EDITORIAL NOTE

What makes a paper appropriate for *Language*?

ANDRIES W. COETZEE, Editor JOHN BEAVERS, Co-Editor

As Editor and Co-Editor of *Language*, we often receive questions about the scope of the journal. These questions usually come in one of two different flavors. More often they come as a request for advice on the appropriateness of a specific paper for *Language*: 'I am finishing a manuscript on topic *X*. Would this be appropriate for *Language*?' Less often it comes in the form of an expression of frustration: 'Why doesn't *Language* publish papers on topic *X*?' or 'Why doesn't *Language* publish research that is done in theoretical framework *Y*?' Questions about the scope of the journal are important enough that we thought it appropriate to dedicate a few pages to how we think about what kind of paper is publishable in *Language*. This note applies primarily to the main section of the journal, where we publish primary research articles. We will publish similar notes in this and upcoming issues of *Language* from the associate editors who oversee our special sections (Teaching Linguistics, Language and Public Policy, Language Revitalization and Documentation).

THE CONTENT OF *LANGUAGE* SHOULD REFLECT THE RESEARCH DONE BY THE LINGUISTICS COMMUNITY. As the flagship journal of the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), *Language* is in a sense the intellectual property of the linguistics community, and the content of the journal thus has to reflect the range of research done by the members of the linguistics community. In practice, this is how we think about it: if we can imagine a paper being presented at the annual meeting of the LSA, then that paper is most likely a good fit thematically for *Language*. More so than the many specialist journals, *Language* therefore welcomes submissions from all subdisciplines of linguistics and representing all theoretical approaches.

Of course, that such a wide range of submissions is appropriate for *Language* does not mean we actually receive submissions that represent this complete range. Since we cannot publish what we do not receive, it also means that the journal's content does not optimally represent the full range of topics that we aim for. If you feel that research in your subfield is not present in or is underrepresented in *Language*, that should serve as motivation for you to submit to *Language*, and to encourage your colleagues to do so, too. You should also feel free to contact the editorial team with questions about coverage of specific research areas in *Language*. Part of our job is to serve as a resource for any questions about what would constitute an appropriate topic for a *Language* paper.

Editors of *Language* have been working to increase the breadth of topics covered in the journal for many decades (discussions on this topic can be found in editorial notes published in *Language* over the decades, and also in the editorial reports presented at the LSA annual meeting). The most visible and probably most successful effort has included recruitment of associate editors representing specific subareas of linguistics or theoretical approaches that were (and sometimes still are) underrepresented in the journal. If potential authors see a prominent linguist who works in their research area as a member of the editorial team, that serves as a strong indication that their research would be welcomed at *Language*. For this reason, the size of the editorial team has increased in recent years, and currently includes nineteen associate editors covering research areas as diverse as sociolinguistics, language processing, phonetics, syntax,

Printed with the permission of Andries W. Coetzee & John Beavers. © 2021.

https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2021.0016 Published online by Cambridge University Press

phonology, language contact, historical linguistics, teaching linguistics, semantics, pragmatics, language acquisition, sign languages, and language documentation. The team also includes members with a broadly generative approach, with a more functionalist approach, and with a usage-based approach to language. Efforts such as this have been successful to some extent. Recent years, for instance, have seen significant increases in submissions from areas such as sociolinguistics and historical linguistics (as reflected in recent Editor's Reports published in every June issue of *Language*). However, there are still areas that remain underrepresented in the journal, including neurolinguistics, anthropological linguistics, raciolinguistics, and research on language and gender, among others. Some of these areas are underrepresented because there are well-established, high-profile publication venues where that kind of research is canonically published. But other areas may be underrepresented simply because authors do not think of *Language* as a potential publication venue, despite the fact that research in these areas would be welcomed for submission.

The pages of *Language* should reflect the full breadth of research done by the linguistics community. We will only get a journal that is representative of the rich diversity of research that linguists do if we receive a wide range of submissions. Consider this an invitation to the linguistics community to submit a wide range of research to *Language*.

WHAT MAKES A *LANGUAGE* PAPER DIFFERENT? Although we welcome research from the full range of topics on which linguists do research, this does not necessarily mean that every paper on one of these topics will make for a good *Language* paper. What then sets apart a good *Language* paper from a paper that may be better suited for a different journal?

