

David Carkeet

**Plagiarism: Two Personal Stories**

In 2005 I wrote an essay titled "Mountain Boy Meets Plato," a personal chronicle of intellectual insecurity arising from my first exposure to an educated world beyond my rural roots. It was published by *River Styx*, a St. Louis literary magazine.

Nineteen years later, a writer who was not me submitted "Mountain Boy Meets Plato," word for word, to *Arts & Letters*, a literary magazine in Georgia. An editor there liked it well enough to try to learn more about the author. She immediately discovered the theft and wrote me a friendly note to call my attention to it.

Naturally, my jaw hit the table, but then came some feelings that I wouldn't have expected. For a moment I was disappointed that the lie hadn't succeeded. With another publication, the essay would have had fresh exposure to a second round of readers. I also felt flattered. Whoever this fellow was let's call him John, as he called himself in his submission cover letter to the magazine he must have admired the essay to want to steal it. My vanity outweighed my outrage.

The benefit to my ego was short-lived. The submitted essay turned out to have strange line-spacing issues that the thief hadn't bothered to correct when he proofread it. But never mind proofreading had he even read it? How could "John" have overlooked the fact that people in the essay address the author as "Dave"? Deflation was complete when I made the mistake of asking the editor if she would have published the essay if she hadn't spotted the plagiarism. No, she said. She didn't like the way it ended.

John, it turns out, has been a tormenter of literary magazines for some time. He has stolen and republished dozens of poems under various aliases. I am not aware of any prose that he has landed, but it's probably out there somewhere. When such a crime is spotted after publication, editors must issue apologies to readers and to authors of the originals and pull the works from their web pages. The editor of *Moon City Review* discovered one of John's thefts just days before publication, and he had to scramble and incur extra expense to remove the stolen work before the printer's deadline.

The only preventive against plagiarism is for editors to google passages from accepted submissions in search of identical word strings tedious labor that would fail to capture published work that had appeared only in print. For most literary magazines, survival from one year to the next is far from certain. Their small staffs don't need John and his other aliases wasting their time and money.

Why would this fellow repeatedly behave like this? The Big Three that motivate writers money, glory, and the need to connect with others by moving, informing, or entertaining them can play no role for John: literary magazines rarely pay writers; no glory redounds from an alias; and it is doubtful that the plagiarizer felt the need to move, inform, or entertain with content that he might not have even read. John must be ruled by a different Big Three: impishness, revenge on a literary establishment that

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has somehow wronged him, and one more that I can't conjure because his behavior is so bizarre. When editors confront him, he does not respond. For this reason, and also because I try to avoid sociopaths, I took no action against him.

If the mildness of my reaction to the theft of my work surprises you, here comes a different tale with outrage aplenty. On an otherwise calm day, a friend alerted me to some peculiar sentences he had spotted in a grammar guide on the website of an eastern college.

Which of the following sentences is prescriptively correct?

A. Reading Carkeet's new novel far into the night, he became more and more convinced that Carkeet had plagiarized him.

B. Reading Carkeet's new novel far into the night, the notion that Carkeet had plagiarized suddenly occurred to him.

C. Both of the above

D. Neither of the above



First, to remove distraction, let's take care of the grammatical issue, a dangling modifier. The correct answer is A. Sentences beginning with participles like "reading" require identity between the implied subject of the participle and the subject of the main verb that follows. The "he" of A satisfies the rule; "the notion" of B does not. The participial phrase in a sentence like B "dangles." To the punctilious reader, it does not feel properly attached to anything.

Now to the issue with a lot more at stake. Below is the exchange of emails between me and the fellow who ran the website containing the test question. Carkeet fires the first shot.

Dear Sir/Madam:

Question number 32 on the grammar exam administered on your website contains a question with sample sentences suggesting I am a plagiarist. Can you tell me why this is? It is no small matter to make such an insinuation, even in this apparently innocuous context. Please contact the creator of this exam, inform him or her that the sentence is offensive and irresponsible, and change the sentence immediately.

David Carkeet



Mr. Carkeet,

The sentences in question are not referring to you, or for that matter, any other author using the name Carkeet (a quick search on the net listed at least half a dozen). It's simply a randomly selected name and nothing is being insinuated about you or anybody else, as is evident by the context. No first name is given, and there is not even an indication as to Carkeet's gender, so I'm not sure what leads you to believe this has anything to do with you.

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Still, we would be happy to consider changing the exam in order to avoid any further misinterpretations. If you would like to request such a change, please submit your request in writing (all change requests must be signed by the requestor) to the mailing address given on the website. I will be happy to pass it on to the appropriate people.

