

# Analyzing Distinct Varieties of Plagiarism

Chad Nilep  
Nagoya University

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Plagiarism is widely recognized as a problem in academic writing, both for classwork and for publication. Scholars have discussed causes of plagiarism ranging from students' ignorance, to teachers' disengaged style and uninspiring assignments, to the ready availability of copy-able models and relatively mild judgement against plagiarism. Although it is generally viewed as a form of academic dishonesty, however, not all plagiarism comes from students behaving unethically or even negligently. This paper analyzes three cases of plagiarism resulting from distinct causes. Plagiarism arises when students attempt to combine information from texts with similar wording but unrelated information. In one case a writer's attempt to "borrow standard phraseology from native speakers" as recommended in writing advice (Swales and Feak 1994) results not only in close paraphrase plagiarism, but also loss of information important to the argument. In each case, writers miscommunicate by focusing too much on language form and not enough on the ideas being communicated. These cases show a need for attention to critical thinking and communication in writing education.

プレジャリズムはアカデミックライティングにおいて問題となっている。先行研究によって、その原因として、学生の無知、教員の指導不足、そしてプレジャリズムに対するあいまいな判断などが述べられている。本稿では、3件のプレジャリズムを分析する。言語形式を重視して、情報や論点が十分伝達されていない状況が発生している。これらのことから、アカデミックライティングにおいて批判的思考やコミュニケーションを重視していく必要があると言える。

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## 1. Introduction

Plagiarism, it seems, is a perennial issue not only in education but in a variety of fields involved with writing, publishing, and public presentation of information. During the 2016 US presidential campaign, for example, speech writers for Melania Trump were ridiculed when portions of her speech to the Republican National Convention appeared to be "strikingly similar" to portions of a speech Michelle Obama delivered in 2008, a similarity critics and even some former campaign staff suggested constituted plagiarism (Haberman et al. 2016). Furor over the allegations continued for several days, but eventually dissipated, as have many similar charges against other political speakers or writers.

Perhaps more consequential – and certainly more relevant to discussion of academic writing – are the cases of similarity that frequently trouble research publications. The academic blog *Retraction Watch*, for example, noted cases of international scientific journals in medicine (Singh Chawla 2016), agriculture (Paulus 2017a), chemistry (McCook 2017), and physics (Paulus 2017b) withdrawing multiple papers that "recycled" older work of the authors or others over the course of just a few weeks. Nor were those weeks unusual; the blog's archives include more than a hundred posts categorized as "plagiarism" in 2016 alone (Retraction Watch 2017).

Why does plagiarism continue, and what can educators, editors, supervisors, and other people involved with writing and writers do to address the various problems? Unfortunately, this paper will not suggest a definitive answer to that question. It will, however, catalog some of the causes, both through a review of educational literature and reflection on my own experiences and those of my students. In addition, the paper will suggest ways that writing education can – I hope – have positive effect in this regard on novice writers and the texts they produce.

## 2. Past work: Knowledge, cost, and engagement

As a university lecturer and member of a writing center, I am primarily interested in plagiarism by researchers and college students. I am defining *plagiarism* here to include taking ideas or data from outside

sources without citing them, and especially copying texts without indicating what was borrowed or from where. In this section I will review a small sample of research in education on the causes of plagiarism. These analyses may be divided into three areas: students' lack of knowledge, the relatively low "cost" to dishonest writers, and teachers or assignments that fail to engage learners.

Work with college students or graduate students writing in a foreign or second language suggests that writers who copy from published texts may do so because they are unaware of the "rules" against such behavior. A large study by Joanna Gilmore and colleagues (Gilmore et al. 2010) looked at research proposals written by graduate students in the United States who were non-native speakers of English. Almost 40% of these proposals contained plagiarism, ranging from incorrect paraphrases to large chunks of text copied from websites. In follow-up interviews, most of the students who committed plagiarism said that they did not believe they had done anything wrong.

Ignorance of the norms of academic writing can indeed be a problem. An additional complication is that these norms are not as straight forward as we make them out to be. There is a gradation from allusion to paraphrase to unacceptable copying, and the limits need to be learned. Good news from the Gilmore et al. study is that a little education seems to go a long way. Participants in their study who did not plagiarize had on average just one more semester of experience than those who did.

