Judgments about plagiarism and plagiarising students in institutional definitions

Gabrielle Grigg

Abstract Plagiarism is perceived as a serious problem for the higher education sector, indicated by the fact that all 39 Australian universities have a policy on plagiarism. It is therefore timely to ask: What are the characteristics of these policies? As an example of policy characteristics, this presentation discusses the types of attitudes inherent in the language of policy in the institutional definitions of Australian universities. It is argued that policies are not neutral, but rather contain judgments that show underlying attitudes, a situation neither surprising nor necessarily undesirable for plagiarism. These judgments contribute towards creating the university stance on important topics such as plagiarism and may clarify this stance for those new to the institution. University definitions of plagiarism have been analysed via Appraisal (Martin and White, 2005). The results indicate that the definitions contain a significant amount of judgment appraising plagiarism and plagiarising students negatively in terms of truthfulness and ethics. Students are predominantly appraised negatively in terms of their diligence, capability or adherence to accepted norms. Variation in the mix and emphasis of judgements in institutional definitions was found across the university sector.

Key Ideas

- Policies include underlying attitudes towards the policy topic and to the institution's students.

- These attitudes can be illuminated via linguistic analysis of the judgments in text.

- These judgments can be helpful in declaring the university's stance towards, and framing of, plagiarism.

- There is a range of attitudes expressed via judgments in institutional definitions of plagiarism across Australian universities.

Discussion Question 1 What do you think the crucial functions of an institutional definition of plagiarism are, and how could analysing judgments contribute to understanding and honing these functions?

Discussion Question 2 What do you consider important elements in an institution's stance on plagiarism – and might the emphasis of these differ between universities?

Introduction

Plagiarism is perceived as a serious problem for the higher education sector, indicated by the fact that all 39 Australian universities have a policy on plagiarism. It is therefore timely to ask: What are the characteristics of these policies?

As an example of policy characteristics, the types of attitudes inherent in the language of policy in the institutional definitions of Australian universities are presented. Institutional definitions, as a key element of policy on plagiarism, provide a worthwhile insight into the language of policy on plagiarism.

It is demonstrated that policies are not neutral, but rather contain judgments that show underlying attitudes, a situation neither surprising nor necessarily undesirable for plagiarism. These judgments contribute towards creating a university's stance on important topics such as plagiarism and may clarify this position for those in the institution.

Australian universities vary in their framing of plagiarism through their institutional policy. Judgments provide a vector for understanding how each institution frames plagiarism as a problem, and for emphasising exactly why it sees plagiarism as undesirable.

Context of existing research

Despite the profile of academic plagiarism, not much academic literature investigates the assumptions underpinning plagiarism policies and the construction of the policies themselves, especially in the implication of language choices – what there is seems to focus more on the overall policy approach e.g., an holistic approach (Macdonald & Carroll, 2006) or decisions made for categorising penalties (e.g. Harvey & Robson, 2006; Kuiper, 2005; Larkham & Manns, 2002). The Australasian Council on Open, Distance and E-Learning (or ACODE) project (Philips, 2005) is a reasonably recent Australasian survey of plagiarism policies in universities; this survey focuses on content of policies and does not include linguistic analysis.

The literature on specific policy issues relating to university plagiarism policies is not particularly recent and is largely based on the American experience (Mawdsley, 1985, 1994; Standler, 2000). Moreover, policy analysis literature does not tend to address university policy issues specifically, although the field has highly relevant principles.

Method

Context of study from which these data are sourced

This paper is based on a subsection of data gathered for a postgraduate research project.

Institutional-level documents were collected because the main focus of the project is how institutions position themselves, particularly in relation to their students.

The study from which the data in this paper are sourced builds on the ACODE project (Phillips, 2005) by supplementing a more recent overview of policies on academic integrity in Australian universities with linguistic analysis that illuminates underlying characteristics of language in these policies.

A search was conducted on documents at institutional level from all Australian universities referencing plagiarism and/or academic integrity or misconduct from university web sites. Three key document types were selected to illustrate a variety of aspects of plagiarism, and the relevant sections of text were analysed from this documentation for the 39 Australian universities. The data presented constitute one subsection of this documentation: the institutional definition of plagiarism.

