EDITOR'S DEPARTMENT

Editorial highs and lows: Some reflections

In my annual report for 2005, published in *Language* 82.2 (June 2006), I noted that the end of 2005 meant that I was well past 'the halfway mark of my editorship' and that I was therefore 'on the downhill slope . . . of my service' (p. 466). The final part of that slope began in spirit for me just after the January 2008 LSA annual meeting, some six months ago as I write this. But it has really begun in earnest only in the past month, as my successor has (finally) been selected.[1] This happy turn of events puts me in a position to begin to reflect somewhat on my own term of office.

I am sure that every editor in looking back over his/her period of service (whether the now-traditional seven years in the case of Sarah Thomason, Mark Aronoff, and me, or longer, in the case of the first three editors, George Bolling, Bernard Bloch,[2] and William Bright) cannot help but contemplate the successes of that stretch as well as the failures. Thus in this, my second-to-last Editor's Department as editor,[3] I offer a (necessarily subjectively determined) list of some of the strong points and the weak points of my time at the helm of *Language*.

Here are what I would consider to be high points:

- Each issue included excellent and varied content, with some truly exceptional articles that should become oft-cited classics.
- With the exception of four issues in the first two years as my staff and I were getting the hang of the process of bringing out an issue of the journal, all issues of *Language* during my term have appeared on time, in the month designated on the cover.
- My decision letters for all submissions contained substantive comments to the author(s) on their papers. I feel strongly that every author deserves the editor's fullest attention, no matter what the outcome, and thus I acted accordingly in crafting my decision letters. Fulfilling this self-imposed mandate admittedly was time-consuming, and it would have been easy with some submissions, especially those that clearly were misdirected—having been sent in by authors who did not fully appreciate what sort of journal *Language* is—to just send perfunctory rejections. I am pleased that I resisted the urge to do that, however, as I saw myself as serving an educational role as editor beyond the merely editorial function.
- The 'Letters to *Language*' section was a frequent, even if not constant, part of *Language*'s content. (I confess that I initiated this section largely because I have always found the 'Letters to the Editor' section of local newspapers to be particularly interesting, a way of taking the pulse, so to speak, of the reading public, and I hoped for similar results from *Language*'s readership.)
- An Editor's Department column appeared in each issue; to some extent, these were an indulgence, and I think it is fair to say that I did them as much for myself and

[1] And the winner is . . . Greg Carlson, of the University of Rochester. He still needs to be formally elected to the post, following the LSA's procedures, but as he is running unopposed and since I, for one, intend to vote for him, there is no question of his being elected into office.

[2] Bloch, of course, was denied by fate the opportunity to do any reflections at the end of his term since he died in office in 1965.

[3] Of course, my annual report for 2008 should appear in an issue of *Language* in 2009, but I will be safely out of the way as editor at that point. I thank my colleague Hope Dawson for reminding me of this detail, and for numerous excellent suggestions for improving a much-too-rough first draft of these remarks.

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for my own enjoyment (maybe more so, I realize) as for *Language*'s readers. Still, I have tried to cover a wide range of topics, largely focusing on issues of editorial concern and matters pertaining to the history of the journal; the former were aimed at giving a greater transparency to *Language*'s operations and policies and the latter were intended to offer the LSA membership some tidbits about their journal that might not otherwise be brought before them.

- The accomplishments and lives of LSA past presidents continued to be recognized through the obituaries (with some long overdue ones being finished—after some nudging and cajoling in some instances—and published even when it would have been easy to just let them slide and to forget about them).
- Dialogue was promoted through the journal's Discussion Notes and similar venues (e.g. the new 'Alternative (Re)views', inaugurated in the June 2008 issue).
- A successful transition was managed from print book notices to electronic book notices, which now reside in cyberspace as a part of *eLanguage* (http://elanguage.net).
- I established and maintained editorial consistency over all of my decisions.
- For the most part, the review process was judged by authors to be fair and thorough, with occasionally even authors of rejected papers sending me positive comments about their experience with *Language*.

By the same token, here are what I consider to be the low points, notwithstanding my various attempts at an *apologia* for them (e.g. in my annual reports):

- The review process, as some authors have rightly complained over the years, was all too often far longer than it should have been.
- There were long delays in publishing reviews and book notices, thus jeopardizing the timeliness of some of them.

And, there is one thing I am disappointed about, namely that the 'Letters to *Language*' section did not sustain itself all that well as an addition to the journal, in that fewer readers wrote to me than I would have expected and several issues had to go without letters altogether. Still, at least there is now a precedent for such items if some future editor gets any printable correspondence.

But most importantly, perhaps, there is one key thing that has been confirmed for me: the value of the peer-review system. The process may have been slow at times, but I know I can say truthfully that every single paper published, even those rare ones that were accepted on the first try, was greatly improved as the result of comments and observations asked for by the referees.[4] The backbone of our field—from which (in part) we derive our credentials and credibility as a scholarly discipline—is quality control with regard to research, so that all results reported on, all analyses put forward, and all new facts discovered are made public only after careful scrutiny by experts who are in a position to judge the claims being made and the data and supporting argumentation and evidence being considered. The presence of such standards is what differentiates publishing in a journal of record like *Language* (and numerous other important journals in our field) from merely slapping a paper (even a good one) up for public viewing on a personal website (and this speaks to how important it is that the LSA in launching its *eLanguage* initiative wisely decided to include only electronic

[4] I say this in each of my annual reports, but it doesn't hurt to repeat it here: I am constantly in awe at the seriousness, the dedication, and the high standards that almost all *Language* referees bring to the task of reviewing papers. I thus applaud them, loudly and proudly, for the work they do for the journal, the Society, and the field.

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cojournals that have a rigorous peer-review quality control system in place). For me, being on the frontlines of upholding this crucial procedural contribution to our science was a real high.

The highs above outnumber the lows, and all in all, as far as I'm concerned, the positives outweigh the negatives too, so that I judge my term to have been enjoyable and satisfying as a result. Whether that adds up to a successful editorship in the judgment of others is, perhaps mercifully, beyond my control.

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