



# The ethics of publishing in two languages

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## Abstract

A duplicate publication, or parts thereof, without disclosure, is now definitively considered to be an ethical infraction. The amount of duplication usually determines the correction that is necessary, either an erratum or a retraction. Such duplications can exist as a result of error, misconduct, or even gray areas in between. In the highly competitive market of scholarly and academic publishing, there exists constant pressure, and thus temptation, to boost output. Academics who are not native English speakers, or who publish in journals whose primary language is not English, may also consider publishing their data sets in their native language. There are increasing cases of duplicated data and papers in the English literature that have been corrected or retracted as a result of undeclared prior publication in another journal and language. This letter explores some of the discussion points surrounding duplicate publications in two languages. Provided that multiple sources in two or more languages that report the same data, text, ideas, concepts, methodologies or analyses are clearly cross-referenced, thereby alerting the editors, peers and readers that such aspects have been previously published, there is a reduced risk of an ethical infraction. In fact, secondary publications in two or more languages could benefit a wider pool of scientists. However, undeclared duplications, whole or in part, are considered to be ethical infractions.

**Keywords** Accountability · Editorial responsibility · Peer review · Quality control · Secondary publication · Transparency

Dear *Scientometrics* Editors,

In 1969, a seminal paper, in fact a *New England Journal of Medicine* (NEJM) editorial that reflected on the consequences of a duplicate submission to their journal, laid out the foundation of a key concept—the Ingelfinger rule—for what is now a corner-stone of academic and scholarly publishing ethics, namely duplicate or redundant publications. The fundamental aspect of the Ingelfinger rule (NEJM 1969)<sup>1</sup> is that no undeclared prior publication—in any source—is allowed. Curiously, in that statement, there was no mention of

<sup>1</sup> “Papers are submitted to the *Journal* with the understanding that they, or their essential substance, have been neither published nor submitted elsewhere (including news media and controlled-circulation publications). This restriction does not apply to (a) abstracts published in connection with meetings, or (b) press reports resulting from formal and public oral presentation” (pp. 676–677).

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the issue of such redundant or duplicate duplications in other languages. A 2005 editorial in the *Revista Española de Cardiología* (Alfonso et al. 2005) provides a neat summary of the historic evolution of the concept of duplicate duplication and makes mention of a 2000 paper (Rogers 2000a), which is of direct relevance to the topic of this letter, that declares that such publications in more than one language carries a serious unethical component, if undeclared.

Rogers (2000a) discussed the issue of duplicate publication in the context of costs, fairness and intellectual exclusivity, not only with regards to the journal, but in general, arguing that “previously published means simply that, previously published”.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, Rogers (2000a) considered that a paper that carries duplicated data, if declared during submission, would be rejected because the “work contains nothing new” and that such submissions and publications, in part or in whole, “are indefensible” (p. 1487). In a fascinating case, Rogers (2000b) described how a group of Japanese authors (Mihara et al. 1999), who had published data and information in a Japanese society journal (*Japanese Journal of Clinical Radiology*) in Japanese and then again in the *American Journal of Roentgenology* (*AJR*) in English, were given the benefit of the doubt, after they argued cultural differences, despite breaching signed declarations to the *AJR*, but offering a stern-worded summary and warning to future authors that undeclared publication, even in other languages, would be considered a breach of ethics.<sup>3</sup> According to Google, the “duplicated” paper in the *AJR* has accrued 22 citations until January 5, 2019, which could be argued as “unfair” citations in the current competitive publishing environment. The issue of whether this publication now merits retraction in the current publishing environment, given its international indexing by Scopus,<sup>4</sup> and the fact that such duplicate publications are still considered to be potential violations of publishing ethics in *AJR*,<sup>5</sup> is worth examining.

