

Diane Pecorari

Academic Writing and Plagiarism

A Linguistic Analysis

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Continuum International Publishing Group

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11 York Road
London
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Suite 704
New York
NY 10038

www.continuumbooks.com

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First published 2008

This paperback edition published 2010

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-0-8264-9166-4 (Hardback)

978-1-4411-3953-5 (Paperback)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The Publisher has applied for CIP data.

Typeset by Aptara Books Ltd.

Academic Writing and Plagiarism

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Acknowledgements

This book is in part about intertextual relationships and the ways they are signalled, so it is only appropriate to begin it by acknowledging some of the important influences on this text. Maggie Charles offered insightful comments which greatly strengthened the rigour and the readability of the finished product and has been an encouraging force since the early days of this project. Martin Hewings, Diane Belcher and Malcolm Coulthard have contributed in important ways to my understanding of plagiarism in academic writing. Karin Molander Danielsson has been generous with her time in reading, listening to and commenting on my approaches to the ideas presented here. Chiara Pecorari has allowed me to share in her acquisition of academic literacy, and has been a sunny presence throughout the writing of this book. I am grateful to all of them for the contributions they have made to this book.

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Chapter 1

Plagiarism: Why the Need for a Linguistic Analysis?

The overarching purpose of this book is to examine plagiarism as a linguistic phenomenon, rather than as a violation of rules or ethical principles. While it is true that plagiarism is a violation of the rules governing conduct in many circumstances (for instance, university classrooms), and of widely held ethical principles, it is also an act of language use. If to plagiarize is to 'take (the work or an idea of someone else) and pass it off as one's own', as the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* says, then the 'passing off' occurs when the work or idea is articulated by the person who took it. The plagiarism is not complete until the 'taker' writes or speaks about the work or idea, identifying it as his or her own. Plagiarism is, therefore, fundamentally a specific kind of language in use, a linguistic phenomenon.

The linguistics of plagiarism have, however, generally been overlooked, just as the immorality of it has been proclaimed frequently, and in scathing terms. 'To take a piece of writing without acknowledging the creator is plain theft' (Ragen, 1987, p. A39) was the verdict of an academic commenting on a case of plagiarism that attracted public attention. While the case that provoked the comment was controversial, the identification of plagiarism with theft is not at all so; stealing is a common metaphor for plagiarism.

In keeping with the metaphor of theft, the received view is that plagiarism is not only a flaw in the text in which it occurs, but also a threat to other texts, and to the discourse communities which produce them. Plagiarism in science 'subverts [scientists'] own achievement' (Klein, 1993, p. S57); one editor of a scholarly journal commented,

Incidents of plagiarism in science corrupt the soul of the perpetrator . . . Erode the integrity of the discipline, and diminish

the esteem of science in the minds of the general public. If plagiarism in science were allowed to become widespread, science would ultimately be destroyed.

(Betts, 1992, p. 289)

These comments, typical of the discourse surrounding plagiarism, illustrate how the act is cast in moral terms, and that the effects of the 'corruption' are seen to reach beyond the texts which are immediately involved. Consequently, the treatment accorded to plagiarism is very different from the response to other flawed aspects of a text.

This special treatment is evidenced by the language of prevention used to discuss the act in student writing. Handbooks for teachers, detection software packages and materials directed at students all speak of 'preventing plagiarism'. Since plagiarism is an undesirable textual feature, the emphasis on prevention may seem reasonable, yet other undesirable textual features are approached differently. Instead of *preventing poor paragraphing* or *preventing an unfocused text* or *preventing subject-verb disagreement* teachers try to *promote* good argumentation, organization and lexico-grammatical choices. While other aspects of writing are judged on a cline of more or less successful performance, plagiarism is judged on another dimension entirely. The opposite of poor organization is effective organization, something that makes a text stronger. The opposite of plagiarism is the absence of plagiarism, a neutral feature. The absence of plagiarism does not guarantee that sources have been used effectively, but simply that a text lacks what would otherwise be a serious flaw.

