

THE EDITOR'S DEPARTMENT

The finality of decisions: Revisiting editorial review (and some general lessons)

Early on in my tenure as editor, I would probably not have dared to write a column such as this, but now with my term a little more than half over and feeling therefore that I am at least halfway towards understanding this job, I am somewhat emboldened by my experiences. Thus, I pick up here on some discussion by one of my predecessors, Sarah G. Thomason, editor from 1988–1994, in her Editor's Department column from the June issue of 1991 (*Language* 67.2.428–31).

In that column, as part of a general consideration of the overall editorial process, she addresses the following question: 'if you [i.e. a submitting author] feel strongly that the [editor's] decision was a mistake, what should you do?'. What follows are my views on the matter, together with some more general musings that—to my mind at least—form a fairly natural pendant to a consideration of this question.

A bit of background first is in order. As a glance at the editor's annual reports, published in recent years in the June issue, reveals, only somewhat less than 20% of the papers submitted to *Language* are accepted (counting revise-and-resubmit decisions as negative, since not all go on to publication and not all are revised and resubmitted). Therefore, in any given year, of the roughly 120-plus authors with papers under review with the journal,¹ some 80% (close to 100 scholars) will be disappointed by the outcome of the editorial review process.

While I make every attempt to ensure that the process is fair and that all authors receive substantial and substantive commentary on their papers, from me, from the associate editor involved with the paper, and from the referees, quite understandably some authors are not pleased with a negative outcome. Of those who choose to share any reaction to the outcome with me, most take it well. Those who comment at all on the process seem to appreciate the level of feedback, often acknowledging that the process brought out flaws in their argumentation or their presentation that they either had been aware of but did not consider fatal or did not know about but now can fix (whether for *Language* if there was an invitation to resubmit a revised paper, or for some other venue).

Relatively few authors have complained, for which I naturally am grateful, and most complaints focus on the length of the process. I have addressed elsewhere the process itself and the matter of time-to-decision,² so let me turn here to the outcome of the process and the question of whether my decisions are final. In particular, can they be revisited or even reversed? The answer on both counts is a qualified yes: my main interest is in fairness to authors but also in ensuring that *Language* continues to be a leader in publishing high quality research papers, and, more generally, in promoting first-rate research in our field at large. To those ends, but particularly the first, it is essential that I be prepared to reconsider a case. Clearly, though, I can't reexamine every decision I make. Thus the review process is structured so as to guarantee that each paper gets a fair hearing the first time around.

¹ Even assuming our recent average of 100–120 submissions a year, the number of authors is actually quite a bit more than the number of papers submitted, since coauthored papers, sometimes involving more than two authors, are increasingly common.

² See, for instance, my Editor's Department of *Language* 78.3 (2002) and 78.4 (2002); the subject comes up also in most of my annual reports.

Opinions are sought from experts in the area(s) and/or language(s) a submitted paper addresses. These opinions, in the usual case, pass through the interpretive filter of an associate editor, who also gives a personal assessment of the paper, and then come to me.³ Authors often worry about biases on the part of referees working against them; however, individual referees do not make or break a paper. I see the referees as advisory to the associate editor and both the referees and the associate editor as advisory to me, so that any one review is just part of the overall assessment process (I also read all papers carefully myself, of course); moreover, as part of the interpretive work by the associate editors, they inform me of any considerations they know of that affect how I am to read a referee's report.

Still, if authors feel they have not been dealt with fairly (most typically this occurs with outright rejections, not revise-and-resubmit decisions), I want to know about it and to know why they feel wronged. If their arguments seem cogent, I will take measures as needed, reopening cases and looking over the paper and the reports once again in the light of any additional considerations an author may bring to my attention. And, sometimes I will be persuaded that I may have been hasty in issuing an outright rejection, at which point I allow the paper to be resubmitted. Such papers generally undergo some revision and often (but not always) are treated as an entirely new paper; in any case, however, they are not treated as regular revise-and-resubmit outcomes, as that outcome carries a presumption that the paper is moving toward ultimate acceptance.

These remarks are not meant as an open invitation for appeals from all disgruntled authors, but working on a good-faith basis, in essence an honor system, where parties that truly feel aggrieved seek redress, I pledge to consider all legitimate complaints.

Occasionally authors whose papers have been rejected have written not to lodge complaints but to tell me that their papers were accepted elsewhere. Rather than feeling that such developments indicate a lapse on the part of *Language's* editorial process, I take them as a good sign—the journal receives, for the most part, fine and interesting papers that each make a real contribution to our understanding of human language in all of its dimensions. But not all of them can be published in *Language*, and some may in fact be better suited for other venues. To my mind, this fact alone offers the best reason for there being as many journals as there are in our field;⁴ there need to be outlets for the full range of solid contributions that advance our knowledge generally or that contribute in specialized areas.

In a previous Editor's Department ('Endgame: The final stages of the review process and reflections at year's end', *Language* 78.4.615–18, 2002), I discussed the reasons for rejecting a paper. To summarize, papers that fall short on some combination of the key criteria of 'scholarship, presentation, newsworthiness, and general interest' will not be accepted.⁵ Of these, the main reason for my rejecting otherwise good articles

³ I occasionally take on a paper in place of an associate editor if it is squarely in my area of specialization, if workloads need to be balanced, or the like.

⁴ The website of the *Bibliographie linguistique* (<http://www.kb.nl/blonline>) claims that it indexes over 2,000 periodical publications, though some of these are book series. A full list is to be found in the forematter of its print volumes.

