

# The plagiarism euphemism parade continues

## Die Plagiarismus-Euphemismus-Parade zieht weiter

### Abstract

Since its founding in 2010 the American blog “Retraction Watch” collects reasons (and excuses) for academic misconduct appearing during the peer review and editing process of submitted publications to international scientific journals. For this short contribution both founding fathers of the blog present us with an euphemism parade on plagiarism. Many of the rather grotesque paraphrases for simple copy&paste were provided by the authors of the retracted publications themselves. A serious question remains – why don't we all just call a spade a spade?

**Keywords:** euphemism, plagiarism, excuses, causes, publication retraction

### Zusammenfassung

Der amerikanische Blog „Retraction Watch“ beschäftigt sich seit seiner Gründung 2010 mit Begründungen (und Ausreden) für akademisches Fehlverhalten, welche beim Peer-Review-Prozess und Edieren von eingereichten Publikationen in internationalen wissenschaftlichen Journalen auffallen. Die beiden Gründerväter des Blogs stellen in diesem Kurzbeitrag eine Parade der Euphemismen für Plagiarismus dar. Viele der oft grotesken Umschreibungen für schlichtes Copy&Paste stammen von den AutorInnen der rückgezogenen Publikationen selbst. Es stellt sich die Frage – wieso nennt man die Dinge nicht einfach beim Namen?

**Schlüsselwörter:** Euphemismus, Plagiarismus, Ausreden, Gründe, Publikationsrücknahme

## The plagiarism euphemism parade

Scientists are precise writers. They have to be. After all, nitrous oxide and nitric oxide sound similar, but one will make you pass out and the other protects the blood vessels. But when it comes to retraction notices, scientists can be woefully opaque. That's particularly true for notices involving plagiarism. As we've discovered through our work on the blog “Retraction Watch” [1], journals appear to be building a veritable thesaurus for alternate expressions for plagiarism – an affliction of “mealy-mouthitis” we believe is corrosive of science.

In the United States, at least, regulators take a strong stance against copying. Although it focuses mostly on data fakery, the Office of Research Integrity, which investigates misconduct in federally-funded research, considers plagiarism to be among its three cardinal sins, along with fabrication and falsification of data [2]. Allow us to present a few examples:

- *Critical Reviews in Environmental Science and Technology* recently retracted a paper for what it called “improper citation methods” [3].

- *Reviews in the Neurosciences* did the same for work that included “inadequate procedural or methodological practices of citation or quotation”, causing an “unacceptable level of text parallels” [4].
- From *BioData Mining* came the charming “inadvertently copied text” in a paper about RNA [5].

Other instances (about which we have already written a column that shares parts of its name with this article [6]) include:

- From the *International Journal of Medicine and Biomedical Research*, “contains passages from a published article without proper attribution and acknowledgement as if they were original” [7].
- From *Educational Research*, an “administrative error” [8].
- From *Chemistry – A European Journal*, “the paper was constructed by copying a number of passages from the paper titled ... The authors apologize for this approach.” [9]. As we wrote on Retraction Watch, plagiarism is an “approach” to writing the way bank robbery is an approach to banking [10].

Adam Marcus<sup>1</sup>  
Ivan Oransky<sup>1,2</sup>

1 “Retraction Watch”, New York, USA

2 Arthur L. Carter Institute of Journalism, New York University, New York, USA

- From *Environmental Monitoring and Assessment*, “certain parts/portions of the article have been published elsewhere and were not appropriately referenced. The situation is due to honest error ...” [11]. Aha – so if it is honest, it’s not plagiarism?
- From *Rejuvenation Research*, “unintended excessive reuse of the text” [12].

We’re not the only ones collecting euphemisms for plagiarism. The National Science Foundation, another research oversight body, gets its fair share during investigations into grantees. Among them are [13]:

- “It’s only background material.”
- “I did not put the text taken from a specific reference in quotes since it usually makes reading a proposal difficult.”
- “The reviewers are smart enough to know what is mine and what is not.”
- “It’s not plagiarism if you change every seventh word.”
- And, the sublimely ridiculous: “I was distracted by bird vocalizations outside my thatched roof hut, grabbed my digital camera ..., and when I returned to my computer where I thought I had saved my changes to the material, it had crashed with the wrong draft saved.”

Part of the problem here is that journals often allow authors to write their own retraction notices. Although such a policy might be necessary in cases of highly complex errors, it makes no sense for instances of plagiarism. Something’s either copied or not copied – there’s no ambiguity. And it becomes a philosophical question whether one needs to demonstrate intent; after all someone is still being ripped off even if the plagiarizing author didn’t mean to do it.

Then there is the fun that happens when lawyers get involved. *Nature* recently acknowledged legal pressures as a cause for unclear retraction notices [14]. Science journals, *Nature* wrote, “might find themselves threatened with a lawsuit for the proposed retraction itself, let alone a retraction whose statement includes any reference to misconduct.”

Whatever the reasons, wouldn’t readers have more trust in journals if their retraction notices reflected reality?

## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests. The Center For Scientific Integrity, the parent nonprofit of “Retraction Watch”, receives funding from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Laura and John Arnold Foundation.