When presented to novice writers, plagiarism is again treated differently from other writing issues. Writing is a skill, and writing from sources¹ is an important subskill for academic writers, yet the instructions students receive about plagiarism are often in the form of warnings and information sheets emphasizing declarative knowledge about the act, rather than the skills needed to avoid it. When the warnings have been delivered, the responsibility for plagiarism is assigned firmly to the student; it is assumed that a student who has been told not to plagiarize and still does so has either failed to be sufficiently attentive to instructions or deliberately stepped outside the framework of the rules. Plagiarism is traditionally constructed not as

a failure to write well, but as a refusal to engage legitimately in the writing process at all.

However, more recently an alternative understanding of plagiarism has challenged this received view. The first- and second-language composition literature has featured a number of accounts of apparent plagiarism appearing in circumstances which make it difficult to portray the writer as a run-of-the-mill plagiarist. An early example comes from Carolyn Matalene's (1985) paper calling for awareness of contrastive rhetoric in teaching non-native speakers of English (NNSEs). She illustrated the need for contrastive rhetorical awareness by recounting an experience with a class in China. After reading an autobiographical piece by Anaïs Nin, Matalene's students were set the task of writing about their own lives. When the students borrowed chunks of the model text, Matalene confronted them with what she viewed as their unacceptable conduct. A discussion ensued, during which the students argued that they had written the way they had been taught to. Afterwards, one of the students summarized the episode like this:

After our teacher's explanation, we understand that in her country or some others plagiarism is forbidden. . . . However in our country, things are [a] little different. We may perhaps call what our teacher calls 'plagiarism' as 'imitation', which is sometimes encouraged, especially for a beginner.

(1985, p. 803)

Similar in many respects are the accounts of student writers at a South African university in Angélil-Carter's (2000) study. One of the writers, Bulelwa, had had limited exposure to English before beginning university, and this created a dilemma for her as she tried to write from sources. She understood the need not to plagiarize, but did not feel confident about her ability to do so without misrepresenting her sources. In response to these conflicting concerns, she developed a hybrid strategy: 'if I want something to be clearer, sometimes I use his [the source's] words sometimes I use mine'. Despite her concern about accuracy, she tried to paraphrase, saying 'by paraphrasing it I don't want to plagiarize' (p. 96). However, Bulelwa's efforts were

not successful in the view of her tutor, who categorized her work as plagiarism (p. 95).

In both of these episodes, typical of many others described in the literature², a key issue is intention. Both Bulelwa and the Chinese writers copied language from their sources, but in neither case does it appear that their intention was to practice deception in order to gain unearned credit for work that was not theirs. In the case of the students in China, this is shown most forcefully by the fact that the source they copied from was one that their teacher had assigned them to read, and could therefore be expected to recognize. Bulelwa articulated a strategy of consciously trying to avoid the pitfall of plagiarism, while simultaneously attending to another aspect of good writing, presenting ideas from sources in an accurate way. Nonetheless, in both cases what the students produced was called plagiarism by their teachers. There appear, therefore, to be at least two sorts of plagiarism, distinguished by the presence or absence of intentional deception. Here the term *prototypical plagiarism* will be used to refer to the former, and will be defined as

the use of words and/or ideas from another source, without appropriate attribution, and with the intention to deceive.

Demonstrating intentional deception is not straightforward, though, and in certain cases it may be questionable whether deceptive intent was present, but hard to determine conclusively that it was not. It is therefore necessary to be able to discuss plagiarism without reference to intent, taking into account only the textual features, i.e., the similarity of one text to another, and the absence of other textual features, such as quotation marks, which would make the similarity acceptable. Here the term *textual plagiarism* will be used and defined like this:

Textual plagiarism is the use of words and/or ideas from another source, without appropriate attribution.

