk of gender criticism, however, is feminist and takes as a central precept that the patriarchal attitudes that have dominated western thought have resulted, consciously or

unconsciously, in literature full of unexamined 'male-produced' assumptions. Feminist criticism attempts to correct this imbalance by analyzing and combating such attitudes such as why a female in *"Luncheon on the grass"* would be naked with fully dressed man. Other goals of feminist critics include "analyzing how sexual identity influences the reader of a text and examining how the images of men and women in imaginative literature reflect or reject the social forces that have historically kept the sexes from achieving total equality.

Psychological Criticisms approach reflects the effect that modern psychology has had upon both literature and literary criticism. Fundamental figures in psychological criticism include Sigmund Freud, whose psychoanalytic theories changed our notions of human behavior by exploring new or controversial areas like wish-fulfillment, sexuality, the unconscious, and repression as well as expanding our understanding of how language and symbols operate by demonstrating their ability to reflect unconscious fears or desires; and Carl Jung, whose theories about the unconscious are also a key foundation of mythological criticism. Psychological criticism has a number of approaches, but in general, it usually employs one (or more) of these three approaches:

1. An investigation of "the creative process of the artist: what is the nature of literary genius and how does it relate to normal mental functions?"
2. The psychological study of a particular artist, usually noting how an author's biographical circumstances affect or influence their motivations and/or behavior.
3. The analysis of fictional characters using the language and methods of psychology.

Sociological Criticism approach examines literature in the cultural, economic and political context in which it is written or received, exploring the relationships between the artist and society. Sometimes it examines the artist's society to better understand the author's literary works; other times, it may examine the representation of such societal elements within the literature itself. One influential type of sociological criticism is Marxist criticism, which focuses on the economic and political elements of art, often emphasizing the ideological content of literature; because Marxist criticism often argues that all art is political, either challenging or endorsing (by silence) the status quo, it is frequently evaluative and judgmental, a tendency that can lead to reductive judgment. Marxist criticism can illuminate political and economic dimensions of literature other approaches overlook.

Mythological Criticism approach emphasizes the recurrent universal patterns underlying most literary works. Combining the insights from anthropology, psychology, and history, and comparative religion, mythological criticism explores the artist's common humanity by tracing how the individual imagination uses myths and symbols common to different cultures and epochs. One key concept in mythological criticism is the *archetype*, a symbol, character, situation, or image that evokes a deep universal response. According to Carl Jung, all individuals share a set of primal memories common to the human race, existing below each person's conscious mind. Northrop Frye, defined archetypes in a more limited way as a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one's

literary experience as a whole. Regardless of the definition of archetype they use, mythological critics tend to view literary works in the broader context of works sharing a similar pattern.

Reader-Response Criticism approach takes as a fundamental tenet that "literature" exists not as an artifact upon a printed page but as a transaction between the physical text and the mind of a reader. It attempts "to describe what happens in the reader's mind while interpreting a text" and reflects that *reading*, like writing, is a creative process. According to reader-response critics, literary texts do not "contain" a meaning; meanings derive only from the act of individual readings. Hence, two different readers may derive completely different interpretations of the same literary text; likewise, a reader who re-reads work years later may find the work shockingly different. Reader-response criticism, then, emphasizes how "religious, cultural, gender and social values affect readings. Thus it also overlaps with gender criticism in exploring how men and women read the same text with different assumptions. Though this approach rejects the notion that a single correct interpretations exists reading exists for a literary work, it does not consider all readings permissible. Each text creates limits to its possible interpretations.

Deconstructionist Criticism approach rejects the traditional assumption that language can accurately represent reality. Deconstructionist critics regard language and visual elements as a fundamentally unstable medium the words or image of a "tree" or "dog," for instance, undoubtedly conjure up different mental images for different people—and therefore, because literature is made up of words, literature possesses no fixed, single meaning. According to critic Paul de Man, deconstructionists insist on the impossibility of making the actual expression coincides with what has to be expressed, of making the actual signs [i.e., words] coincide with what is signified. As a result, deconstructionist critics tend to emphasize not *what* is being said but *how* language is used in a text. The methods of this approach tend to resemble those of formalist criticism, but whereas formalists' primary goal is to locate unity within a text, that is, how the diverse elements of a text cohere into meaning, deconstructionists try to show how the text "deconstructs," how it can be broken down ... into mutually irreconcilable positions. Other goals of deconstructionists include (1) challenging the notion of authors' "ownership" of texts they create (and their ability to control the meaning of their texts) and (2) focusing on how language is used to achieve power, as when they try to understand how a some interpretations of a literary work come to be regarded as "truth."

