THE GRAVITY OF ACADEMIC PLAGIARISM IN THE PERCEPTION OF SCHOLARS, STUDENTS, AND SCIENCE POLICY MAKERS IN BULGARIA

Irena Vassileva[1], Diana Yankova[2], Mariya Chankova[3]

[1,2]New Bulgarian University, Sofia, Bulgaria

[3]South-West University Neofit Rilski, Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

Abstract

The ever-increasing spread of plagiarism in academia requires development of strategies to combat it so as to increase the prestige of Bulgarian scholars at the international and local level. Therefore, the main goals of the project are to analyze the concept of plagiarism in academia, arriving at a clear and detailed definition, applicable in practice to create efficient methods to combat it, and to investigate its understanding by students, scholars and science managers to establish the discrepancies between the nature of plagiarism and its perception in the Bulgarian academic community. Expected results: (1) Theoretical – elicitation of a definition of plagiarism; drafting of comprehensive legal and administrative approaches to combat plagiarism; design of a sociological methodology for a study of the problem. (2) Applied - transfer of knowledge; creating guidelines for combating plagiarism; raising the awareness of Bulgarian academe about the severity of plagiarism as a violation of academic ethics.

Keywords: plagiarism, academic integrity, perception of plagiarism, codes of ethics

Correspondence: **Irena Vassileva, PhD**, is Professor of English and German and has worked extensively on spoken and written academic communication in English, German and Bulgarian. She has published three monographs and a number of articles in peer-reviewed journals and collections of articles. Vassileva has also received various research awards from outstanding foundations in international competition and has worked at universities in Bulgaria, Germany, and the UK.

E-mail: ivasileva@nbu.bg   https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0150-6375

Overview

The problem of plagiarism in academia is exacerbated by the ever-increasing development and spread of new technologies and the vast amount of available information, posing an extremely serious challenge to society and research institutions related to copyright on intellectual products, which is also directly related to career and financial benefits. This is substantiated by the fact that many developed countries constantly update their legislation on plagiarism, universities and other research organizations adopt stringent regulations, train students in good academic practices and impose strict penalties.

The issue remained neglected in Bulgaria but has become topical recently due to the proliferation of plagiarism cases. Attempts to introduce centralized measures encountered fierce opposition from university rectors who treated this as interference in academic autonomy. Eventually, an independent *Commission for academic ethics* was established at the Ministry of Education, whose task is to evaluate reported cases of plagiarism and advise university administrations on appropriate measures. Although the creation of the *Commission* is undoubtedly a step in the right direction, its power is limited to cases of plagiarism only detected in promotion procedures and it does not change the general attitude of scholars and society towards such breaches of academic ethics.

Therefore, it is essential to reinforce the efforts to combat plagiarism with in-depth research in order to raise both scholars' and public awareness and thus – create intolerance towards unethical practices. This article reports on the initial stages of a project whose aim is to study the perception and attitudes towards plagiarism of all stakeholders in the academic process.

Objectives and hypotheses

The study has several objectives. From a general theoretical perspective, the focus is on the evaluation of definitions of plagiarism in terms of their variation, relevance in the digital age, ethical and legal aspects. It is of extreme importance to delineate its forms, its surface linguistic expression, and, especially in the Bulgarian context, instances of translated plagiarism. Another topical objective of the study is to establish the extent to which plagiarism detection software can be a reliable tool in recognizing academic dishonesty and to consider other means of plagiarism detection, for instance knowledge

of the plagiarised publication, abrupt changes in the writing style and fonts, incorrect referencing, grammatical, lexical and discoursal constructions untypical for the language or genre.

The study will also examine whether there is any change in scholars' attitudes after the establishment of the *Commission for academic ethics* at the Ministry of Education, as well as the Codes of Ethics and respective commissions at individual universities, and to what extent the work of these commissions has had a deterrent function.

The dissemination of the results aims at raising the awareness amongst the Bulgarian academic community and the public of the gravity of plagiarism as a breach of academic ethics and at creating intolerance towards its forms. The outcomes of the project will be used to produce guidelines for all groups concerned with the issue of plagiarism.