Finally, as already noted, a type of plagiarism exists which is characterized by the lack of deceptive intent. Often the language from one or more source texts is not only adopted, but also woven into

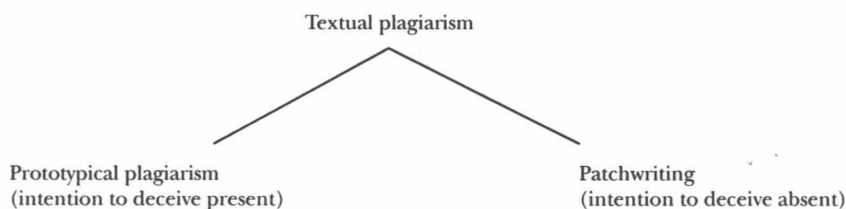


Figure 1.1 Types of plagiarism.

the student's text, mixed with parts that have been written more autonomously; it shows signs of having been adapted to the new text: synonyms have been substituted, active verbs made passive or vice versa and so on. This source use strategy is what Rebecca Howard (1995, 1999) calls *patchwriting*, and defines as 'copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one synonym for another' (1999, p. xvii). Patchwriting, according to Howard, is virtually inevitable as writers learn to produce texts within a new discourse community, and is a beneficial part of the learning process,

a primary means of understanding difficult texts, of expanding one's lexical, stylistic, and conceptual repertoires, of finding and trying out new voices in which to speak.

(1999, p. xviii)

Patchwriting gives writers the chance to flex their muscles under controlled and guided circumstances—guided by the linguistic choices of the source authors.

Patchwriting comes about as a result of novice writers' need for support as they develop, and not because the writer intends to deceive the reader. Patchwriting and prototypical plagiarism can therefore be seen as subcategories of textual plagiarism, distinguished by the presence or absence of intention to deceive (Figure 1.1). A further reason for the need of a linguistic analysis of plagiarism can now be seen: one type of plagiarism, patchwriting, is a byproduct of the process of learning to write in a new context. It is, therefore, one aspect of language learning.

Yet another set of reasons relates to the criteria for establishing that either type of textual plagiarism exists. To determine that a piece of writing contains textual plagiarism, three things must be true. First, the new text must contain words and/or ideas that are also present in an earlier text. In principle, plagiarism could involve the appropriation of ideas expressed entirely in new language; however, in practice, it is often the similarity of language that arouses suspicion and serves as evidence of plagiarism. The linguistic relationship between two texts is, therefore, an important element.

Secondly, to meet the definition of textual plagiarism, a new text must *repeat* words or ideas from an earlier one; that is, the similarity between two texts cannot be coincidental. This is one reason why those in the position of trying to determine whether plagiarism has occurred—for example, teachers or members of disciplinary boards—take length into account. The longer the chunks of language that two texts share, intuition suggests, the greater the likelihood that plagiarism has occurred. If it were possible to be certain that similarities between two texts were entirely coincidental, the label *plagiarism* would not be applied to it. Writing processes are, therefore, a key to understanding plagiarism.

The third and final criterion is that the new text must fail to attribute its relationship to an earlier one, or fail to attribute it adequately. Quotation, for example, involves the intentional repetition of language in a prior text, but provided that quotation marks are in place and the source is cited, plagiarism is not involved. However, whether attribution is adequate is not determined by absolute principles; among the factors that must be taken into account are the reader's understanding and the conventional expectations of the discourse community in which the text is produced. Textual plagiarism, therefore, results not only from writing processes, but is partially constructed by the reader (an idea which will be explored in a later chapter).

An examination of plagiarism as a matter of ethical concern involves looking at a particular set of intertextual relationships in the context of rules and standards. A full understanding of plagiarism requires going deeper still, and examining the nature of the intertextual relationship itself. The purpose of this book is to provide

such a detailed examination of the linguistic aspects of plagiarism, by presenting the findings of an investigation into the source use of 17 writers.

Plagiarism is an issue in a wide range of areas: journalism, politics and literature are just a few of the fields in which high-profile cases of plagiarism regularly appear. The context in which it occurs makes a great deal of difference, though, to a number of specific questions, so this study concentrates on a single context: plagiarism and source use in academic writing, and specifically in the writing of postgraduate students. The 17 postgraduates whose work is studied here are all NNSEs. This criterion was built into the research design not through a belief that NNSEs are greatly more likely to plagiarize than native speakers (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of this question), but because language skills, as noted above, are deeply implicated in plagiarism, and therefore are likely to play a role in the specifics of the act. Because context, again, is important, the writers were drawn from four academic areas: the social sciences, the humanities, engineering and natural sciences.