Research objectives

This research study was therefore guided by the following research objectives.

- ➢ To identify differences and similarities in visual interpretations by male and females.
- ➢ To what extent does gender affect visual discourse analysis at teacher education level in Zimbabwe, Masvingo province?
- ➢ To evaluate how the meaning making process or visual interpretation is influenced by gender.

Methodology

The researcher used a qualitative paradigm and the descriptive survey method in particular to collect data. Qualitative designs seek insight or deeper understanding about a problem and its context. Borg and Gall (1995) suggest that descriptive surveys are done for the purpose of producing detailed description about a phenomenon or develop possible explanations of phenomena or evaluating phenomenon. The study was done in the present, as things occurred at the time of the research. Data was collected conveniently by the researcher. Descriptive survey estimates the nature and degree of existing conditions hence the method was found suitable for the study.

Purposive sampling procedure was employed to select a total of 49 teacher education art students 24 females and 25 males for the study. This was to ensure that only art and design education students participated in the study that was likely to be knowledgeable about the phenomena under study.

Participants made individual interpretations to visual texts (paintings, drawings, installations, stone sculptures and public art structures- photographs). Marshall and Rossman (1999) view document analysis as a method for describing and interpreting the artifacts of a society or social group. The content analytic approach was used to analyse artworks by the visually handicapped learners. Short interviews as suggested by Chivore (1990) were used to aid document analysis for enlightening the evaluators on the culture, socio-politics and socio-economic educational background of the art learners. Interviews and observations were used to support and validate the interpretations written.

Findings

Interviews on academic and professional attainment as well as biographical circumstances were conducted and obtained the following data.

Academic Art background

Academic level	Grade 7	Z.J.C	O' level	A'Level	Total
Females	20	3	0	1	**24**
Males	21	2	0	1	**25**

Professional Art Background

	Nill	N.C	Dip	HND	Dip Edu.	Total
Female	7	0	0	0	17	**24**
Male	5	0	0	1	18	**25**

Though the respondents are all involved or studying art and Design at teacher education level, their background knowledge about the subject, the visual grammar is limited to aid them fully read and unlock the meanings in visual world. This results in them commenting, "I don't

understand it'. Most females quickly withdrew themselves from the abstract work. They didn't want to commit themselves when they didn't recognise objects and their resemblance in the real world.

Birth position and family members sex composition

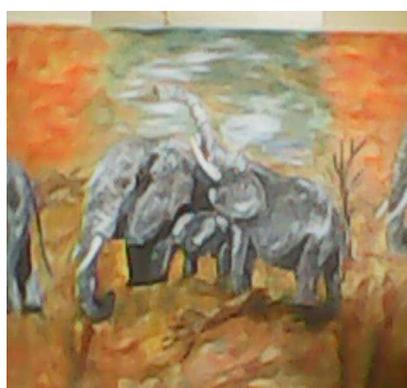| Birth position	Sex	
	Female	**Male**
1ˢᵗ born	5	4
1ˢᵗ Opposite sex	7	8
Last Born	5	2
With mixed elders	8	10
Total	**25**	**24**

The following visual forms were analysed in the research. Participants were asked to make individual interpretations on these visual works of art with titles supplied.
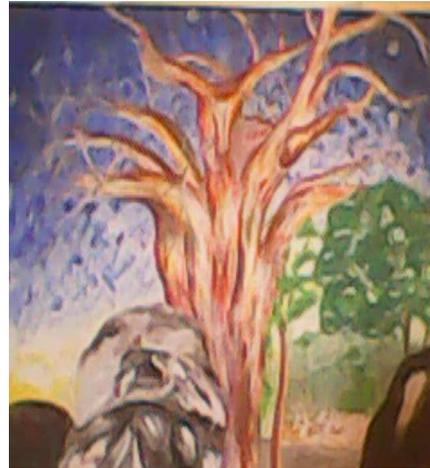
"Accident"   **"** *Nzou nemhuru yayo"*/ **"The Elephant & its calf"**

"Ita Havapo"/ *"Tell them I'm away"*   *"The emerging Giant"*

From the data collected the following results were gathered.

