

# Dictionary Dacoits: Self-Quotation and Plagiarism in Colonial Urdu Lexicography

Walter Hakala  
Department of English  
University at Buffalo, SUNY  
306 Clemens Hall  
Buffalo NY 14260  
Phone number: 716-645-3419  
E-mail address: [walterha@buffalo.edu](mailto:walterha@buffalo.edu)

Sayyid Ahmad Dihlavi's *Farhang-i Asafiyah* (first published in four volumes between 1888 and 1901) continues to be among the most widely consulted dictionaries of the Urdu language. Colonial lexicographers like Sayyid Ahmad vied for official patronage and institutional approval in their efforts to secure inclusion in educational curricula or subsidized print runs. When a work as influential as the *Farhang-i Asafiyah* did appear, it was only a matter of time before less scrupulous publishers would present their own black market reprint editions or absorb the original text into new dictionaries republished under different titles. While Sayyid Ahmad would complain bitterly of being the victim of great iniquity, accusing several individuals in the 1918 introduction to the *Farhang-i Asafiyah* of having "committed daylight robbery," he himself lifted without attribution substantial portions from several mid-nineteenth-century dictionaries—including their various errors and misattributions. Despite his seeming willingness to copy definitions verbatim from the work of his predecessors, he was loath to reproduce verses that had been penned by fellow lexicographers, instead substituting his own or seeking out quotations by non-lexicographers. This paper will situate attitudes to self-quotation within the evolving pragmatics of Urdu prose in nineteenth-century India. It examines colonial Urdu lexicography in light of analogous and equally contentious practices in other disciplines and prose genres—from the 'backgrowth of *isnads*' in early collections of *hadith* (Brown 2007) to self-representation through reported speech in various genres of life writing. Much like other emerging forms of prose writing, I argue that self-quotation in nineteenth-century lexicographic works facilitated the assertion of narrative distance at a time when Urdu lexicographers sought to professionalize their occupation. Authors also harnessed self-quotation to preempt plagiarism through the insertion of literary subjectivity in what was becoming an increasingly competitive market for lexicographic works.