Methodology and procedures

This first stage of the interdisciplinary research involves a comprehensive review of relevant publications on the topic of plagiarism in order to elicit the main concepts that will be used. An encompassing definition of 'plagiarism' will be provided based on a critical analysis of existing research. Using sociolinguistic tools for analysis, the most controversial issues connected to what constitutes plagiarism, what forms it takes, the reasons for resorting to academic dishonesty, the reticence on the part of academics in revealing instances of plagiarism, among others will be pinpointed. Special attention will be paid to Internet plagiarism where the Internet will be envisaged as a source of material to be plagiarized and as a space for e-publications. Collaborative multiple-authored web-based texts (such as Wikis) are considered to be particularly susceptible to plagiarism since they are frequently treated as free sources of ready-made information. Therefore, these types of plagiarism will be focused on from a linguistic perspective. A major challenge here is not only the widely-spread copy-paste practice but, much more importantly, the treatment of unsolicited and unacknowledged 'borrowings' across languages and semiotic modes – an issue that has hardly received any scholarly attention so far. The results will materialize in the design of the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, which will be the second stage of the research.

The next stage of the interdisciplinary research employs sociological methodology whereby the main research method is comparative-historical, supplemented and enriched with the method of discourse analysis: in their conceptual unity they aim to construct and verify a sociological diagnosis of sustainable practices, basic attitudes and key factors (degree, intensity and forms) for dissemination of plagiarism in the Bulgarian academic community with an analytical focus on three reference groups: university lecturers, science managers and students from different educational levels. Such a methodology is not only paradigmatically accepted, validated and tested in the theory of modern humanities and social sciences, but is also an extremely effective scientific tool for achieving reliable and valid results.

The research methodology comprises three stages: desk-research; field collection of empirical data; their processing, analysis, and interpretation. The desk-research has two fundamental aspects. It seeks to investigate current views of what constitutes plagiarism and what its manifestations are and ultimately to arrive at a clearer definition of the concept. In addition, it aims to explore, describe and summarize current policies to counter academic plagiarism at the levels of state legislation and university regulations.

Field empirical data collection aims to explore, describe and summarize the practices, attitudes, and factors of academic plagiarism among reference groups regarding its definition, identification, intensity, response and prevention. The reflexive focus will be on its internet forms. and the empirical techniques used are: (1) Quantitative – surveys; (2) Qualitative - semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The three reference groups will be accessed through a specific combination of quantitative and qualitative empirical techniques.

Qualitative techniques allow respondents to give free replies, statements and interpretations, and share personal experiences, observations and findings on academic plagiarism. The individual opinions thus collected will be reformulated into a homogeneous system of empirical indicators suitable for quantitative research through sociological questionnaires among the three reference groups. This specific combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques will ensure sufficient density, distinctiveness and comparability of the data, ensuring that the research will cover the widest possible range of hypotheses, positions and actors in Bulgarian academia and higher education.

Theoretical background

Plagiarism is the most common type of research misconduct along with results *falsification* and *fabrication*. Although, according to van Harten, it "is the least impactful in terms of perceptions from the outside […], it clutters the research record and it's effectively an act of stealing credit" (Mayer 2016). Besides, since plagiarism is (almost exclusively) the most common crime in the social sciences, as they deal much less with experiments and rely mainly on language for justifying claims, the present study is confined to this form of misconduct only.

Over the last several decades, scholars have turned their attention to a wide plethora of issues concerning plagiarism. One of the most prominent areas of research is the question of student plagiarism, especially in the digital age, with studies concentrating on Internet-plagiarism (c.f. Blum 2011; Sutherland-Smith, 2005). Some of the reasons for students adopting the practice are identified to be cultural-conditioning (Sowden 2005; Pennycook 1996), unsatisfactory language skills (Liu, 2005), the influence of the Internet over the students' understanding of notions such as authorship, attribution of credit, originality (Breuer, Chankova & Vassileva, 2020).

Considering plagiarism from a more general socio-cultural perspective and starting from the assumption that it is advisable to discard the notion of plagiarism in order to avoid its negative and moral implications, Chandrasoma et al. (2004) suggest employing Borg's (2002) notions of 'transgressive and nontransgressive intertextuality'. Focusing on student academic production, they argue "that transgressive intertextuality is best understood as one aspect of textual construction deeply embedded in a wide variety of social, textual, and academic practices" (p.172), and that the ascription of transgressive or nontransgressive intertextuality is highly context-dependent.

