

# Back-translation: the latest form of plagiarism

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**Abstract** This paper addresses the continuing problem of plagiarism which, as a form of academic misconduct, has plagued pedagogy for generations. Little has changed in the way students employ the various methods of plagiarism, until now. Traditionally detection technologies have kept pace with the technologies students use to cheat. However, the technologies students can harness to assist them in plagiarising have now leapt forward another generation, making the detection of plagiarism very difficult to detect. Further, it seems unlikely that technology can advance to a state sufficient to bridge the gap.

This new method of plagiarism utilises the intercultural technique of back-translation. This is where a passage of text is taken, verbatim, and translated to a foreign language, French for instance. It is then re-translated back into English using the same technique.

Through a discussion of how students use translation technologies to change and conceal their copied text, the paper exposes back-translation as a method of plagiarising and concealing it. The paper concludes with a discussion on methods that teachers could adopt for reducing the potential of back-translation misuse. These methods include: use of current materials, writing up in class, and tighter control over resources.

## Key Ideas

- Students can and do use more advanced methods of cheating to avoid modern plagiarism detection.
- New technologies are permitting students to cut and paste whole sections of text without the necessity of citing.
- Enhanced awareness by academics is needed to catch these instances of plagiarism.

**Discussion Question 1** How can back-translation be detected in student submissions?

**Discussion Question 2** How advanced/large is the problem?

## Introduction

This paper takes a fresh perspective on plagiarism. It discusses a new form of plagiarism termed *back-translation*. This is where a student translates a passage of text from English, to another language, and then back to English again. This paper intends to raise awareness amongst teachers of the ease with which students are able to cheat using this method.

There is very little contained within the literature on this type of plagiarism. It is therefore a matter of urgency for teachers to understand and recognise back-translation in student papers. It is also important that strategies are adopted to manage or avoid situations where students may benefit through its use.

## What is plagiarism?

Although the term 'plagiarism' seems clear in the mind of most academics; it is in fact a rather nebulous statement to make regarding the authenticity of student generated work. Issues such as *copyright*, *copying* and *collusion* come in to the mix to make the topic less clear. Added to this are practical aspects such as students: *forgetting to quote*, or *not including a citation*, or *not paraphrasing properly*. Further, there are the intercultural elements of plagiarism: *this is what we do in our country*, *copying verbatim is a sign of respect*, etc. It is therefore important for students and academics to settle on a definition. Just what is it that constitutes plagiarism? Among the scores of definitions scattered across the literature is the meaning ascribed by Jude Carroll (2002, 9): "Passing off someone else's work, whether intentionally or unintentionally, as your own for your own benefit". It is this definition that shall be adopted in this paper.

## Why does it happen?

A review of empirical studies of plagiarism from as early as 1941 through until 2005 shows varied statistics regarding the extent and intensity of plagiarism – from as few as 20% of students to as high as 75% of students engaging in plagiarism of some form (Harris 2001; Carroll 2002; Park 2003; Hart and Friesner 2004; Maurer and Zaka 2007). What is clear however is: (1) the advanced armoury of technological resources that students have at hand today provides greater opportunity for academic misbehaviour. (2) Tertiary study today places increased emphasis on students to perform under pressure. (3) The expectations placed on students, by academics is greater than it was in previous generations.

Today's students are not only spoiled with the wealth of material provided on the World Wide Web, including on-line journals and books, students are also able to procure essays on the web, and use internet tools to assist in the reworking and camouflaging of their copied material (Carroll 2002; Howell, Williams et al. 2003). *Like taking a child to a candy store, how much can we blame the student for giving in to temptation, and how much should we, as academics, bear the burden of responsibility?*

Students today have faster and busier lifestyles from those of previous generations (Harris 2001; Howell, Williams et al. 2003). Students are working

more and commuting further. They also have larger debts (cars, phones, clothes, etc) that need to be managed (Lyons 2004; Manthei and Gilmore 2005). All of this means that they have relatively less time to dedicate to pure study (Park 2003). In most cases students managed their lives first, and leave their academic obligations to a last minute rush job. Additional pressures come to overseas students who, supported by their parents, are through familial obligation, desperate to maintain good marks, under comparatively difficult conditions (Park 2003). Finally, there are increased levels of competition in the job market today. It is no longer sufficient to have a degree; there is now more demand in the workplace for the degree to be a competitively earned, high ranking degree (Carroll 2002; Park 2003). These pressures mount to provide an air of desperation, forcing students to achieve relatively good marks under demanding circumstances, and to do what it takes to get the results they need.

Students perceive that academics are also pressing students to do more, compared to students of previous generations (Chambers 1992; Kember 2004). Easy access to academic resources finds lecturers asking for larger numbers of citations in reports and essays and usually a wider range of literature. Students are also expected to produce higher quality assessments, especially with regard to presentation, with relatively lower rates of face-to-face contact (Park 2003). An additional factor is the frequency of group work and the complexities that is now inherent in group work (as mentioned above) with geographic and time boundaries for group members.

All of these factors accumulate to force students to find a solution. Often this solution means they may compromise their integrity, and cheat. As a means of cheating, plagiarism is relatively easy to accomplish, and in many cases to get away with (Harris 2001).

