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Borrowing Others' Words: Text, Ownership, Memory, and Plagiarism

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In this article, I attempt to deal with some of the complexities of text, ownership, memorization, and plagiarism. Arguing that plagiarism cannot be cast as a simple black-and-white issue, the prevention of which can be achieved via threats, warnings, and admonitions, I suggest that it needs to be understood in terms of complex relationships between text, memory, and learning. This is part of an attempt to explore more generally different relationships between learning, literacy, and cultural difference. I look first at the background to the notion of authorship and ownership of text, arguing that the way ownership and creativity are understood within European and U.S. contexts needs to be seen as a very particular cultural and historical development. By looking at shifting premodern, modern, and post-modern understandings of text and authorship, I show how the dominant modernist paradigm has always been filled with tensions and ambiguities. Then I discuss how these confusions around plagiarism lead to difficulties and hypocrisies in how textual borrowing is understood. I follow this examination of the development of the Western notion of textual ownership with a consideration of what it means to impose this view in a context where understandings of texts, ownership, and learning may be very different. By looking at learning in a Chinese context and also at the particularities of studying in Hong Kong, I show why we need much more subtle appreciations of the relationships between different approaches to texts. Finally, I discuss some general implications for understanding text, ownership, and learning.

A number of years ago, when I was teaching at Xiangtan University in China, I asked my first-year undergraduate English majors to write a brief biography of a well-known person (such exciting tasks do we set our students). When I was grading these, I came across one toward the bottom of the pile that had a strange quality to it. It was a

short piece on Abraham Lincoln (Why Abraham Lincoln? I wondered), written in rather simple but perfectly “correct” prose: “Abraham Lincoln was born in a log cabin in 1809 . . .” (or words to that effect). It had the ring of a text from elsewhere, of language borrowed and repeated. Because I was at the time supervising my fourth-year students’ teaching practice in Yiyang, a small town in the north of Hunan, I asked one of them what he thought about this text. He looked at the first two lines and smiled. The text, he explained, was from one of the high school textbooks. So did that mean, I asked, that it had been copied? Well, not necessarily, the student replied, and then demonstrated that he too knew the text by heart: “Abraham Lincoln was born in a log cabin” When I got back to Xiangtan University, I sought out the first-year student and asked him about his text. He explained that although he felt that he had not really done the task I had set, because I had asked them to do some research prior to writing, he had felt rather fortunate that I had asked them to write something which he already knew. Sitting in his head was a brief biography of Abraham Lincoln, and he was quite happy to produce it on demand: “Abraham Lincoln was born in a log cabin”

Whereas I might have responded to this with moral outrage or delivered a lecture on plagiarism, or “academic norms,” I found instead that I was rather fascinated by the issues it raised: questions about ownership of texts, practices of memory, and writing. Because all language learning is, to some extent, a practice of memorization of the words of others, on what grounds do we see certain acts of textual borrowing as acceptable and others as unacceptable? How have the boundaries been drawn between the acceptable memorizing and use of word lists, phrases, sentences (remember *English 900* with its 900 sentences to be memorized?), paragraphs, poems, quotations, and so on and the unacceptable reuse of others’ words? How is it that notions of ownership of text have developed? When does one come to own a language sufficiently that to say something “in one’s own words” makes sense? And how can we come to deal with different relationships to text and memorization in different cultural contexts? I recall some time after this incident talking to some of my Chinese colleagues about memorization and language learning. I was arguing that although memorization of texts might be a useful learning technique, it could never lead to productive, original language use (this, we have been taught to believe, is one of those “facts” of second language acquisition). I gave as an example one of our colleagues who was acknowledged as one of the most eloquent and fluent speakers in the department, suggesting that he could never have become so if he had been a mere memoriser. The others smiled, for this other colleague was known not only as an excellent user of English but also as someone

with a fine talent for memorizing texts. Again, pause for thought. I knew that when we sat and drank beer and talked philosophy, he wasn't speaking texts to me. How had he come to own the language as he did, when that had apparently been done by borrowing others' language?

When I worked in Hong Kong more recently, parallel puzzles about ownership of text emerged in "moderation meetings," in which a number of us teaching on the same course compare grades for the same essays. Although such meetings often produce, in any case, quite extraordinarily divergent views on what is and what is not a good piece of writing, there is nothing like the hint of something borrowed to radically split the meeting down the middle: Some teachers will heap praise on an essay while others are pouring scorn on it. The issue, almost invariably, is whether it is the student's "own work." And the trigger for both the praise and the scorn can sometimes be as little as a two- or three-word phrase. For some, it is a felicitous phrase, appropriately used, suggesting someone with a good feel for language; for others, it is a phrase that could not be part of this student's "competence" (such is the tyranny of our knowledge of students' interlanguages and competency levels), thus casting doubt not only over the origins of this phrase but also the origins of the rest of the text. The lines are drawn and the arguments rage over whether the essay warrants a D (or worse) or an A. Ironically, once the spectre of doubtful ownership is raised, teachers start to look for grammatical errors as a sign of good writing and to become suspicious when such errors are crucially absent. Our criteria are turned on their head: Suddenly we are looking either for language that is "too good" in order to incriminate the student, or we are looking for evidence of errors in order to exonerate the student. Thus, we end up in the "paradoxical state of affairs that the worse an essay is linguistically, the better mark it is perceived to merit" (Hutton, 1990). From being teachers constantly in search of sophisticated and standard language use, we become detectives in search of evidence that some chunk of language has been illegitimately used.

Indeed, once we start to explore the whole question of textual borrowing, the notion of ownership of text and learning becomes very complex. It is important to understand the cultural and historical specificity of notions of ownership and authorship and to explore the implications of these concepts' being increasingly promoted as international norms. Plagiarism also needs to be particularized in other ways: In terms of the particular cultural and educational context in which it is being discussed—what are the relationships to text, knowledge, and learning in a particular cultural context? And in terms of the nature of the institution and the particular language in which it is

seen to be occurring: Is an educational institute promoting or thwarting creative thought, and in what language is it asking students to function academically? And in terms of what is understood as shared language or knowledge and particular language or knowledge: At what point does a phrase or an idea become owned? And at what point does it become public? Other interesting complexities arise: How do we understand the relationship between language and knowledge? What are we to make of the academic emphasis on repeating the ideas of others while doing so in our own words? Why is it that many teachers seem to react to supposed acts of plagiarism with such moral outrage? How important is the notion of intentionality: Is the issue that certain words are not the students' own, or is it more important to understand the intention behind the apparent borrowing? And is it perhaps useful to distinguish between notions of good and bad plagiarism?