There seems to be no consensus among academics on the different aspects of plagiarism. Some efforts are to be noted on classifying the offences (Hexham 2013), but the wide variety of malpractices that may be identified as plagiarism are seldom encompassed in a comprehensive definition. Most notably, despite the growing interest in plagiarism, very little research focuses on *academic plagiarism*. In the public domain, discussions are usually limited to a few cases regarding high-profile, usually political figures (as evidenced by recent cases in Germany and Central Europe). Martin (1984)

speaks of academic plagiarism as a taboo topic across academia, which stems first from the unfortunate fact that academic plagiarism is a much more common occurrence than might be expected and second, from a preoccupation of not tarnishing the image of academia. There is a growing concern that both scholars and institutions refuse to take responsibility when allegations of plagiarism are levelled against a member of academia, by either ignoring the issue or by taking refuge behind existing convenient procedure flaws, such as the anonymity requirement, avoiding undertaking proper investigations to either prove or disprove the allegations (Martin 1984, Kock 1999, Bartlett & Smallwood 2004, Lewis, Duchac & Beets 2011, Luke & Kearins 2012).

Even a cursory overview of honour codes (see also the extensive discussion in McCabe et al. 2002) of leading universities in English-speaking countries demonstrates the extreme importance attributed to combating academic misconduct in general and plagiarism in particular, and the detailed descriptions of what is considered plagiarism **regardless of the presence or absence of intent to deceive**.

The latter claim has been explicitly emphasized as following from the Roman law postulating: „*Ignorantia legis non excusat*", since unvoluntary plagiarism, especially in Bulgaria, is often used as an excuse for using someone else's work without proper acknowledgement. On the other hand, the existing official documents in Bulgaria are quite vague on this issue and the solutions are left in the hands of the individual universities which cannot be viewed as impartial parties. Therefore, the study will also consider in detail the existing legal practices and university policies and their application in Bulgaria as compared to other countries and will suggest solutions for improving the implementation mechanisms.

The Internet as the main source of plagiarism

The Internet is not only a virtually unlimited source of information; with two decades under the participative Web 2.0, users can easily produce, exploit and disseminate ideas and information, and create communities. The multimedia environment also has a strong impact on the *interpersonal level of scientific exchange* – issues such as authorship in the more or less anonymous world of Web 2.0, production and reception strategies as well as changes in the structure and interrelationships within the scientific discourse community all represent compelling areas for research.

It is true that the notion of textual ownership has been challenged for the past two decades (e.g., Bloch, 2001; Lunsford & West, 1996), including the postmodernist idea of "the death of author" and "the decentring of the authority of a single, unitary self over a text" (Belcher, 2001, p.142). The latter belief has been strengthened by the participative Web 2.0 where it is sometimes hard to distinguish between authored and freely co-authored texts.

Therefore, as a reflection on the rise of the "remix culture" of the Web (the term is taken from Manovich, 2007), which influences the formation of the notions of originality and authorship in young Internet users, we turn our attention to the attitude of scholars and students towards plagiarism. Studies show that the notion of plagiarism is not uniformly perceived by scholars and students, and scholars have difficulties in applying the criteria to particular cases in order to decide whether plagiarism has occurred (Pecorari, 2013). Academic staff report mixed attitudes towards plagiarism among students, ranging from negative perceptions of the institutional regulatory mechanisms or the lack thereof, to unwillingness to invest time and effort into pursuing plagiarism investigations (Sutherland-Smith, 2005). The spread of (mostly) Internet-based plagiarism among students worldwide is symptomatic of the different perceptions about proper information exploitation (Breuer, Chankova & Vassileva], 2020; Blum, 2011). Remarkably, the bulk of research in this area is directed at student plagiarism, its origins and reasons (e.g., Sowden, 2005; Liu, 2005) and different preventive measures, such as assignment design (Zobel & Hamilton, 2002; Wiedemeie,r 2002; Heckler, Forde & Bryan, 2013), paraphrasing training (Walker, 2008) or "revised institutional plagiarism policies combined with authentic pedagogy" (Howard, 2007, p.3). There is precious little research directed at academics' plagiarism (for example, Clarke, 2006), the assumption being that academics do not plagiarize. This unwillingness to engage in a discussion seems to persist to this day (Luke & Kearins, 2012). Review articles of the issue implicitly restrict their focus on student academic misconduct (Awasti, 2019) and lately, on the emerging AI-aided production, whose status is being discussed (Cotton et al., 2024).

