

On Stealing Words and Ideas

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Over the past decades, Iran has had such a sharp increase in science production that it was placed among the 31 countries of the world that published the so-called "top 1% most cited publications" (1). I believe such a surge in science production by Iran has several reasons including allocation of a larger budget to the scientific research sector, increased number of graduates and assistant professors over the recent years, and the requirement for junior professors and postgraduate students to publish scientific articles in recognized journals to obtain academic career promotion, and to graduate, respectively (2).

Expectedly, as scientific research and pressure over researchers increase, science misconduct also comes to the surface (3). "Plagiarism" as one of the most frequent science misconducts observed in daily practice of an Editor, means "to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own" (4) and is strongly condemned universally by scientific community (5). However, there is yet no consensus as to how many words or statements or what portion of a Table or Figure from another work would be re-used to be referred to as plagiarism. The situation becomes a little bit more perplexing with "self-plagiarism;" using portions of our own published articles, as this often violates the copyright that has been assigned to the publisher (6). There are not so many ways to present the same thing in several occasions. This is particularly true for some methodologies used in science research. Therefore, it is not surprising that self-plagiarism is widespread particularly among prolific authors and sometimes unintentional. And, that is why many authorities do not treat self-plagiarism in the same light as plagiarism (6).

My experience with editing of hundreds of manuscripts has led me to believe that many researchers, at least in Iran, plagiarize because they

simply do not know that it is an illegitimate act. Sometimes a non-native English speaking author may insert words or even sentences from a previously-published article simply because s/he is declined to sacrifice quality and accuracy of the work for want of linguistic expertise (7). However, plagiarism is not confined to non-native English speaking authors; it is not uncommon among native speakers (8, 9).

Thanks to the online access to numerous databases, we can now easily find many cases of plagiarism (10). But, what is next? Although, plagiarism is universally accepted as a *faux pas* and there are some algorithms describing how to face such cases (11), universities and journals do not always have an appropriate reaction to it (5, 12). As a matter of fact, we in Iran, like many other places, have almost no tools against plagiarism so that in many instances, the accused author ultimately comes to the conclusion that s/he can continue to plagiarize with impunity.

Currently, a group of researchers and editors headed by Dr. Farrokh Saidi from *Iranian Academy of Medical Sciences* is working, albeit at a low pace, on plagiarism and science misconduct and the ways we should employ to confront these problems. Some Editors believe that the only effective strategy to tackle plagiarism is to put sanction on the accused author and not consider his/her future submissions—"one strike and you are out." They even go further and propose to share the name of such authors with other journals—to develop a "Hall of Shame!"

Considering that most Iranian authors are really not aware of the seriousness of the problem, it seems that the most practical (and probably the best) way to face plagiarism in Iran is to inform authors of the importance of the issue (some journals ask for it during submission process) and to teach authors to paraphrase rather than plagiarize. Establishing

institutions where medical writers help authors to express themselves in English could also be very useful. In the meantime, providing journal offices with the necessary software programs to detect plagiarism is very important. Finally, it is of paramount importance to set rules (and stick to them) strong enough to abolish the plague of plagiarism before it spreads to our whole scientific community and bear in mind "how soon it becomes late!"

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