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DISCUSSION NOTE

Language and the LSA: A reappraisal

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As a longtime member, since 1976, of the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), and having a firm belief in the value of the LSA, I of course find it disconcerting to hear that any member is dissatisfied with the Society. Thus I was distressed to read the letter by Sean Fulop that was recently published in this journal (Fulop 2010), since not only does he levy criticism at the LSA and at its journal, *Language*, but he also states that he is giving up his LSA membership. I feel compelled to respond in some way, especially since the issues raised by this letter merit the attention of all members of the LSA.

It is probably inevitable that some members will become disaffected with any society's policies and workings, so that the adage that 'you can't please all of the people all of the time' surely applies to the LSA and, realistically, to any such body. Yet it is to be hoped that each new generation of linguists will recognize the tangible benefits of LSA membership, such as participation in the annual meeting and the biennial Linguistic Institute, as well as the intangible benefits, such as professional identification. And, among the benefits, one needs to count the Society's journal, despite Dr. Fulop's very pointed criticisms of it.

In his critique, Dr. Fulop compared *Language*, and by extension its sponsoring society, the LSA, to (among others) *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America (JASA)*, associated with the Acoustical Society of America, and *Cognitive Science: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, associated with the Cognitive Science Society, and drew attention especially to the number of articles in a typical volume of *Language* and the number found in those other journals, and to the criteria by which articles are selected for publication.

With regard to the former, he noted that members of the LSA 'are treated to perhaps two dozen research papers per year', while each of the other journals in his comparison set publishes 'many dozens of papers per year'. His interpretation of those numbers casts a highly negative light on *Language*, as, in his estimation, the ratio of the cost of the journal through LSA membership to the benefits of being a member is to *Language's* disadvantage compared to the other societies and their associated journals.

Those criticisms deserve a response for several reasons, not the least of which is that the negative view that they offer of *Language's* 'numbers' is not as justified as it might at first seem. Further, though, they raise broader issues about the nature and value of a scientific journal's contents and of membership in scholarly societies more generally.

My response is based in part on aspects of the inner workings of the journal that would undoubtedly be useful for all members to know about before they engage in their own similar sort of comparative exercise. As with the comparative method in historical linguistics, about which my mentor Calvert Watkins said that the first and most crucial step is knowing what to compare, some of the comparisons made here are not as cogent as one might think.

First, the economic side of producing the journal must be considered. The LSA, based on its budget, allocates to *Language* the wherewithal to publish approximately 950 pages densely packed with linguistic content each year, and pages cost money to produce, from paying copyeditors to ensure that the journal's material has a consistent and professional look to the cost of paper and shipping and such. The number of pages

is thus in part a function of the LSA's resources and has to be measured against other demands on the society's budget (the LSA Institute, for instance). There may well be ways of cutting *Language*-specific costs that could in principle allow for more pages and more articles, and the LSA leadership has made many steps in that direction, including this year's 'transition from Maryland Composition to Dartmouth Journal Services' in regard to actual production of each issue (referred to in Carlson 2010). One means that was often mentioned when I was editor, however, namely moving to electronic-only dissemination, while certainly allowing for more articles, nonetheless raises a host of issues having to do with copyright, distribution, access, and even with seemingly mundane matters such as indexing and bibliography, as well as—given that *Language* has an eighty-six-year history to keep in mind—historical continuity, all of which need considerable time and thought to be sorted out. Any such step is not a decision to be entered into lightly.

Second, there are a few practical sides to the matter of page count. For one thing, linguistics articles tend to be considerably longer than articles in, say, acoustics.¹ More importantly, perhaps, besides full-length articles, there are several types of short items that serve to advance linguistic knowledge in small but not insignificant ways; I have in mind here short reports, discussion notes, review articles, book reviews, and even, in some instances, letters (see Johnson et al. 2004, Whalen et al. 2004, and Youmans & Pfeifer 2005, for instance). Thus the proper items to be compared are not just research articles in *Language* and research articles in *JASA* or *Cognitive Science*. And, with regard to book reviews, my feeling—and it would be worth hearing from the readers of *Language* about this—is that they serve an important function in offering expert assessment and critical evaluation of books that come out in our field;² given the large number of such works, a book review section is necessarily going to take up space, but to me this is hardly wasted space that should be reassigned so as to add one or two articles.³ Interestingly, and importantly, the journals in question here to which *Language* is compared generally do not run book reviews, and indeed acoustics as a field (if indeed it is a unified discipline and not just at the intersection of several disciplines—see below) is not a book-oriented discipline, so that a professional society journal in that area can devote more pages to research articles.

But this is not just a numbers game; there is an important philosophical side to the issue of *Language*'s publication policies and criteria and, by extension, to the matter of the value of the LSA that is hinted at by my reference above to 'professional identification' and even my use of the characterization 'our field'. The LSA was founded with a broad vision of what linguistics is and how it fits into the scheme of scientific investigation that was expressed by Leonard Bloomfield in his call for the formation of a linguistic society as follows:

The science of language, dealing with the most basic and simplest of human social institutions, is a human (or mental or, as they used to say, moral) science. It is most closely related to ethnology, but precedes ethnology and all other human sciences in the order of growing complexity, for linguistics stands at their foot, immediately after psychology, the connecting link between the natural sciences and the human. The methods of linguistics resemble those of the natural sciences, and so do its results, both in

¹ Whether linguistics articles need to be so long is a different issue, as touched on briefly in Joseph 2006:467.

