The editorial process for linguistics journals: Survey results

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To gather some basic data about how editors of linguistics journals handle the editorial process from the time of submission of a manuscript to the time of an editorial decision, I asked the editors on the CELxJ email list the following questions:

1. Who is involved in handling manuscripts (just the main editor, main editor plus associate editor(s), others), in initial evaluation and choosing readers?
2. Do you do 'desk rejections' (i.e., reject manuscripts without external review)? If so, based mostly on fit with your mission or quality of the paper or both?
3. Are reviewer guidelines available to potential authors and others?
4. How many reviewers do you typically ask to vet the paper and what are selection criteria?
5. What is the basic timeline for the process?
6. Who is involved in writing editorial decisions?

At *Diachronica*, to give an example, our process looks like this:
- We invite prospective authors to submit an abstract to the editor for advice on whether we're the right outlet. We often ask to see the full paper, by electronic submission if the paper is clearly something we'll consider or by email if we want a closer look. At least one person on the team reads the paper, almost always me, typically probably 2 people. We often ask for some work on papers before official submission, e.g. in terms of developing a point of interest for an audience beyond specialists in a particular language or family.
- When a paper is submitted (these days through the Benjamins' electronic system), our editorial team (associate editors, book review editor, production editor) checks quality of the full manuscript and discusses possible reviewers. I typically make some suggestions and we discuss any reviewers suggested by the author(s). We look for coverage in terms of theory and data and try to avoid conflict of interest (positive or negative). Reviewers can be anybody in the world with expertise, not restricted to board members or in any way like that. I then invite the three agreed-on people to review the paper. This may take a week.
- We do 'desk rejections', that is, we decline manuscripts without full external review. This may be because the paper doesn't fit our scope and mission (e.g. if it's a synchronic treatment of a historical dataset rather than a diachronic analysis) or because we are confident based on our reading that it would not survive review with any positive reaction. In those cases, we advise authors on where to send the paper and/or how to improve the quality. Sometimes, we suggest that a reworked paper might be suitable for review by us. Our guidelines for reviewers are available on our webpage and we hope they are useful for authors as well as reviewers.
- We ask for reviews within a month, but they typically take longer to come in, often a couple of months. (Our electronic system sends automatic reminders and I send personal reminders when things get too

late. Occasionally, we simply can't get a review and go with two reviews, if the decision is relatively straightforward, or solicit a new third.)

- When all reviews are in, I read the paper (independent of the reports, almost always) and then the reports and draft an editorial decision, which I circulate to the editorial team. We discuss the reports and paper and draft decision. Unless it's a very simple decision, one or more other members of the team will read or at least skim the paper, often looking at specific issues raised in the process. The editorial team always provides serious feedback, from helping clarify points to adding useful references, to suggesting possible ways to respond to points raised by readers. For papers that go out for review, the whole process normally runs about 4 months, occasionally under 3, and -- to my chagrin -- sometimes more than 5. If it takes that long, we've had major problems getting the right reviewers and you can assume I've been nagging tardy readers.

- Like many journals, a common decision for us is 'revise and resubmit'. Almost nothing (≈ 2%) is accepted with only a single round of review. Young authors often do not realize that many 'R&R' decisions are in essence positive decisions — it's a chance to improve a paper with expert input. We try to give really concrete advice on what has to be done for successful revision (without telling authors how to rework the paper) and we have no deadline for revisions -- as we often say, 'we're more interested in quality than speed.'

Editors of 21 journals responded to the call (for some journals, more than one editor, in fact), covering a wide range of general, language- or subfield- or theory-oriented, and some very specialized journals:

- *Australian Journal of Linguistics*
- *Biolinguistics*
- *Brain & Language*
- *Diachronica*
- *Functions of Language*
- *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*
- *International Journal of American Linguistics*
- *Italian Journal of Linguistics*
- *Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics*
- *Journal of Jewish Languages*
- *Journal of Linguistics*
- *Language*
- *Language Dynamics and Change*
- *Latin American Journal of Content and Language Integrated Learning*
- *Lingua*
- *Linguistic Inquiry*
- *Linguistic Typology*
- *Semantics & Pragmatics*
- *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia*
- *Studies in African Linguistics*
- *Written Language and Literacy*

Below, I summarize the major patterns in the responses to the six questions, with answers in green.

1. Who is involved in handling manuscripts (just the main editor, main editor plus associate editor(s), others), in initial evaluation and choosing readers? There's a particularly wide range of practices here and a whole set of different people working for the journal may be making key decisions and doing key parts of the work on your manuscript:
   o At some journals, especially smaller ones, the main editor does this work, often even alone.
   o A number of mostly larger journals have co-editors who share the work, typically with them each taking on similar numbers of manuscripts and sometimes working collaboratively. Some journals allow authors to select which of a set of editors will handle their manuscript.
   o Some journals, as described for *Diachronica* above, have a team that deals with this, that is, as a group.
   o For journals that have them, the role of Associate Editors (AEs) varies tremendously. In some cases, AEs provide advice on reviewers and such; at others, much of the work is done by the assigned AE rather than executive editors.
   o A couple of journals include managing editors or editorial assistants in this part of the process.
   o It seems that it is becoming more common over time for the work of editorial decisions to be shared. This is, I think, unambiguously positive: it provides richer feedback, some control on personal biases, and so on.