⁵ Occasionally, worthy papers suffer from being forced into an article format, where the need for succinctness can mean that an author has to skimp on background or is unable to follow tangents and various threads related to the main discussion. Such papers strike me as better suited for book-length treatment, where the number of words is not so constrained and the greater length gives the author room to develop ideas and follow up on lines of thought that might be distracting or counterproductive in the shorter format of an article.

is the last of the criteria listed above, in some sense the hardest to define, namely general linguistic interest. In my first Editor's Department (*Language* 78.1.1–2, 2002), there was brief mention of this criterion, with reference to the characterization of *Language* papers as being 'of interest to professional linguists' (a statement I borrowed from the 'Information for Contributors' on the journal's inside back cover). Moreover, I overtly acknowledged that 'there is room for discussion about what constitutes "interest to professional linguists"' and promised to address this somewhat elusive issue at some point. That point is now!

To me, 'general linguistic interest' means at least that a topic is one that all linguists are aware of and care about, just by virtue of their being involved in the study of human language and being part of the community of scholarship on language in all its intricacies. Thus, the topic itself need not be general; it is unrealistic, for instance, to expect that all papers in *Language* will solve or even address such large issues as the degree to which language is iconic, the origins of language in humans, the extent to which language learning taps general cognitive processes or ones specific to language itself, and so on. Similarly, 'general' does not (necessarily) mean coverage of a large number of languages or broad overviews of particular topics. Indeed, papers on very specific matters and/or on very specific issues in particular languages can, to my mind, have general appeal.

A glimpse at some of the sorts of papers that I have accepted is illustrative. Without wanting to show any disrespect to articles not noted here, or to suggest that they were not 'of general interest', let me mention the topics of a few of the papers published under my editorship and why I considered them to be 'of general interest'.

- i. deixis in Lao: of general interest even though focused on one language since all languages express deixis in some form and moreover the study employed innovative methodology
- ii. the theoretical implications of a language pathology: of general interest since pathologies are a fact of life, not just an academic concern
- iii. the birth of world Englishes: of general interest since, like it or not, the spread of English has affected billions of speakers in all parts of the world and is a salient issue for nonacademics that academic linguists need to be prepared to talk about
- iv. sign language interrogative syntax and sign language morphology: of general interest since understanding how visual/manual modality works in such languages sharpens our understanding of comparable phenomena in languages with vocal/auditory modality
- v. paradigmatic syncretism: of general interest since morphological paradigms are found in a large number of languages and syncretism within paradigms is a widespread feature in such languages
- vi. a uniquely complex stress system: of general interest due to its uniqueness and complexity
- vii. syntactic acquisition in a language not generally treated in the literature: of general interest in part simply by bringing a hitherto relatively understudied language into scholarly view in a way not seen before, that is, acquisitionally

And, to this list can even be added a study of a single phenomenon in a single well-studied language.

- viii. control in English: of general interest since much theorizing hinges on the proper analysis of control but also since it has figured prominently in discussions of

syntax for the past fifty years to the extent that few linguists today could have escaped from graduate school without exposure to a consideration of control sentences

As this last example indicates, my thinking about this notion of ‘general linguistic interest’ in part touches not only on what we know or care about as linguists but also on those topics that are part of our communal ‘upbringing’ as linguists and which thus represent, in a sense, what the collective wisdom of those shaping our training have felt we OUGHT to care about. That is, for me, it is hard to ponder the meaning of the phrase ‘interest to professional linguists’ without also thinking about how we each were trained to become professional linguists and how we in turn train our graduate students, the professional linguists of the future. Such training naturally includes what a ‘linguist’ might be expected to know and indeed defines the areas that constitute the core that we teach and that we want to see our students exposed to and aware of.

I nudge this piece towards a conclusion, therefore, with some thoughts on this broader topic. In my view, all linguists ought to know something (not necessarily to the same depth in each) about the main areas of language analysis (phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics) and interactions among them (interface issues), and should have some understanding of language in its social, cultural, and historical contexts (sociolinguistics, anthropological linguistics, and historical linguistics, including the study of language contact) and its psychological and cognitive dimensions (psycholinguistics and cognitive science/linguistics). Finally, we should all have an awareness of key methodologies: experimental, quantitative, variationist, and computational (taking in modeling, working with corpora, and the like).

This is a tall order, to be sure, and may not be possible even now in all programs,⁶ but I firmly believe that the profession is well served by our being as broad as we can be while at the same time homing in on one area in depth as a specialization; language is intricate and complex, but part of the intricacy and complexity comes from the interactions between and among its various dimensions so that specialists in one subpart of the overall picture can’t really ignore other pieces of the puzzle, or do so only at their intellectual peril.

What we ought to be interested in and care about is certainly less clear-cut and more open to debate than what all linguists actually do care about, so I close, as I often do, with an invitation to readers to join in a dialogue—through the ‘Letters to *Language*’ section—on their view of what the core should be that unites us as linguists. Letters complaining about my decisions, are, as noted, welcome too, though they will just be for my private mailbox!

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⁶ And indeed, may not have been possible at all times in the not-too-distant past: as a graduate student thirty-plus years ago, I did not have any classroom exposure to sociolinguistics (even though crucial to my specialization in historical linguistics), for the simple reason that there was no sociolinguist around; so also for psycholinguistics (though there were psycholinguists in other departments). Even now there are major programs in which sociolinguistics, historical linguistics, and/or other areas that form part of my vision of the ‘core’ are not represented.