



Information, data and media literacy

Podcast Transcript

TYPES OF PLAGIARISM

Daniel Buser as Franz Theobald zu Flunkerfels

Nicolaia Marston as Moderator Anne Kann

Colette Studer as Prof. Dr. Lea Basi

Moderator: Good evening and welcome to “Manege”. My name is Anne Kann and today we are talking about plagiarism. We have invited two guests to join us for the conversation. First, I would like to welcome Professor Lea Basi. As a university professor, she has many years of experience with academic papers. Our second guest is Franz Theobald zu Flunkerfels, who is currently defending himself against accusations that his doctoral thesis is plagiarized. I would like to begin with you, Professor Basi. What has to be done in a paper to ensure that plagiarism is not an issue?

Prof. Dr. Lea Basi: Well, essentially a paper must be prepared independently, consist of one’s own ideas and be based on properly cited sources. Then it’s not plagiarism.

Moderator: And if you forget to cite a source correctly or you accidentally paraphrase something?

Prof. Dr. Lea Basi: Then it’s an example of unintentional plagiarism.

Franz Theobald zu Flunkerfels: You see, it’s because of this hair-splitting that I am sitting here. How can something such as “unintentional plagiarism” be proven? There are even cases in which people couldn’t be sued for plagiarism because the errors they made were things that could happen to anyone – for example, they honestly thought that they wrote down their own thoughts due to a false memory or source amnesia. Academia is ultimately a team sport. Where’s the team spirit?

Moderator: But in a team – in group work, for example – is there not a greater risk of errors?



Prof. Dr. Lea Basi: Yes, that's what we call student collusion.

F: But conversation is critical to academia. Will we soon be too afraid to even attempt it anymore?

Prof. Dr. Lea Basi: Of course not. Even in a team, it's easy to avoid plagiarism. You just have to make clear who was responsible for which part, and give the sources, of course.

Moderator: But is a source always necessary; for example, if you just adapt and rephrase parts?

Franz Theobald zu Flunkerfels: An excellent question!

Prof. Dr. Lea Basi: That still requires a source to be listed, otherwise it's paraphrasing plagiarism. However, cases in which passages of text are copied and pasted are even clearer.

Franz Theobald zu Flunkerfels: Oh, come on! There's nothing wrong with copy and paste. It just ensures that no typos make their way into the text – or is that plagiarism now too?

Prof. Dr. Lea Basi: No, not necessarily, and precision is also important, but if the sources aren't listed, then it's plagiarism.

Moderator: Speaking of copy and paste, let's take a moment to talk about the digital world. It makes sense that expressions from natural languages can be plagiarized. But what about programming languages?

Prof. Dr. Lea Basi: If you copy sections of source code and add them to your own program without permission and proper references, even with slight alterations, that is considered computer code plagiarism. A code can even be subject to copyright law.

Franz Theobald zu Flunkerfels: How in the world is anyone supposed to keep all that straight? I prefer to stick to my subject and what I know.

Moderator: Speaking of existing knowledge, can I steal from myself if I re-use materials from my own papers?

Prof. Dr. Lea Basi: Yes, that's called self-plagiarism. Even with passages from your own papers that were previously published or submitted, the source must be indicated.



Franz Theobald zu Flunkerfels: What's the point of that? Who am I depriving if I don't cite myself?

Prof. Dr. Lea Basi: It's about being able to find and examine sources, regardless of who wrote them. If references to sources are incomplete or erroneous, this is considered source-based plagiarism.

Franz Theobald zu Flunkerfels: Are you accusing me of incomplete references?

Moderator: Come now, Mr. zu Flunkerfels, I didn't hear Professor Basi say anything of the sort.

Franz Theobald zu Flunkerfels: It sounded like it to me. Of course my references are complete, but when one is working with a lot of sources it's theoretically possible that something like that could happen. We can look the other way now and then, as long as the most important sources are listed.

Prof. Dr. Lea Basi: No, that's not enough. If you combine excerpts of text from a variety of sources without providing references, that's mosaic plagiarism.

Moderator: How does plagiarism detection software manage these kinds of combinations?

Franz Theobald zu Flunkerfels: Yeah, I'd like to see that program prove me – I mean, anyone – guilty of plagiarism! Someone told me you can mislead the software by inserting white letters that are invisible to people. Then the program supposedly can't recognize long quotes.

Prof. Dr. Lea Basi: Are you serious? What your "acquaintance" was describing is called text modification and it is done to make computer detection of plagiarism more difficult. The same applies to software-based text modification. But you must realize that's fraud?

Moderator: How can I modify text with software?

Prof. Dr. Lea Basi: With a translation program, for example. And before Mr. zu Flunkerfels comes at me again: there's nothing wrong with this kind of translation, as long as it's good quality and you provide the source. Otherwise, it's considered translation plagiarism.



Franz Theobald zu Flunkerfels: You're just making this up. How many more kinds of plagiarism are there? These days everything is plagiarism, I guess. When are we going to let science be about facts again instead of about who supposedly copied what from whom?

Moderator: When we talk about facts, we're usually talking about data. Is that not protected as well?

Prof. Dr. Lea Basi: Yes, data must be valid and with sources listed, if you don't want to commit data plagiarism.

Franz Theobald zu Flunkerfels: You say that as if it's easy, but a lot of subjects have strictly defined structures on how to present data.

Prof. Dr. Lea Basi: Yes, of course sometimes it's necessary to keep to the required structure. But that's not always the case. And if you use a structure from someone's else's paper in your paper without referencing the source, that's structural plagiarism.

Franz Theobald zu Flunkerfels: Now you're saying it's possible to steal even the basic structure of a paper? Next you'll accuse me of plagiarism because my dissertation contains an introduction and conclusion! A person might as well put their name on someone else's paper if everything is plagiarism anyway.

Prof. Dr. Lea Basi: I don't understand why you're being so hostile. What you're describing would be full plagiarism, and of course that's not permissible. That also includes ghostwriting, when someone contracts with someone else to write the paper and then presents it as their own work.

Franz Theobald zu Flunkerfels: What are you accusing me of? These are scandalous allegations – I don't have to put up with this!

Moderator: I'm afraid we'll have to stop here. Professor Basi, thank you for the conversation.

Prof. Dr. Lea Basi: My pleasure.