Patriarchy

With reference to the painting '*Nzou nemhuru yayo*' above, 80% males generally concurred that it is a representation of adult elephants dominated scene with only one calf as a minor. These big mammals have destroyed the whole vegetation around them. Such is the nature of elephants with power, authority and dominance and does not tolerate any other animal spices in their vicinity. Most of these animals are males save for one female with the calf. That is patriarchy. Females agreed that the title itself suggest that only one female is responsible for the calf present in the image. This is a caring mother standing close to the calf, protecting that it is not harmed away from her in this unpredictable world. Fear of the unknown away from her the care giver's vicinity therefore they maintain a close physical distance. This patriarchal attitude of dominance was common in the interpretations done.

Carl Jung (2006) on personality in his psychoanalysis theory suggests that first born males and females develop a tendency towards decision making responsibility leadership roles and caring attitudes toward siblings. This could explain the greater proportion of the respondenses whom in their analysis of *"Nzou nemhuru yayo"* was concerned about the barrenness of the land to sustain lives of elephants. There are no trees, grass or water to feed the animals

Personal attitudes

Females bring in subjective experience and identity crisis into visual analysis. They brought comments like "I don't like elephants". This is not based on visual impression of the paintings as if the images are not properly drawn or represented, but rather personal reaction to the referent in the real world. Sinclair declares that interpretation can also be influenced by culture and context. Animals are used as totems in Sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore some attitudes to the animals are connected to personal attitudes gained elsewhere.

Concept

Sausure (1916) in Holdcroft (1991) say signifier and the signified are linked with a psychological "associative bond". The associative bond is the ability to relate or remember what the work of art refers to in the world or the permanent association stored in the mind or brain of the art critique. The symbol is the signifier in a work of art and the referent is the world of experience equivalent. These two can only be linked in criticism by thought of reference which is the concept. For example the term "Giant" has many referents but the thought of reference or concept is a huge object rising above the rest. Hence regardless of sex and gender identifying a baobab tree as a true giant was easy and common because the concept has no sexual bias.

Both males and females showed that they are greatly influenced by the art works title in their interpretation. Ferdinand de Sausure (1916; 1959) in Holdcroft (1991) in the sign system theory suggests that a signifier is a word in the language with a referent, signified in the real world that it stands for. Therefore a title of a work of art has a referent in the work of art or abstract. Therefore, the first level of interpretation is recognizing the referent image, for example, **the elephant and its calf or the acciden**t scene. One has to, at first level; identify the elephant and the calf or the original vehicle(s) that has been involved in the accident. When the referent was not recognisable, interpretation stopped. Most females lost interest in pursuing analysis of *"Tsaona" w*hen they could not relate or identify the referent in the real world of an accident.

The metal collage of *"Tsaona"* is not a realistic representation of vehicles collision but a conceptual or abstract representation. Mostly males appreciated and recognized the conceptual referent of vehicles in the deformed metals.

Semantic structure

Meaning can or is also derived from the whole sentence. The rocky outcrops or boulders on the visual composition "*emerging giant"* were also recognized as emerging giants complementing the concept of emerging baobab tree giant. Hence it creates intra-relations within the whole composition, "semantic structure".

Sinclair (2004) suggests that form words have a grammatical meaning that cannot be stated in isolation but in relation to other words/ whole sentence or composition. While most participants agreed that the human subject in the composition *"Ita Havapo"* [Tell them I'm away], is expressing fear. The colour of the curtain generated different interpretation among males and females for intra relations within the whole composition. Most females liked the red colour in the curtain just for the sake of femininity. While the red colour added fear for most males. Thus they said the red colour is symbolic of danger which the human figure is fearing. One female, probably influenced by a stronger academic background of art education espoused on the black background surrounding the figure. She laments that the black shows depth and uncertainty which in itself generates a sense of fear, implying that there could be fear even from within the person much as from outside. Palmer (1994) says colour raises some interesting general problems of semiotics. Colour is accounted for in its hue, luminosity and saturation.