There are several sources, including reputable publishers or journals, that support the position that an undeclared duplicate submission and publication of a paper (text, data, etc.), in part or in whole, that was previously published in another language, is unethical. Elsevier, a Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) member that claims to follow the relevant COPE ethics guidelines,<sup>6</sup> notes that undeclared duplicate publication in another language is misconduct and a breach of ethics.<sup>7</sup> Taylor & Francis, also a COPE member,

<sup>2</sup> Rogers (2000a) argued, emphatically, that “Previously published in any language, previously published anywhere in the world, previously published in part or in whole, previously published in print or on electronic media, previously published regardless of whether that publication is listed in the *Index Medicus*, and previously published with or without the requirement for signing a transfer of copyright. Previously published means previously published, published anywhere under any condition; nothing more, nothing less” (pp. 1487).

<sup>3</sup> Rogers (2000b) stated: “The fact remains that these authors signed the *AJR*’s exclusive publication statement, in essence denying the fact that they had indeed previously published, at least, a very similar article if not the same article in another journal. It makes no difference that this was in another language, not in English, not peer reviewed, nor that no copyright agreement had been required or signed by the authors for the original publication” (pp. 1487).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.scimagojr.com/journalsearch.php?q=17886&tip=sid>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.arrs.org/uploadedFiles/ARRS/Publications/authorGuidelines.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.elsevier.com/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/70228/redundant-publication-A.pdf](https://www.elsevier.com/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/70228/redundant-publication-A.pdf); [https://www.elsevier.com/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/70229/redundant-publication-B\\_0.pdf](https://www.elsevier.com/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/70229/redundant-publication-B_0.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.elsevier.com/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0012/653889/Simultaneous-Submission-factsheet-March-2019.pdf](https://www.elsevier.com/_data/assets/pdf_file/0012/653889/Simultaneous-Submission-factsheet-March-2019.pdf): “Submitting a paper to journals in different languages without acknowledgment of the original paper. Is it unethical? Yes” (p. 2; March, 2019); <https://www.elsevier.com/about/policies/publishing-ethics>; <https://www.elsevier.com/editors/perk/multiple-duplicate-concurrent-publication-simultaneous-submission>.

ascribe to COPE-established ethical policies,<sup>8</sup> and retractions based on duplicate publications in two languages were observed in *Current Eye Research*.<sup>9</sup> Hindawi journals explicitly prohibit duplicated publications in two languages.<sup>10</sup> John Wiley & Sons, Inc. also have a zero tolerance policy towards redundant publications, although no explicit mention is made of undeclared duplication in two or more languages.<sup>11</sup> Curiously, the Springer Nature ethics guidelines pertaining to duplicate or redundant publications do not explicitly address the issue of duplicate publications in two or multiple languages, although the publisher is a COPE member.<sup>12</sup> However, there is some evidence (Shen 2019)<sup>13</sup> that the unethical nature of duplicate publication in two languages is a Springer Nature COPE-based ethics policy. This is confirmed by the submission guidelines and ethics requirements of authors that submit to *Scientometrics*, a Springer Nature title.<sup>14</sup> The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), which refers readers to the COPE flowcharts, also considers duplicate publications in two languages unethical.<sup>15</sup> The *JMA Journal*, published by the Japanese Medical Association, claims to strictly follow the COPE ethics guidelines and

<sup>8</sup> <https://taylorandfrancis.com/about/corporate-responsibility/publishing-ethics/>; <https://authorservices.taylorandfrancis.com/ethics-for-authors/>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.3109/02713683.2012.645404> referring to the retraction of three papers (“The above articles duplicate previously published work and are hereby retracted in both the print and online editions of *Current Eye Research*. These articles appeared earlier in Chinese-language journals (referenced below). As far as can be determined, no permission was sought for the translation and re-publication of the articles. The English-language versions do not cite or refer to the prior publications, and are therefore redundant to scientific literature”).

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.hindawi.com/ethics/#duplicatesubmission>: “Hindawi journals consider only original content, i.e. articles that have not been previously published, including in a language other than English”.

<sup>11</sup> <https://authorservices.wiley.com/ethics-guidelines/research-integrity.html>: “the copyright transfer Agreement, exclusive License Agreement or the open Access Agreement, one of which must be submitted before publication in any Wiley journal, requires signature from the corresponding author to warrant that the article is an original work, has not been published before, and is not being considered for publication elsewhere in its final form” p. 3).

