

Debora Weber-Wulff

False Feathers: A Perspective on Academic Plagiarism

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Index; Index of Persons

Although it is true that plagiarism is a very old phenomenon and that it certainly has not appeared with the invention of the Internet, the most recent European history, related to the careers of some highly ranked politicians, brought back attention to the importance of documenting and studying plagiarism. Of course, the diagnose of plagiarism must not be underestimated: to prove plagiarism and to differentiate it from other forms of scientific misconduct, often becomes a real challenge.

The author of the book *False Feathers: A Perspective on Academic Plagiarism* is Debora Weber-Wulff (b. 1957), Professor of Media and Computing at the University of Applied Sciences (*Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft*) in Berlin. Educated in San Diego (computer science) and Kiel, Prof. Weber-Wulff has been interested in plagiarism since 2002, and active in the VroniPlag Wiki group discovering and documenting plagiarism in dissertations at German-speaking universities. The title of her most recent book not only wittily reminds of the well-known Aesop's fable on "The jay and the peacock", but also epitomises the ethical problem of plagiarism in the best way.

Weber-Wulff departs from the problem of the definition of plagiarism and its typology: copy & paste, translations, disguised plagiarism ("editing"), shake & paste collections (of paragraphs from various sources), clause quilts ("patchwriting", a variation of paraphrasing), structural plagiarism (paraphrasing without citing), pawn sacrifice and cut & slide (inappropriate, minimal quotations), self-plagiarism, and other dimensions. Weber-Wulff also briefly comments on other types of academic misconduct, including ghostwriting (writing for others), contract cheating (payed ghostwriting for students), honorary authorship, and falsifying data. At the end of Chapter 2, incidence of and reasons for plagiarising are analysed.

Chapter 3 is devoted to plagiarism in Germany, documenting the discovery and destiny of the 2011 scandal involving the then German federal Minister of Defence, Karl-Theodor von und zu Guttenberg, whose dissertation was proven to be plagiarised. Analysed is also the role of the GuttenPlag Wiki, and later VroniPlag Wiki groups, as well as the reflections of the German universities. Particularly interesting are the provided examples of old plagiarism cases, since 1865 (Haas, Dietz, Englisch, Nix, Ströker, Mathiopoulos, Gottinger, etc.), up to one more “ministerial” plagiarism that ended, in 2013, with the resignation of the then German federal Minister of Education and Research Annette Schavan.

The most useful part of the book certainly is devoted to plagiarism detection modes (Chapter 4), thoroughly analysing search engines, techniques for finding text parallels, identifying candidate sources, comparing, finding a thesis, etc. (with the example of the VroniPlag Wiki methodology). In Chapter 5, the ways to prevent plagiarism are suggested, including training of students in academic writing (proper quoting, etc.), public reporting of the discovered cases, and other measures. A brief overview is provided also of plagiarism policies in other countries – USA, UK, Canada, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Austria, Poland, Slovak Republic, and the Netherlands.

Each chapter ends with a detailed bibliography. In Appendices, chapters are devoted to the DFG (German Research Foundation) recommendations for good scientific practice, Franklyn-Stokes & Newstead’s catalog of cheating behaviors, McCabe et al.’s list of actions to stop students from cheating, a learning unit about plagiarism, an honor code for universities, and an Internet homepage register of sites of interest for studying and fighting plagiarism (i.e., *Compilatio*, *CrossCheck*, etc.).

The author might consider for the next edition of the book to include also the analysis of the case of the Dutch scientist Diederik Stapel, recently very thoroughly documented and published, as well as to complete the overview of non-German practices with Hungary (where the President of the Republic had to resign for plagiarism), Romania (with the resignations of two ministers of education and heavy accusations against the Prime Minister), and Croatia (with several interesting cases from politics – Đapić, Mlinarić, Brkić – and one from science – Kurjak). In Croatia, a group at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Rijeka, has systematically been studying plagiarism, with three dissertations defended (Lidija Bilić-Zulle, Ksenija Baždarić, Martina Mavrinac), and one in the process of preparation (Vanja Pupovac).

There is no other way of fighting plagiarism but repeating it is wrong, over and over again. No technique will stop it, no legal solution will prevent it. It only can be hoped that proper education and the examples of good practice will control human ambitions and minimise the risk of transforming science in a worthless play. The book of Debora Weber-Wulff has certainly helped this endeavour a lot.

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