

Amy E. Robillard

Illinois State University

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How Metaphors Shape Our Approaches to Plagiarism

I'd like to begin by thanking Jennie Kearney and Deb Gentry for inviting me to talk with you here today. I hope that my remarks call attention to the effects that our language use has on our students. I recently conducted a series of talks on plagiarism at ISU's Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, and for one of those talks, my co-presenter and I decided to go the entire hour and a half without once mentioning the word “plagiarism,” in part to challenge ourselves and in part to demonstrate that we could have a meaningful conversation about citation and credit without using the p-word, as fraught and overdetermined as it is. We didn't tell participants that we were doing this, and at the end of our time together, I was nearly jumping out of my seat, eager to show everyone what we'd done.

I'm not going to do this today, of course, as I would already have failed with my title. I am instead going to share with you my most recent thinking about the ways that metaphors affect how we talk about and how we understand plagiarism and, by extension, academic honesty, dishonesty, integrity, and cheating. My approach is rhetorical; by that I mean that I approach the issue with a desire to understand how we've been persuaded to believe that we know what plagiarism is, by whom we've been persuaded, and how we persuade others. My goal is to understand what happens when we revise the *plagiarism is theft* metaphor to highlight the *credit*

that is lost when an author's work isn't cited. This instead of the commonplace idea that what is stolen in plagiarism is words or ideas. To do this, I provide an analysis of the metaphors that underwrite the *plagiarism is theft* metaphor, namely, what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson call the Moral Accounting metaphor and its entailment, a *right is an I.O.U.*

Let me be clear up front. I do not believe nor do I wish to claim that all writing teachers themselves believe in or subscribe to the *plagiarism is theft* metaphor; rather, I wish to analyze the implications of a collective reliance on the metaphor to *explain* plagiarism to students. Indeed, we as scholars involved in disciplinary conversations understand our own work and the work of others as *contributions* rather than as objects to be stolen; we *want* others to use our work. We might say that in our work as scholars, we emphasize the *passing on* of new knowledge—a socially and morally responsible act—while in our work as teachers, we endorse conceptions of citation as *passing off*—a socially and morally reprehensible act.

[slide] This work depends upon the fact that our talk about plagiarism is a rhetorical event with implications that we have not yet fully considered. We are the rhetors, working to persuade students, the audience, that plagiarism is wrong, that academic honesty is a moral imperative, and most of us do this at least once during a semester. Because we experience this rhetorical situation so often, it becomes easy for us to forget that our talk about plagiarism and academic honesty is shaped by assumptions about our audience's values and beliefs: when we talk about plagiarism with students, we're working from assumptions that they are generally lazy, selfish, and out to get the most benefit from the least amount of work. In an unscientific survey of popular writing textbooks and handbooks, I found that treatment of plagiarism generally appears in the research-paper writing or source-use section. Typical headings include "Avoiding Plagiarism and Documenting Sources," "Acknowledging Sources and Avoiding

Plagiarism,” and, simply, “Avoiding Plagiarism.” Explanations of source use and the admonition to avoid plagiarism seem to be inseparable. Source use is linked with plagiarism so often that students can’t help but understand the purpose of citing sources as avoiding accusations of plagiarism. When we caution students against plagiarizing before they even begin and when we explain plagiarism to them in terms of theft, we send the message that we believe they are selfish and lazy.

[slide] Plagiarism has been explained with the use of a number of metaphors. While I argue that theft is the most pervasive metaphor for plagiarism, we also hear it explained in terms of borrowing—a softer form of theft, perhaps—intellectual laziness—wherein it’s simply too much effort to do the work yourself—lying—we know this as academic dishonesty, with academic honesty the equivalent of doing your own work—disease—for which we are so often seeking a cure—a plague—it’s affecting so many that we don’t know how to control it—or cheating—which itself is dependent upon another metaphor, that school is a game with rules that can be followed or broken.

[slide] It has become standard practice in all academic discussions of plagiarism to note that the word *plagiarism* derives from the Latin word *plagiarius*, meaning the kidnapping of a child or a slave—people who could “in some sense be owned” (xvi). This fact is generally called upon to support the commonplace definition of plagiarism as theft. In her recent article for *Slate Magazine*, Meghan O’Rourke explains that

Roman satirist Martial gave us its modern sense when he wrote an epigram complaining that another man (whom he labeled a “plagiarius”) had kidnapped his writings (which he metaphorically labeled his slaves) and was passing them

off as his own. What had been a metaphor for a slave-stealer—someone who got labor for free—became a symbolic expression for the theft of words. (2)