Why institutional definitions

Institutional definitions of plagiarism are valuable sources of material for linguistic analysis for a number of reasons: primarily, all institutions have an official definition of plagiarism, so it is a text that can be compared across the sector. The institutional definition is an authoritative statement for which a range of stakeholders representing various perspectives within the university will have had input, or the opportunity for input, among them academic staff, administrative staff, student representatives and, not least, university lawyers. The official institutional definition is what university processes are based on and what students, staff and administrators must use. Therefore the wording of and assumptions inherent in the institutional policy permeate the functioning of the institution in its actions regarding plagiarism: the definition has the potential to have a great deal of influence across the institution.

Data selection

An institutional definition was defined as a comprehensive statement of what plagiarism is, that is, what constitutes plagiarism in all its forms, but not including examples of plagiarism that may follow in succeeding sentences.

The institutional definition was located by a search of policy documentation accessible through the institutional web site. Thirty-four definitions were located in the institutional policy on plagiarism while six were sourced from related documentation (procedures for plagiarism; institutional plagiarism statement; institutional glossary; copyright responsibilities) because the policy itself did not include a definition of plagiarism. The policy document of one university includes two definitions of plagiarism. Both definitions have been included in the analysis, hence the total number of 40 definitions.

Appraisal: analysing language choices

University definitions of plagiarism have been analysed via Appraisal (Martin & White, 2005), an approach within the field of Systemic Functional Linguistics. It focuses on three aspects: firstly, how people's use of language simultaneously depicts and constructs the relationship between them; secondly, how the way language is used indicates the speaker/writer's attitude towards and evaluation of

subject matter, and lastly, how it depicts the judgements made of characters within the text. Appraisal focuses on the vocabulary used and requires analysis of expressions in context to accurately gage their effect in a particular situation.

This paper focuses on the aspect of judgment. Judgement expresses positive or negative valuations that the writer makes about other people under the categories of social esteem (capacity: how able; tenacity: how tenacious or diligent; normality: how usual) and social sanction (veracity: how truthful; propriety: how ethical). Social esteem relates to personal qualities while social sanction refers to the ethics or legality of actions performed. A judgment can be explicit, or implicit or implied; the latter case is classed as a token, indicating that it is weaker than an overt judgment.

Judgments in institutional definitions

The results indicate that institutional definitions of plagiarism contain a significant amount of judgment. Many of these judgments appraise plagiarism and plagiarising students negatively in terms of truthfulness and ethics. By far the bulk of the positive judgments appraise the work of others, emphasising the capacity of other authors and minimising the positive qualities of students. There are also many token judgements in the institutional definitions analysed.

Common cases of ambiguous judgment categories

The phrase 'without acknowledgment' and slight variations on it occur in 28 definitions. It depends heavily on personal interpretation which judgment is most appropriate: is the cause a lack of honesty, ability or care? For the purposes of this analysis the phrase and its variations have been triple-coded as negative veracity, tenacity and capacity. Imposing a prevalent judgment from the three options did not accurately represent the data.

Similarly, 'unintentional' was double-coded as negative tenacity and capacity since a student may plagiarise due to a lack of care (negative tenacity) or lack of knowledge or technical ability (negative capacity).

Social sanction: social rules

Social sanction judgments relate to whether a person's actions follow or break society norms, rules or laws. Propriety and veracity are both subsections of social sanction.

Social sanction: veracity: how truthful

Of the 75 veracity judgments, 73 are negative and appraise students.

A typical example of a negative veracity judgment is: 'as one's own' or 'as if it were one's own', e.g., 'Plagiarism is presenting the ideas of another as one's own.' Phrases of this type occur in 32 of the 40 institutional definitions of plagiarism.

The two positive veracity judgments that appraise students provide an example of how an institutional definition can be framed positively or negatively: the prevalent negative framing option found within the definitions analysed is 'without appropriate acknowledgment', e.g., 'presenting the works of others as one's own without acknowledgement'[1]. The positive variation found is 'appropriate citation': 'unless the source […] is acknowledged with an appropriate citation'. The latter presents a clear path for students of what is necessary and desirable in academic writing, that is, what they should aim for rather than focusing on what they should avoid.

Social sanction: propriety: how ethical

Fifteen of the 23 negative propriety judgments are attached to plagiarising students directly, while the remaining eight appraise plagiarism as a generalised phenomenon.

A typical example of a negative propriety judgment appraising students is: 'intentionally', e.g., '<u>intentionally</u> presenting the work of others as one's own'.