THE ORIGINALITY MYTH: FROM DIVINE TO DISCURSIVE VENTRILOQUY

Constructing the Author

In order to understand how Western views on textual ownership have developed, we need to examine in greater detail what it means to be original, an author, and how it is that author, authenticity, and authority are so closely intertwined in Western thought. What, then, does it mean to be original, to say something new? In his genealogy of Western imagination, Kearney (1988) identifies three dominant paradigms, the *mimetic* (premodern), the *productive* (modern), and the *parodic* (postmodern). In the premodern, mimetic era (biblical, classical, and medieval), the image stood as a representation of reality, as a means through which nature, and especially God, could be worshiped. For both Aristotle and Plato, imagination remained “largely a *reproductive* rather than a *productive* activity, a servant rather than a master of meaning, imitation rather than origin” (p. 113, emphasis in original). The great monotheistic religions are still tied to a position that it is divine, not human, inspiration that produced their texts (a view notoriously transgressed by Salman Rushdie). It was not until the great shift of thinking in Europe that became known as the Enlightenment that this view of imagination shifted and was replaced by the productive paradigm of the modern. In this view, the imagination was no longer viewed as a mimetic capacity but as a productive force: “As a consequence of this momentous reversal of roles, meaning is no longer primarily considered as a transcendent property of divine being; it is now hailed as a transcendental product of the human mind” (p. 155).

Shifting from the earlier onto-theological view of meaning, the humanist subject now became the centre of creativity. It is this view of meaning as held in place by the humanist subject which, once coupled with the notion of property rights, produced an understanding of individual ownership of ideas and language.

This understanding of imagination is clearly closely tied to the development of the notion of the author. The medieval concept of the author put great store on the authority and authenticity bestowed on a text by the *auctor*. In this view, texts were given truth and authority by dint of having been written long ago by famous men: As Minnis (1984) suggests, the only good author was a dead author. But it was the development of print, Ong (1982) argues, that “created a new sense of the private ownership of words” (p. 131). Tracing back the history of the development of the notion of the author, Foucault (1984) suggests that there was, in the 17th or 18th centuries, a reversal of the need for authorial attribution. Prior to this, he suggests, literary work was generally accepted without a notion of an author, an observation that accords with Kearney’s (1988) that the premodern imaginative work was generally unauthored because it was the representation of reality or the creation of a religious icon through which God could be worshiped that was of importance, not the image-making itself. Scientific work (texts on medicine, cosmology, and natural science), by contrast, were accepted as true by dint of their authorship. This, Foucault suggests, was reversed in the 17th and 18th centuries, when the authorship of individual works of literature as individual acts of creativity became crucial, whereas the scientific domain evolved into a more general unauthored agreement on scientific truths. Kearney (1988) suggests that “the coming into being of the notion of ‘author’ constitutes the privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences” (p. 101).

What is of significance in the description of these shifts of creativity and authorship is the need to see a stress on “new” meaning, on originality, on individual creativity, as very much an aspect of Western modernity, and thus both a very particular cultural and a very particular historical emphasis, albeit one with a great deal of salience in the world today. It is with the rise of such individualization that the history of literary plagiarism started to emerge (the notion of copyright and thus “intellectual property” was encoded in British law in 1710; see Willinsky, 1990). Thus, as Willinsky (1990) puts it, “this contest of creative imitation, invention, and authority, which has been at the heart of the force of the book as an intellectual property, is secured by the concept of an originating author, an actual body that gave life to words” (p. 77). In this development, then, we can see the conjunction between the development of the notion of the author and the develop-

ment of individual property rights, which, allied to other developments such as printing, produced a very particular vision of ownership of language and ideas.

Modernist Tensions

Despite the strength of this vision, backed up as it was not only by philosophical underpinnings but also by legal sanctions, it also seems to have been a view with many tensions and ambiguities. One thing that is immediately striking when reading about textual borrowing is how remarkably common it has been and still is, and thus how textual borrowing has always been with us to an extent that the purer humanists and modernists would be unwilling to admit. As Mallon (1989) puts it, “the Romans rewrote the Greeks. Virgil is, in a broadly imitative way, Homer, and for that matter, typologists can find most of the Old Testament in the New” (p. 4). White’s (1965) study of plagiarism in the English Renaissance raises similar interesting concerns. As he points out, the classical heritage on which the Renaissance drew was itself a period full of imitation: A great deal of the flourishing of Roman arts was based on free imitation of Greek works. When the writers of the European Renaissance turned back to their classical heritage, they not only revived art that had based itself on free imitation, but they also based their own work on the free imitation of this period. But this has always been the case for a great deal of artistic creation: As T.S. Eliot (1975) put it, the “most individual parts” of an artist’s work may be precisely those “in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (p. 38).

What emerges from studies of literary plagiarism such as Mallon (1989) or Shaw (1982) is a very confused and complex picture.¹ First of all, the list of accused plagiarists is long and prestigious, including Laurence Sterne, Samuel Coleridge, Thomas De Quincey, Edgar Allan Poe, Norman Mailer, Alex Hailey (*Roots*), Dee Brown (*Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*), Martin Luther King, Gail Sheehy (*Passages*), Jacob

¹Indeed, as Mallon (1989) and Shaw (1982) show, there seem to be some strange psychological aspects to plagiarism, including a tendency to “give the game away” (Shaw, 1982, p. 330). It was De Quincey, for example, who leveled the accusations of plagiarism against Coleridge soon after the latter’s death in 1834, an accusation which, as Mallon suggests, was ironic because De Quincey had previously stated a great aversion to such accusations and because he himself was yet another in the great line of literary plagiarists. According to Mallon (1989), “Coleridge’s case suggests that he may have been addicted not just to opium but to plagiarism itself, flirting with the equivalent of an overdose in the risks of exposure he ran” (pp. 34–35). Plagiarists, it seems, like Dostoevski’s Raskolnikov, arsonists who return to the scene of the crime and serial killers who write ever more revealing notes to the police and newspapers, draw attention to themselves, whether as a result of guilt, a desire to be found out, or the thrill of flirting with the threat of exposure. “Giving the game away,” suggests Shaw, “proves to be the rule rather than the exception among plagiarists” (p. 330).

Epstein (*Wild Oats*), Helen Keller, and many more. Second, part of the difficulty here lies in the relationship between the demand for originality and the reverence of other writers, a tension that occurs when “the demand for novelty meets the sensitive writer’s normal worship of the great literary past” (Mallon, 1989, p. 24). There is, therefore, a constant interplay between creativity and previous writing, a relationship which, as we shall see, is particularly significant in the context in which we teach. Third, the writers themselves or their supporters will often go to extreme lengths to exonerate the writer from accusations of unoriginality. Anything from poor note-taking to psychological disturbances, from unconscious errors to clever parodying are suggested once it is shown that a great author’s originality is brought into question. The debates around Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, for example, are intriguing because his work is seen both as highly original, a precursor to much later 20th-century literary experimentation, and also as heavily reliant on a number of other sources. The common explanation among Sterne scholars is that there was a kind of mockery going on here, a parodying of others’ work, and that those who accuse him of plagiarism misunderstand his work, his humour, and his originality.

The Individualist-Romanticist view of originality that emerged in the modern era, then, also carried with it many of the seeds of its own destruction, rife as it was with contradictions, borrowings, and pretended originalities. An understanding of the whole Orientalist-Romanticist trait in European writing (the search for the “exotic” in distant places to revive the flagging powers of European creativity) reveals how the great claims to European exploration and discovery were another powerful set of myths. The actual physical invasions and colonisations of this period were of course very real, but the discoveries of difference were in many ways little more than repetitions of European tropes. As Tatlow’s (1993) discussion of Gauguin shows, for example, what was really discovered in these voyages of European discovery was nothing but another part of the European imaginary: monsters, cannibals, and primitive natives. Furthermore, as Tatlow suggests, Gauguin was, like most artists, part of a larger tradition of massive borrowing: “Like Brecht, Gauguin borrowed from everywhere. His disdain for originality was his mark of it and, as Delacroix observed of Raphael: ‘Nowhere did he reveal his originality so forcefully as in the ideas he borrowed’” (p. 5).

