

## Correspondence

### Scholarly versus research misconduct

I enjoyed reading Ksenija Baždarić's article on patchwork plagiarism,<sup>1</sup> and find myself in full agreement with her positions on the causes of plagiarism, the need for plagiarism detection software for journal editors, and her recommendations for non-native English-speaking authors.

Given the likelihood that any editor may encounter ostensible plagiarism in journal submissions, one can easily understand Baždarić's call for developing criteria for detecting plagiarism at individual journals. It is unfortunate that there is no widely accepted, quantifiable definition of what constitutes plagiarism. For example, it is still unclear how many consecutive words can be taken from another source without attribution. One reason for the absence of such a definition might be that not all scientific disciplines would apply it. Consider the phrases in Fig. 1 in the index essay that were flagged by the plagiarism detection software. Many similar short and even longer phrases ("all main effects and interactions were statistically significant", "subjects were randomly assigned to either the experimental or control") are commonly used in scientific writing, and appear in many published papers, contributing to a manuscript's overall percent similarity index. The same can occur for entire references or for short technical descriptions that, frankly, should not be tampered with. Editors using a percent similarity score without carefully reviewing the 'plagiarized' text may automatically reject an otherwise acceptable submission and falsely accuse an innocent author of serious wrongdoing. I am aware of one such incident in which an author's submission was rejected with an implicit accusation of plagiarism.

A distinction needs to be made between serious plagiarism that rises to the level of scientific misconduct (for example, intentional plagiarism of data, ideas, or large amounts of text), when either the scientific record or the scientific process such as peer review has the potential of becoming tainted, and plagiarism as scholarly misconduct. Examples of the latter are instances of copying a few sentences from another source, including a citation, without putting quotation marks, or various forms of patch-writing with small snippets of text taken from different sources. Such plagiarism is usually committed because of inadequate knowledge of English,<sup>2</sup> and it does not taint the science, nor does it substantially misappropriate the intellectual contribution of anyone's work.

Journal editors ought to uphold standards of scholarship for their publications and demand nothing but excellence from all authors. Editors detecting plagiarism in the form of research misconduct are obliged to take appropriate actions, and particularly follow the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) recommendations.<sup>3</sup>

When plagiarism takes a form of minor lapse of scholarship, resulting from a combination of ignorance, inexperience and inadequate English skills, a more thoughtful editorial action should be taken.<sup>3-5</sup> I suspect, however, that most cases of ostensible plagiarism fall in that much larger, gray area that lies between research misconduct and scholarly misconduct

for which available guidance is less than perfectly suitable. One can only hope that the editors' hard-earned experience together with collective wisdom of their peers will be sufficient to guide them.

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### References

- 1 Baždarić K. Patchwork plagiarism. *European Science Editing* 2013;39(2):32–33.
- 2 Shafer SL. You will be caught. *Anesthesia and Analgesia* 2011;112(3):491–493. doi: 10.1213/ANE.0b013e3182095c73
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- 4 Vessal K, Habibzadeh F. Rules of the game of scientific writing: fair play and plagiarism. *The Lancet* 2007;369(9562):641. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(07)60307-9
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### Plagiarism and text similarity

This issue of *European Science Editing* contains Ksenija Baždarić's article on patchwork plagiarism.<sup>1</sup> It reads well. However, I think some points need further clarification.

Critical in plagiarism is the plagiarists' intention to deceive the reader and pass on the text or idea as original.<sup>2-4</sup> Editors have to investigate whether there is an intention to deceive the reader, and the point on deception needs to be incorporated in the definition.<sup>5</sup>

Most authors who commit plagiarism do it because of a lack of linguistic expertise.<sup>4,6-8</sup> Most of them admit that they cannot resist the temptation to borrow a piece of text that exactly conveys their own thoughts as their own writing is not sufficiently clear and eloquent.<sup>8</sup>

English is the de facto scientific lingua franca. Scientists try to publish more in English to reach a wider readership. Writing in one's mother tongue is not an easy task; writing in a non-native language is much harder. Therefore some authors believe that science publication in its current form is unfair, and native English speakers have a significant advantage.<sup>8</sup>