A second cause of plagiarism described in education literature is what I sometimes lament as simply being rational: students perceive copying texts as relatively easy, and the costs of doing so as acceptable. Chris Park (2010) digests reasons for plagiarism identified in scholarship from the 1980s through the 2000s. Among these are students' perceptions that cheating – including plagiarism – yields higher grades with less effort, so that the benefits outweigh the risks of being caught or suffering in other ways. Students who plagiarize often express negative feelings about teachers or classes; for some people plagiarism is a way of expressing discontent with oppressive power structures. And while non-native speakers writing in English seem to plagiarize more frequently than native speakers do, this may not be purely a reflection of language ability. The research surveyed by Park finds that students who lack confidence in their abilities, feel disconnected from the subject matter, or have very different backgrounds from their teachers are more likely to commit plagiarism.

English-language education at the university level in Japan, at least in my experience as a foreign-born teacher, seems to resonate with the causes of alienation and resultant plagiarism identified in past studies and catalogued by Park (2010). Japanese universities have long endeavored to employ foreign-born native speakers as the ideal language teachers, particularly in the case of English (Kubota 2002). Yet students, and indeed the universities where they study, retain an image of these teachers and the courses they teach as separate from Japan and Japanese life. Students appear to be keen to sign up for classes with native English speaking instructors, but are decidedly reticent in class. It is likely – and understandable – that they lack confidence their own abilities and feel distanced from the teacher and the course.

On the other hand, the explanations described above may not hold for graduate students or post-graduate researchers. Other studies Park (2010) surveys suggest that older students are less likely than younger students to commit plagiarism. Moreover, writers with higher academic ability or greater experience are less likely to plagiarize.

A third factor identified in educational literature as leading to plagiarism is assignments or teachers that don't connect with students. It should almost go without saying that academic writing and critical thinking are learned behaviors, and yet this is easy to forget. For skilled writers and experienced educators, logical argumentation and critical engagement seem almost like second nature. To us, "cite your sources," "make your argument more explicit," and "follow the style guide" seem like simple instructions. Yet for novice writers knowing how to do these things is far from obvious.

Dorothy Wells (1993) notes how difficult some "simple" writing assignments can be. Writing a basic works cited page, for example, requires attention to the difference between authors and editors, and that between news magazines and scholarly journals, not to mention the different information signaled by

periods, commas, and colons. Beginning assignments in college writing courses are often based on personal topics and common life experiences. Given the different expectations of academic writing versus everyday language use, however, novice writers often find it baffling, impolite – perhaps even morally wrong – to bring critical insight and argumentation to such topics. Faced with the glaring differences between their own voices and the scholarly register in textbooks and academic articles, some novice writers copy the more “appropriate” language of published sources. While Wells’s experience was in historically black colleges in the United States, her students’ attempts appear very similar to those of my students in Japan.

Ruben Comas and Jaume Surenda’s (2010) work with students in Spain shows that Wells’s experiences are not restricted to the US or to the twentieth century. They surveyed more than 700 students about their attitudes toward plagiarism. In informal group discussions students said they are more likely to plagiarize when they receive too little feedback on assignments, when there are too many assignments, when assignments are uninteresting, or when they think that lecturers are not committed to the subject. These suggestions point to a pattern of disconnection similar to that described by Wells (1993) and by Park (2010) and the literature he reviewed.

It is, however, interesting to drill down a bit more on Comas and Surenda’s (2010) data. While group discussions suggested problems with assignments and instructors, the broader anonymous survey found that the most common reasons for plagiarism relate to poor time management, such as leaving assignments to the last minute and working on many assignments during a short span of time. It is possible that the problems noted in the face-to-face discussions – while no doubt real – were emphasized in order to play down the participants’ own contributions to the problem.

### 3. Three cases

The following sections describe three cases of what Wai Ling Lai and I (2014) called “ethical plagiarism.” That is not to suggest that the plagiarism itself is ethically acceptable, but that the reasons for it often are. Other scholars have discussed this as “unintentional” (Wells 1993) or “unconscious plagiarism” (Drum 1986). Since the rules governing plagiarism are not always clear, students may be unaware of their own violations.<sup>1</sup> Ethical plagiarism includes not only writers unaware that they are copying but also those who believe that their copying is an acceptable, even proper way to build an academic text.

These examples of well-intended but harmful plagiarism are, in a sense, a partial catalog of my failures as a teacher, since all three come from my past students. But failure is a road to knowledge: as I frequently tell classes, *success* may be defined as trying one more time than you fail. That idea is obviously not original to me. I often cite Soichiro Honda, who various sources (e.g. Nikkei Style 2016) suggest said that one percent success rests on 99% failure. I suspect, however, that the sentiment is not original to Honda, either.