2. Do you do 'desk rejections'? If so, based mostly on fit with your mission or quality or both? The answer from all journals was 'yes'. In addition to quality and fit, language was mentioned, that is, papers which are not in suitable shape in terms of the language and style may be rejected without review. Many editors stressed the value of desk rejections in saving time for the authors and some mentioned sparing their reviewers work on manuscripts that would not be accepted in the end. Some journals desk reject a majority of submissions; others only do it in extremely clear cases.
   o My strong sense is that desk rejection is becoming more common. If your work is desk rejected, keep in mind that this saves you a lot of time: you can rework the paper based on feedback and start thinking about a more appropriate outlet for it without waiting months for the rejection that was inevitable in the editors' view.

3. Are reviewer guidelines available to potential authors and others? 9 editors answered yes, 4 said no, while 3 do not have guidelines for reviewers and a couple did not respond to this question.
   o For the second and third categories, a piece of advice was this: Young scholars should work closely with a mentor in preparing any paper for publication.
   o If guidelines are available, you should look at them carefully and make sure your paper fits the relevant bill.
   o Four editors indicated that they are planning to make guidelines available to authors or to make them more visible online, so the practice is spreading.

4. How many reviewers do you typically ask to vet the paper and what are selection criteria?
   o 11 journals go for two reviewers plus a third as needed or two plus an Associate Editor. This can be due to disagreements between the first two reviewers, complexity of the data, methods

and analysis, among other things. Two editors indicated that they use two reviewers and four regularly (try to) get three but don't expect that. One editor indicates expressly that their journal aims for three but has trouble finding them.

- o A number of others routinely get three reviews.
- o Journals vary in who reviewers are — some prefer senior scholars, others look simply at expertise. Most look for a range of perspectives, it seems, to cover theory and data, etc.
- o Some accept suggestions from authors (critically and selectively, in all cases) and others simply do not.
- o In most of linguistics, I think it was once very standard to have only two reports on papers and it seems that there's a trend toward three and more flexibility.

5. What is the basic timeline for the process?
- o Almost every editor noted the mismatch between goals for getting decisions and the reality of getting decisions in a timely fashion. Finding the right, most qualified reviewers is a huge challenge. Once reviewers agree to take on an assignment, try as we might, we cannot control the actions of other people and we often have to wait for reviews well beyond the deadline.
- o One editor aims for turnaround in one month and typically achieves decisions in roughly two.
- o The most common pattern was roughly this: a week or two to do an initial check of the manuscript, then a highly variable period to find readers (from a week to a couple of months), with readers most often having a deadline of a month. It then takes time to draft a decision, circulate it among the relevant parties, and get it out.
- o As many people noted, readers commonly take far longer than a month, often two or three months. It then takes a week to a month to draft and revise an editorial decision.
- o A typical GOAL is to have decisions within 2-3 months and a typical REALITY is that many decisions take 4-6 months. One editor reports an average time-to-decision of 67 days for last year and another was under 60 days, a number skewed by relatively common and rapid 'desk rejections'.
- o My strong impression — as an author, a reviewer and an editor — is that wait-times are getting shorter. Earlier in my career, I had a depressing number of editorial decisions that took over a year and even over a year and a half to come. When you're looking for a job or trying to get tenure, that's extremely stressful. Such waits are very rare today from what I know.

6. Who is involved in writing editorial decisions?
- o Here, reactions split relatively evenly across three categories: the editor (either executive editor or the 'handling' editor) does it alone, the editor does it with input from an associate editor, the editor regularly works with or consults a broader team.
- o It looks like things are moving from the first toward the second or third, based on some comments.
- o Most editors who write decisions alone specifically mention plans for difficult cases, in which they consult other editors.
- o One editor indicates that "we do not have a summary decision sent to authors but the raw reviews".
- o It was once common practice for editorial decisions to be basically what one editor calls 'a collation of the peer reviews'. That person captured the spirit of a number of other journals that

rely on broad input for an editorial team in writing this: "Our decisions are epically detailed, typically going far far beyond a collation of the peer reviews." Editors are now, judging from the responses, more actively engaged.

Beyond the survey questions, a number of other important issues came up and I'll simply quote editors directly. The first was alluded to above (emphasis added):

The most common decision is 'revise and resubmit', which should be taken as **good news: It means that the paper is publishable if the author engages seriously, scrupulously, and constructively with the reviews**. Authors can always discuss reviewers' points, or the incompatibility between reviewers' demands, with the handling editor, who will advise the author.

Another substantive point is this:

If you are talking to junior people, one minor, but potentially enlightening, point for them might be to discuss how the various editorial management platforms (e.g., ScholarOne, Editorial Manager) display the status of a paper. In some cases, it may seem like no action is being taken when, in fact, a lot of work is going on behind the scenes. In other cases, the messages are a bit opaque. I imagine that junior scholars may be looking at those more closely than the rest of us, especially for the first papers.

This is emphatically true and certainly not limited to junior people. In some sense, we are ALL still feeling our way through electronic editorial processes. Practices are still emerging and changing quickly and no clear norms have evolved at many journals, even as many journals have not (yet) gone to these systems. For *Diachronica* at least, you should contact me with any questions at any point.

A third example is this:

… we consider reviews ADVICE; DECISIONS about publication or otherwise are taken by the Editorial Board in light of this advice. Thus, the Editorial Board reserves the right to overrule (positive as well as negative) reviews. In practice this doesn't happen a lot, though.

From what I can tell, this holds for virtually all journals.