

THE EDITOR'S DEPARTMENT

More on the Editorial and Production Process

My previous piece (*Language* 78.2.217–20) began an explication of the inner workings of the journal, giving an account of the varied types of contributions considered for publication. As noted there, by far the most important type is the article, to which in the usual case at least half of each issue—and often far more—is devoted. All articles submitted to *Language* are subjected to a rigorous review process, something I see—as indeed my predecessors have seen—as absolutely crucial to quality control, to guarantee that only articles exhibiting the very best scholarship and research in linguistics are published in the pages of this journal. In this column and the next, I provide a demystification, so to speak, of this review process and give an in-depth look at what's inside the black box of a submission to *Language*. I discuss here what is done with new submissions; the question of resubmissions is taken up in the next installment.

First, the paper arrives at the Language Editorial Office (n.b. it should NOT be sent to my departmental office; that only delays our handling of the paper) in four copies together with an abstract. If there is no abstract or if there are fewer than four copies, we typically contact the author and do not consider the paper officially submitted until we get that. *Language* does not accept electronic submissions at present; this may change but for the moment we require hard copy. The office acknowledges receipt of the paper and the review process proper begins.

The first review phase is a decision as to review-worthiness, in which I decide, sometimes with input from the associate editors, if the paper stands a chance in the review process. In some instances, a 'summary dismissal' is appropriate, if, for example, the topic is clearly not within the scope of the journal (perhaps, say, presenting some practical tips for the teaching of subjunctive mood forms in Hindi). I intend to err on the side of including more rather than less at this point, so that if in doubt, I plan to give the paper a chance in the review process.

Any problems that might get in the way of the review process are dealt with at this point, for example, if the paper is far too long (as noted in my previous column a long paper might make it difficult to find reviewers since it entails more work, and, as Sarah G. Thomason has observed, one could argue that a longer paper needs to be even better than a shorter one to justify devoting to it a greater percentage of the fixed number of journal pages available in any given volume). Similarly, excessive self-reference by the author(s) can be problematic at this stage, as it gets in the way of ensuring some degree of anonymity in the review process (an issue to be considered more fully in a subsequent Editor's Department). Any such papers are returned to authors for repair if needed prior to formal review, but are not considered to have been summarily dismissed.

The next step is to send the paper to an associate editor. An associate editor generally volunteers to take charge of a paper based on information the office provides on title, author(s), and contents (this is where the abstract comes into play). If necessary, I simply assign a paper to an associate editor and occasionally even take on one myself.

What comes next is really the heart of the review process, and it is what I dwell on in this column (with more on the final stages of the process to come in the December issue). Based on recommendations from the associate editor in charge of the paper, but occasionally with some input as well from the author(s) as to POSSIBLE reviewers, a list

of the most suitable external reviewers (those outside the circle of the editor and the associate editors) is drawn up and we begin to look for two individuals to read the paper and provide us with an informed opinion of it and a recommendation about its publishability. Clearly, the external reader (variously called referee, reader, or reviewer, in my usage at least, with no distinction of meaning intended)¹ must be someone who has the relevant expertise needed to read and evaluate critically the paper's content, argumentation, and methodology. But it is also important to find someone who is known to be prompt, fair-minded, and not burdened with any real or seeming conflict of interest that might in actuality or even just in appearance impinge on objectivity (for example, being a collaborator with the author on other work, being a colleague or close friend of the author, or the like). We typically solicit opinions from two reviewers, though occasionally a third might be consulted if the subject matter warrants an additional perspective.

Serving as a reviewer is a critical professional service that an individual agrees, voluntarily, to undertake on behalf of the journal and the field at large. Peer review is the essence of evaluation in so much of what we do as academics and scientists in general—in tenure and promotion cases and with grant and fellowship applications—and so too in regard to publication decisions. Without advice from expert readers, none of these processes of judgment could be assured of adhering to the highest standards of scholarship and science. On a practical level, in many cases, I would not be able to make well-informed decisions about papers without the expert advice that the peer-review system offers. Reviewers should thus take the job seriously, and indeed virtually all do, though I am troubled by the length of time it takes for some to complete the task. Ideally, we would like to see a reader turn in the agreed-upon report and recommendation within four to six weeks but we understand that even this amount of time is sometimes too little for colleagues whose attention is typically divided among students, service, and their own research, not to mention family and the like. In many instances, asking the right person means getting into the queue for that person's time, yet I feel often that it is worthwhile to wait a bit even if it means letting the process stretch out. This is especially so in those cases where there are not many experts available for the conjunction of topics found in a given paper. But it is also true that having invested time in locating a referee and getting the paper to that reader, it is less desirable to have to start the process over again—and that would of course entail further delays.