While plagiarism of ideas is universally considered a blatant misconduct tantamount to theft, in some cultures plagiarism of text is not treated as a misconduct.<sup>7</sup> Text recycling is not uncommon in some parts of the world, mostly because of the absence of any clear declaration deeming this act unethical.<sup>4</sup> Some believe that unlike literature and the humanities, where the originality of the work is in the wording, in science writing the originality is in data processing — no matter how eloquently the text is written.<sup>4,7-9</sup> In literature and the humanities the text

is the essence of the work. In science writing the text serves as a medium for conveying scientific data and messages from a sender (author) to a receiver (reader), and it is fine as long as the transfer of data is correct and with a low level of noise. Some researchers even find it acceptable to reuse the text,<sup>4,7</sup> particularly in the methodology section of a manuscript. In fact, is it possible to describe the blood pressure measurement in multiple ways?

Another big issue is the use of software to detect plagiarism. The software reports “text similarity”, which does not necessarily mean plagiarism. An editor should examine the text to judge whether the similarity is due to plagiarism or not. The automatic rejection of a manuscript solely based on the outcomes of a plagiarism-detecting software report is unjustified. Though CrossCheck® is good at detecting text similarity, as it contains the largest information base, it requires a subscription. There are many good and free substitutions for detecting text similarity such as Google Scholar®, Google®, Plag Tracker®, and eTBLAST®.

Short pieces of the text can be checked in Google Scholar® and Google®, whereas several paragraphs at once in Plag Tracker® and eTBLAST®. Though these free platforms do not issue reports similar to those of CrossCheck®, they are adequate in editorial offices of small journals.

Considering the significant advances in artificial intelligence and machine translation, we will soon witness a dramatic change in software programs and search strategies. Text similarity will be found much more easily, but our

definition and the way we handle plagiarism of text may also be significantly changed.<sup>4,7</sup>

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## References

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- 9 Habibzadeh F. On stealing words and ideas. *Hepatitis Monthly* 2008;8(3):171-172.

## Science Editors' Handbook – second edition – coming soon!

### Editing

Copy editing scientific papers  
 Editing texts by non-native speakers of English  
 Increasing your editing efficiency by using Macros  
 Using units and quantities correctly  
 Numerals  
 Layout and principles of lists  
 Symbols for physical quantities  
 References  
 Editing and design of tables  
 Editing graphs  
 Multipliers in axis labels of graphs and column or row headings of tables  
 Last but not least – the index  
 Personal development for editors

### Nomenclature and terminology

Nomenclature and typography in chemistry and pharmacy  
 Anatomical nomenclature  
 Bacteriological nomenclature  
 Virus nomenclature  
 Zoological nomenclature  
 Nomenclature of algae, fungi and plants  
 Mineralogical nomenclature  
 Nomenclature of igneous rocks  
 Nomenclature of sedimentary rocks

Nomenclature of metamorphic rocks  
 Stratigraphic nomenclature

### Policies and processes

Facing the void: editorial policies  
 Today's hot topics in editorial policy  
 Establishing a new journal  
 Editorial boards  
 Organizing the editorial board and office  
 Scientific authorship  
 Instructions to authors  
 Editorial processing of manuscripts and proofs  
 Book reviews (writing editing and publishing)  
 Guidelines on good refereeing practice

### Peer review

Working with peer reviewers  
 Peer review reports as a tool for improving the journal  
 Peer review systems

### Ethics

Dealing with fraud  
 Images in figures - quality control and managing illegitimate image manipulation  
 Conflict of interest in biomedical publications  
 Editors and commercial companies

### Plagiarism

Reporting guidelines  
 Basic statistical reporting for articles published in clinical medical journals: the SAMPL guidelines

### Publishing issues

Requirements and preferences for the first page of journal articles  
 Requirements and preferences for individual issues and entire volumes of printed journals  
 Design - print and web  
 Grey literature: challenges and responsibilities for authors and editors  
 CrossRef, DOIs and reference linking  
 Open access journals – it's not all about free  
 Legal issues: copyright, plagiarism and other concerns  
 Online bibliographic databases  
 Bibliometrics for journal editors – an overview  
 Promotion of journals: especially small scholarly journals  
 Maximizing research visibility, impact and citation: tips for editors and authors  
 Using social and traditional media to promote awareness of your publications