

Copying of texts

Texts were copied in different ways and for different reasons: different methods were used (1), the copyists had different intentions and attitudes towards the texts they were copying (2) and as a result different kinds of changes were introduced into the texts (3).

1. Methods used in copying

Texts may be copied in different ways. In some cases the copyist had an older manuscript, an *exemplar*, of the text in front of him / her when he / she wrote the new text (i.e., copying by *visual inspection*), but in other cases the text was read aloud to one or several copyists who wrote down what they heard (i.e. copying by *dictation*).

Sometimes the copyist used, often with the intention to get as accurate a text as possible, more than one manuscript when he produced his new manuscript. To the modern scholar this procedure poses a challenge known as *contamination*.

In some cases, however, the copyist willfully introduced changes – for instance in order to improve the text (cf. *emendation*) or to change its scope (cf. *editions, ancient and mediaeval (and early modern)*).

In the universities in mediaeval Europe particular ways of copying and spreading texts were developed. In a university lecture the teacher read a text aloud to the students (cf. expressions like *lectio*, *lecture* and *Vorlesung*): in the beginning the intention was that they should learn the text by heart. However, when the matters taught gradually became more complex, it was clear that it was necessary to take notes during the lectures. As a result the so-called *reporatio* arose: it was a collection of notes which the student could bring home and study. Sometimes such annotations spread among the students. The teaching of several important mediaeval philosophers is known to us through such transcriptions of their oral lectures.

A famous modern example of a publication made on the basis of lecture notes made by others is Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*. This fundamental work was published in 1916 (three years after the author's death) on the basis of annotations made by his students during lectures which he held between 1907 and 1911.

Some of Aristotle's transmitted work goes back to lecture notes too, but in that case the annotations are believed to derive from the author's own pen (cf. *editions, ancient and mediaeval (and early modern)*).

Another procedure connected to the mediaeval universities is the so-called *pecia* system. It was developed in the early 13th century in the Italian universities and spread from there to other universities. A manuscript was broken up into often rather short sections which were called *peciae* 'pieces': four folios was often the size of such a section. Students would rent them, section by section, and in that manner create their own copies of the text. In many cases there may have been more than one approved exemplar divided into *peciae* and in such cases *contamination* and *exemplar shift* may have occurred.

2. Attitudes to copying

Texts were not always copied with the same respect for the original wording of the text. A literary text of high prestige, such as Vergil's *Aeneid*, was usually copied with great respect for the original wording. Anonymous texts of a technical nature were, however, more likely to be affected by notable changes in both language and technical terminology.

The relationship between the copyist and the text may differ, too. The copyist may be a professional *scribe*, who copied a text because somebody else wanted it to be copied, or somebody who was copying it for his (or her) own purposes. The copyists differed as far as regards the degree to which they were capable of understanding the texts which they were copying. This affects the kind of changes which were introduced into the texts – a copyist who does understand the text he or she is copying well is more likely to introduce a synonym instead of the word used in the exemplar than a copyist who has a limited understanding of the text.

If the copyist was producing a new manuscript for his own purposes, it is much more likely that he would intentionally introduce changes. A medical doctor copying a medical treatise may for instance change the terminology (because he preferred other terms than the ones used in the original text) or either abbreviate the text or add other material to it. Such deliberate changes are not rare in the traditions to technical texts and in works of a grammatical nature, which therefore often occur in different versions. Such changes, are however, also frequent in some ancient novels and in some hagiographic texts. Certain texts which were to be used in schools were deliberately modified, too.

