

Journal Rankings: An Editor's Perspective

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Whether talking about RANKING, or EVALUATION, or DESCRIPTIVE CLASSIFICATION, human nature being what it is, interpreting results as RANKINGS seems inevitable --- European Science Foundation's classification initiative used "A", "B", and "C" as labels for different types of journals, but these have been viewed by many as meaning "Best", "Good", and "Mediocre" (respectively)

ESF *could* have used “X”, “Y”, and “Z”, so in a sense they invited a ranking interpretation (or even “L”, “M”, and “N” (reflecting that journals are *elemental* to scholarship(!)))

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How problematic is the enterprise of journal ranking/classification?

- **in a certain sense, we ALL operate informally with a ranking system by sending our own papers to what we perceive to be the most prestigious journals**

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What goes into such perceptions?

- **rejection rate (= selectivity)**
- **citations (= an index of influence)**
- **who else publishes in the journal (= you are known by the company you keep!)**
- **audience (= who does the journal matter to, based in (large) part on who reads it)**
- **what other linguists we know and respect think of it (= peer pressure)**

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And, there are hundreds and hundreds of journals in

linguistics (note that the *Bibliographie Linguistique* draws

citations from over 2200 serial publications (book series

as well as journals)

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The sad truth:

- clearly not all journals can be *the* best; not all can fall into what is perceived as top class

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So, putting all these points together,

- **maybe journal rankings are just codifying what we already do informally?**
- **and if so, maybe they are benign. Still, inevitably, if there are rankings, even informal ones, there will be “winners” but also “losers” (as consumers “vote with their feet”)**

So what is the big deal with rankings? LOTS!

There are several legitimate questions to be asked here, namely (with some possible answers indicated) – as to the ranking itself:

- Who is doing the ranking? (Peers, or outsiders?)**
- What criteria is it based on? (Scholarly quality, including rejection rate (as a measure of selectivity) or other (numerical) measures (such as citation patterns or circulation)?)**
- Are purely numerical criteria really insightful as to quality? (Maybe, but they are not the whole picture)**

--and, as to the nature of the “commodity” (public statements of the results of academic research, i.e. research papers) contributing to the ranking:

- Can bad papers (poor scholarship) be published in “good” journals?
(YES, of course)
- Can good papers (i.e., influential oft-cited ones) be published in “bad” journals, or more generally, in “nonstandard” outlets like conference proceedings? (YES, of course – cf. Zwicky 1977, *On clitics*, “published” (i.e. printed and distributed) by the Indiana University Linguistics Club), Ross 1972, “The category squish: Endstation hauptwerk”, published in CLS 8), etc.

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ALSO: what is the motivation for rankings?

- **If it is to upgrade quality all around ... fine! Who can argue with that?**
- **But if it is to punish scholars for not publishing in certain journals, one has to wonder about their value.**
- **If it is to steer scholars into particular journals, then it has to be realized that there are consequences for the journals (and publication outlets more generally) that are (perceived as to be) excluded.**

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Possible consequences for journals:

- **alterations in patterns of submissions (with “lesser” outlets receiving fewer submissions or submissions of poorer quality)**
- **effect on referees – scholars might not be willing to spend (i.e., “waste”) their time helping with the review of submissions for what might be viewed as “lesser” outlets**
- **drop-off in subscriptions (and thus a greater risk of financial non-viability and ultimate collapse)**

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So, would we be better off if “lesser” journals are forced out or if submissions to them dry up?

- **NO (in my view), since ALL journals play a role in our field and occupy functional niches in its “scholarly ‘ECO-SYSTEM’”, because:**

- a. publication outlets are needed for rising scholars: where are the scholars of the next generations (read: our graduate students and junior colleagues!) supposed to publish so as to begin to establish themselves?**

- b. given that leading journals are (or have to be, or at least are able to be) selective, many fine papers simply cannot be published in top journals all the time; a “lower” rung of journals thus offers important outlets**

- c. there really ARE audiences with specialized needs: where else would one go for detailed studies on the history of the field on a regular basis EXCEPT a journal like *Historiographia Linguistica*, or for details on an obscure and little-studied African language except *Studies in African Linguistics*, etc.