A paper in *Language* makes a contribution to linguistic theory. Our focus is on research that makes a contribution to linguistic theory, where we take a very broad view on what 'theory' means. This does mean that a paper that is primarily descriptive in nature may not be the right kind of paper for *Language* (even though description of data may well represent a valid research contribution). A typical *Language* paper therefore identifies a question in theory or an area of theory that is underdeveloped, and explores that question based on linguistic data. We do not expect a paper to make big theoretical leaps, but every paper has to engage meaningfully with the relevant theoretical literature and has to push our understanding of theory forward in some way. Theory here could include grammatical theory, but also sociological theory, pedagogical theory, theories on language change, theories of speech perception/production, theories drawn from cognitive science or from theoretical computer science, and so forth, all of which reflect the breadth of research done in linguistics.

(Note that *Language* also has a section, called 'Research Reports', where we publish shorter papers whose main contribution is in reporting data or methodological innovations that are theoretically relevant without necessarily developing theory. There is hence also a place for research where development of theory per se is less important.)

A paper in *Language* is accessible to a broad audience. As a generalist journal, the readership of *Language* is broader than that of a specialist journal. We therefore expect a *Language* paper to be written in such a way that any linguist should be able to understand the main gist of the argument and should understand why the research is interesting and important to our understanding of the human capacity for language. This does not mean that a nonexpert should be able to understand every technical aspect of the paper. But it

https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2021.0016 Published online by Cambridge University Press

does mean that the framing of the paper should be broad, should address a generalist audience, and should make connections to the 'big questions' of linguistics.

Although there are some papers that are so technical that they are not appropriate for a generalist journal and should therefore be submitted to a specialist journal, this is the exception rather than the rule. We believe that nearly any paper could in principle be publishable in *Language*. The main difference between a *Language* paper and a paper submitted to a specialist journal might be in the framing rather than the content. In particular, authors may need to write the introductory sections differently to address a generalist audience than they would for a specialist audience.

One way of thinking about the framing of a paper in generalist terms is to ask the question of what readers who work in the same broad area but in different frameworks of analysis could take away from the paper that they could build on or incorporate into their own work, so as to promote cross-fertilization of ideas. This could involve, for example, finding more framework-neutral ways of expressing key empirical generalizations, or finding less technical ways of getting the central analytical concepts across before developing the more framework-specific analysis. Indeed, a good way to get a sense of this would be to pay attention to work outside of the author's chosen framework, so as to find the commonalities and insights. There are independent advantages of approaching the writing in this fashion: the results are more likely to stand the test of time as frameworks of analyses change, and the key ideas will be accessible to linguists outside of the broad research area who may not work on the topic of the paper but will benefit from being at least aware of where the literature on this topic stands.

Although a *Language* paper may require framing with a generalist audience in mind, the middle 'content' part of the paper could remain technical and be written with a specialist audience in mind. There is no expectation that every reader will understand all aspects of the paper, and technical details are usually important for appropriately outlining the proposals. At the same time, authors are encouraged to give some consideration to a generalist audience regarding the technical details. Sometimes certain technical aspects of a paper are potentially dispensable when telling the story the paper wishes to tell, and if dispensing with them would improve readability for nonspecialists, it might increase the overall readership and thus the impact of the paper.

A paper in *Language* should be a reasonable length. For regular research papers, we have a strict upper limit of 18,000 words (including everything except for references and supplementary material). That said, we strongly encourage shorter submissions of around 12,000 words. Submissions over 16,000 words are subject to additional scrutiny, and we expect such papers to make a particularly important contribution in order to warrant the additional length. There are at least three reasons for imposing a length limit, and specifically for encouraging shorter papers. First, there are a limited number of pages that we can publish per issue, and keeping article length shorter means that there is space for more authors to get published in *Language*. Second, it is more difficult to get longer papers through the editorial process. It is more difficult to secure referees for longer papers, and even once we have referees they usually need more time to prepare a review. Third, we also believe that readers are more likely to actually read a shorter paper, so such papers are more likely to have an impact.

Although we encourage shorter papers, this does not mean that authors should artificially shorten a manuscript. A manuscript should be as long as is necessary to get its point across. That is often shorter than one would think—it is often easy to cut 10–15% from a first draft without the argument losing coherence. Sometimes, though, a topic

https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2021.0016 Published online by Cambridge University Press

necessitates a longer format. In such cases, it may be more appropriate for a monograph, or the length may be an indication that it is really more than one paper. Either way, authors should keep in mind that longer papers may be declined without review (and they will be if they are over 18,000 words) and that even if they go into the review process, they will spend more time there and will be evaluated against a stricter standard.

Conclusion. As the *Language* editorial team, we are tasked to be caretakers of the journal on behalf of the linguistics community. We take this responsibility seriously, and we trust that our approach reflects the values of the linguistics community. That said, we are always happy to hear from the community about ways in which the journal can be made better and more representative—of course, within the limits that the format and the history of the journal allow.

[language@languagelsa.org]

https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2021.0016 Published online by Cambridge University Press