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.springer.com/gp/authors-editors/editors/publishing-ethics-for-journals/4176>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10853-019-03408-9> (“The Editor-in-Chief has retracted this article [1] because it has been previously published by the same author in a Chinese-language journal [2]. Some additional text is included in the English version of the article, but most of the text and all the figures are the same as in the article that was written in Chinese. The Chinese-language publication was not cited in the duplicate publication”).

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.springer.com/journal/11192/submission-guidelines> (“The submitted work should be original and should not have been published elsewhere in any form or language (partially or in full”).

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/publishing-and-editorial-issues/overlapping-publications.html>. Several statements are worth highlighting: “Authors should not submit the same manuscript, in the same or different languages, simultaneously to more than one journal. The rationale for this standard is the potential for disagreement when two (or more) journals claim the right to publish a manuscript that has been submitted simultaneously to more than one journal, and the possibility that two or more journals will unknowingly and unnecessarily undertake the work of peer review, edit the same manuscript, and publish the same article”; “Duplicate publication is publication of a paper that overlaps substantially with one already published, without clear, visible reference to the previous publication”; “Readers ... deserve to be able to trust that what they are reading is original”; “The bases of this position are international copyright laws, ethical conduct, and cost-effective use of resources. Duplicate publication of original research is particularly problematic because it can result in inadvertent double-counting of data or inappropriate weighting of the results of a single study, which distorts the available evidence”; “Authors who attempt duplicate publication without such notification should expect at least prompt rejection of the submitted manuscript. If the editor was not aware of the violations and the article has already been published, then the article might warrant retraction with or without the author’s explanation or approval”.

notes that undeclared duplicate publication in another language is misconduct and a breach of ethics.<sup>16</sup>

According to Alfonso et al. (2005), academic recognition and productivity are still widely determined by the number of publications, although other non-academic incentives in more recent times also play a large part and weigh heavily on these status symbols (Teixeira da Silva 2017). Such publishing pressures and non-academic incentives may drive researchers whose first language, which is not English, to seek double (or more) publications, one in their mother tongue, and another in English. Publications in English tend to accrue more citations than non-English scientific papers (Di Bitetti and Ferreras 2017). The value of the broader English-based scientific, technical and medical publishing market in 2017 was over US\$25 billion while the number of active English peer-reviewed journals amounted to 33,100 in mid-2018 (vs. 9400 non-English journals) (Johnson et al. 2018). Since China accounts for 19% of global scientific research (Johnson et al. 2018), the issue of duplicate publications in two languages, such as in Chinese and English, is a core issue that requires deeper exploration. Little data exists in the literature that quantifies this problem, but Tucker et al. (2011) showed that 19% of 100 English papers had unattributed substantial overlap in Chinese following a full text examination. Although Chen et al. (2018) in a more recent analysis of retractions emerging from mainland China cited Tucker et al. (2011), they did not quantify the number of retractions attributed to duplicate publication (16.2% of examined papers in PubMed and Web of Science) that were specifically duplicate publications in two languages. It is also not clear what percentage of the 14.9% of retractions due to duplicate publications in PubMed/DOAJ-indexed open access journals were due to duplicate publications in two languages (Wang et al. 2019). Kempers (2002), citing a 2000 book chapter, claimed that there is between 1 and 30.6% duplications of the clinical medical literature in two languages, but such wide variation may be purely speculative. These unspecific statistics suggest that the issue has not yet been adequately analyzed, that reliable and/or reproducible data does not exist, or is insufficient, and that quantification of this serious problem may thus still be in a nascent phase of discovery.