An example of a negative propriety judgment appraising plagiarism is: 'cheating', in the context: 'one form of academic <u>cheating</u> is plagiarism'. In this example, 'cheating' applies to plagiarism as a generalised action, as opposed to stating 'students cheat when they plagiarise', where cheating is aligned to the students' behaviour.

Social esteem: personal qualities

Social esteem judgments relate to how desirable someone's personal qualities are. The subsections within the category of social esteem are capacity, tenacity, and normality.

Social esteem: capacity: how capable

There are 148 capacity judgments, with 33 negative and 115 positive. The significant number of positive judgments is due to the 113 token positive capacity judgments. These constitute the most common type of judgment and account for nearly half the appraisal judgement items in total. 110 of these judgments refer to intellectual work, e.g., 'presenting <u>the work</u> of others as one's own'.

The most common examples[2] of these token positive capacity judgments are: 'ideas' (18 definitions), 'thoughts' (10 definitions), 'words' (8 definitions) and 'work/s' (25 definitions). Less common examples demonstrate the variation in terms used in institutional definitions of plagiarism. They include: 'data' (1 definition), 'designs' (1 definition), 'intellectual output' (1 definition),

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[1] The phrase 'without acknowledgment' and its variations are multiple-coded negative veracity, tenacity and capacity, while 'appropriate citation' is multiple-coded positive veracity, tenacity and capacity, as discussed on page 3

[2] Twenty-five institutional definitions include more than one term for intellectual work, hence the total is greater than 40.

'interpretations' (1 definition), 'literary work' (1 definition), 'property' (2 definitions), and 'substantial extracts from written, printed, electronic or other media' (1 definition).

Eleven of these synonyms for work appraise students' work, while 99 appraise the work of other authors, i.e., those authors that students might plagiarise. This focus on the work of others may emphasise other writers as capable, while students' capabilities are de-emphasised because the products of their intellectual efforts are referred to less often. This possible effect is balanced against policy considerations such as clarifying to students the range and types of work that academic rules determine require acknowledgment appropriate to the context of student assessment items.

Of the negative judgments, three appraise plagiarism and 30 appraise students.

Negative capacity judgments typically appraise students' lack of skill: e.g., 'unintentional', 'inadvertently', or 'unknowingly' [plagiarising].

Social esteem: tenacity: how dependable

The majority (34) of the 36 tenacity judgments are negative. Two tenacity judgments are positive. Of the negative judgments, three appraise plagiarism and 31 appraise students.

Negative tenacity judgments appraising students typically occur in the phrase: 'without acknowledgment', e.g., 'presenting the works of others as one's own without acknowledgement'.

The two positive tenacity judgments appraise students and occur in the phrase: ''appropriate citation': 'unless the source [...] is acknowledged with an appropriate citation'.

Social esteem: normality: how usual

There are only seven normality judgments in institutional definitions, six positive and one negative. Therefore their inclusion marks a definition as having a distinctive note.

An example of a positive normality judgment is: 'proper', e.g., 'without proper acknowledgment'.

Contrasting judgment profiles in whole definitions

Comparing whole definitions demonstrates the variation across institutional definitions of plagiarism and the types and amounts of judgments they contain. Four examples follow as illustrations. The institutions are anonymised to minimise any impression of ranking or criticising the universities. For the coding a token, or implied, judgment is indicated by the lower case 't' included in brackets.

1) Plagiarism is a specific form and serious act of academic **misconduct** (-*propriety*).

2) Definition: Plagiarism involves using the **work** (*t, + capacity*) of another person and presenting it **as one's own** (*-veracity*).

3) "Plagiarism" occurs when a student **intentionally** (*-propriety*) presents as his/her own (*- veracity*) **work** (*t, + capacity*) the **thoughts** (*t, + capacity*), **ideas** (*t, + capacity*), **findings** (*t, + capacity*) or **work** (*t, + capacity*) which he/she knows to be the **work** (*t, + capacity*) of another person or persons, **without acknowledgement** (*t, SS, - veracity*), of the kind **commonly** (*t, normality +*) required in academic practice, of the source.