FYI, the creator of the site passed away last year, so I cannot pass along your comments to him, even if I were so inclined.

Regards,

Trent Anderling, Webmaster



Mr. Anderling,

Look, I'm not an egomaniac. "Carkeet" is a "randomly selected name"? That must have been some "quick search on the net" you did. My own search resulted in exactly zero other Carkeet authors, or at least zero who are candidates for this particular reference. Yes, there's Peggy Edwards-Carkeet, who has illustrated books about California shrubs and wildflowers. There's the Australian ophthalmologist Andrew Carkeet, who has written some lengthily titled articles on the eyeball. And there's me, who has written novels with linguist heroes and a number of essays on languageworks known by some grammarians and no doubt by the fellow who made up this exam. What he has against me I'll never know. It's almost as mysterious as why your institution would require a formal, signed request for alteration from "a requestor." Does this come up that often? How many people does your test slander? I think this email should carry sufficient legal force as a request. Change the damn name to "Johnson," or "Trent Anderling," for that matter, and it will still test the same grammatical knowledge.

David Carkeet



Mr. Carkeet,

As I said previously, we would be happy to consider changing the exam in order to avoid any further misinterpretations. If you would like to request such a change, please submit your request in writing.

By policy we do not accept content change requests submitted via external email for any of our websites. This policy is strictly enforced, particularly when the request is made in the context of an unsubstantiated accusation against a former faculty member.

Trent Anderling, Webmaster



Mr. Anderling,

You're wrong about who has made an "unsubstantiated accusation." My last email substantiated mine beyond any reasonable doubt. Your grammarian simply made his accusation against me and put it out there on the internet without substantiation.

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Trent Anderling is clearly an institutional stooge, but I had to admire his iron resistance and the studied care of his language. His words dutifully protected his establishment in case of a civil suit. He practically dictated the college counsel's future brief: "Defendant disproved any identity between Plaintiff and the hypothetical plagiarist. Moreover, Defendant, though under no obligation to do so, swiftly proposed a remedy."

I sent the letter. A few days later, I read the remedy online. It consisted of the same set of sentences, but instead of "Carkeet," the plagiarist was now identified as "David." Trent Anderling was not just a stooge. He was evil.

I found it far worse to be accused of plagiarism than to be plagiarized. Writers with whom I have shared both stories have reacted just as I did: curiosity and puzzlement about plagiarist John, moral horror and loathing for false accuser Trent. Sadly, our correspondence came to an end. I was satisfied that I had bested him, which is easy when you've got the truth on your side. Still, there was a gnawing. Trent had presumably inherited this website from his predecessor, the Carkeet expert, whose demise Trent had reported as if I had killed him. Just who was this dead man and why did he hate me?

A "quick search on the net" showed him to be a poet and grammarian who had died too young and was evidently beloved, so I'll stop calling him a dead man. He was respected locally as a longtime professor and college webmaster and nationally for his immense online grammar guide, which he had made available to any and all without charge. The tradition continues. The site is presently referenced by, to name a few, Smith College, San Jose State University, Gallaudet, USC, UCLA, Hofstra, Michigan State, the Universities of Wisconsin and Delaware, many secondary school districts, and the King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals. Yes, even Saudi Arabians can learn about plagiarist David, formerly known as Carkeet. According to the college's public relations department, the site has had as many as 30,000 hits per day.

My research further revealed that the grammarian received a master's degree in English from Washington University in St. Louis. This unsettled me. His time in the city could have overlapped with my own years of teaching at UM-St. Louis. He could have driven north a few miles to take a class from me, perhaps in a subject not offered at Wash U, and my tutelage could have generated enough bile to spill into his grammar guide years later. When I finally found a date for his degree, I was relieved to see it had been awarded five years before I arrived in the city. As far as I knew, personal acquaintance had not created his enmity.

This conclusion satisfied me until I realized that a less direct kind of acquaintance was possible. My accuser's grammar site is fiercely prescriptive. That is, it is about good and bad grammar. Prescriptivism teaches us not to say "He don't." Linguistics, on the other hand, teaches us that some people say "He don't," others say "He doesn't," and let's go find out why. Linguists can't stand prescriptivism. They find it willfully ignorant of the reality of language change and superficial in its approach to a subject of

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infinite depth to them. I once observed the fate of a prescriptivist who stumbled onto a linguistics listserv to offer a few gentle usage recommendations; within hours he had been bullied off the forum by the regular gang.