Once one starts to take a closer look at the context of textual borrowing, then, it is hard not to feel that language use is marked far more by the circulation and recirculation of words and ideas than by a constant process of creativity. One thing that emerges from a recent book on spurious quotations and misquotations (Keyes, 1992), for

example, is the vast amount of constant borrowing that goes on in the field of quotations. In one chapter, Keyes reports research by Robert Newcomb that reveals that many aphorisms generally attributed to Benjamin Franklin were in fact lifted from other sources, virtually word for word. Although Franklin pointed to this practice when he asked, "Why should I give my Readers bad lines of my own when good ones of other People's are so plenty?" (quoted in Keyes, p. 31), he never acknowledged that his great collection of aphorisms were indeed the good lines of others. As Keyes shows, in fact, many of the famous lines attributed to various American presidents also have much older origins. These include Kennedy's "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country," which is remarkably similar to various other sayings such as Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.'s 1884 request to an audience to "recall what our country has done for each of us, and to ask ourselves what we can do for our country in return" (Keyes, 1992, p. 91). Other famous examples include Franklin Roosevelt's "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," which had already been said in more or less the same words by Montaigne in 1580, Francis Bacon in 1623, the Duke of Wellington in 1832, and Thoreau in 1851. By the time we get to Ronald Reagan, whose fallible memory and inability to distinguish between fact and fiction are legendary, examples abound. It is worth noting here that because these examples are known to us today because they exist in the writings or sayings of well-known writers, so they must surely be but the tip of a vast iceberg of such repetitions.

Now it is tempting to chuckle at these famous sayings echoing through the years, and perhaps to cluck one's tongue at the thought that some of this must have been done wittingly. Yet I believe that these simple examples point to a far more significant series of questions. First, is it perhaps the case that there really is nothing, or at least very little, new to be said? As Goethe (1963/1829) once said "Alles Gescheite ist schon gedacht worden, man muß nur versuchen, es noch einmal zu denken" (Everything clever has already been thought; one must only try to think it again; *Maximen und Reflexionen*, p. 52). Rather than the generativist-grammarian view of language as an infinite production of sentences—a view that suggests that such linguists have rarely been in a conversation, read a newspaper, or indeed encountered any form of language use—is it not far more significant to focus on the social production and the circulation of meanings? A view of language that relates its use to social, cultural, and ideological domains suggests that we need to go beyond a view of language as an infinite series of decontextualized sentences or as the idiosyncratic production of a completely free-willed subject. Second, if it is in fact so hard to pin down the real originator of a quotation, are we perhaps engaged

here in a false teleology, an impossible search for the first speaking or writing of certain words? Indeed, is it not possible that in some ways our endless books of apparently dubiously attributed quotations (or indeed all of our cherished canon of “authored” works) are a product of a search both to attribute authorship to certain words and to elevate writers to their canonical status by attributing pithy sayings to them? Is it the case that the insistence on the authorship of quotations, poems, books, and so on has less to do with authorial (author-real?) creation of texts and far more to do with textual creation of authors?

Postmodern Uncertainty: The Death of the Author

The notion of the individual as creative guarantor of meaning and originality, this particular vision of self and authenticity, has, of course, taken a fair battering since Marx, Freud, and others have questioned the notion of the unmediated and authentic expression of self. Dominant though this modernist paradigm of the author has been, it is now being questioned by the parodic paradigm of the postmodern. In the wake of both the “death of God” and the “death of the subject,” imagination and creativity become nothing but a play of images themselves, images that neither reference a reality nor are the products of a human subject. According to Kearney (1988), “one of the greatest paradoxes of contemporary culture is that at a time when the image reigns supreme the very notion of a creative human imagination seems under mounting threat” (p. 3). The postmodern and poststructuralist positions on language, discourse, and subjectivity, therefore, raise serious questions for any notion of individual creativity or authorship. If, instead of a Self or an Identity, we consider the notion of subjectivity, or indeed subjectivities (we are, in a sense, the fragmented products of different discourses), then we arrive at more or less a reversal of the speaking subject creating meaning: We are not speaking subjects but spoken subjects, we do not create language but are created by it. As I suggested earlier, the question then becomes not so much one of who authored a text but how we are authored by texts.² Thus, the development of a notion of creativity can be seen to move from an external position, in which the origin of meanings has some determinate source, especially in the word of God (the divine ventriloquist);³

²Of course, there are dangers with this position. Although it helps to move away from the foundational concept of a core self or rationality, it may leave us little more than discursive ventriloquists. We need, therefore, to theorize a notion of agency or voice in order that we do not reduce subjectivity to nothing but a product of the discursive. There is not space here, however, to elaborate on this.

³I have borrowed this phrase from Coleridge, who, in defense of the accusations leveled against him declared “I regard truth as a divine ventriloquist” (quoted in Mallon, 1989, p. 31).

through an internal version of meaning, in which the individual was seen as the originator and guarantor of meaning (the speaking subject); and back to an external model, where meanings play off each other without any stable referent (discursive ventriloquy).

As Kearney (1988) suggests, "Postmodernism casts a suspecting glance on the modernist cult of creative originality" (p.21). This skepticism about creative originality is linked not only to the "death of the subject," but also more specifically to the announcement of the "death of the author," signaled most emphatically by Roland Barthes (1977). Arguing, like Foucault (1984), that the notion of the author was very much a construction of modernity, Barthes (1977) states that "a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (p. 146). "[T]o give writing its future," Barthes argues, "it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (p. 148). Barthes suggests that by doing away with the notion of the author, writing can no longer be seen as an act of representation, and meaning can no longer be attached to some authorial intent. Linking this idea to speech act theory, he suggests that all writing is nothing but "a performative," having "no other content . . . than the act by which it is uttered" (p. 146).⁴

If this line of thinking raises many questions about authorship, Swan's (1994) discussion of Helen Keller's supposed plagiarism starts to raise different postmodernist issues concerning the body and its boundaries. For Helen Keller, deaf and blind since the age of 2, perception was almost entirely tactile, and thus texts for her took on a different context in relationship to memory. As Helen Keller explained, her "friends often read 'interesting fragments' to her 'in a promiscuous manner,' and . . . if she then uses them in her writing, it is difficult to trace the 'fugitive sentences and paragraphs' which have been spelled into her hand" (Swan, 1994, pp. 57–58). But Swan is pointing to far deeper concerns here than the fact that Helen Keller must have developed very particular memory practices. Working through the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan, he points to fundamentally different understandings of language and boundaries: Because "touch is perception," it was an immense battle to construct for Keller

⁴Jacques Derrida, also taking issue with the idea that meaning in speech act theory is guaranteed by the author's intentions, speculates about the possibility of understanding "performatives" as scripted performances rather than individual acts. Perhaps, he suggests, language is not so much made up of infinite individual acts but rather is subject to what he calls a generalized citationality (see Norris, 1983). See also Derrida (1988) for an interesting debate with Searle.

an understanding that “the boundaries between self and other that her blind groping continually transgresses” have parallels in the “boundaries between her words and the words of others” (p. 97). This discussion starts to open up a range of issues to do with modes of perception, memory, texts, and the understanding of personal and social boundaries. If we look at Helen Keller’s case not as one limited to the particular perceptual constraints with which she had to work but rather as opening up concerns about bodies, texts, and ownership, we can also admit the possibility that different cultures and different psyches may operate with fundamentally different understandings of self and other and therefore of boundaries and ownership.

