THE EDITOR'S DEPARTMENT

Language in the 21st century: An assessment and a reply*

Over the holiday break this past December, while catching up on some reading, I had occasion to read Thomas Friedman's very interesting article 'It's a flat world, after all' (*New York Times Magazine*, April 3, 2005 (clearly I had a lot of catching up to do!), pp. 33–37). The author talks about how technology has 'flattened' things out, with so many people now being connected to 'all the knowledge pools in the world' and thus working, even as individuals, in virtual far-flung teams potentially spanning the globe.

This article came to my attention within a few weeks of my receiving Stephen Levinson's thoughtful and provocative letter (pp. 1–2 in this issue), and thus not long after I had prepared my annual report for the LSA (to be published in the June issue) in which I held forth about where the journal had been in the previous year and where it is going in the current year. These three things—the article, the letter, and the report—converged in an intriguing way, for the different pieces resonated with one another, and together they led me to the musings contained in this column.

I have used this space in a variety of ways over the past few years, ranging from discussing details of the editorial process and of journal policy to elucidating aspects of the history of the journal, and against advice, even pontificating (though I prefer to say 'stating my views') on directions in which the field and the journal are headed. Stimulated by the aforementioned convergence, and by way of offering some response to the telling points Levinson (hereafter L) raises in his letter, I include here a mix of comments on all of these topics.

L makes several observations and claims, all of which mostly boil down to a single issue: *Language*, he says, is not reflective of the vibrancy of our field. In support of his case, he draws attention to the following: too few articles are published each year; they do not come out in as timely a manner as is desirable; certain policies do not square with the reality of who is writing linguistics articles these days; book reviews and book notices no longer serve a useful function; and material supporting and, importantly, supplementing published analyses is not readily available, for example, electronically via internet sites.

Moreover, these characteristics, he says, are not consistent with directions in which the field should be moving in the twenty-first century, where rapid access to information (note Friedman's 'pools of knowledge') on the part of individuals and groups of scholars is increasingly critical to making advances in the sciences in general, and including our science of language.

To a large extent, L is absolutely right, and it is certainly the case that in this, the sixth year of the twenty-first century, it is not unreasonable to expect *Language* to be current with the times. Indeed, something can be done, and in fact is being done, about it.

Before detailing these ameliorative steps, even at the risk of adding some suspense, let me point out one aspect of L's argument that is clearly supported by facts from the history of the journal and especially its recent history. Multiple authorship, which he refers to in the context of a suggestion that present *Language* policy about multiple concurrent submissions by the same person is outmoded, indeed has become far more

* I would like to thank Hope Dawson for her help with the statistics and discussion about multiple authorship and for her very helpful comments on an earlier version of this column.

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prevalent. While it is true that the first coauthored paper in *Language* occurred as early as 1927,[1] multiple authorship as reflected in the pages of the journal is far more common now than ever before. A trend in this direction is shown dramatically by a comparison of the 'paper-to-author' ratio (number of papers published versus number of authors for all of the papers) across several arbitrarily chosen years at twenty-year intervals, representing the 'olden days' (1935), what might be termed the beginning of the modern era (1955, immediately pregenerative), the thick of the generative era (1975), and a more recent point (1995); the relevant statistics are given in Table 1, with those for the past two years added in as well.[2]

YEAR	PAPERS PUBLISHED	NUMBER OF AUTHORS	PAPER-TO-AUTHOR RATIO
1935	24	25	1 : 1.04
1955	27	30	1 : 1.11
1975	41	50	1 : 1.20
1995	15	21	1 : 1.40
2004	23	33	1 : 1.43
2005	29	51	1 : 1.76

TABLE 1. Paper-to-author ratios.

This trend is entirely in keeping with Friedman's view of the flattening of the world, scholarly or otherwise, in that research seems increasingly to involve groups of scholars working as a team, rather than the solitary individual working alone, as seems to be (still) characteristic of what L calls 'a traditional humanities discipline'.