#### 3.1. Somehow important, but not understood

The first case comes from an English course I taught in 2016. The course, for first-year students majoring in science, is designed to develop English reading and writing abilities. During the first several weeks of the course plagiarism was touched upon at least four times. During the first class we talked about class policies, including the definition of plagiarism and my treatment of it when grading papers. Later we discussed how to include published data in lab reports, and still later how to use secondary sources in essays. Week four included a lecture about norms regarding plagiarism, and instruction in the mechanics of quotations, paraphrases, and works cited. In week seven of the course students were assigned to work in small groups to read and discuss a short explanation of Rayleigh scattering – the phenomenon that makes the daytime sky appear blue – and then to write a summary of that explanation. The assignment included the instruction, “Use your own English; do not copy any of [the author Philip] Gibbs’ sentences.”

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<sup>1</sup> At Nagoya University, for example, there is no university-wide rule, and individual departments range widely from general advice to “avoid plagiarism” to relatively explicit definitions of prohibited behavior and the consequences for violation.

One of the group submissions contained the following passage.

John Tyndall took the first steps towards exactly explaining the color of the sky in 1859. **He discovered that when light passes through a clear fluid holding small particles in suspension the shorter blue wavelengths are scattered more strongly than the red.** This is called the Tyndall effect, but it is known to physicists as Rayleigh scattering. (Student submission; emphasis added)

That passage contains a sentence copied verbatim from the source text that the students were asked to summarize. The copied sentence included no citation, nor any quotation marks or similar indicators.

The first steps toward correctly explaining the colour of the sky were taken by John Tyndall in 1859. **He discovered that when light passes through a clear fluid holding small particles in suspension, the shorter blue wavelengths are scattered more strongly than the red.** This can be demonstrated by shining a beam of white light through a tank of water with a little milk or soap mixed in. (Gibbs 1997; emphasis added)

I informed the group that submitted this summary that it included an unacceptable amount of copying, and that their group score would be lowered as a result.<sup>2</sup> One student from the group responded with an email. She wrote, “I want to apologize for the report. [...] I really didn't know how to paraphrase that sentence. But I think that sentence was necessary. I am really sorry.” The student knew that this sentence was somehow important to the explanation of Rayleigh scattering, but didn't understand what the sentence means. It is somewhat technical, after all. Rather than admitting that she didn't understand, the student decided to simply copy what she thought was the important information.

The words that were copied, though, are not the important information as such. The important information is the *ideas* that these words might have communicated if all went well. There was a miscommunication. I, as the teacher, chose material that failed to communicate to the student. She and her fellow group members failed to grasp that information, or at least to ensure that every member of the group understood it. Plagiarism here was the end result of failed communication and perhaps an attempt to save face.

For second-language writers and their teachers, this case suggests two important ideas about understanding and avoiding plagiarism. First, texts are not ideas; they are a means to communicate ideas. Second, before you can use a text, you have to understand the ideas that the text represents. In the long- or even medium-term, that means you need to understand the field you would engage with. In the short term, however, it may be fine to simply avoid those arguments you don't understand and to admit your ignorance if necessary. The student described above, for example, could have written a perfectly acceptable summary without including Tyndall's early experiments. These may seem like simple truisms, but both need to be learned and understood if one is to engage in critical thinking and to participate in what Kenneth Burke (1967) called the “interminable discussion” that is academic writing.

For teachers and education researchers, his case also serves as a reminder of the important interplay between topic and form in foreign language learning. The topic described in the reading assignment was probably not familiar to all of the students in the class. Even within a class for students majoring in science fields, it is unlikely that all of them are interested in physics, and it is certain that many are unfamiliar with the concepts that the assigned reading describes. Past research shows that topic familiarity has a significant effect on reading comprehension (Hammadou 1991; Leeser 2007) as well as fluency and error rates in language production (Chang 2008). It is not known how topic familiarity may affect plagiarism, but this case suggests that the question is worth considering.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This assignment accounted for a very small portion of each student's grade, so that the reduction had essentially the same effect on the course grades that arriving late to one class meeting would have.

<sup>3</sup> My thanks to a reviewer for suggesting this connection.

### 3.2. Grasping for similarities

The second example comes from a similar class for first-year students in science. In that class students read about rocketry, built model rockets, and then discussed Newton's third law of motion in small groups. Newton's third law is, you may recall, "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." This reaction is what causes rockets to go up, in the opposite direction of their downward exhaust gasses. I gave students a number of questions about rocketry and Newton's laws of motion, including this one.

**2. For many years people believed that space travel was impossible because there was nothing that vehicles could push against in space in order to provide propulsion.** How are rockets able to accelerate in the vacuum of space without pushing against anything? (Class discussion questions; emphasis added)

There were also other questions about other topics discussed on other days. Several weeks later students were required to choose a topic and write a paper about it. One student's paper included the following paragraph.