Finally, drawing this discussion back to issues more closely related to language learning, it is worth noting the ideas of Bakhtin (1986/1936), who insists on the dialogic nature of language: “the real unit of language that is implemented in speech . . . is not the individual, isolated monologic utterance, but the interaction of at least two utterances—in a word, dialogue” (Voloinov, 1973, p. 117). By this he means not so much that language is used in communication but rather that all language use carries histories of its former uses with it. “Our speech, that is, all our utterances,” are therefore “filled with others’ words” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 89). Commenting on the importance of this idea of “appropriating others’ words” for language learning, Lensmire and Beals (1994) suggest that “We are born and develop, learn to speak, read and write, awash in the words of others Our words are always someone else’s words first; and these words sound with the intonations and evaluations of others who have used them before, and from whom we have learned them” (p. 411). Put together, these challenges to the notion of the author and individual creativity, and this argument that meanings are in a sense in circulation, that language is constantly cycled and recycled, raise profound questions about how we consider the notion of textual borrowing or plagiarism.

TEACHERS AND CHANGING TEXTUAL PRACTICES

What I have been trying to show here is that looking more carefully at traditions of ascribing meaning and creativity to God, the individual, or discourse raises a number of concerns about how meaning, texts, and textual borrowing are understood and thus challenges any easy ascription of a notion of plagiarism. An understanding of the notion of authorship and originality as a very particular cultural and historical orientation to meaning raises profound questions about plagiarism. We need to take seriously the “postmodern conviction that the very concept of a creative imagination is a passing illusion of Western

humanist culture” (Kearney, 1988, p. 28). I have been trying to question the premises on which a simple version of plagiarism is based, by showing that this particular version of meaning, originality, and authorship is located within a Western cultural and historical tradition that stresses creative and possessive individualism. Furthermore, Western claims to originality have always been made alongside a tradition of wholesale borrowing of language and ideas. Questions and research following from Foucault’s (1977/1984) key question, What is an author? therefore suggest that “the author in this modern sense is a relatively recent invention, but . . . it does not closely reflect contemporary writing practices” (Woodmansee, 1994, p. 15).

Hunting Down Those Borrowed Words

As teachers, therefore, we are presented by something of a dilemma. For those of us brought up in this Western tradition, we often find ourselves vehement defenders of “correct” textual practices, desperately trying to promote our version of language and ownership. This position, however, is filled with tensions. As I shall discuss in the next section, it faces very real challenges if we start to take seriously different textual and learning practices in other cultures. But, as I want to show here, it also faces challenges from its own inconsistencies. These are of two main kinds: On the one hand, as I suggested in the last section, the Western cult of originality has existed alongside wholesale borrowing, and thus whether we see Coleridge and others as devious plagiarists or as careless scholars, this history of plagiarism suggests a certain ingenuousness to the accusations made by teachers. Indeed, in light of the vehemence with which many teachers pursue apparent plagiarisers (see below), it is worth considering the vehemence with which many literary scholars defend their adored writers: “Scholars will tie themselves up in knots exonerating Coleridge” (Mallon, 1989, pp. 32–33). At the very least, there is a degree of hypocrisy here as teachers on the one hand accuse their students of lacking originality, while on the other they defend their cherished creative geniuses against suggestions that they were simply resaying what had been said before. On the other hand, it would seem in any case that textual practices are changing: Even if there once were clearly defined lines between the borrowed and the original, they are starting to fade in a new era of electronic intertextuality.

Perhaps the best example of plagiaristic hypocrisy can be found in the following report from the *New York Times* (June 6, 1980; quoted in Mallon, 1989, p. 100):

Stanford University said today it had learned that its teaching assistants’ handbook section on plagiarism had been plagiarised by the University of

Oregon. Stanford issued a release saying Oregon officials conceded that the plagiarism section and other parts of its handbook were identical with the Stanford guidebook. Oregon officials apologised and said they would revise their guidebook.

On one level, this is merely laughable. Yet I am left wondering how this could actually have happened. What was going on here when guidelines to avoid plagiarism were being copied? This case certainly suggests that the same double-standards that seem to obtain in literary circles may also be the case in the academic domain, with one set of standards for the guardians of truth and knowledge and another for those seeking entry. Beyond the obvious observation that plagiarism exists on a large scale in the academic world (see, e.g., Mallon, 1989), there are two other domains that produce a degree of skepticism. First, in the same way that Western literary practices centre around the notion of the individual creator and yet constantly echo the lines of others, academic work also stresses the individual, creative thinker, and writer and yet constantly emphasizes a fixed canon of disciplinary knowledge. This problem is most obvious for undergraduate students (and especially if they are writing in a second language) who, while constantly being told to be original and critical, and to write things in their “own words,” are nevertheless only too aware that they are at the same time required to acquire a fixed canon of knowledge and a fixed canon of terminology to go with it.

The second problem concerns the power relations between different academics and between academics and their students or research assistants. One aspect of this is the common practice of senior academics (particularly in the sciences but also in other areas) putting their names at the head of papers in the writing and researching of which they have had little or no role.⁵ More generally, however, this issue touches on far broader questions of the origins of academic ideas and who gets credit for them. Just as questions have been raised about Wordsworth’s solitary male creative genius, because it seems he borrowed heavily from his sister, Dorothy, so it is evident that much of what gets claimed as the result of original academic work actually draws heavily on the work of silent others—women, graduate students, research assistants and so on.

The extent of moral rectitude and vehemence with which teachers

⁵A controversial case of plagiarism of a questionnaire at Hong Kong University, which was eventually settled in the Hong Kong Court of Appeal in 1993, had its origins in just such a practice. According to Linda Koo Chih-ling, who brought the case of plagiarism against a colleague, the origins of the dispute go back to 1983, when she refused to put the name of a senior colleague on a paper she had written (interview in the *South China Morning Post*, August 28, 1993). From then on, she claims, she has been ostracised and discriminated against. And, like literary scholars tying themselves in knots to exonerate their cherished literary heroes, an internal inquiry (labelled a “kangaroo court” by Linda Koo) has since been working to downplay the implications of the decision by the Court of Appeal.

sometimes pursue student plagiarisers can be extreme. Given the emphasis on the creative individual as producer and owner of his or her thoughts, it seems that the borrowing of words is often discussed in terms of “stealing,” of committing a crime against the author of a text. This particular connection presumably has its origins in the peculiarly Western conjunction between the growth of the notion of human rights and the stress on individual property (see, e.g., Pollis & Schwab, 1979), thus making the reuse of language already used by others a crime against the inalienable property rights of the individual. It is worth noting here in passing that whereas other student “misdeeds,” such as grammatical errors, failure to understand a text and so on, may incur frustration, censure, and perhaps wrath, I cannot think of anything else that is viewed as a crime in this way. Although some language purists may rail against the ways language gets bent and twisted in both our and our students’ hands and mouths, rarely is this taken up in such moralistic terms. Plagiarism, Kolich (1983) suggests, “is a highly emotional subject, and the issue of how to deal with it seems muddled by moral confusion, apprehension, and general loathing” (p. 141). It seems that there is a very clear idea here that texts are “owned” by their “original” creators and that to use those words and ideas without acknowledging their ownership is indeed to transgress a moral (and legal) boundary. In Deckert’s (1993) study of attitudes toward plagiarism, for example, he asked the students to identify instances where “the writer *committed* plagiarism” (p. 145; emphasis added).

