

THE EDITOR'S DEPARTMENT

Endgame: The final stages of the review process and reflections at year's end

This issue marks the end of my first year as editor. Needless to say, though I say it nonetheless, I have learned much over these months. Naturally, I hope that I have been able to keep *Language* on the excellent course it has been on for seventy-eight years, but I leave that for others to decide. Instead, in this piece, I want to complete the trilogy—begun in *Language* 78.2 ('A first take on the editorial and production process') and continued in 78.3 ('More on the editorial and production process')—on the nuts and bolts of editorial decision-making, and then to offer some reflections ranging over a few events of the past year.

I left off last time with the promise of some discussion of the different types of decisions authors might receive on a submitted paper at the end of the review process. The three possible outcomes are for the paper to be accepted outright (though possibly with relatively minor changes), for it to be rejected outright, and for it to be rejected in its submitted form but with an invitation to the author to revise and resubmit.

An important preface to this discussion is the fact that of the roughly one hundred papers that are submitted or resubmitted to the journal in a year (figures on submissions can be found in the Editor's Report published each year; see, for instance, Mark Aronoff's report in *Language* 78.2.394–97), only about fifteen to twenty are accepted for publication (I defer a discussion of acceptance rates to a later column). Clearly, among the eighty or so that are not accepted, there will be a significant number of papers that have real interest for some linguists; therefore, the criteria by which papers are ultimately accepted or not need to be as explicit as possible, out of fairness to everyone involved. This task proves to be trickier than it might seem, but I give here an account of what goes into my decisions.

In reaching my final decision, I evaluate a paper on four key elements: scholarship, presentation, newsworthiness, and general interest. The ideal paper will embody the best in each of these areas. The scholarship must be impeccable: the data cited must be accurate, the relevant literature must be covered appropriately, the interpretations given must not contain glaring or irreparable errors, the right statistical tests must have been performed (and performed accurately), the experimental design must not be flawed, and so on. The presentation must be clear: the ideas must flow in a natural and logical way from one to the next, the links between ideas must be explicit, the arguments must all go through, tables and displays must accomplish what they are intended to, an appropriate amount of space must be spent on each point, technical terminology must be explained, and the writing must be crisp and clear. The point of the paper itself must be newsworthy: the paper must present some novel set of facts or an original interpretation or creative synthesis of already known facts. The discovery in question need not be earth-shattering—our science, like most, generally grows by small steps—but it must be significant in some sense, and it must not simply restate material and views that are already known, agreed upon, or rejected by the linguistic community at large. If the paper speaks to an existing controversy, its contribution to resolving that controversy should be made evident. Note that nowhere have I said that a particular theory needs to be advocated or adhered to. As my predecessors have often emphasized in these pages and I have echoed in my previous columns, *Language* is in principle open to linguists of all theoretical persuasions. Simply advocating a particular theory

does not guarantee an entry into the pages of the journal, nor is it a cause for exclusion; conversely, advocating or debunking a particular theory or claim does not merit acceptance or rejection in and of itself. Rather, at all times, it is what the authors make of a theory vis-à-vis the facts, or of the facts in the light of a theory, that contributes to a paper's acceptability. At the same time, though, with regard to the fourth, and perhaps most elusive, criterion—general interest—some considerations of theoretical framework must be taken into account. To me, this criterion means that the paper must inform a broad range of linguists or discuss material that (nearly) every linguist (or a significant subset thereof) should know about or would have an opinion on. To be successful with *Language*, therefore, authors need to make clear why their work, regardless of the theoretical framework adopted, speaks to an issue that ought to command the attention of practicing linguists.

A paper that does not meet these criteria will not be accepted, even if it perhaps does make some original point or presents a novel argument or interpretation. This means that some excellent papers may not be accepted for publication in *Language*, though they may well be eminently publishable in other journals. Indeed, the most common thing I find myself saying in letters to authors of a paper I have decided not to accept is that the paper seems more addressed to a narrow, specialist audience than to a general one; in such cases, I often direct the author to more specialized journals, where, I expect, the paper will enjoy a more enthusiastic response.

A paper that meets the four criteria will generally be accepted. Even such a paper, however, will usually require some changes based on the results of the review process. Thus it is fair to say that all papers require at least some revision and virtually no paper is acceptable in exactly the form in which it was submitted.

Papers that come close on several of these criteria are invited for resubmission after the authors work further on them. No guarantees are made, but only papers that have a strong likelihood of eventually being accepted are invited for resubmission after revision. Most typically, this additional revision takes into account the comments made in the review process by the referees, the associate editor, and me, but authors may of course incorporate reactions to other feedback they may have gotten, for instance from conference presentations based on similar material or from further work they have done. Authors are expected to revise and resubmit within a reasonable amount of time, mostly to guarantee that the topic treated in the paper and the general approach taken are still timely—a paper that sits on an author's desk for ten years before resubmission may have missed the critical period during which the facts and analyses would have been of wide interest. The field moves on, and a paper from too long ago may not have relevance later on (though, of course, it may—some topics and some treatments of them are timeless). I generally ask authors who are resubmitting to send in along with the resubmitted paper an indication of what changes they have made, explaining how they have reacted to referees' and editors' comments, with the understanding of course that not every comment deserves action on the part of an author.