Using a survey of editors and authors, Yank and Barnes (2003) noticed how as many as 68% of editors suggested a publishing ban in the case of duplicate publications, a hard-line approach also adapted by the *JMA Journal* discussed above. It is also important that authors declare such duplications on their *curriculum vitae*, including those associated with science social websites (Teixeira da Silva and Tsigaris 2018). The achievement associated with only one of the duplicate publications in a bi- or multi-lingual publication should be considered (Zhang 2013). However, in practice, this is difficult to achieve since citations to both (or more) versions of the paper might accrue separate citations, thereby altering metrics, such as the *h*-index, of that scientific discovery (Tramèr et al. 1997). This aspect also does not seem to have been explored yet in the citations, retractions and bibliometric literature. Non-native English speakers who have duplicated their data or papers in a local or less-known journal, and then republished it in English in an indexed or more reputed

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.jmaj.jp/instruction.php>: section 9.3 “Articles that have been previously published or are being considered for publication in another journal in any language will not be accepted.”; section 9.5 “Articles that are being considered for publication in another journal including advanced publications such as “in-press” or “E-pub ahead of print” articles in any language might be regarded as redundant or duplicate publication.”; section 9.8 “All manuscripts submitted to the JMA Journal must represent the authors’ original work and not duplicate any other previously published work in any language”.

journal, without prior acknowledgement of the first publication, might not be fully aware of their misconduct (Habibzadeh and Winker 2009).

Summarizing these case studies and fragmented evidence drawn from case studies pertaining to ethical guidelines and retractions, the main arguments against redundant publications in two languages that are not declared to the editors (of both or more target journals) and in the manuscript itself are: (a) the impression of deceit and misleading declarations regarding uniqueness and originality, i.e., such publications are redundant and lack exclusivity; (b) wasted time and resources; (c) possible copyright infringement if copyright to all languages was assigned in the first publication; (d) failure to respect authorship guidelines and submission or publishing ethics; (e) unfairness to those who are limited to a single publication; (f) reputational damage to the journal or other related third parties.

There are certainly benefits of publishing the same data or publication in two or more languages (English and another language), especially in markets where the readership still appreciates literature in local non-English languages (as select examples: countries in South America that would rely on Portuguese or Spanish; Arabic countries, including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the I.R. of Iran;<sup>17</sup> China; Japan; India; EU countries,<sup>18, 19</sup>; Russia<sup>20</sup>). However, transparency in the publication process that would involve the open declaration of previous publication (art or whole) in another language, both in the submission process and peer review, as well as in the publication of the second duplicated paper, are essential, as suggested more explicitly in the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME).<sup>21</sup> Misconduct and ethical breaches come into play when such prior publications are not openly disclosed. Plagiarism or similarity detection software such as iThenticate®'s Turnitin® is still unable to detect cross-language duplication,<sup>22</sup> as was more recently

<sup>17</sup> <https://ascelibrary.org/doi/full/10.1061/%28ASCE%29IR.1943-4774.0001332>: in this case in *Journal of Irrigation and Drainage Engineering*, one of the reasons for retraction was previous publication in Farsi.

<sup>18</sup> <https://doi.org/10.3109/02713683.2015.1024548>: in this case in *Current Eye Research*, the reason for retraction was previous publication in German.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.ehu.es/ojs/index.php/THEORIA/about/submissions#authorGuidelines>: in *Theoria*, an open access journal published by UPV/EHU Press, a curious statement is made regarding duplication in two languages: “We have a strict policy of avoiding duplicate publication. In particular, we do not consider for publication Spanish versions of papers already published in English”.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/01/russian-journals-retract-more-800-papers-after-bombshell-investigation>: “In September 2019, after sifting through 4.3 million Russian-language studies, Antiplagiat found that more than 70,000 were published at least twice; a few were published as many as 17 times. Chekhovich believes most instances are due to self-plagiarism”.

<sup>21</sup> <https://wame.org/recommendations-on-publication-ethics-policies-for-medical-journals#Originality>: “Redundant publication occurs when multiple papers, without full cross reference in the text, share the same data, or results. Republication of a paper in another language, or simultaneously in multiple journals with different audiences, may be acceptable, provided that there is full and prominent disclosure of its original source at the time of submission of the manuscript. At the time of submission, authors should disclose details of related papers they have authored, even if in a different language, similar papers in press, and any closely related papers previously published or currently under review at another journal”.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.ithenticate.com/products/faqs>: iThenticate® is one of the most popular similarity/plagiarism detection tools used by a large number of commercial academic publishers. Yet, the company indicates that even though it is able to check for similarities in 30 languages, those matches are in same-language comparisons only (i.e., duplications across bi- or multilingual papers is still not possible): “Which international languages does iThenticate have content for in its database? iThenticate searches for content matches in the following 30 languages: Chinese (simplified and traditional), Japanese, Thai, Korean, Catalan, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Norwegian (Bokmal, Nynorsk), Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Serbian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish, Swedish, Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, Farsi, Russian, and Turkish. Please note that iThenticate will match text between text of the same language”.