And yet even this notion of possessive individualism does not seem to account sufficiently for the moral outrage that is expressed and the zeal with which transgressors are pursued. As Kolich (1983) points out, “The mere hint that a student may have cribbed an essay transforms us from caring, sympathetic teachers into single-minded guardians of honor and truth” (p. 142). Accounts of plagiarism abound with stories of the “hunt,” the attempt to catch the offender and bring him or her to trial. “I was thrilled by the chase,” recalls Murphy (1990, p. 900), a chase which finally led to the student’s confession of having copied some sections from a book. “Within the week,” reports Murphy, “he was suspended from the university” (p. 900).⁶ Perhaps another way of explaining the outrage expressed at plagiarism is to look not so much at a notion of ownership but rather at authorship and authority. Plagiarism, in a number of ways, undermines the authority of both teacher and text. Furthermore, if I am right that this tradition is under challenge from a number of quarters, the ferocity of this hunting

⁶Murphy (1990) also discusses the problems with such witch hunts, including a traumatic account of accusations made against an anorexic woman.

down of borrowed words may be seen as part of a desperate rearguard action against changing textualities.

Changing Textual Practices

The postmodern and poststructuralist critiques of the notion of originality that I discussed in the last section tend to operate at a certain level of philosophical abstraction. There is another side to postmodernism, however, which tends to deal in more material changes. From this point of view, we might also ask how communication is changing in post-Fordist industrial contexts, how our writing practices themselves are undergoing rapid changes through e-mail, word-processing, collaborative writing, electronic words, and so on. Thus, if the view of textuality discussed in the previous section is postmodern to the extent that it follows the epistemological shifts brought about by postmodern philosophical changes, there is also a postmodern approach grounded in the notion that postmodernism is a real condition of late capitalist society. That is to say, whereas on the one hand we may point to the death of the author brought about by deconstructionist approaches to texts, on the other we may see the death or the demise of the author as a product of changes in communication in societies dominated by electronic media. Following more this second line of thinking, Scollon (1994) argues that “we are currently seeing a shift away from the long dominant Utilitarian ideology with its emphasis on the presentation of a unique, individual author who is the ‘owner’ of the text toward a much more diffused form of referencing which has much in common with the forms of authorship and responsibility of oral traditions” (p. 33). Scollon goes on to argue that referencing the writing of others is only partly about establishing ownership of language; it is also about establishing the authorial self of the writer. Thus, teaching attribution in academic writing may run into a number of difficulties since “the authorial self may well constitute an unacceptable ideological position” (p. 35).

As Scollon (1994) suggests, writing practices are changing, and it is now common to find multiple layering effects in academic texts, where the supposed origin of a quote becomes ever murkier. To give one instance of this, while researching the ideas for this article, I came across the following example of layered quotation: In an unpublished manuscript, Morgan (1995) says this about an article by Ann Raimés (1991): “Giroux is then quoted as saying that academic discourse communities are ‘often more concerned with excluding new members than with ways of admitting them’” (p. 14). So Morgan claims Raimés is quoting Giroux. I was interested to see what Giroux had actually said,

so I had a look at Raimes (1991), where the relevant passage reads thus: "Another thorny problem is whether we view the academic discourse community as benign, open, and beneficial to our students or whether we see discourse communities as powerful and controlling, and, as Giroux (cited in Faigley, 1986) puts it, "often more concerned with ways of excluding new members than with ways of admitting them" (p. 537). So Raimes is claiming that Faigley is quoting Giroux. Still in search of the Giroux quote, I went in search of Faigley, which reads: "Giroux finds discourse communities are often more concerned with ways of excluding new members than with ways of admitting them. He attacks non-Marxist ethnographies for sacrificing 'theoretical depth for methodological refinement' (p. 98)" (Faigley, 1986, p. 537). So Faigley appears to be paraphrasing the supposed Giroux quote but quoting another piece of Giroux. And at this point the trail seems to go rather cold: Giroux's words, which the other two articles suggest are quoted, turn out, it seems, to be Faigley's. The reference seems to be to Giroux's *Theory and Resistance in Education: A Pedagogy for the Opposition* in Faigley's bibliography, but the phrase "theoretical depth and methodological refinement" does not appear on page 98 of the book (or at least the copy I looked at). And so, as these words and ideas circulate around the academic community, it becomes unclear quite what their origins are. And does it matter? The ideas attributed to Giroux are interesting, but do we need to know who really said them originally? Within contemporary academic writing practices, with layers of citations, e-mail, cutting and pasting, and so on, the adherence to supposed norms of authoriality are becoming increasingly hazy.

Another interesting way in which our textual practices seem to be changing is happening alongside the greater use of the pronoun *I* in academic writing. Formerly, writers would often refer to their own published work as texts "out there," as objective entities to be referred to or quoted. Thus, Nunan (1988), for example, frequently refers to his own work in these terms: "The course design model developed by Nunan (1985a) is similar in many respects to that devised by Richards" (p. 19); or "For example, Nunan (1986c) studied a number of 'communicative' classrooms In the Nunan data, a study of the lesson plans" (p.139); or "This is made clear in the following quote: 'While objective needs . . . ' (Nunan 1989a, p. 5)" (p. 45). In this tradition, even if one is the author of the text, it is treated like any other in terms of quoting and referencing. This practice fixes text, ownership, and authorship in a clear and objective system.

By 1992, however, Nunan (1992) appears to be using a mixed style: on the one hand employing the old style: "This is exemplified in the action research programs described by Nunan (1989)" (p. 103), but on the other hand shifting to greater use of *I*: "In the second

investigation, I looked at a number of different aspects of language teaching pedagogy, including teachers' decision-making (Nunan, 1991a)" (p. 95); or "In fact, in a recent survey I found that it was the most frequently employed data collection method, being used in half of the studies analysed (Nunan, 1991b)" (p. 136). Once this shift occurs, as it seems to be doing in a great deal of academic writing, the relationship to one's own texts clearly changes, enabling a shift from direct quotation to easier incorporation. The reference may still be there, but there is a slipperiness over the reusability of one's own words (self-plagiarism?), a process greatly enhanced by the ease of cutting and pasting between documents on a computer.⁷

It would seem, then, that both the postmodern skepticism about the myth of originality and the more material considerations about changing writing practices point toward the need to reevaluate beliefs in originality and textual ownership. There is therefore a degree of hypocrisy in the defense of the culture of originality because postmodern understandings of language and meaning, by contrast, point to the possibility of little more than a circulation of meanings. One of the central issues that emerges from this discussion, however, is that there is a discourse available to teachers educated in the Western tradition which stresses the centrality of originality and creativity. This is of particular significance when cultural traditions regarding text, ownership, and memorization collide with each other, as is the case in many writing programs and ESL classes. Scollon (1995) argues that "the traditional view of plagiarism constitutes, in fact, an ideological position which privileges a concept of the person established within the European Enlightenment, and . . . as such it obscures our understanding of the construction of identity in intercultural discourse" (p. 3). It is to this relationship between the Western understanding of textual ownership and other cultural practices that I now wish to turn.

