



How to Act When Research Misconduct Is Not Detected by Software but Revealed by the Author of the Plagiarized Article

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The detection of plagiarism in scholarly articles is a complex process. It requires not just quantitative analysis with the similarity recording by anti-plagiarism software but also assessment of the readers' opinion, pointing to the theft of ideas, methodologies, and graphics. In this article we describe a blatant case of plagiarism by Chinese authors, who copied a Russian article from a non-indexed and not widely visible Russian journal, and published their own report in English in an open-access journal indexed by Scopus and Web of Science and archived in PubMed Central. The details of copying in the translated English article were presented by the Russian author to the chief editor of the index journal, consultants from Scopus, anti-plagiarism experts, and the administrator of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). The correspondents from Scopus and COPE pointed to the decisive role of the editors' of the English journal who may consider further actions if plagiarism is confirmed. After all, the chief editor of the English journal retracted the article on grounds of plagiarism and published a retraction note, although no details of the complexity of the case were reported. The case points to the need for combining anti-plagiarism efforts and actively seeking opinion of non-native English-speaking authors and readers who may spot intellectual theft which is not always detected by software.

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Defining plagiarism quantitatively by referring to the percentages of the copied texts is often problematic since many other instances of the appropriation of others' ideas, methodologies, and graphics can be missed easily. Plagiarism may take different forms caused by varying intentions of the plagiarists. Unintentional plagiarism by an inexperienced author, who is unaware of the norms of paraphrasing, referring, and citing, is often excusable but still requires proper analysis, corrections, and improving the quality of mentoring (1). Intentional, covert text recycling, stealing ideas and manipulating with published graphics is absolutely unacceptable and points to the more sinister causes, threatening the integrity of the whole system of the scientific evidence accumulation (2).

Journal editors encountering research misconduct are advised to upgrade their instructions by defining what constitutes plagiarism and copyright violation and formulate their editorial strategies aimed at preventing unlawful copying (3). The editors' and publishers' preventing misconduct by enforcing their journal instructions on ethics help to distinguish the legitimate sources from the so-called illegitimate, or predatory, journals (4). Most indexed journals have already adopted strategies on publication ethics and plagiarism detection, with iThenticate[®] software being widely employed to report the overlaps in the

English texts (5). But even with the use of iThenticate[®], which is the most powerful anti-plagiarism tool, the increase in the detection of the similarity of the processed texts accounts for only 15% (5), and there is no correlation between levels of the similarity index and plagiarism (6).

Apparently, plagiarism prevention by solely electronic means is not a workable solution to the problem. Journal editors should take a more active stance on pre- and post-publication communications with authors, reviewers, and readers. In the era of digitization and open access, readers with interest in the topics of the published articles may play a decisive role in detecting misconduct and requesting corrections or retractions (7).

Herein we report a didactic case of overt plagiarism of ideas, methodology and visual materials by Chinese authors who published their article in English in the *Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences* (Lin Feng, Hua Li, Ling-Ling E, Chuan-Jie Li, Yan Ding Pathological changes in the maxillary sinus mucosae of patients with recurrent odontogenic maxillary sinusitis. *Pak J Med Sci* 2014;30:972-5). The article is archived by PubMed Central and available from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4163215/pdf/pjms-30-0972.pdf>. This open-access journal is archived in PubMed Central and indexed by Scopus and Web of Science. Recently, it came to the attention of Olga D. Baydik

that the index article by Feng L. et al. is a meticulously translated and edited copy of her own article in Russian, which was published in a non-indexed and not widely visible subscription journal in 2011 (Baydik OD, Sysolyatin PG, Shkurina TN. The structural and functional changes in the mucous membrane of the maxillary sinus in recurrent odontogenic sinusitis. *Institut Stomatologii = The Dental Institute* 2011;53:56-7 (in Russian). Available from: <http://www.instom.ru/publish/magazine/30957/article/31093>). The author carefully read and compared both items and reported the literary theft of her work to Shaukat Ali Jawaid, the Chief Editor of the *Pak J Med Sci*. The article in the *Pak J Med Sci* replicates the flow of ideas in the Introduction and Discussion sections and presents methodology and results in the same order as in the original Russian article. Conclusions in both items are identical, though in different languages. The list of references in the plagiarized article includes 1 English and 5 Russian citations whereas in the plagiarizing item the list is expanded to 15 citations with only 1 Russian reference.

Methods and tables in both articles list the same markers, CD3, CD4, CD8, CD20 positivity, and muramidase activity in the mucosal layer of the maxillary sinus. Grouping of subjects is the same with 8 and 10 patients in the original and plagiarizing articles, respectively. With slightly different numbers of patients, age limits (17-26 years), mean age of the enrolled patients (23.83 ± 2.51) and all findings in tables are identical to the decimal point. Histological samples of the maxillary sinus mucous membrane, infiltrated by CD3+, CD8+, and CD4+ cells, are presented in three color figures of the original article and in merged grey-scale figure of the plagiarizing item. Image manipulation with converting original color and changing positions of the samples is eye-balling and points to the plagiarists' frail attempt to manufacture a genuine item.

A quick comparison of the main tables and histological images in the Russian and English items are sufficient for picking up the indistinguishable features by anyone with no knowledge of both languages. Nonetheless, when the chief editor of the *Pak J Med Sci* was approached by the corresponding author of the original article, the immediate response was that the suspected Chinese authors would be contacted to clarify the situation and that iThenticate® generated just 2% similarity index. No any official response has been received from the editor since then.

It should be pointed out that several world-renowned experts in publication ethics and plagiarism, a consultant of Scopus, and an administrator of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) have all been contacted with a request to guide. The consultant of Scopus informed that the database has nothing to do with the case, and especially because the Russian journal was not indexed by Scopus, and advised to contact the COPE and journal editors. The response from the COPE, which does not investigate individual cases, encouraged the author to sort

out the issue with the editor, publisher, or owner of the Pakistani journal where the plagiarizing item was published. Finally, the Chinese corresponding author, who claim to design the study protocol and draft the final version of the manuscript, admitted the fact of the misconduct after receiving several emails and expressed readiness to 'take off' the unlawful article from the website and apologize to the Russian author.

After all, it seemed that the resolution of the case was near and the retraction of the item by the *Pak J Med Sci* could be the logical end of the story. In fact, while our opinion piece was in process of publication, we found out that the editor of the *Pak J Med Sci* published a retraction announcement, notifying about the retraction of the English article on grounds of plagiarism (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4928446/>). Although the retraction notice refers to both Russian and English articles, details of the complexity of the case are not disclosed and no official apology from the plagiarists is published.

The current case of plagiarism may be just the tip of the iceberg since too many non-English journals are still invisible on the global indexing and archiving platforms, and some naïve authors may be tempted to fabricate and publish pseudoscientific translated articles. The described case is a strong message to all stakeholders of science communication, highlighting the need for combining anti-plagiarism efforts and actively seeking opinion of non-native English-speaking specialists throughout the manuscript processing and post-publication.

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DISCLOSURE

The authors have no potential conflicts of interest to disclose.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

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