Chapter XV
Substantial, Verbatim, Unattributed, Misleading:
Applying Criteria to Assess Textual Plagiarism

Wilfried Decoo
Brigham Young University, USA and University of Antwerp, Belgium

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how to measure textual plagiarism more precisely, using as basis the four criteria of the American-based Office of Research Integrity’s definition of plagiarism: to what extent is the reuse of someone else’s text substantial, (nearly) verbatim, unattributed, and misleading? Each of these criteria is studied in its variables, leading to the proposal of a scale. Next, the implications for the verdict are discussed. This criterion-based approach does not claim to offer an easily workable solution in all cases, but at least stresses the need to achieve greater consensus and impartiality in assessing alleged plagiarism. Indeed, such cases are often handled very differently in terms of disclosure, assessment, and decision-making. For the sake of fairness, an allegation as serious as plagiarism requires the establishment and acceptance of more solid criteria.

INTRODUCTION

Dictionaries give closely resembling definitions of plagiarism, in essence the copying of someone else’s words or ideas while pretending you are the author. By such definitions, some cases seem to require only a short assessment. A student who hands in a paper which has been copied verbatim from a published source, giving the impression it is his/her own work, is considered guilty of plagiarism. A student who fills major parts of a thesis with sentences written by someone else, without proper quotation marks and attribution, is prone to deserve the same label.
Nevertheless, even in such obvious cases, legal inventiveness may deny the charge of plagiarism. It suffices to add to the definition facets such as the element of monetary profit, the requirement that the copier explicitly claim that the work is his/her own, and/or proof of damage to the original author. If the accused did not make money from his/her work, if he/she did not overtly state that he/she created that particular text, or if the original author did not suffer, the verdict might be, not plagiarism, but the far more innocuous “failure to cite the source properly” or “inaccurate processing of information” or “improper delineation of citations.” More than one case of alleged plagiarism has been defused that way, even in jurisdiction. It shows the complexity of defining plagiarism for assessment purposes. This chapter, however, is not about the way cases of alleged plagiarism have been or can be handled in judicial contexts (Dijkhuis, Heuves, Hofstede, Janssen, & Rorsch, 1997; Green, 2002; Kamvounias & Varnham, 2006; Saunders, 1993; Standler, 2000; Taubes, 1995).

Besides the obvious cases where extensive verbatim copying is involved, without any required personal input, there are also the more confusing and more numerous marginal situations that fall in a variety of gray areas. In such cases, the defense of the accused is predictable: there are “significant” differences in wording, the overlap is minimal, it is impossible to express a truism in completely original language, a word-processing glitch mixed up copied material with original, the document actually cites the source—perhaps not completely, correctly, or in the correct location—still, it is there, and so on. And, indeed, the convicting term plagiarism may have been used too quickly in view of the seriousness of such an allegation and the dramatic consequences it often entails, as cases in academia show (e.g. Bottum, 2004; Fox, 2004; Jansen, 1996; Kirkpatrick, 2002; Leatherman, 1999).

What should strike us as teachers and scholars as we thoughtfully consider various cases of alleged or proven plagiarism is the wide range of evaluations and subsequent verdicts. A trivial instance, if highly publicized, may destroy a student’s career, while a case of extensive copying for a thesis may be kept quiet and end in tacit exoneration. A graduate student who plagiarizes a paper will, at one institution, gently be reprimanded in a private meeting with a professor, while the same offense at another institution will mean expulsion from the program. An author may be publicly exposed as a plagiarizer because two or three sentences are ambiguously referenced while, at the same time, an academic institution handles a “plagiarism” case behind closed doors even though the accused researcher has published under his own name a work that uses whole pages out of an article in another language that is hardly known in his field. The school, concerned about damage to its reputation, handles the matter within a small circle of insiders, with no publicity at all, and administers only a discreet verbal rebuke.

In our sometimes over-regulated society, it is surprising to see how much vagueness still prevails in the identification of student plagiarism once we take into account more variables. It is equally surprising to see Web services advertising to detect student plagiarism, but without offering advice or warnings on how to handle alleged findings. Moreover, those services usually work with massive databases of potential source texts, that is, student papers handed over by professors, often without the consent of their students, thus raising already for the professors themselves intellectual-property issues.

This chapter probes into criteria that can help us assess alleged plagiarism more consistently, especially once we leave the relatively simple case of verbatim copying of a full text or of large extracts without any citation of the source. I limit the discussion here to textual plagiarism, omitting such areas as the complex theft of ideas or methods, the plagiarism in music or visual arts, or software plagiarism, which belongs to the realms of “look and feel” controversies and of “software