

Good reasons for obscure writing?

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Abstract. I identify two seemingly good reasons for obscure writing, one to do with avoiding plagiarism or near-plagiarism (which I have identified before), and the other to do with avoiding attracting readers who prefer accessible writing but nevertheless have no space for you in the structure of roles they envisage.

Draft version: Version 1 (27th October 2022).

“Why write so poorly,

Or, if this be style, why obscurely?”

Why write in a way that is deliberately hard to follow? I shall identify two seemingly good reasons, in some circumstances, the first of which I have identified before.

Plagiarism concerns. Let us imagine that a research community is just getting going. The members are committed to writing in a clear and accessible way, wherever possible. What they find is that other research communities take ideas from them and adapt them slightly without acknowledging the source. These communities are well-established and have advisors on how to do this while avoiding a charge of plagiarism, or at least making it very difficult to establish plagiarism. In response to this tactic, members of the newer community learn to deliberately make their writing hard to follow for outsiders, so as to make it hard to extract the ideas from these writings.

“Structural” readers. Our research community of accessible writers also

begins to attract wider audiences beyond researchers as readers – like a luminous star which can be seen further away. But these wider audiences, or portions of them, have no space for such work in their envisaged system of roles: “Writing accessibly, you are either a Nietzsche, with his brief aphorisms, or a writer for the newspaper, but you are neither!” is the message they send to members, or the most plausible interpretation of their behaviour. For example, when some of these readers see you in the street after reading your work, they yawn, to drive you to that brief aphorism level. Community members begin to write more obscurely, in order to be not so welcoming to such troublesome readers, or began to, if my tenses are all mangled.

Reference

Edward, T.R. 2022. Are individuals a problem for British structural-functionalist anthropology? Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/EDWAIA-6>