Such a letter gives me the best possible basis upon which to judge the resubmission. I must determine whether the resubmitted paper goes out for a full review to two readers, and if so, to two entirely new readers or instead to at least one of the readers from the first time around. In some instances, I decide on my own, or with the advice of an associate editor, whether the author has adequately addressed the problems raised in connection with the original paper and thus reach a final decision on the paper without additional external review. As suggested above, not all resubmitted papers are ultimately accepted, though the vast majority are, and as a matter of general policy,

Language does not allow more than one resubmission—that is, there are no re-resubmissions (though an accepted resubmission may need additional editorial adjustment, as could a paper accepted the first time through).

The goal of the review process and of my application of these criteria is to be as fair as possible to all authors and to ensure that what appears in the journal is of the very highest quality, thereby serving to the utmost both the field and the pursuit of knowledge in general. More can undoubtedly be said, but this series of pieces on the editorial process should suffice to demystify the process and give all authors an understanding of how their papers will be judged.

As noted above, this issue comes at the end of my first year. Year-end is always a time to take stock and reflect, and in that vein, I offer the following select observations. The journal *Language*, just like human language and other of our institutions, experiences change. Besides the obvious aspects of the transition to my editorship, one direct piece of evidence of change that I am particularly pleased with is the inauguration in this issue of an official section of letters, 'Letters to *Language*'; I trust this is a change for the better, and hope that this will be a successful permanent addition to the journal. I thus renew my invitation to all readers to send me brief comments that might grace the pages of that section.

Not all changes are for the better, however, and thus it is that I have sad news to report here. Kathleen ('Kate') Fenton, the long-time proofreader par excellence for *Language*, passed away on September 12 of this year. She was an institution in and of herself, aiding four editors of *Language* over a span of a quarter of a century, from 1977 to this year. Even at an advanced age and in failing health, she proofread part of the March 2002 issue (78.1) for me this year and, characteristically, spotted errors that no one else caught. Her skills and accuracy are legendary. Bill Bright, for whom she proofread for a decade, said recently that she had the sharpest eye in his experience and noticed problems of both an editorial and a proofing nature, adding that many contributors to *Language*, as well as he himself in his editorial capacity, 'were spared embarrassment by her catching both substantive and typographic errors in our proofs'. Sally Thomason, editor after Bill Bright, notes that although Kate 'suffered from arthritis and a variety of other ills . . . she never lost her immense enthusiasm or her dedication to the work of proofreading', adding that 'she often jotted notes about things that interested her on proofs and in correspondence, as well as finding so many errors that she could with justification claim that the relatively error-free state of the journal was due to her efforts'.

At the 2001 annual meeting of the LSA, my immediate predecessor, Mark Aronoff, recommended that the society recognize Kate Fenton's contribution by awarding her the Victoria Fromkin prize for distinguished service to the field. Dr. Aronoff delivered the award to her personally in late 2001, since she was unable to attend the 2002 annual meeting.

In recommending Kate Fenton for this honor, he said 'It is difficult to believe how valuable Ms. Fenton has been to *Language* without seeing her work, which is invisible to all but the editorial staff. She checks everything, from the percentages in tables (they often don't add up) to the consistency in citing a given work across issues. She knows every quirk of the prescribed style of every section of *Language*, some of which has never been written down and exists only as oral tradition, presumably since the time of Sapir. She is always pleasant and completely unflappable. Truly, Kate Fenton is the soul of *Language*. It is a real honor to work with her.'

Bill Bright described her as 'a fine editor and proofreader, and a real lady of the old school; in fact, in more than one sense, she is irreplaceable'. Those of us associated with the journal agree, and note her passing with sorrow. We reprint here the obituary that appeared in the Boston Globe on September 16, 2002.¹ *Requiescat in pace.*

Columbus, Ohio
October 19, 2002

KATHLEEN M. FENTON

Kathleen M. Fenton of Malden, a linguistics expert, died at home on Thursday of kidney failure. She was 81.

A native of Malden, Ms. Fenton graduated from Girls' Catholic High School in Malden. She received a full scholarship to Emmanuel College and graduated magna cum laude in 1943.

Ms. Fenton worked at the National Security Agency in Washington, D.C., during World War II. The agency sent her to the University of California at Berkeley, where she received her master's degree in languages.

After leaving the NSA, she worked as office manager for the Catholic Information Center in Washington for several years before taking a position at the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington. While she was there, Dr. Thomas A. Sebeok asked her to work at his Research Center for the Language Sciences at Indiana University, where she became editor of the journal *Language Sciences*.

After a number of years at Indiana, she returned to Malden in 1977 and became a proofreader at G. K. Hall Publishers in Boston. At the same time, she was asked to proofread *Language*, the journal of the Linguistic Society of America. She received the second [Victoria] Fromkin Award for distinguished service to the society.

Ms. Fenton leaves no immediate family.

Funeral services will be held today at 11 a.m. in St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Malden.

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