**For many years people believed that space travel was impossible because there was nothing that vehicles could push against in space in order to provide propulsion.** But rockets travel in space and they took humans to the moon. One **sent beyond the atmosphere carries a supply of liquid oxygen to enable it to keep burning fuel in the airless vacuum of space.** So rockets are able to accelerate in the vacuum of space. (Student paper; emphasis added)

This explanation about combustion doesn't seem to have anything to do with Newton's third law. And yet it copies – without quotation marks or attribution – part of the question quoted above. It also copies part of a sentence from the course textbook.

A rocket that operates solely in the Earth's atmosphere can use the oxygen in the atmosphere to burn the fuel, as a jet engine does. However, a rocket **sent beyond the atmosphere carries a supply of liquid oxygen to enable it to keep burning fuel in the airless vacuum of space.** (Bowring et al. 2013, 44; emphasis added)

The lack of quotation marks and attribution are what make this "plagiarism" as it is usually defined. But even adding those things would not make this an appropriate paper. Carrying liquid oxygen is irrelevant to Newton's third law, and that law is not related to combustion in any obvious way. Clearly, this student was attracted to the repetition of the phrase "the vacuum of space", which appears in both texts. Here again, too much attention to the words of the text and not enough to their meaning led the writer astray.

Let us add here another truism about the relationship between texts and ideas, and what writers should do with those ideas. Good writing makes an argument. That means that to be effective, a writer needs to put ideas together in a way that supports a conclusion; in other words, to use ideas to make an argument. This writer went wrong by simply using texts to make a homework answer. He didn't pay sufficient attention to the meanings those texts represent, or how those meanings might be put together to make an argument.

### 3.3. Misapplying a recommended strategy

Both of the examples discussed above come from first year students who lack experience writing in English and who probably felt pressure to write a required assignment with the "correct" form. Excessive attention to form, with insufficient attention to ideas, is common in student writing. I think that we second-language learners and teachers fool ourselves about the importance of linguistic form. After all, we have to spend a great deal of time and effort to master grammar and vocabulary. It is not surprising, then, that when it comes to writing we think of words and sentences as essential elements rather than the means to communicate our ideas. Linguistic form is important. Without it, we would have a hard time communicating and would probably be unable to communicate any but the simplest of messages. But form is not the most

essential thing. Imperfect form – sentences or paragraphs containing errors or diverging from accepted language varieties – can still communicate. In many cases that may be preferable to texts that contain no grammar errors but don't convey a clear message.

I want to include an example from a more experienced scholar who nevertheless made a somewhat similar mistake. Some time ago a client came to me in the writing center asking for help with a paper for publication. He was a college graduate. In fact, he had finished writing his master's thesis and wanted to publish an article in English based on his research. He had some skills and valuable experience as a critic and a writer, but still lacked confidence in his English ability. After we talked for some time he created an outline and then went off to write the paper. Later he sent me his paper and asked me to comment on its form. In the introduction I noticed the following.

**Authenticity is not there to be discovered, nor even to be cleverly coaxed into range of our recording equipment; rather, it is conferred** and practiced by the film maker. **I seek to build on this work by relocating** the construction of authenticity within film from the director's point of view. (ms qtd. in Lai and Nilep 2014, 182)

The sentences seemed familiar. A quick internet search confirmed the source from a paper that I happened to have read.

Taken as a whole, this body of scholarship indicates that contrary to the way much sociolinguistic research has proceeded, **authenticity is not there to be discovered, nor even to be cleverly coaxed into range of our recording equipment; rather, it is conferred** by language users and their audiences, and by us, the sociolinguists who study them.

**I seek to build on this work by relocating** the construct of the 'authentic speaker' within sociolinguistics. (Bucholtz 2003, 407-408; emphasis added)

This looks, like the previous example, to be a case of putting texts together without sufficient attention to their meaning. Mary Bucholtz was talking about *authenticity* as a construct in sociolinguistics; this author is talking about *authenticity* as an aesthetic element in filmmaking. Simply adding quotation marks to this text would seem to misrepresent the relationship between the two papers.

When I asked him about this sentence the graduate student–author said that he had adapted passages from several papers written in English to define some of the key terms in his work. He said that he was in the practice of finding well-written prose that he could then adapt to fit his argument. In doing this, he would seem to be misapplying advice from English writing instructors. In the popular textbook *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* John Swales and Christine Feak offer the following advice.