evidenced by a retracted paper in MDPI's *Biomolecules* which was unable to detect the previously published duplicate in Chinese in *China Tea Processing*.<sup>23</sup> Curiously, another MDPI journal, *Languages*, neither tolerates duplicate or redundant publications, or secondary publications.<sup>24</sup>

There is thus a potentially large pool of as-yet unexplored literature that has been published in two or more languages that may be in direct violation of international publishing ethics codes. The continued lack of understanding of the ethical implications of double-language duplication<sup>25</sup> suggests that normative rules of publishing ethics still remain unknown to many academics globally, a situation that can only be remedied by: (1) greater educational efforts; (2) intensified post-publication peer review by bi- or multi-lingual sleuths since the pool of bi- or multi-lingual scientific experts who could serve as whistle-blowers in post-publication peer review to detect, and report, such publishing ethics violations, are rare; (3) the voluntary retraction of earlier versions of a paper in any language, but this will require industry-wide destigmatization of retractions (Teixeira da Silva and Al-Khatib 2020); (4) standardized, and strict, implementation of correction and retraction policies by editors, journals and publishers, especially those that claim to follow international ethics guidelines such as those by COPE or the ICMJE; (5) careful reflection on the blanketed implementation of retractions for all double- or multi-language duplications, since some might be valid and useful secondary publications,<sup>26, 27</sup> but that simply lacked open and transparent declarations during submission, and/or that might have resulted from honest error.

**Authors' contribution** The author contributed entirely to the intellectual discussion underlying this paper, literature exploration, writing, reviews and editing, and accepts responsibility for the content of this letter.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.mdpi.com/2218-273X/9/3/85/htm>: “the paper published in *Biomolecules* in 2018 was published by the same authors in 2017 in Chinese in *China Tea Processing*”. Of note, unretracted copies of this retracted paper continue to exist on research social media sites such as ResearchGate (<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327879735>) or even on the pirate site Sci-Hub (<https://sci-hub.tw/10.3390/biom8040099>), allowing other researchers without knowledge and who might not access the source publication from the publisher's website to continue to cite this retracted paper (Teixeira da Silva and Bornemann-Cimenti 2017).

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.mdpi.com/journal/languages/instructions>: “Manuscripts submitted to *Languages* should neither been published before nor be under consideration for publication in another journal”; “Republishing content that is not novel is not tolerated (for example, an English translation of a paper that is already published in another language will not be accepted)”.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03009742.2019.1655241>: the retraction statement by the editors and publisher (Taylor & Francis) in the *Scandinavian Journal of Rheumatology* does not specifically mention that the prior publication was in Chinese, which was gleaned from the authors' statement: “The authors of the latter paper did this because they thought that publishing a paper in Chinese language would not contradict our submission to *Scandinavian Journal of Rheumatology* in English. Clearly, this is a misunderstanding of the academic rules”.

<sup>26</sup> See ICMJE definition in the link in footnote 13.

<sup>27</sup> <http://pleiades.online/en/authors/declaration/>: As one example, Nauka Publishing House in collaboration with Pleiades Publishing Ltd./Allerton Press Inc. publish translated articles (Russian to English) of the Russian Academy of Sciences that are then published by Springer Nature. Such openly previously agreed-upon secondary publications are not redundant duplications in two languages, and do not violate the ethical guidelines of these publishers. However, any additional undeclared copies (part or whole) of these dual secondary publications would constitute a violation of such ethics codes.



## Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflicts of interest** The author declares no conflicts of interest of relevance to this topic.

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