TEXTUAL CULTURES IN CONFLICT

Before returning to the Chinese contexts with which I started this article, it is important to clarify my understanding of culture. What I wish to avoid here is the construction of a crude East/West dichotomy or to assume some essentialist version of Chinese culture. First, in discussing what I described as a "Western" view of text, I was attempting to sketch and critique a dominant tradition that has emerged

⁷This example seems to be more a case of the rebirth of the academic author rather than the death of the author. My point, however, is that it shows how textual practices are changing in terms of the relationship between text, authority, and ownership.

from European and American contexts. Within the so-called West, there are of course, as Heath (1983) and others have shown, a diversity of literacy practices. Some of these may coincide to a certain extent with literacy practices from other cultural contexts, whereas others may not. My chief interest was to describe what has increasingly been promoted as a global academic norm and to contextualise it as a particular cultural and historical practice. Second, by turning to look at China and Hong Kong, I am not attempting to construct some “exotic Other” but rather to return to the teaching contexts with which I am most familiar (most of my life as a teacher has been spent in Japan, China, and Hong Kong) and the contexts in which my own doubts about notions of textual ownership were formed. Furthermore, by looking at how students in Hong Kong dealt with the everyday difficulties of studying, I hope to be able to discuss these contexts in terms of the everyday practicalities faced by students.

Third, in talking of cultural difference, I want to avoid simplistic arguments such as “it’s OK to plagiarise in Chinese.” This both begs the question (it does nothing to question the notion of plagiarism) and fails to engage with a sense of difference. Rather, what I am trying to get at is the ways in which relationships to text, memory, and learning may differ. To deal equitably with our students, we need to appreciate such differences. Finally, it is important to understand the notion of cross-cultural communication not as some idealized cultural exchange, but rather as a place of struggle and contestation, because alongside the tradition of emphasizing the creativity of the West, there has also been a tradition of deriding other cultures for their supposedly stagnant or imitative cultural practices (see Blaut, 1993). Thus, I want to suggest along with Scollon (1994) that because plagiarism is a complex notion related to “the cultural construction of human identity, accusations of plagiarism may all too easily mask ideological arrogance” (p. 45). The important point here is that whereas we can see how the notion of plagiarism needs to be understood within the particular cultural and historical context of its development, it also needs to be understood relative to alternative cultural practices. It is to an exploration of ways of understanding learning in a Chinese context that I shall now turn.

Deriding Chinese Learners

It is not uncommon in discussions of plagiarism to hear those cultural Others—our students—derided as rote learners. Different educational approaches are seen as deficient and backward. Masemann (1986) points to “the implicit evolutionary thinking about pedagogy in which teaching is conceived as progressing from ‘rote’ to ‘structured’ to

‘open’” (p. 18). In this view, memorization is a traditional and outmoded pedagogical practice. Derisory views on Chinese education have a long history, dating back in Hong Kong well into the 19th century. Thus, the otherwise fairly liberal Frederick Stewart, headmaster of the Central School in Hong Kong and a strong advocate of bilingual education, nevertheless showed little respect for Chinese educational practices: In his education report for 1865,⁸ he wrote, “The Chinese have no *education* in the real sense of the word. No attempt is made at a simultaneous development of the mental powers. These are all sacrificed to the cultivation of memory.” (p. 138). Such views were commonly held by many colonizers who worked in Hong Kong or China. The Rev. S. R. Brown, Headmaster of the Morrison Education Society School, wrote in a report in 1844 that Chinese children are usually pervaded by “a universal expression of passive inanity: The black but staring, glassy eye, and open mouth, bespeak little more than stupid wonder gazing out of emptiness.” This view is linked to Brown’s view of Chinese schools, where a boy may learn “the names of written characters, that in all probability never conveyed to him one new idea from first to last.” Despite this lack of education, the Chinese boy also comes “with a mind to be emptied of a vast accumulation of false and superstitious notions that can never tenant an enlightened mind, for they cannot coexist with truth” (cited in Sweeting, 1990, p. 21). The principal characteristics of Chinese boys are “an utter disregard of truth, obscenity, and cowardliness” (p. 22).

Such views reemerged in the 1882 Education Commission’s interview with the Bishop of Victoria:⁹ “You know the way they learn; they memorate [sic], they hear the Chinese explanation, and this goes on from morning to night for years, and they get the classics into them” (1882, p. 6). And later, “When a Chinaman goes to school he is given a little book, and he just simply sits and pores over it, not understanding the meaning of a character, and he goes on growing and getting other books which he does not understand at all, and at the end, when he is in his teens, he begins to have some explanation given to him” (p. 11). This view can be found again in an article by Addis (1889) on education in China: “In truth Chinese education is—*pace* the sinologues—no education at all. It is no ‘leading out of’ but a leading back to. Instead of expanding the intelligence, it contracts it; instead of broadening sympathies, it narrows them; instead of making a man honest, intelligent and brave, it has produced few who are not cunning, narrow-minded and pusillanimous” (p. 206). He then goes on to discuss the

⁸The Annual Report on the State of the Government Schools for the Year 1865, published in the *Hong Kong Blue Book*, 1865.

⁹*Report of the Education Commission Appointed by His Excellency Sir John Pope Hennessy . . . to Consider Certain Questions Connected with Education in Hong Kong*, 1882.

sinologues' excuses for Chinese education: "It is natural that those, who have devoted much time and labour to the study of a language and literature like Chinese, should be disposed to overrate the value of that which has cost them so much industry and effort to acquire, and occasional encomiums of the Chinese methods of instruction are only what we might expect. We are told, for instance, that it is eminently suited to the present system of government" (p. 206). He goes on: "The truth is that if the comparative test be applied, almost the only merit which can be claimed for Chinese education is that it strengthens the memory" (p. 206). The poor state of Chinese education he compares with Hong Kong where "half a century ago the island was peopled by a few half savage settlers steeped in ignorance and superstition" but where "a foreign Government, by the impartial administration of wise and just laws, has made this dot on the ocean so attractive" (pp. 206–207).

Such views, with Chinese learners cast as passive, imitative memorizers, to be enlightened by the advent of the creative West, echo down to the present (see Deckert, 1992, 1993; Jochowitz, 1986). Sampson (1984) points to how Western teachers in China "respond to memorization by Chinese students with such derision and scorn" (p. 162), and Biggs (1991) discusses similar stereotypes perpetuated by external examiners at Hong Kong University and discussions of Asian students studying in Australia. From within such discursive constructs of our memorizing students, it is easy to see alternative learning practices and relationships to text as little more than backward, outmoded learning strategies. Once the students' authorial creativity is questioned and once they are positioned within these discourses of cultural derogation, students are treated as potential or actual criminals, with large warning signs posted around their assignments to make clear what the law is. "If you copy other writers' words," teaching materials for first-year Arts Faculty students at Hong Kong University warn, "pretending they are your own, you are engaging in what is known as plagiarism. *If you plagiarise in this way, you are guilty of intellectual dishonesty. You will be penalised heavily for this. Take care to avoid it, therefore*" (emphasis in original).