Since search engines and reference databases normally provide the latest reference to a particular concept, both students and scholars often do not bother to go deeper and search for the original source. Especially in cases when translated sources are concerned, this may lead to such distortions and misattributions that the original

becomes almost invisible, which results in a text that stands somewhere between plagiarism and falsification (for a detailed analysis of authorship and responsibility in discourse see Scollon 1994).

Expected results and conclusions

The study will have three fundamental results. The first will be directed at clarifying the definition of plagiarism. More specifically, after the successful completion of the project the following **theoretical results from a linguistic viewpoint** are expected:

- to contribute to the clarification of the much-debated issue of what constitutes plagiarism;

- to elicit which forms it may materialise in;

- to describe how it is linguistically realized;

- to illustrate how, whether and to what extent plagiarism detection software is applicable and reliable in revealing instances of plagiarism;

- to consider other means of plagiarism detection, such as familiarity with publications, change of style, typography, problematic referencing, unusual grammatical and lexical structures that may indicate the presence of translated plagiarism.

Stemming from the comprehensive analysis of questionnaires, focus groups and informal interview-based surveys, the second main group of **theoretical results from a sociological viewpoint** will be a fresh insight of the attitudes toward plagiarism in Bulgaria of all parties concerned: students, academics and science managers. The study will thus elicit the existing knowledge gaps and grey areas that should be filled in order to achieve full understanding of the issue of plagiarism. The differences in the attitudes towards intellectual and textual ownership and the reasons for resorting to plagiarism in Bulgaria will be foregrounded. The ultimate aim is to establish the inconsistencies in the perception of plagiarism. The study will also highlight changes in attitudes in academia after the establishment of the Commission for Academic Ethics in 2018.

Following the new knowledge gained from the first two groups of theoretical results, the third result is **practically oriented** – the aim is to provide much-needed guidelines for recognizing and eliminating plagiarism in academia. It is assumed that a good familiarity with the issue would lead to the establishment of strict and unambiguous

norms aimed at combatting plagiarism at all levels. The popularisation of the results is expected to deepen the understanding of the magnitude and importance of plagiarism amongst academia and the society in general, thus providing solutions to a serious academic, ethical, moral and socially significant problem.

The study will contribute to a proper understanding of the concept of plagiarism and develop an attitude of intolerance towards its practice. Once the inconsistencies in the perception of plagiarism are established then the phenomenon can be more easily eradicated. The introduction of clear-cut regulations is expected to minimize attempts at plagiarising. Besides, the solution of this problem should improve the quality of the research production by Bulgarian scholars and thus increase their competitiveness at international level. As a result, the prestige of Bulgarian scholars among the general public will increase and more trust will be generated in their achievements and trustworthiness which mirrors the crucial importance of researchers' social credibility.

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Authors note

Irena Vassileva, PhD, is Professor of English and German and has worked extensively on spoken and written academic communication in English, German and Bulgarian. She has published three monographs and a number of articles in peer-reviewed journals and collections of articles. Vassileva has also received various research awards from outstanding foundations in international competition and has worked at universities in Bulgaria, Germany, and the UK.

E-mail: ivasileva@nbu.bg   https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0150-6375

Diana Yankova, PhD, is Professor of Linguistics and current head of the Languages and Cultures Department, New Bulgarian University, Sofia. She teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in text linguistics, translation of legislative texts, American and Canadian culture studies. She is the author of several monographs and numerous articles on legal language with special emphasis on culture and genre-specific characteristics of Common law and Continental legislation, points of convergence between legal studies and linguistics, terminological and structural considerations in translating supranational law, approximation of legislation, teaching EALP.

E-mail: dyankova@nbu.bg   https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4524-882X

Maria Chankoav, PhD, is Associate Professor of French and English at the South-West University Neofit Rilski, Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria. Her research interests range from linguistic pragmatics, political discourse analysis, legitimisation strategies, strategic interaction, speech acts, to interdisciplinary issues, such as academic integrity, artificial intelligence in research and education.

E-mail: mariya.chankova@swu.bg   https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3017-125X