[slide] In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson suggest that the source of many of the metaphors we live by can be found in our everyday lived experience. Our understanding of the concept of *argument*, for example, is dependent upon our everyday understanding of the concept of *war*. Thus, *argument is war* (*Metaphors* 2-6). We *win* and *lose* arguments, we *attack* our opponents' positions, we *strategize*, and some arguers *take no prisoners*. This seems so simple. Of course arguments have winners and losers. But Lakoff and Johnson want us to understand that the metaphor *argument is war* is not a rhetorical flourish; instead, it is a concept we live by. "We talk about arguments that way because we conceive of them that way—and we act according to the way we conceive of things" (5). Metaphors we live by both shape and reflect our ordinary ways of understanding, so much so that many of these metaphors have become invisible to us. Crucial to their early work on metaphor were the tenets that metaphors are "rooted in physical and cultural experience" (18), that they "can never be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of [their] experiential basis" (19), and that the primary purpose of metaphor is understanding (36). Thus, not only do our cultural experiences with war shape our conceptualizations of argument, but such conceptualizations cannot be understood or represented independently of our physical and cultural experiences of war. We do not know how to talk about argument except to invoke war.

Since the publication of *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson have amplified their claim about the experiential basis of primary metaphors by focusing in more depth on the degree to which such metaphors are dependent upon an understanding of knowledge as fundamentally embodied. Embodied not in the simple sense that we think with our brains and we need bodies to

have brains. Rather, knowledge is fundamentally embodied in two important ways. First, reason is “shaped crucially by the peculiarities of our human bodies, by the remarkable details of the neural structure of our brains, and by the specifics of our everyday functioning in the world” (*Philosophy* 4). Because we have the bodies we have, we understand the world in very particular ways and our primary metaphors reflect this understanding. For instance, our primary experience of feeling warm when being held close to another body affectionately induces us to understand and live by the metaphor *affection is warmth*. Thus, we know what it means to say that he is a cold person. We are not referring to his literal body temperature but to his tendency to withhold affection (*Philosophy* 50). [slide] Second, knowledge is fundamentally embodied via neural connections in our brains. Lakoff and Johnson explain that

whenever a domain of subjective experience or judgment is coactivated regularly with a sensorimotor domain [e.g., the subjective experience of affection is coactivated regularly with the physical experience of being held closely to another person] permanent neural connections are established via synaptic weight changes. Those connections, which you have unconsciously formed by the thousands, provide inferential structure and qualitative experience activated in the sensorimotor system to the subjective domains they are associated with.

(*Philosophy* 57)

Neural connections established repeatedly between the abstract concept *affection* and the subjective experience *warmth* allow us not just to understand affection metaphorically in terms of temperature but to *reason* about affection based on our understanding of warmth. How do we talk about a person who seems to slowly be letting down his guard and opening up to another? We reason about affection by reasoning about temperature. If affection is warmth and a person is

slowly becoming more affectionate, we say he is “warming up to us.” It is worth noting here that my moving away from the warmth metaphor led me to talk about affection in terms of enclosures that are guarded. Like the concept plagiarism, affection is practically impossible to talk about or refer to without recourse to metaphor.

Theft is a relatively concrete concept that seems to provide the right kind of structure with which to understand the abstract concept *plagiarism*. We can and we have, therefore, used our experiential understanding of *theft* to reason about and to draw inferences about *plagiarism*. First we consider the structure of the concept *theft*. [slide]

A thief intentionally steals an object from its rightful owner with the express goal of getting away with it.

It is the police’s job to prevent and detect crime.

A thief, once caught, deserves to be punished.

A thief will be punished by an entity more powerful than the police, usually the court system.

[slide] The metaphor maps the following structure:

The student is a thief.

The teacher is the police.

Punishment is the consequence.

Plagiarism policies spell out appropriate punishment.

Punishment is carried out by university administrators.

[slide] Therefore, when we use the structure of the concept *theft* to reason and draw inferences about *plagiarism*, we get the following commonplaces:

A student intentionally steals an object from its rightful owner with the express goal of getting away with it.

It is a teacher's job to prevent and detect plagiarism.

A student, once caught, deserves to be punished.

A student will be punished by an entity more powerful than the teacher, usually an organization housed in Student Affairs or Community Rights and Responsibilities.

This all seems straightforward enough. We reason about plagiarism by reasoning about theft. There are very specific rhetorical effects that follow from reasoning about plagiarism by reasoning about theft. But two things nag. First, Lakoff and Johnson's profound observation that knowledge is embodied and that any understanding of metaphor must take this embodiment into account seems to be missing in this mapping of theft onto plagiarism. Second, stopping at this point in the analysis allows the *moral content* of our everyday understanding of theft to remain unarticulated and thus unchallenged.