This being the case, I agree with L that it is time to revisit the policy prohibiting authors from submitting a paper if they already have another paper in any stage of the *Language* review or production process. I have already relaxed this policy on occasion, for instance so as not to penalize one member of a set of coauthors, but it seems that it may be time to do away with the policy altogether,[3] and to just let the chips fall where they may with regard to authorship with the best papers being published when they are ready, period.[4] Quality has always been the overriding concern lying behind

[1] 'What symbols shall we use?', by Leonard Bloomfield and George Melville Bolling, *Language* 3.2.123–29; the first article with more than two authors came in 1933: 'The influence of a change in pitch on the articulation of a vowel', by C. E. Parmenter, S. N. Treviño, & C. A. Bevans, 9.1.72–81.

[2] The best measure of any trend in multiple authorship would actually come from the statistics on papers submitted in a given year rather than those actually published. However, it is hard to get reliable information on such statistics for most years. Still, for the two most recent years, years for which my office has full records, the ratio for a given year of papers-to-authors for the published papers is comparable to that for the papers submitted in the same year (it must be borne in mind that the papers published in any year mostly are submitted in a previous year so that these are crude measures at best but certainly suggestive): in 2004 there were 111 submissions with a total of 169 authors, a paper-to-author ratio of 1:1.52 (versus 1:1.43 for papers published in 2004), and in 2005, for instance, there were 105 submissions with a total of 151 authors, a paper-to-author ratio of 1:1.44 (versus 1.76 for papers published in 2005).

[3] Although further checking into the history of this policy is needed, it was particularly clearly enunciated by Sarah G. Thomason when she was editor (1988–1994), in her Editor's Department in *Language* 69.3, 1993, p. 639. If we may judge from the many articles by the same individuals (for instance, Edgar Sturtevant) in successive issues in the early days of the journal, this policy may not have come into being until somewhat later on (indeed, authors with two pieces appearing within a single volume are found at least into the 1950s, for example, in 1955, 1956, and 1957), though with a faster review process such papers need not have overlapped.

[4] L, by the way, suggests that the overall review process tends to favor established authors; I point out in response that I have accepted papers written by graduate students and newly minted Ph.D.s, among others, as have my predecessors. I suspect that if most *Language* authors are established scholars, it is because such linguists tend to submit more papers to *Language* and have a better sense, through their experience, of how to reach the broad audience at which *Language* articles are aimed.

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any decision of mine to accept a paper anyway, and eliminating this policy would reinforce this most basic criterion for acceptance of a paper. I am inclined to do this but will wait to see if this issue provokes any reactions from readers. This move would be a step in the direction of modernizing *Language*'s editorial policies.

As for what other modernizing might be done, the journal and the LSA have, in fact, been taking steps to address the issues that concern L. The most important of these is putting concrete measures into place to make a reality of the plan—first announced in January 2005 by then-President Joan Bybee in Oakland, at the annual LSA meeting—for the LSA to develop an electronic journal, to be called *eLanguage*.[5] While these plans have been brewing since January 2005, a major hurdle for *eLanguage* was overcome at the most recent meeting of the LSA Executive Committee in Albuquerque, in early January of this year. In particular, it was decided once and for all that the electronic journal would be separate and distinct from the print journal *Language*. This solved several thorny logistical problems, such as the look of *eLanguage* (there is no need for it to have a look and format comparable to the pages of *Language*), the pagination of each e-issue, how *eLanguage* might be indexed vis-à-vis the print journal, and so forth, that would have arisen had *eLanguage* been merely a electronic 'arm' of *Language*.

But what then of the print journal if there is an *eLanguage*? The existence of *eLanguage* will presumably make it possible for short articles focusing on new findings or analyses to be publicly and widely disseminated (to all LSA members including institutional members, and thus to an even wider reading audience) in a fairly short time frame; shorter pieces will be encouraged for the electronic medium. Book notices can be shifted to *eLanguage*—here I differ from L in that I see a real value to the more controlled form of descriptive material that the book notices provide, but I agree that space in the print journal need not be devoted to such descriptions once *eLanguage* is fully functioning. Moreover, it has been suggested that electronic book notices could be collected once a year into a single large document to create a virtual annotated bibliography that would be a searchable tool we could all benefit from in tracking down materials for our research and our teaching.[6] Shifting book notices to *eLanguage* would also free up valuable space in the journal and allow for the publication of more articles per year. And the sort of ancillary 'supporting material' that L refers to as useful and perhaps even essential these days will find a natural home in *eLanguage*, without filling up the pages of the print journal.