3. Changes introduced when copying

A number of different changes are introduced when texts are copied. Some of these changes are deliberate and intentionally introduced by the scribes, whereas others are mistakes or *errors*. It is, however, not always easy to decide whether a *variant* is the result of a deliberate change or of an error. Typical changes which occur when a text is copied include (cf. also *types of errors*):

- 1) The copyist may misinterpret a word, a letter or an abbreviation. Changes in the script, i.e. in the kind of letters used, has created textual problems in antiquity as well as in the middle ages and beyond. Such changes took place in antiquity (for instance as a result of the change from the Old Roman cursive to various forms of uncial script) as well as in the middle ages (for instance as a result of the change from the uncial to minuscule script). The practice not to leave a space between words (*scriptio continua*) in ancient manuscripts made the chances of committing mistakes even greater.
- 2) Omission might occur because the copyist unintentionally skips a passage and thus creates a *lacuna*: it often happens because one line starts with the same word as another (*saut du même au même*), or it may happen because a word that should be written twice is written just once (*haplography*). Sometimes, however, it happens because the manuscript that is being copied is damaged – a part of the text might have become illegible or one or several leaves might have been lost.
- 3) The copyist may unintentionally add more material to the text. New material may be added simply because a word, which should be written just once, unintentionally is written twice (*ditto-graphy*), or when a gloss, perhaps written in the margin in the older manuscript, is introduced into the text itself (*interpolation*).
- 4) The copyist may change the order of things in the text. This happens because the copyist keeps not just a single word but a whole phrase in his mind before writing it down. In poetry the order of the verses has often been changed. In prose word order is frequently subject to change.

- 5) The copyist may unintentionally change a word in the text. This might happen because he keeps not just a single word but a whole phrase and its meaning in his mind before writing it down. The word introduced instead is then often a synonym.
- 6) The copyist may change a word in the text because he misunderstands the original (cf. # 1) or because he does not understand a rare word in the original and replaces it with a more familiar one. The text is thus rendered more banal; when there is a choice between such a banal reading (*lectio facillior*) and a more rare and sophisticated one (*lectio difficilior*), the latter is usually considered to be the better choice, because it is more probable that a common and banal word has replaced a more rare one than the other way around.
- 7) The copyist may introduce mistakes induced by phonetic and orthographic changes. This is probably more likely to happen when a text is copied by dictation and it is more likely to happen in a period in which orthographic rules are less severe. This frequently happens in the “vulgarised” texts (cf. [vulgarisation](#)).
- 8) The copyist may introduce mistakes induced by the context. Sometimes a word is wrongly assimilated to an adjacent word or to words recently copied. The endings of the words might be confused, thus bringing disorder to syntax.
- 9) The copyist may introduce mistakes induced by the intellectual or ideological context in which he is living. There are, for instance, some mistakes in the manuscripts of non-Christian texts which betray the influence of Christian thought (e.g. when we read *Sathana* instead of *Athana* in a manuscript of Petronius).

Most of these changes (1–9) are generally not deliberate and could therefore be defined as **errors**. There are, however, also some changes which imply a certain degree of intention:

- 10) Changes may be introduced because the copyist recognises a problem in the text and tries to correct it (cf. [emendation](#)). This kind of corruption is more insidious than inadvertent miscopying, since it is less easily detected afterwards.
- 11) Changes may be introduced because the copyist uses more than one manuscript when copying a text (cf. [contamination](#)).
- 12) The orthography or the grammar of a text may be improved or the technical terminology of a text may be changed (cf. [normalisation](#)).
- 13) A text may be abbreviated and turned into a shorter version – sometimes with a somewhat different focus or scope than the original version (cf. [edition s, ancient and mediaeval \(and early modern\)](#)).
- 14) New material or sections of texts may be added to a text. In certain cases new versions, or *recensiones*, are thus created of earlier texts (cf. [editions, ancient and mediaeval \(and early modern\)](#)).

Many of the errors mentioned above suggest that manuscripts were copied by visual inspection, i.e. in a situation where the copyist had an older manuscript, an exemplar, in front of him. Omissions caused by [saut de même au même](#) and mistakes created by an incorrectly interpreted older script imply this.

Changes that are more likely to occur when a text is copied by dictation, are major changes in orthography and morphology. Such changes seem to have been particularly frequent in the copying of Latin texts in the early middle ages, when the orthographic norm was not very strong.

References

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In other languages

DE: abschreiben, kopieren
FR: copier
IT: copiatura di testi

[GH](#)