Cultures of Memory and Text

In comparing cultures of memorization, it is tempting to make a comparison between former Western practices of memorization and more recent Chinese (and other) practices, thus perhaps suggesting that the West has simply developed a more modern attitude to the text. Thus one might see in the following advice on English teaching by Herbert Palmer (1930) an earlier evolutionary stage in the West:

“*Memorizing* or *Repetition* is especially good, because, by aid of it, the form and flame of expression adhere to the mind, and little by little Taste is acquired, good literature becoming a sort of personal property of the recipient, to act as an antagonism to the mediocre” (p. 32). While acknowledging the importance of understanding these historical antecedents, I wish to avoid any argument that suggests some evolutionary path to cultural change, and I want to suggest that cultural difference may be more profound than such surface similarities might suggest.

It is important first of all to consider different ways in which language is understood. Harris (1980) argues that “the European is the inheritor of an intellectual tradition which is strongly biased in favour of regarding languages as superficially different but fundamentally equivalent systems of expression” (p. 21). This view is in part a result of a belief that language represents a more or less similar “real world.” This surrogationist (or representationist) orientation of Western thinking on language (whereby languages are seen as “surrogational systems” [p. 33], as representations of reality or of thoughts) is a very particular cultural and historical tradition. By contrast, the Confucian doctrine of *cheng ming* works with the opposite assumption, namely that “things are conceived of as conforming to the natural order not in themselves, but in virtue of corresponding to their names” (Harris, 1980, p. 48). In this quite different understanding of language, in which primacy is accorded to language and not to the “real” world, notions such as metaphor, which suggests that some word “stands for” something else, become quite different because reality is in the language and not in the world.

This kind of reversal may be seen, I think, in the contemporary significance in Chinese society¹⁰ of performing acts according to homophonic reference: for example, students breaking beer bottles (*xiǎo píng(zi)*: small bottle) in a reference to Deng Xiao Ping, or people eating crabs after the fall of the Gang of Four in a reference to the phrase *héng xíng bà dào*. This four-character phrase is made up of “walking sideways” (= running amok) and “feudal rule” and together suggests how rule without order (walking sideways = tyranny) rides roughshod over the people. In the same way that smashing bottles challenges Deng Xiao Ping, eating crabs (standing metaphorically for “walking sideways”) can signal the end of tyrannical rule. What I think is interesting here is the way in which reality appears to reflect language

¹⁰I am not suggesting that Chinese society is still determined by Confucian doctrines such as *Cheng ming*. Rather, I want to suggest that such doctrines reflect a long tradition of a particular understanding of the relationship between language and the world that reverses the polarity of much Western thinking.

rather than the other way round: Objects in the world are changed in order to effect change through language. This kind of reversal of language and reality, in which “doing language” can stand in for doing reality, also seems to occur in other cultures: Christie’s (1995) discussion of literacy among the Yolngu people of Northern Australia suggests a similar relationship whereby it is language that shapes reality and not reality that shapes language. Indeed, there is a provocatively intriguing parallel here between this reversal and a poststructuralist view of language in which, as I suggested earlier, the issue is not so much how authors produce texts but how texts produce authors.

What I am trying to suggest, therefore, is the possibility that the memorization of texts is not a pointless practice from this point of view, because the issue is not one of understanding the world and then mapping language onto it but rather of acquiring language as texts as a precursor to mapping out textual realities. This view of texts and language, which is derided from a Western point of view because the learning of texts is seen as meaningless unless coupled to “prior understanding,” also ties in with (perhaps produces) a respect for textual authority. This veneration of old textual authority—akin in some ways to the medieval European view of the text—is often seen as an inherently conservative construction of authority. I want to suggest, however, that it is not necessarily so; rather, it can also be understood as according primary importance to the text rather than to the world. To assume a material reality that is described by language may well be an equally conservative position. In any case, I think these speculations at least point to some profoundly different possibilities in how language, texts, and memorization may be understood.

This view is supported by explorations of what Chinese learners actually do when they memorize. Biggs (1991) has pointed out that there is a major contradiction in common perceptions of Asian students: On the one hand, they are held up as paragons of educational excellence, while on the other hand they are derided as rote learners. In an attempt to resolve this paradox, Marton, Dall’Alba, and Tse Lai Kun (in press) have shown that there are important distinctions to be drawn *within* forms of memorization rather than *between* memorization and understanding: “The traditional Asian practice of repetition or memorization can have different purposes. On the one hand, repetition can be associated with mechanical rote learning. On the other hand, memorization through repetition can be used to deepen and develop understanding. If memorization is understood in this latter way, the paradox of the Chinese learner is solved” (p. 16). The point here, then, is that research into Chinese learning practices shows that there are different types or levels of memorization. And thus, a stu-

dent's "ownership" over a text may have different causes and different effects.

The Everyday Contexts of Borrowing

Importantly, too, we need to try to understand the ways in which our students develop particular relationships to texts and learning within the everyday contexts of their lives as students. To this end I conducted informal interviews with Hong Kong Chinese students at the University of Hong Kong who had been "caught" plagiarising. A number of different concerns emerge here. In most cases, it seemed that there was a complex mixture of things going on: It could not simply be said that students had just copied a passage and hoped to get away with it. Some were aware that the essay had not been very good and complained of heavy workloads—four assignments due in one week, for example. In these cases, students seemed to be aware that they had not done a particularly good job (the "plagiarism" was more a symptom of careless work than a deliberate strategy). Other students showed less awareness that they had done much wrong but revealed similar careless study habits in which highlighted parts of texts were reused in the essay. This was sometimes also linked to a broader dissatisfaction with the first year at the university—students complaining of little incentive to work hard (the first year only requires a pass) and disappointment with the quality of the lectures and tutorials. From this point of view, these study habits became more a case of resistance than of ignorance, ineptitude, or dishonesty. Indeed, the notion of plagiarism as resistance is one worth exploring further.

One interesting issue that was raised concerned the distinction between plagiarising ideas and plagiarising language. The problem, as one student put it, was that the ideas he was discussing were clearly not his own, so if he took the ideas but rephrased the language, he would be plagiarising ideas but not words. To him, it seemed almost more honest to simply keep the language the same and leave the ideas. As another student explained, she had understood the author and felt that to rewrite in her own words would be less effective than using the author's own words. She knew that rewriting would bring about more mistakes and probably a less powerful message. Another student explained that if you understand the material but use language from the text, that may be the best means to achieve such clarity. According to another student, "It's my usual practice When I find something that seems to be meaningful, I will try to take it from the article." Referring specifically to the passage for which he had been criticised,

he explained: "I think the language of the passage is quite good, so I don't take time to change the words."