Note, by the way, that I say only book notices are to be shifted to *eLanguage*; despite L's suggestion in this regard, I feel book reviews, inasmuch as they are more evaluative and offer well-informed critical appraisals of published books, deserve a place in the print journal. We may even expand their number somewhat, though exactly how that might be done remains to be worked out with the Review Editor.[7]

[5] Current LSA vice-president/president-elect Stephen Anderson is the author of this *bon mot* of a title.

[6] This suggestion was made by the now-late Peter Ladefoged, in the Oakland Executive Committee meeting (January 2005); this wonderful idea was a small suggestion to be sure, but it is just one of the many contributions to our field made by this great man.

[7] This is as good a place as any to signal that there has been a change in *Language*'s Review Editor: Stanley Dubinsky, after four years of extraordinary service to the journal, to the Society, and to the field, has decided to turn his considerable talents to other pursuits and leaves this post with my gratitude for a job well done. I am pleased to announce that Gregory Stump of the University of Kentucky has taken over, as of this issue, as the new Review Editor, and I look forward to working with him in the remaining years of my editorship to maintain the high level of interest that the book reviews have generated.

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In my book, therefore, *eLanguage* is certainly a venture whose time has come; an official call for proposals as to the structure and conceptualization of this enterprise by prospective editors has been put out by the LSA. Even though it has been posted on the LSA website (www.lsadc.org/info/pubs-elang-rfp.cfm), it seems appropriate to include it in this issue; the full text of the Request for Proposals appears herein on page 9.

These moves go a long way toward addressing the key issues L brings out and have the effect of moving the Society into the twenty-first century. A remaining concern is one I worry about constantly, namely the time-to-decision in the review process. I have discussed this matter before, here and in my annual reports, and will probably continue to discuss it as it does not seem to be going away. While the length of the review process depends on many factors, one area where all LSA members and professional linguists (myself included) can do some soul-searching is with regard to commitments they might make to serve as referees for papers; although delays in the review process are sometimes my own fault or my associate editors', in some instances promises made by external referees to evaluate papers are never fulfilled, or are not completed expeditiously. While I have said repeatedly in my annual reports that the quality of the (essentially volunteer) work done by referees consistently amazes me and never fails to impress me, timeliness can be a problem. Here, therefore, I appeal to the general readership for any ideas that might shorten the length of time referees take: should we demand a report in less than six weeks, even for long manuscripts? Should we badger late referees on a daily basis (a suggestion of Peter Ladefoged's)? Should we give up on such referees after eight weeks? Should we use only prompt referees with a proven track record for delivering timely reports? Should a stable of the most trusted and reliable referees be retained and called upon, somewhat like a super associate editorial board? Different journals use different models and ours may not be the most effective, though for the most part it works reasonably well.

Let me close with a consideration of one other of L's points: is linguistics (still) a traditional humanities discipline, or has the field undergone a (modified) paradigm shift toward a more scientific model, not unlike the globalization stages that Friedman refers to in his aforementioned article? I might not be the best person to answer this (and as always invite comment from you the readers), as my own largely humanistic training and orientation would seem to lead me to a positive answer to the first question. But my impression is that we as linguists have always liked to refer to what we do as the 'science of language' while always at the same time stressing that there is a fully human side to language as well. If so, then perhaps a 'paradigm' shift per se is not what is at issue but rather a more subtle, but no less real, shift in orientation. My guess, for what it is worth, is that as long as our subject matter is human language we will always at least in part be a (somewhat traditional) humanities discipline; at the same time, though, we undoubtedly are becoming a more scientific discipline, certainly more so than in the past, in terms of methods, goals, guiding assumptions, and such. I would like to think that the strength of the field as a whole will continue to lie in its ability to bridge these different areas rather than to take sides, as it were, with one or the other.

Brian D. Joseph
Columbus, Ohio
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