Publishing in linguistics journals

Gene Buckley, 30 March 2004

Venue

Seek a **balance of volume and prestige** in your CV. If you seek only prestige, your CV may be too thin. Early on, you're perhaps more likely to be successful (and less frustrated) if you aim for a journal with a higher acceptance rate.

When looking for a job, and especially when eventually seeking tenure, the important category is **"refereed"** or "peer-reviewed" journal (i.e. not conference proceedings, etc.); remember that this includes *Lingua* as well as *Linguistic Inquiry*. Even one paper in a refereed journal can do you a lot of good.

Choose the journal that best **fits your topic**. If your paper focuses on a specific language or family, consider an areally oriented journal, such as *International Journal of American Linguistics*, *Studies in African Linguistics*, *Oceanic Linguistics*, etc. These are also usually easier to get into, but are perfectly respectable.

Topic

You should seriously consider submitting **every quality paper** you write to a journal, or at least to a conference. Do it while you're still thinking about the topic, too, rather than waiting until you're preoccupied with something else. But **don't** let this interfere with the completion of your dissertation.

If you have a **short paper**, it may be appropriate for a squib or "notes" section of a journal. This is a very good way to get some experience and some exposure. Similarly, while some topics require lengthy discussion, don't try to cram too much into one paper: try splitting up the topic into two papers.

Don't be shy about publishing a more **descriptive** paper in the right journal as well. Not everything you write has to be cutting-edge theoretical analysis. An intelligent presentation of new facts or generalizations, theoretically aware but not just making a theoretical point, can be quite valuable and is less likely to require much revision on the basis of referee complaints.

Manuscript Content

Keep revising your paper until the organization is optimal and the arguments are clear. Don't just accept the way the paper developed over time along with your thinking about the topic (a chronological organization). Consider carefully the best way to present your ideas, even if it means completely reworking the paper. Arrange with other students to "trade" critical reading of your papers. If you're a non-native speaker, be sure to have a native speaker read it for you.

Don't be afraid to **delete** entire sections that don't actually contribute to the main point. These deleted sections can sometimes be worked into other papers, long or short; but if the text is relevant only to your personal intellectual development, no one else wants to read about it.

Remember that the average reader won't be nearly as familiar as you are with the data you're discussing or with the details of the theoretical issues. Make your **assumptions** clear. Always **summarize** in prose what generalizations are to be extracted from a list of examples.

You should, of course, be thorough and responsible in your **citations** as a matter of professional competence. But it's also a potential matter of self-interest, since if you ignore or mischaracterize the work of one of your referees (or someone they know about), you'll pay a price. Do searches in databases such as LLBA, and even on Google, to make sure you're aware of relevant work.

Manuscript Form

Don't submit a manuscript until it's been carefully **proofread** for substance and form, including typographical errors — there's no faster way to irritate a referee than to show how little regard you have for their time and even for your own work. Check to be sure that you've included all cited works in the references. Observe the rules in the style sheet about double spacing and margins. If they ask for an abstract, make it clear and informative.

You don't need to obsess about things like the **bibliographic format** on the first submission, but certainly you should be internally consistent. If you're looking for a style, you might as well choose that for the journal you're submitting to. The details among linguistics journals don't really differ that much anyway. If you're rejected at one journal and submit to another, though, you probably don't want to maintain the distinctive style of the first journal.

Similarly, it's not usually necessary, at an early stage, to worry about making the footnotes into endnotes, and having all the figures and tables at the end is often a hassle for the referee. (Those conventions are for the **typesetter**, who's irrelevant during the review process.) But it's always possible you'll encounter an editor or referee with rigid views on such matters; mention in your cover letter that you'd be happy to supply a new copy with separate figures, etc.

Revisions

You'll probably have to **wait** at least several months for reviews, possibly six or more, depending on the journal's practices, the efficiency of the editor, and the conscientiousness of the referees. Don't inquire with the editor until six months have passed.

Don't take the reviews too **personally**. Nobody likes to have their work criticized, but it's essential to producing a good end result. Almost every paper submitted has to be revised somewhat. It's also much better to hear the objections while there's time to fix them, than to realize what you did wrong after it's arrived in every major research library.

Some **referees** will be much more responsible, courteous, and with-it than others. Occasionally a referee is obtuse or vengeful, but on the whole you'll find that they typically devote considerable care to this relatively thankless service to the academic community.

Don't get overwhelmed by the review as a whole. Put it aside for a couple days, then come back to it and convert it to a **list of points** that you need to address, one by one. Many editors appreciate (or even require) a point-by-point response that shows how you answered the referees' criticisms, so this strategy helps you prepare that response.

You may find it useful to begin by addressing the smaller, easier points, and then **working your way up**. Realize that one way to address a criticism is to omit the section that raises it; if you're wasting time on a side issue that is just getting too far afield, drop that issue. Mention it in a footnote, or save it for another paper. Stay focused on the main ideas.

Try to complete your revisions in a **timely** matter, rather than sitting on the paper, since the weeks can turn into months or years. Unless you decide a topic is hopeless, it's worth getting the benefit of your previous work by completing the project and then moving on to a new one. Get it back in the pipeline to publication.

If you're **rejected** (without the option of "revise and resubmit"), you can still send it to another (perhaps more lenient) venue. But make good use of the comments from the referees — this will enhance your chances at the next journal, and is also important if you get the same referee again.