4) Plagiarism is **intentionally** (*- propriety*) or **unintentionally** (*- tenacity/capacity*) using the **work** (*t, + capacity*) of other persons, copying (in whole or in part) the **work** (*t, + capacity*) or **data** (*t, + capacity*) of other persons, paraphrasing closely or presenting substantial extracts from written, printed, electronic or other media in a student's written, oral, electronic, online or group assignment **work** (*t, + capacity*) **without due acknowledgment** (*t, - veracity; t, - capacity/tenacity*). Plagiarism involves **giving the impression** (*t, - veracity*) that a student has thought, written or produced something that has, **in fact**, **been taken** (*- propriety*) from another.

3.2. **Intentional plagiarism** (*- propriety*) is an act defined in 3.1 that arises from an **intention to deceive** (*- veracity*).

3.3. **Unintentional plagiarism** (*- tenacity/capacity*) is an act defined in 3.1 that arises from **lack of knowledge or understanding** (*-capacity*) of the concept of plagiarism, or **lack of preparation, skill or care** (*- tenacity*).

The above examples of institutional definitions illustrate the varying emphases and approaches that universities have taken, as manifested in the variation in judgments. There is distinct variation in the length and detail of the institutional definition of plagiarism, also represented by the above selection.

Definition 1 is brief and contains a negative propriety judgment appraising plagiarism. The brevity of this definition implies that students should already be knowledgeable about what plagiarism is. The focus is on the seriousness of plagiarism, which is framed as a problem because it contravenes the accepted rules.

Definition 2 is also brief. It contains one token positive capacity, and one negative veracity judgment. The positive capacity judgment appraises other authors as competent while the negative veracity judgment frames plagiarising students as untruthful, and hence plagiarism as an issue of truthfulness.

Definition 3 contains six positive capacity judgments that positively appraise the work of others. Plagiarising students are judged through two negative propriety and two negative veracity judgments. The specification that plagiarism

encompasses intentional actions only strongly directs the institutional framing of plagiarism. Hence if it is determined that a student has plagiarised, the documentation frames them as deliberately breaking the rules of the academic community, stigmatising them as deliberate offenders.

The one normality judgment implies a positive appraisal of those familiar with academic conventions. Inclusion of this concept of what is commonly accepted raises the issue of whether there is a universal standard for academic practice. This element of definition 3 may be an indirect acknowledgment that the requirements for avoiding plagiarism vary across the many contexts of academic practice, affected by factors such as discipline, level of study and type of assessment.

Definition 4 includes four positive capacity judgments that positively appraise the work of other authors. Plagiarising students are negatively appraised in regards to their propriety (three instances), capacity (four instances), tenacity (four instances), and veracity (four instances). There are also a noticeable number of overt judgments as opposed to the implied token judgments. The institution emphasises its framing of plagiarism as intentional or unintentional. Definition 4 frames plagiarism as having multiple causes: a student may have been a deliberate and conscious law-breaker (negative propriety), be careless (negative tenacity), or be ignorant (negative capacity).

The first two definitions vary in focusing their judgment respectively on plagiarism itself and on plagiarising students. The judgments present contribute to the university stance on plagiarism by indicating that students who plagiarise are lacking in either morals (definition 1) or honesty (definition 2).

Both imply through their brevity that students and staff are already aware of what constitutes plagiarism, or that they are responsible for informing themselves.

The second two definitions overtly express the universities' position on the important aspect of intentionality. Plagiarism is framed as deliberately breaking the rules and established practice of academic work (definition 3) or as a complex matter which may have occurred for any one of a number of reasons (definition 4).

Conclusion

Plagiarism is an important issue for higher education and therefore it is worth paying attention to implications of the language choices as well as the content of policies on plagiarism. Institutional definitions of all Australian universities have been discussed as an example of language in policy to demonstrate the range and types of judgments and to make explicit the underlying understandings of why plagiarism is heavily sanctioned.

In these definitions, plagiarism is framed as a problem for universities for a variety of reasons: because plagiarising students are breaking rules of acceptable behaviour, or because they are lacking in honesty, diligence or the necessary knowledge.

Given that this variation does exist across the sector, acknowledging the institutional framing of plagiarism can be beneficial for institutions, students and staff. Many students and staff move between universities with prior experience of plagiarism policies that may not be relevant to their new academic environment, not to mention newcomers to academic study who are still learning the rules and becoming acculturated to the academic culture. Recognising that plagiarism can be perceived as a problem for a variety of reasons may contribute to policy development as universities continue to address the challenge presented by an issue as complex, yet crucial to academic work, as plagiarism.

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