The next chapter reviews several ideas closely implicated in plagiarism. Chapter 3 consists of a more detailed exposition of the contextual factors mentioned above: the role of citation in academic texts, the expectations of the discourse community and the processes of learning to write from sources. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 will look at the source use of the 17 students from three different perspectives: the texts, the writers and their readers. The final chapter will discuss the implications of these findings within the university.

Notes

1. Russ Hunt has pointed out (in a personal communication, 7 September 2007) that 'writing from sources' suggests a mechanical, repetitive process, while what experienced academic writers do—or at least try to do—is engage with sources and use them for a purpose. For reasons of efficiency I will use the expression 'writing from sources' here, but will use it to mean writing which draws on sources in that fuller and more meaningful way.

2. See, for example, Braine (1995), Connor and Kramer (1995), Crocker and Shaw (2002), Dong (1998), Leki (1995), McClanahan (2005), Pecorari (2003), Petrić (2004), Prior (1998), Shaw (1991), Sherman (1992), Spack (1997) and St. John (1987) for evidence of students producing writing which is, or is likely to be, judged as plagiarism by their teachers, but who appear not to have intended to be deceptive.

Chapter 2

Plagiarism in Perspective

Why do writers plagiarize? Sometimes they are dishonest and are willing to break the rules, of which they are quite aware, in order to gain unearned benefit. Another reason can be simple necessity. In a study of the progress of a second-language writer through a business course, Currie (1998) found that the student, Diana, worked diligently in the early weeks of the course to raise the level of her writing assignments, but was at real risk of not receiving the grade she needed to stay in her program. Eventually Diana hit upon the strategy of repeating words and phrases from her sources; in other words, she began to patchwrite. From then on her teacher's feedback was more positive. Although Diana adopted the patchwriting strategy consciously, she differed from the prototypical plagiarist in at least two important respects. First, unlike a student who buys an essay from the internet and thus gains credit without expending effort, Diana's patchwriting cost her substantial time and energy. Currie notes that

It is difficult to read the juxtaposed texts without realizing the extraordinary time, effort, and patience it must have taken for Diana to struggle through the reading, find precisely those phrases or sentences that met her needs in terms of content and generality, and then weave them together, using still-developing syntactic skills, into what she hoped would bring her an acceptable grade.

(1998, p. 9)

In addition, there is no indication that Diana saw her strategy as cheating; in contrast, she described it as a positive approach to learning the specialist terminology of her area, as her teacher had encouraged her to (p. 10).

Another (closely related) cause of plagiarism may be the lack of awareness that certain writing strategies may be considered inappropriate. This was what Matalene's Chinese students, quoted in Chapter 1, argued: 'we may perhaps call what our teacher calls "plagiarism" as "imitation," which is sometimes encouraged, especially for a beginner' (1985, p. 803). Supporting this explanation is a certain amount of research showing that some students do not perceive as inappropriate some forms of intertextuality which their teachers are likely to object to (e.g. Deckert, 1993; Errey, 2002; Hayes and Introna, 2005).

These three explanations amount to saying that writers may plagiarize as an act of intentional wrongdoing; or because they are attending to another objective (such as learning the terminology of their area) and lose sight of source-use issues; or because they do not know that certain writing strategies are labelled plagiarism and considered wrong. What these explanations have in common is that they hinge on a deficit in the writer. Writers plagiarize because they are in some way unwilling or unable to use sources in appropriate ways. The last of the three, though, can be framed in another way. Instead of saying that plagiarism can happen because writers do not know what acts fall under the heading of plagiarism, it is equally possible to say that textual plagiarism can be identified when student writers and the people who evaluate their work do not agree about which kinds of source use are appropriate. That is, the problem may not be that one group has a mistaken perception, but that two groups have different perceptions.

This reformulation shifts the potential wrongness of a particular kind of intertextual relationship from the individuals involved to the context in which texts are produced and read. The importance of considering textual plagiarism in context is a theme that recurs in the coming chapters. The remainder of this chapter illustrates this by considering plagiarism from four specific perspectives. The next section presents a brief review of the historical development of the concept of plagiarism. The following section examines plagiarism in intercultural educational contexts, and the final two sections explore two very public episodes of plagiarism.