Musclunity and femininity traits

The *"Ita havapo"* imagery was interpreted as someone hiding from reality. Men /women, who cannot face reality, hide secrets or have life full of pretence. They are the worst enemies of themselves, people who cannot face challenges or consequences of their own actions. Most males suggested that such characters have suicidal tendencies and they deserve such ending. This unsympathetic attitude was prevalent among males and contrary to females. Females felt pity for the character threatened by unknown fearful and dreadful circumstances.

Conclusions

It can be concluded that there is diversity of interpretations in general between males and females influenced to a considerable extend by gender and other factors like proficiency in art and biographical circumstances.

Consciously or unconsciously the bulk of the criticism done were influenced by the percept of the patriarchal attitudes that have dominated for some time in our society.

The biographical circumstances of the readers as active participants in the visual interpretation have an influence on the reader response behaviour. For instance first born males displayed attitudes of caring and sympathy more than other colleagues. It has also been noted that males or females born with elders of opposite sex express their specific and exclusive traits. Castle (2007) suggests that their behaviour and gender role expectation is role modeled. Sigmund Freud's castration anxiety demonstrates that they have identified that their genitals are different therefore behaviour expected is different as well and could account for the gender different interpretations.

Females relate forms identified in the visual texts to personal feelings and emotions in their interpretations while males considered forms in their context or semantic relations. For instances to say "I don't like elephants", "red is nice" is subjective to emotion and personal attachments.

There is no reference to a specific literary theory in the criticism by teacher education art students but there is a tendency informed or uninformed towards formalistic and deconstructionist criticism. They both searched the meaning within the forms, style and structure within the visual images. No participant bothered to investigate the biography of the artist in order to interpret images.

Regardless of gender, visual discourse analysis requires competence in the language and grammar of art in order to be able to unlock meaning embedded in the visual text, form style, elements, tone of the imagery.

Personal experiences, myth, cultural and social beliefs and religious orientations have a strong influence on interpretations. These circumstances shape patriarchal attitudes that have always persuaded gender inequality principles of male dominance.

Recommendations

In view of the conclusions drawn which are based on the findings of this research, it is recommended that:

Art students at teacher education level be trained in the visual language and grammar as a critical component that can help in interpretation of visual works as well as assessment and

Art student teachers should be taught the visual criticism theories so that their analysis is based on a theoretical framework hence can reduce gender biased interpretations and promote objectivity in analysis.

Further researches are recommended to further probe the influence of birth positions and role socialization in the shaping of gender stereotypes in visual interpretations.

_____

Dairai Darlington Dziwa - Art & Design lecturer in the Department of Curriculum Studies at Great Zimbabwe University, Masvingo, Zimbabwe. e-mail: dairaidziwa@yahoo.co.uk

References

Battler, J. (1990) *Feminism and The Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, New York.

Barry, P. (2002) *'Feminist Literary Criticism' in Beginning theory.* Manchester University Press

Borg, W.R. and Gall, M.D. (1989) *Educational Research: An Introduction.* Longman, New York

Brassler, C. (1994) *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to theory and Practice.* Prentice Hall,New Jersey

Calasanti, T.N. & Slevin, K.F. (2001) *Gender, Social Inequalities and Aging.* AltaMira press, Walnut Creek CA.

Castle, G. (2007) *Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Chivore, B.R.S. (1990*) Curriculum Evaluation in Zimbabwe. An Appraisal of Case Studies*. University of Zimbabwe, Harare.

Holdcroft, D. (1991) *Saussure: Signs, System, and Arbitrariness*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Jung, C. (2006). The Undiscovered Self: The Problem of the Individual in Modern Society. *New American Library. pp. 23–24. ISBN 0-451-21860-4.*

Marshall, C. and Rossman, G.B. (1999) *Deigning Qualitative Research 3RD Ed.* SAGE
    Publication, New Delhi.

Newmark, D. (1991) *About Translations. Multilingual Matters*. Gromwell Press Ltd.
    London.

Palmer, F.R. (1994*) Semantics,2nd Ed.* Cambridge Press, Cambridge.

Sinclair, J. (2004) *Trust the Text, Language, Corpus and Discourse.* Routledge, London.

Stubbs, M. (1996) *Text, Corpus, Analysis*. Blackwell Publishers, Massachassetts.