Thus, even though delays beyond about six weeks in this stage of the review process are unfair to the author(s), sometimes we have to deal with such situations. While I feel, in a sense, as if the journal is being held hostage in those cases, we nonetheless cajole, wheedle, nudge, and even threaten (mildly, of course!) referees about fulfilling their promises. I always have to weigh the expected value of that particular referee's opinion against the amount of time that has elapsed and the amount needed to get another reviewer lined up. This is often a difficult calculus. Timeliness is important on a personal level—no author wants to have to wait longer for a decision than is necessary—but also on a scientific level, since some papers contain ideas that are time-sensitive and might be passé if too much time elapses before their formal presentation in published form. Referees who do not complete the task are thus doing a disservice

¹ Some speakers do draw distinctions here. Rich Janda has brought it to my attention that Dawkins (1986/1996, *The blind watchmaker*, New York: Norton, xvii) complains that younger speakers in the United States do not properly describe the prepublication evaluators of a manuscript as its *referees*, the term he prefers, saying such evaluators actually are 'not "reviewers" . . . [,] *pace* many Americans under 40'.

to the profession as well as to their colleagues. At the very least, they forfeit their right to complain about lengthy review times for any papers they submit, but unfortunately, beyond that, and beyond my not asking such reviewers again, there is little recourse available to the editor in the case of egregious delays.

However, since most reviews are completed in a fairly timely fashion, and most reports that come in are thorough and extremely helpful, I move on to the next phase. Once both reports are in, we send them to the associate editor in charge of the paper and give that person a month to review the paper in the light of the reports, and provide me with a report of his/her own together with an explicit recommendation. Oftentimes, the associate editor has to interpret and weigh radically different recommendations—it is not just a matter of adding one reviewer's recommendation to the others and averaging them (if such is even possible with nonquantitative evaluations). Sometimes, too, the associate editor makes a recommendation that is at odds with what the reviewers suggest.

The final step comes once I receive the associate editor's report. At that point, I read the paper carefully in the light of all the reports and ultimately make up my own mind based on what they say and what my own reading of the paper tells me. While in the typical case I follow the advice of the associate editor (who often follows the advice of the readers), I am not bound by the recommendations that emerge from the earlier stages of the review. I consider it important also to offer authors my own reactions to their paper, so that the basis for my decision is clear to them. I communicate my decision in a letter outlining my reasons and providing commentary as needed; copies of the associate editor's report (signed) and the reviewers' reports (anonymous) are sent along with my letter. This part of the process takes time, but is, in my view, essential, so that authors recognize that their submission has been dealt with fairly and knowledgeably.

There are basically three possible decisions at this point: accept outright (though some further changes may be called for), reject outright (with no invitation to resubmit), and the middle ground of revise-and-resubmit. Very few papers are accepted outright; most fall into the revise-and-resubmit category. A fuller discussion of what goes into these decisions and of the implications they have for authors is planned for my next contribution in this forum.

Adding up the various stages in this process and the length of time each can take, it should be clear that even in the best of circumstances—a quick assignment of a paper to an associate editor, a speedy determination of suitable referees with relatively little time spent in extracting commitments from them to review the paper, actual review by the outside referees within our desired four to six weeks, no more than a month for the associate editor's time with the paper, and a reasonably short period on my part for reading, deciding, and writing the formal decision letter—the process is likely to take four months. And, if there are delays in any step of the process, it can and will take longer, so that six months is not at all unusual. I am not proud of the fact that sometimes the review process can drag out for as much as a year, and I do all I can to move the process along quickly, but sometimes our hands are tied. One way of thinking about it is that this length of time is the price *Language* and submitters to *Language* have to pay for the quality control expected of a major journal. On the positive side, once a paper is accepted, it is often possible to get it into print fairly quickly by the standards of the field in general.

Clearly more needs to be said here to fill out the picture of what the review process entails, but I save that for next time.