## A note on “Retraction Watch“ by the editor

In August 2010 Ivan Oransky and Adam Marcus started the blog “Retraction Watch”. Both of them work as editors so they know very well the publication business in science. In the very first blog entry they posted their reasons for doing it [15]:

- *First, science takes justifiable pride in the fact that it is self-correcting – most of the time. Usually, that just means more or better data, not fraud or mistakes that would require a retraction. But when a retraction is necessary, how long does that self-correction take? The Wakefield retraction, for example, was issued 12 years after the original study, and six years after serious questions had been raised publicly by journalist Andrew Brian Deer. Retractions are therefore a window into the scientific process.*
- *Second, retractions are not often well-publicized. Sure, there are the high-profile cases such as Reuben’s and Wakefield’s. But most retractions live in obscurity in Medline and other databases. That means those who funded the retracted research – often taxpayers – aren’t particularly likely to find out about them. Nor are investors always likely to hear about retractions on basic science papers whose findings may have formed the basis for companies into which they pour dollars. So we hope this blog will form an informal repository for the retractions we find, and might even spur the creation of a retraction database such as the one called for here by K.M Korpela.*
- *Third, they’re often the clues to great stories about fraud or other malfeasance, as Adam learned when he chased down the Reuben story. The reverse can also be true. The Cancer Letter’s expose of Potti and his fake Rhodes Scholarship is what led his co-authors to remind The Lancet Oncology of their concerns, and then the editors to issue their expression of concern. And they can even lead to lawsuits for damaged reputations. If highlighting retractions will give journalists more tools to uncover fraud and misuse of funds, we’re happy to help. And if those stories are appropriate for our respective news outlets, you’ll only read about them on Retraction Watch once we’ve covered them there.*
- *Finally, we’re interested in whether journals are consistent. How long do they wait before printing a retraction? What requires one? How much of a public announcement, if any, do they make? Does a journal with a low rate of retractions have a better peer review and editing process, or is it just sweeping more mistakes under the rug?*

## References

1. Retraction Watch [Internet]. Continuous blogroll by "Retraction Watch" [cited 2015 May 22]. Available from: <http://retractionwatch.com>
2. ORI Website [Internet]. Definition of Research Misconduct. 2011 [updated 2011 April 25; cited 2015 May 22]. Available from: <https://ori.hhs.gov/definition-misconduct>
3. Statement of Retraction. *Critical Reviews in Environmental Science and Technology*. 2015;45(4):428. DOI: 10.1080/10643389.2014.957984
4. Roche R. Retraction note. *Rev Neurosci*. 2015;26(1):119. DOI: 10.1515/revneuro-2014-0084
5. Zhou Y, Lin N, Zhang B. Erratum: An iteration normalization and test method for differential expression analysis of RNA-seq data. *BioData Min*. 2014;7(1):30. DOI: 10.1186/s13040-014-0030-4
6. Marcus A, Oransky I. The Euphemism Parade. What's behind paper retractions? [Internet]. 2013 [updated 2013 Nov 26; cited 2015 May 22]. Available from: [http://www.labtimes.org/labtimes/ranking/dont/2013\\_07.lasso](http://www.labtimes.org/labtimes/ranking/dont/2013_07.lasso)
7. Sofola OA. Statement of Retraction. *Int J Med Biomed Res*. 2013;2(2):163. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14194/ijmbr.2212>
8. Retraction notice to: "Development studies students as constructors of classroom pedagogy in practice - Observed classroom dynamics from the Kingdom of Lesotho". *Educ Res*. 2013. Available from: <http://www.interestjournals.org/er/october-2010-vol-1-issue-9/retracted-development-studies-students-as-constructors-of-classroom-pedagogy-in-practice-observed-classroom-dynamics-from-the-kingdom-of-lesotho> [cited 2015 Jul 20]
9. Retraction: A new indicator for potassium ions at physiological pH by using a macrocyclic luminescent metal complex. *Chemistry*. 2013 May;19(19):5783. DOI: 10.1002/chem.201300850
10. Marcus A. Plagiarism: It's just an "approach" to writing papers, right? [Internet]. Retraction Watch. 2013 [cited 2015 May 22]. Available from: <http://retractionwatch.com/2013/05/06/plagiarism-its-just-an-approach-to-writing-papers-right/>
11. Retraction note to: Detection of bacterial endotoxin in drinking tap and bottled water in Kuwait. *Environ Monit Assess*. 2013 Jul;185(7):6219. DOI: 10.1007/s10661-013-3232-1
12. Retraction: Age-related impairment of visual recognition memory correlates with impaired synaptic distribution of GluA2 and PKM $\zeta$  in the dentate gyrus. *Rejuvenation Res*. 2013 Aug;16(4):339. DOI: 10.1089/rej.2013.1449
13. Kroll J. Stories from the research misconduct files [presentation]. In: 3rd World Conference on Research Integrity; 2013 May 5-8; Montreal, Canada. Available from: <http://slideplayer.com/slide/3546852/>
14. Retraction challenges. *Nature*. 2014 Oct;514(7520):5. DOI: 10.1038/514005a
15. Oransky I, Marcus A. Why write a blog about retractions? [Internet]. Retraction Watch. 2010 [cited 2015 Jul 21]. Available from: <http://retractionwatch.com/2010/08/03/why-write-a-blog-about-retractions/>

### Corresponding author:

Ivan Oransky  
 Arthur L. Carter Institute of Journalism, New York  
 University, 20 Cooper Square, 6th Floor, New York, NY  
 10003, USA  
 oransi01@nyu.edu

### Please cite as

Marcus A, Oransky I. *The plagiarism euphemism parade continues*. *GMS Med Bibl Inf*. 2015;15(1-2):Doc11.  
 DOI: 10.3205/mbi000338, URN: urn:nbn:de:0183-mbi0003386

### This article is freely available from

<http://www.egms.de/en/journals/mbi/2015-15/mbi000338.shtml>

**Published:** 2015-08-12

### Copyright

©2015 Marcus et al. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License. See license information at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.