My graduate school training was in linguistics, and somewhere in one of my novels I state the official position. A character finds herself hesitating over alternative expressions, perhaps "lie" vs. "lay," and she asks a linguist which of the two is correct. The linguist says, "It doesn't matter." Or maybe he says, "Either one." I can't find the scene, though I've tried like the devil. I know it's somewhere in my little canon. The character's indifferent response is antithetical to my slanderer's credo, to which he had devoted much of his life. If he had read it, he would have felt insulted, just like the poor sap who had blundered onto the listserv.

This answer pacified me for a while, but then I began to wonder, "Why plagiarism?" The specificity of the charge made it unlikely it had been plucked from the air as a random smear. Did the accuser think my work drew too heavily from that of other writers? I did indeed steal a solution in a mystery novel from Peter Dickinson's *The Poison Oracle*, and one of my novels closely follows the structure of Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*. I also must confess that the field manager in my baseball novel is none other than Vincent Gardenia, plucked from the baseball film *Bang the Drum Slowly*. But this kind of thing isn't plagiarism. It's indebtedness, or influence, or intertextuality, whatever that means. And of course I'm the only one in the universe who knows these secrets about my books. Writers who needlessly fret over their originality beg for the rebuke "Get over yourself."

I got over myself and dumped the theory. Then I had a new thought, based on a fresh reading of one of the slanderer's test questions: "Reading Carkeet's new novel late into the night, he became more and more convinced that Carkeet had plagiarized him." The "him," rather than being an unaffiliated pronoun in some imagined scenario, might actually be the author of the sentence, the grammarian, speaking about his actual life. Carkeet had stolen *his* words.

But from where? To find out, I ordered his two books of poetry, where I discovered no overlap between his language and mine. I did find, to my chagrin, some very good poems. Several had been published in literary magazines. Garrison Keillor chose four of them to read on his public radio show *The Writer's Almanac*. The poems are sweet "tender," to use a word my minister sister favors. Many were magnificently conceived, like the one lamenting the death of Christopher Robin Milne (son of A. A.) in the melancholy voice of Eeyore. Or the one about a deaf man signing to someone in an airport terminal while, perched on his shoulders, his small son signs his own story as well. Or the one in which the speaker explains shadows to his young grandson and describes Wendy's sewing of Peter Pan's shadow back onto his feet. I'd forgotten that!

But enough poetry. Enough tributes to mine enemy. A more likely body of material was his online grammar guide. However, it was huge, and I didn't want to read it and say of every pairing of grammatical options, "It doesn't matter." A better methodology would be to begin with *my* work. What grammatical nuggets might I find there that could also plausibly

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occur in a general treatment of grammar? As soon as I had the question, I had the answer.

It was a joke, a silly one about ending sentences with a preposition. A little boy in his pajamas, eager for his bedtime story, is disappointed to see the book his father is carrying up the stairs. He says, "What are you bringing that book that I don't want to be read to out of up for?" A character in one of my novels tells the joke. I've milked it many times in public readings, so it was the first nugget that came to mind.

Sure enough, it took me only a few minutes to find the joke in the online grammar guide, in a section on prepositions. The grammarian must have presumed that his own knowledge of the joke was so unusual that any occurrence of it after he had posted it had to have come from his website. I had indeed imported the joke, but not from there. It had come to me from the air, from soundwaves that had drifted my way, most likely in graduate school. It felt like something I had known forever. How do you credit the air? I am sure my accuser had picked it up as I had, via some untraceable transmission going back to an obscure Homeric originator.

The source was actually not Homer but E. B. White, as I have since learned, in a 1962 letter to his editor. Neither my nemesis nor I credited White, and neither did Steven Pinker when he retold the joke in *The Language Instinct*. Pinker calls it "an old grammarian's saw," suggesting he was as ignorant of the source as I was.

My conclusion: the accusation that Carkeet had committed plagiarism was a retaliatory act that is ridiculous on three counts: (1) the accuser did not originate the joke; (2) Carkeet did not get the joke from the accuser; and (3) the joke, by virtue of its renown, is likely governed by the doctrine of fair use.

It all made sense.

Or did it? Later, on further inevitable reflection, the grammarian struck me as too intelligent to have drawn the conclusion that I owed my knowledge of the joke to his website. Also, he was beloved and sensitive, even tender, and such a man wouldn't attack another writer unless the provocation had been deeply injurious. My conclusion seemed inconsistent with his character.

When someone doesn't like you, you want to know the reason. I can't rule out a return to the subject. The grammar guide is abundant, fertile ground yet to be fully explored. It's going to take a long time.