² See Levinson 2005:1 for a different opinion.

³ In a typical year during my editorship, the *Language* book review office would receive over 500 books for review; the statistics are reported on in each of my annual reports.

their certainty and their seeming by no means obvious, but rather in many instances, paradoxical to the common sense of the time ... [Yet] linguistics introduces into the order of the sciences the peculiar rate of change known as history—a rate of change more rapid than the biologic, and therefore more subject to observation. (Bloomfield 1925:1)

I have always taken this statement to mean that linguistics, simply put, is the scientific investigation of human language as to its social/ethnological, formal, psychological/cognitive, expressive, and historical dimensions, and that linguists therefore are investigators interested in those aspects of language. These various endeavors complement and support one another, so that one has always to keep all of these dimensions in mind when approaching a linguistic problem. Since we cannot all be specialists in all areas, we need to learn from one another, and remember at all times that we are working toward the same goal of understanding human language.

Bloomfield refers at the end of the piece (p. 5) to ‘the sence [sic]⁴ of craftsmanship and of obligation which is called professional consciousness’. It was that ‘professional consciousness’ of the LSA’s membership, a consciousness of being a LINGUIST, pure and simple, that informed my view of the journal when I was editor. I embraced the vision I refer to above, and allowed it to guide my decision to look for articles that (as Dr. Fulop reminded us, chiding both me and the journal) ‘90% of linguists can understand’. And, I still believe that there is something that connects linguists, even in subareas as seemingly disparate as computational linguistics and sociolinguistics or Indo-European linguistics and formal syntax: in all instances, we are interested in finding out what makes human language ‘tick’, whether from a formal, a historical, a social, or a modeling point of view. Moreover, all of the subareas learn from and draw on the results and methods of other subareas in our field; for instance, practical computational implementations and theoretical formalizations of syntax ultimately have to take social and historical variation into account, investigations into the semantics and pragmatics of focus need to draw on the phonetics of prosody,⁵ and so on. It is not clear to me that this cross-fertilization between subareas is so in other fields, especially the ones that serve as the points of reference for the unflattering comparisons to which *Language* has been subjected.

I am reminded of a work that I cited in Joseph 2008, my final Editor’s Department, and I mention it again as I feel it speaks to the question of whether linguistics is a united field in which it is realistic to assume that there is value to articles that can be read by 90% of practitioners. The work in question is Hudson 1981, an article entitled ‘Some issues on which linguists can agree’, and it is essentially a manifesto covering points about language that unite all linguists, even in the face of differences in theoretical approaches and in methodology. I do not think that quoting extensively from it here is necessary, but I would suggest that we all read it from time to time, as it reminds those of us with a ‘professional consciousness’ that focuses on the careful and objective study of language of just how much there is that we hold in common. As I said in that Editor’s Department, ‘I see this list as being somewhat like *Language* ... [in] offer[ing] a rallying point for linguists that goes beyond our areas of disagreement in theory, analysis, and description’ (Joseph 2008:688) and I added that ‘I see *Language* too as fulfilling the function of being a focal point—a recurring one that is offered to the scholarly community every three months—around which all of us as linguists can come together’ (p. 689). Members of the LSA can thus look to *Language* as an emblem of their profes-

⁴ As a point of orthographic trivia, I note that this is not a typo on Bloomfield’s part but rather is an older spelling that he presumably liked, even though it was not all that current in his time (see the *Oxford English Dictionary* for details).

⁵ See German et al. 2006, for instance, on this.

sional identification, since it offers articles that will always speak to some aspect of their professional interest in language, and in the same way, they can look to the LSA as a focal point for their professional identification, under the view that there are ways in which it represents one society for the field that we all indeed collectively constitute.

This was my interpretation of the mission of *Language*, and it was therefore the vision that guided me as editor. That is, I saw our field as a unified one (à la Hudson), a field where each article in each issue of the journal of its flagship society needed to say something to everyone involved. It was for these reasons that I aimed to publish articles that ‘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’ (Joseph 2002:616).⁶ I am the first to recognize that my vision (and that of former *Language* editor Sarah G. Thomason—also mentioned in Dr. Fulop’s letter—and of Leonard Bloomfield, for that matter) may not be shared by all in (or leaving) the Society; it may well be a matter for debate, but I would suggest that it is a debate worth having. I hope that my defense of the journal and of my views regarding its position in the field will spur such a valuable discussion.

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⁶ I had a discussion not all that long ago with a colleague, Nigel Vincent, at a conference (Evaluation in the Human Sciences: Towards a Common European Policy, held in Bologna, December 12–13, 2008), and this statement of my guiding editorial policy came up. He said that his impression is that not all that many of us in linguistics read articles outside of our own (narrow) areas of interest, and if that is the case, then the idea of publishing a phonology article that will be read by (and thus of value to) not only phonologists but also others, for instance to semanticists (even if not about the phonosemantics of some sound in some language, or whatever), may not make sense. I personally hope that he is not right about this, as it would mean that the prevailing view within our field is a fairly short-sighted one.