Interestingly, many of these comments echo those reported by Sherman (1992) from her Italian students:

They were virtually unanimous that it was a good idea to reproduce large tracts from source material when dealing with an academic subject. They found my requirements for "own wording" rather quaint They pointed out that the opinion or the facts could not be better expressed than they were by the source writer, and that they themselves could hardly presume to improve on a publicly acknowledged expert. Taking over his words was thus necessary in order to cover the subject, and also a mark of respect for the originator. (p. 191)

Another student who was unsure what she was supposed to have done wrong (indeed, it wasn't very clear to me either) argued that secondary school had never prepared them for such issues, either practically or theoretically. In school there were few chances to write essays: Most of the time they were required to take tests, for which of course books could not be used and memorization was a key strategy. Essays were generally only for English classes and required interpretation of texts, not citation of facts. Other students made similar comments, one explaining that he didn't see much wrong with what he had done because "In secondary school no teacher forbids us to do something like that." It was a question of which subject was being studied: If it was English, which was the only class designed to "improve my English," they were expected to write in their own words and be original; but in other classes there was no problem in borrowing from other sources—they were supposed to answer the question; how they wrote the answers didn't matter. Another issue raised was the status of translated words: One major piece of work a student had done in Form 7 (Grade 13) involved using Chinese sources, which she had translated, using the translated pieces as they were. Her teacher had been more concerned with the content and correct referencing than with the origins of chunks of language. In fact, the question of textual ownership in relation to translation opens up a whole new domain for investigation (see Duranti, 1993).

A number of quite challenging issues were raised by several students, showing that many of them, while sometimes unsure about the rules of textual borrowing, were nevertheless aware of issues to do with texts and learning.¹¹ One argued that both of the writing processes he used (either trying to write original texts or using much more language from the readings) could be useful. There was a satisfaction

¹¹Indeed, I have elsewhere (Pennycook, 1994) argued that these students may be more aware of issues around textual borrowing than their teachers.

in being able to write in one's own words but useful things to be learned from reusing the structures and words from others' texts. This process of memorization of such texts, he pointed out, had been a crucial part of how he had learned English at high school. Some students pointed to what they saw as the hypocrisy and unfairness of the system in which they were required to do little more than regurgitate ideas but always required to do so in a foreign language. It was also suggested that there was a degree of hypocrisy in lectures where it was evident that a lecturer was doing little more than reproducing chunks of the course text (with their good textual memories, students were very good at spotting this) and yet never acknowledged the source. If they took close notes, memorized them, and rewrote them in an exam, they could be accused of plagiarism. Another student directly confronted the strict attitudes to borrowing from other texts since it failed to take into account what students learned. Perhaps, she suggested, this was a teacher's problem not a student's. The important point here is that she was questioning the idea that antiplagiarism attitudes were linked to better learning. From a student point of view they may not necessarily be so: "Whether I copy or not, I know the material. I don't think we should be forced to say it in our own words I don't think if one plagiarises, that means he doesn't learn anything Perhaps plagiarism is a way of learning."

A final issue that emerged from these interviews (and also other work I have been doing with students at Hong Kong University) concerns the extent to which these students feel the English language remains a language of colonialism, a language which, although important to them for social, academic, and economic advancement, remains a colonial imposition. Thus in a number of students I found an interesting ambivalence, on the one hand an acknowledgment of the importance of English and sometimes a fondness for English (these are the students that have made it to university through their knowledge of English), on the other hand an anger at the imposition of English in their lives. As one student put it, "the teaching of English is a kind of cultural intrusion in Hong Kong and may be regarded as a political weapon" (Ma Wai Yin, 1993, p. 2). The important issue here is that there is often a deep split between the English/academic domain and the Cantonese/daily life domain in these students' lives. Many seem to feel that they have no ownership over English—it remains an alien language—and thus to write "in their own words" is not something that can be done in English. They are obliged to study in a foreign language and they return the chunks of language in the form in which they receive them.

What I think this brief summary of the interviews points to is the complexity of things going on behind the surface phenomenon of

apparent plagiarism. Students come to our classes with different cultural and educational backgrounds, with different understandings of texts and language, with different approaches to learning. They are also confronted by a range of more local concerns such as particular assignments which may require little more than the regurgitation of a set curriculum. Some students were led into trouble through a mixture of heavy workloads and inappropriate study skills: good reading habits but overuse of highlighted sections in their writing. It certainly seemed important to distinguish here between good and bad plagiarism, that is between those who reused parts of texts very well and those who seemed to randomly borrow. Other students seemed to take a more active view in all this and to see their borrowing strategies either as an unappreciated approach to learning or as an act of resistance to the university and the English language context they are obliged to work in.

CONCLUSIONS AND EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

I have been trying in this article to complexify and situate different understandings of texts, memory, and learning, to show how relations between texts and learning are far more complex than a simple accusation of plagiarism will allow. The issue of textual borrowing goes to the heart of a number of key issues in second language education: the role of memory, the nature of language learning, the ownership of texts, the concepts of the author, authority, and authenticity, and the cross-cultural relations that emerge in educational contexts. For some, the position I have been trying to establish here may seem too relativistic, allowing no grounds for asserting that someone's writing practices are unacceptable. My point, however, is that although of course we still need to leave a space open to criticise unacceptable borrowing practices, unilateral accusations of plagiarism are inadequate and arrogant. Part of the problem here lies with the use of the term *plagiarism* as if it described some clearly definable practice. What I have been trying to show here, by contrast, is that behind this clumsy term may lurk any number of different concerns, and so, despite the demands on our time that such reflexivity may make, I believe it is incumbent on us as teachers to develop an understanding of the complexity of issues involved in language learning and textual borrowing.

Another argument might suggest that whatever complexities there may be in textual relationships and memorization, there are nevertheless a very clear set of standards in academic practice to which we need to get our students to adhere. I also want to suggest, however, that

this argument is inadequate. It articulates nothing but a normative view on so-called standards, does nothing to challenge the ways in which academic systems operate, and fails to take into account any of the complexities that our students may bring in terms of their own relationship to texts and memory. I am suggesting, therefore, that many of the ways we approach supposed plagiarism are pedagogically unsound and intellectually arrogant. It is not adequate to observe simply on the one hand that students “copy” or that on the other hand they need to learn academic writing practices. Both observations are trivially true but insufficient in terms of an awareness of cultural difference and a self-reflexivity about the practices to which we adhere. Part of any discussion of citation, paraphrase, textual borrowing, and so forth needs, as Willinsky (1990) observes, to include discussion of how and why these notions have been constructed, how authorship, authenticity, and authority have been linked together, and how these practices may be in a process of flux. It is not enough, however, to focus only on Western writing practices as a “cultural syllabus” (Sherman, 1992, p. 197). Also needed is an attempt to understand the other side of the coin—our students’ textual and language learning worlds as well as the constraints on their lives and their perceptions of how academic norms operate and may be flouted.

Given the difficulties in establishing any clear sense of authoriality, it is important to understand authorship, authority, and plagiarism as located not within some objectively describable system of textual relations but rather in “an historically established system for the distribution of social power and privilege” (Scollon, 1995, p. 25). Thus I hope to encourage others to pause and consider what is going on, to try to consider self-reflexively how a particular notion of authorship and ownership has grown up, how it is a very particular cultural and historical tradition and may now be undergoing transformation, how our students may be operating from fundamentally different positions about texts and memory. All language learning is to some extent a process of borrowing others’ words and we need to be flexible, not dogmatic, about where we draw boundaries between acceptable or unacceptable textual borrowings.

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