[slide] Perhaps nothing more frequently goes without saying in contemporary social theory than the rhetorical effects of morality metaphors on our conceptions of right and wrong and thus on our reasoning about everyday acts with a presumed moral content. Morality, Lakoff and Johnson show us, stems from "our fundamental human concern with what is best for us and how we ought to live" (*Philosophy* 290). Like all metaphors we live by, the metaphors we have for morality are grounded in our bodily experiences of well-being. Our well-being is dependent on, for instance, health, connection, nurturance, protection, wealth, and the more of each we have, the better off we are. "Morality is fundamentally seen as the enhancing of well-being, especially of others," Lakoff and Johnson write. The primary metaphor *well-being is wealth* is rooted in the fact that "most people find it better to have enough wealth to live comfortably than

to be impoverished,” and we therefore understand that an “increase in well being is a *gain*; a decrease, a *loss*” (291). *Well-being is wealth* is the basis for what Lakoff and Johnson call the Moral Accounting metaphor wherein “increasing others’ well-being is metaphorically increasing their wealth. Decreasing others’ well-being is metaphorically decreasing their wealth. In other words, doing something good for someone is metaphorically giving that person something of value, for example, money” (292). The Moral Accounting metaphor conceptualizes moral action in terms of financial transactions (292) and thus provides a number of reasoning structures for understanding right and wrong, such as reciprocation, retribution, revenge, and restitution (see 293-297). Reasoning about morality is, in many cases, dependent upon our reasoning about finances or wealth. Lakoff and Johnson point out, too, that the source of the metaphor, “the domain of financial transaction, itself has a morality: It is moral to pay your debts and immoral not to” (293).

Ownership of a thing grants us exclusive rights to the possession, use, and access to that thing. Lakoff and Johnson explain that “a right is a form of metaphorical social capital that allows you to claim certain debts from others” (298). Ownership of a thing, then, grants us the exclusive right to claim debts from others should we decide to let others access or use that thing.

When we reason about plagiarism by reasoning about theft, and when we encourage students to engage in this reasoning with us, we reactivate neural connections between not just the logical structure of one and the logical structure of the other but also between the moral content of one and the moral content of the other. We suggest that plagiarism is wrong because theft is wrong and plagiarism is just like theft in that it involves the unauthorized taking of another person’s property. But we rarely take the next step and explain *why* theft is wrong because to do so would require an articulation of the moral basis of ownership and the metaphor

of a right as an I.O.U. that entitles an author to *credit* for his or her work. Giving credit to the cited author enacts recognition, a specific form of human well-being without which social life would be virtually meaningless. Explaining why theft is wrong and thus why plagiarism is wrong thus requires an examination of precisely what is stolen when someone plagiarizes. The object of theft, the thing for which the author holds exclusive rights, is not the words or the language or even the ideas, but the *credit*.

[slide] In “The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism,” Jonathan Lethem copies Lawrence Lessig’s idea that “A time is marked not so much by ideas that are argued about as by ideas that are taken for granted. The character of an era hangs upon what needs no defense” (63). Though he labels his work a plagiarism, he names all of his sources at the end of the piece, encouraging readers to pursue the ideas in the essay by reading further. This is one of the functions of a Works Cited list or a bibliography: to assist readers in their pursuit of the ideas drawn upon in the work. One of the ideas that is taken for granted in our time is that plagiarism is theft. But if we reconceive of the object of theft as *credit*—rather than words or ideas—new ways of doing things become possible. Indeed, we don’t have to talk about theft at all if we begin discussions of citation from the positive, from an explanation of the power of credit and acknowledgement for those who offer their work to us.

[slide] Understanding and explaining the object of theft as credit allows us to explain the work of writing from sources in terms of *passing off* and *passing on*. Both require a third party. To pass *off* an idea is to say something along the lines of, I’ve found this great idea and I want you to think it’s mine. To pass *on* an idea is to say something along the lines of, I’ve found this great idea, and look what it can do to help us rethink x, y, and z. Have you heard about it? Passing on is the very definition of collaboration, and it is the primary intellectual reason we cite

the work of others. Moreover, passing on assumes the existence of an interested audience. Passing on enacts a different kind of social relation than passing off. Passing on highlights the relationships among readers and renders visible the kind of sharing that is necessary for the construction of knowledge.

In *The Curious Writer*, Bruce Ballenger warns students that “Modern authors get testy when someone uses their work without giving them credit” (392). Ballenger’s reliance on unstated moral beliefs about ownership, authorship, and the social relations of intellectual work is anything but unusual. It is the norm. I am suggesting that using the language of *passing off* and *passing on* can go a long way toward a cognitive reframing of what it means to draw on the work of others. Each makes explicit the function of the social in the creation of knowledge, and each provides opportunity for open discussions of the Moral Accounting metaphor upon which so much of our intellectual work depends. [slide] Citation is passing on. We need to say this again and again. Lakoff and Johnson explain that “certain neural connections between the activated source- and target-domain networks are randomly established at first and then have their synaptic weights increased through their recurrent firing. The more times those connections are activated, the more the weights are increased, until permanent connections are forged” (*Philosophy* 57). The neural connections between plagiarism and theft have been forged and forged again since the days we first learned what it meant to draw on the work of another. It’s time now for us to begin the work of reshaping those connections for ourselves and for our students.

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