## **The changing face of plagiarism**

The traditional approach to plagiarism is for a student to select a passage of text and to cut it from its source document, and then paste it into their work – claiming the resulting collage of mixed work as their own. The extent of plagiarism in this context varies by the length of the cut-and-pasted text, by the amount of ‘paraphrasing’ or word changing that may take place, and by the amount of citing through which the student may acknowledge original authorship.

Detecting this, traditional style of plagiarism, is relatively straightforward, but is not infallible. Usually there are signs of inconsistency in: style; font; sentence structure; dates of sources or material within the text; spelling styles (American and English), and in students’ writing abilities (Carroll 2002). Students’ discussion may also be off track, discussing elements tangential to the questions asked of them. Harris (2001, 69-70) suggests that the structure and density of the sentences within the student’s work can also indicate potential for plagiarism, the more variation in sentence length, the more likely it is that plagiarism is occurring. He states that:

Software analysis of student essays shows that college freshmen usually have an average sentence length of about 15 to 17 words ... As writers improve, sentence structures tend to grow more complex and hence sentence lengths increase. (Note that there are exceptions such as

business prose and journalese, which set short sentences as a goal.) Generally, however, if the sentences of an entire paper or a section of a paper are unusually long you may want to give the paper a second look for other clues to copying. Finally, if the sentences vary in average length by paragraph, that is also cause for concern.

## Back-translation

The new approach for students (especially international students) is for them to use the advanced technologies that are available to them on the Internet to translate the words they cut-and-paste so that they can conceal their cheating entirely. Using these tools (Babelfish or Google for example) students can convert the English language text to another language (French for example) and then retranslate these translated words back into English.

An example of how this works can be seen below. In this example a very famous passage of text taken from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr has been selected. The translation was accomplished through Babelfish (<http://babelfish.yahoo.com/>):

### Example 1

English Original:

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

French Translation:

J'ai un rêve que pendant un jour cette nation montera vers le haut et vivra dehors la signification vraie de sa foi : " ; Nous tenons ces vérités pour évidents en soi, ce tous les hommes sommes equal." créés

English Retranslation:

[I] have a dream that during one day this nation will go up to the top and live outside the true significance of its faith: " ; We hold these truths for obvious in oneself, this all men naps equal." created

It is clear from this example, since we know the original text from Dr. King, that this translation is incorrect and nonsensical. However, while we may debate its clarity, it would be difficult to charge the student with plagiarism – it does not look like the text has been copied, just poorly understood or poorly written.

If, however, we took a less notable segment of text and translated it similarly. We would find that the text becomes more difficult to spot for plagiarism and for fidelity. This is illustrated in Example 2.

## Example 2

English Original (from Carroll 2002, 20):

Several reasons students give for plagiarism seem to apply especially frequently to international students, especially the belief that citing verbatim signifies respect for authority. Many academics describe how international students come from cultures where knowledge is held communally, available to all.

French Translation:

Plusieurs raisons que les étudiants donnent pour le plagiat semblent s'appliquer spécialement fréquemment aux étudiants internationaux, particulièrement la croyance que la citation signifie in extenso le respect pour l'autorité. Beaucoup d'universitaires décrivent comment les étudiants internationaux viennent des cultures où la connaissance est tenue communément, disponibles à tous.

English Retranslation:

Several reasons which the students give for plagiarism seem s' to especially frequently apply to the international students, particularly the belief which the quotation means in extenso the respect for l' authority. Much d' academics describe how the international students come from the cultures where knowledge is held communally, available to all.

English Retranslation (after applying a spellchecker – *including grammar*):

Several reasons which the students give for plagiarism seems to especially frequently apply to the international students, particularly the belief which the quotation means in extensor the respect for authority. Much academics describe how the international students come from the cultures where knowledge is held communally, available to all.

It is likely that a student submitting a passage similar to Example 2 would be perceived as having poor English language skills, and would be dismissed accordingly. It is also probable that the examiner will spend time and effort correcting this student's grammar. It is unlikely the examiner would suspect that this passage was completely plagiarised, with minimal, if any, student input.

Given the combined likelihood that students will pass off this work as being a result of their poor English skills and examiners likewise assuming that the results are a result of poor writing skills, the detection of plagiarism in this case is not as easy as it is for more conventional forms of plagiarism. Detection software, like TurnItIn, will not find fault with the student's submission. The only means available to examiners, in detection, is to be hyper-astute and aware of the student's capabilities in other assessments, and to check for internal consistency within the current submission.

## Managing students who have a propensity for back-translation

The best strategy for managing students who use, or could use, back-translation as a means of cheating is to avoid its use. Assignment tasks should be written so that students cannot be tempted to use online resources, or where their use is minimised. For instance:

- Tasks could be written which ask students to engage with issues which are current in the media – in so doing, students will be unable to find material which will address these same, current issues.
- Students can carry out research on a subject or issue, in their own time, but will write their essays during class time, with their resources at hand. An additional measure in this situation could be to withhold the actual essay question, until class time.
- Lecturers could also specify select sources that the students must use. This will then limit the opportunity of students to copy text from other sources.

## Conclusion

Back-translation is at work in the student community today, but its use is still in its infancy. However, given the continued desperation for students to produce high quality work with their ongoing shortages of time and effort, it is clear that the practice of back-translation will continue to grow, especially when students realise that its use is very difficult, if not impossible, to detect. As a result, it is imperative that teachers understand how the process of back-translation works and how assessment tasks can be constructed to avoid it.

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