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# How IsiZulu speakers use cohesion in English in their academic writing

**Drummond, Andrew Meikle**

**2016**

http://hdl.handle.net/10539/20758

Drummond, Andrew Meikle (2016) How IsiZulu speakers use cohesion in English in their academic writing, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <http://hdl.handle.net/10539/20758>

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# Abstract

Achievement rates in higher education in South Africa for black students remain low after 20 years of democracy. Writing academic English according to existing conventions is a complex skill. One aspect of this skill is producing dense, cohesive text. The writing of a group of IsiZulu speakers at Wits is analyzed to find out how Hallidayan (1976) cohesion is operating therein: how does this language group use conjunctions, lexical cohesion, referencing, ellipsis and substitution when writing in English? In addition, it explores whether differences in how IsiZulu and English are structured create problems with cohesion for these undergraduates when writing in English. Furthermore, it aims to uncover if the rhetorical structure of IsiZulu influences the organization and the cohesion of their English texts. From this analysis, it is evident that there are elements of referencing, conjunction use and lexical cohesion which are well developed in their writing. At the same time, evidence of speech-type syntax in the data points to areas where further development is possible. This knowledge has led to suggestions on how academic literacy input could facilitate writing skills development for this language group. The investigation has also established the dominance of English rhetorical organisation in both the English and IsiZulu writing of this cohort. It has also shown that these students experience rhetorical conflict when instructed not to use repetition as a meaning-making strategy in their writing. Both a pragmatic and a critical response to these findings has been provided. The pragmatic response is a set of suggestions on how to develop language skills in the area of cohesion. The critical response is a proposal for an alternative style of academic textual organisation with stronger links to IsiZulu oral rhetoric practices.



**Key words**: Cohesion in IsiZulu, cohesion in English, IsiZulu rhetoric, English rhetoric, academic literacy, transformation in tertiary education