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My suggestion (based on my experience as editor): the value of all these journals should be recognized, but it should be recognized as well that due to their serving different needs, different standards can be applied in terms of “quality control”

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TWO case-studies about applying standards (involving journals I have been editor for):

Language versus *Journal of Greek Linguistics*, where the different journals require different standards, given their different goals and different audiences

- ***JGL* papers are good and make a contribution, and have been written by some very prominent linguists (e.g. Irene Philippaki-Warbuton, Eric Hamp, Paul Kiparsky, Peter Trudgill) but they necessarily have a point of saying something about Greek, and that focus means that some lapses in coverage of all the theoretical literature and nailing down all aspects of an argument can perhaps be overlooked (ideally not, of course, but realistically, yes)!**

- ***Language* papers are uniformly excellent but are broadly representative of the whole field (and a whole organization with a diverse membership) -- therefore the content cannot be overly specialized, and every aspect of the paper must be of the highest quality; each paper is a model for the rest of the field, as it were, showing what scholarship in its sector of the overall field is like (that is, phonologists will be learning about syntax from the syntax papers, semanticists will be learning about historical linguistics from the historical papers, and so on).**

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Moreover, journals can “grow” in stature and take on prominence and prestige they did not have at one time, especially now for new(ish) journals in a highly competitive market – that is probably the case with *Diachronica* (another journal I have been associated with for many years). Note that it might not have had a chance to develop that way if it was “low-balled” from the start as a “less-favored” journal

The opposite side of the coin: journals can decline in stature too.

Thus, rankings/evaluations have to be “dynamic” and must be able to reflect (or react to) rises and falls in stature, and be sensitive to the “ecology” created by the journals in a field)

“Cultural” differences in our field and across others:

- one type of journal almost automatically has the deck stacked against it from the start as far as linguistics (in the humanities) is concerned: on-line journals (e.g. *Linguistic Discovery* (<http://linguistic-discovery.dartmouth.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/Journals.woa/xmlpage/1/issue>), *Journal of Language Contact* (<http://www.jlc-journal.org>), and others) largely because of suspicions about rigor and peer review

Except in computational linguistics, where the main journal (*Computational Linguistics*, the journal of the Association for Computational Linguistics), is going to exclusively on-line delivery soon (and surely will not sacrifice its leading status)!

The self-perpetuating character of the problem:

- if we advise our junior colleagues not to publish in e-journal outlets because administrators will value such products less, we are buying into the administrators' viewpoint and reinforcing it – “we have met the enemy and he is us”!).
- Yet, these are fine journals that fill important niches in the coverage of the field and meet high standards of peer review and rigor.

Note what the LSA is doing about this particular problem:

- ***eLanguage* (<http://elanguage.net/home.php>), the LSA-sponsored “portal and aggregator site” for open-access electronic journals in linguistics, so-called “co-journals”**
- **in order to be an LSA-approved co-journal accessible through *eLanguage*, rigorous peer-review with an editorial board of experts is essential; thus all scholarly criteria that are expected of print journals must be met**

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Some Conclusions:

- **rankings may be inevitable (but must they be?)**
- **even so, we don't have to like them nor do we have to just accept them without doing anything**

What might be done?

- **minimally, the benefits of (essentially a “market-driven”) scholarly “eco-system”, with different journals occupying different but useful niches in the scholarly environment, must be made clear to administrators and others pushing for and endorsing these rankings**
- **the possible negative consequences must be made known as well**

- **and, we can take it upon ourselves to support a wide range of journals by offering papers to specialized as well as general journals, reviewing for them, urging libraries to subscribe to them, even subscribing ourselves (if finances permit), encouraging students and colleagues to submit papers to and generally support them, etc.**

FIN / THE END / ΤΕΛΟΣ