Borrowing the words and phrases of others can be a useful language learning strategy. Certainly you would not be plagiarizing if you borrowed items that are commonly or frequently used in academic English or that are part of common knowledge. [...] But do not borrow "famous" phrases without at least putting them in quotation marks. (Swales and Feak 1994, 125-126)

Which are the "famous" phrases, and which phrases are fair game? Swales and Feak suggest – quite rightly, in my opinion – that different readers may draw the line between plagiarism and acceptable use somewhat differently. The definition of plagiarism Swales and Feak offer is, "a deliberate activity [...] conscious copying from the work of others" (1994, 125). Certainly unintentional plagiarism may be less blame-worthy than conscious copying. Yet even ethical plagiarism can do harm. In this case, the graduate student-author spent a great deal of time looking for texts to communicate his ideas. When he could not find appropriate texts, he abandoned or changed some of those ideas. Thus the focus on words and phrases caused damage to the ideas and the argument that the author had developed.

One solution, or at least one step toward a solution to this kind of problematic but not unethical plagiarism, is to focus on the content of arguments first, and to think about the words that will communicate

these ideas only second. As I am fond of saying, you have to give yourself permission to write imperfect English. In most cases it is easier to correct grammar or vocabulary errors than it is to squeeze an argument into pre-existing linguistic form. There are exceptions, of course. Summaries of statistics, for example, are often written in a highly standard form. Copying this form from other papers is not only acceptable; it helps readers understand more quickly. But when writing new insights or analyses it is generally more useful to get these into an imperfect form than to search for a pre-existing one. This imperfect language can later be refined and improved as necessary.

The other lesson I take from this case is that even for more advanced scholars, people who know how to carry out academic research and to make an argument, writing takes practice. It takes multiple attempts, and multiple drafts. And often it takes help from colleagues, teachers, or editors. One success may rest on ninety-nine failures.

#### 4. Conclusion

Plagiarism should not be thought of as only, or even as primarily an ethical lapse. As seen in the cases sketched here, as well as the educational literature on causes of plagiarism, problems arise not only from attempts to short circuit the educational process in order to earn higher grades, but also from misunderstandings of either the norms or the procedures of academic communication and from sincere but misguided attempts to reproduce the style of language seen in the scholarly literature. Even in cases where novice writers do intend to copy from published sources, they may be motivated by feelings of disconnection or insecurity rather than desire for easy success.

Given the variety of motives and causes, this paper will not offer a simple solution for dealing with plagiarism. What I can offer, though, are several suggestions to students and to teachers to improve academic writing and academic writing education. These simple reminders may help to reduce “ethical plagiarism” – either plagiarism that is not intended, or that novice authors think of as a correct way to produce a text. These suggestions amount to simple truisms about writing and communication, but they are important to bear in mind both for writers and the people supporting or teaching them.

First, it is important to remember that text is a tool for communicating ideas. The text itself is not the communication; it is merely an instrument to facilitate the exchange of knowledge among writer and readers. Therefore, good form is desirable, but it is not the most important thing to worry about. Linguistic form – including mechanics, grammar, and wording as well as writing style, register, and voice – takes time, effort, and patience to master. But don’t let this difficulty confuse you into inflating the importance of linguistic form. Often the temptation to “borrow” from source texts reflects an insecurity with the writer’s own linguistic ability. This can not only result in plagiarism but, worse, can lead writers to alter or abandon parts of their message.

Another important idea to keep in mind is the proper way to use the texts you read. Before you can engage with or use a text, you must understand it. Quoting a text you don’t really understand – even if you use proper citation form and don’t technically commit plagiarism – can result in writing that is confused or misleading. Understanding texts means constructing an understanding of the message the author’s words convey. Only after you understand that message can you use it as part of your own writing.

Good academic writing makes an argument. In order to make an argument, a writer has to assemble a series of ideas to support a conclusion. A well-framed argument explains the basis for its conclusions, and can convince readers of their validity and correctness. Therefore, useful writing education needs to reflect the importance of argumentation and rhetoric every bit as much as style and form.

It is also important to give yourself – and your students, if you are a teacher – permission to write imperfect English. As described above, focus on the form of writing can derail the important mission of constructing a text that communicates ideas, engages in broad “conversation” (Burke 1967), and supports a valid argument. An imperfect text, one that assembles the elements of a message even with errors and infelicities, can be refined in subsequent drafts. It is easier to improve an imperfect text than it is to squeeze an argument into pre-existing models.

And finally, it is important to acknowledge that this all takes practice and repetition. Virtually all good writing is the result of gradual improvement over multiple drafts. Almost all good writers have achieved their ability through effort over an extended period of time. And the best writing benefits from the support of editors, colleagues, and readers. Good writing takes repeated, sustained effort. Success means trying one more time than you fail.

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