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What exactly does an editor do?

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Abstract: This final editorial by outgoing *Multilingua* editor Ingrid Piller provides a glimpse behind the scenes of academic publishing. The work of a journal editor falls into five broad areas: desk-rejecting; managing peer review; evaluating and assessing research; taking affirmative action; and solving problems and setting directions. This article provides a brief overview of what is involved in each area, and includes recommendations for improvement, both for the field and individual researchers.

Keywords: academic publishing; desk rejections; editorial work; epistemic justice; peer review; research quality assessment

1 Time to say good-bye

This issue brings my 10 years as editor of *Multilingua* to an end. I feel like the proverbial boat owner whose happiest day is when they buy their boat and whose second-happiest day is when they sell their boat. In 2013, I was excited to learn the ropes from the outgoing editor, Professor Richard Watts (Universität Bern, Switzerland), and throughout 2022 I have enjoyed passing on the baton to the incoming editors, Professors Eva Codó (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain) and Jürgen Jaspers (Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium).

But what did I do in between?

It seems to me that the processes of academic publishing are relatively opaque to many academics. There is merit in demystifying what goes on behind the scenes, between the submission platform and the published product. In the interest of transparency, I will therefore take the opportunity of this final editorial to reflect on the activities I spent my editorial time on. It is my hope that this will be of some use to our field and, particularly, junior researchers.

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2 Desk rejecting

The editor is a gatekeeper, and I spent a lot of time saying “no.”

Many people are not aware of the sheer size of the academic publication endeavor, even in a field as tiny as ours. *Multilingua* publishes six issues per year and each issue contains five to seven articles. On average we publish 35 articles per year. However, we receive many more submissions. In the past 10 years, close to 1,400 manuscript submissions have crossed my desk. I have seen around 350 of these through to publication. That means that I have rejected over 1,000 manuscripts – our average annual rejection rate has been 77%.

The overwhelming majority of these rejections were desk rejections, around 800 in total. That is a lot of manuscripts that did not even make it to peer review, and it is reasonable to ask how those decisions were made.

To begin with, we conduct automated plagiarism screening upon submission. Consequently, each manuscript comes to the editor with a similarity index. A similarity index of 20% or higher usually results in desk rejection. This way, a non-negligible number of manuscripts are filtered out, most of them for self-plagiarism.

Other than obvious plagiarism, how does the editor decide which manuscripts do not merit peer review? The main considerations are scope and quality.

The scope of *Multilingua* is relatively broad. The journal is “an international forum for interdisciplinary research on linguistic diversity in social life” (“*Multilingua*,” 2022). We publish research related to bi- and multilingualism; language education, learning, and policy; inter- and cross-cultural communication; translation and interpreting in social contexts; and critical sociolinguistic studies of language and communication in globalization, transnationalism, migration, and mobility across time and space. Even where a manuscript addresses such topics, it may be deemed out of scope if it does not directly engage with the debates that are currently taking place in the journal. A crude way of checking for direct engagement is to go through the list of references. If there is not a single reference to a *Multilingua* article, that might justify desk rejection, particularly during busy times. And times in an editorial office are almost always busy!

Even if a submission is in scope, it may still be desk-rejected due to inferior quality. An initial quality assessment considers the research problem, conceptual framework, methods, innovation, significance, and presentation. As a matter of principle, I prefer to err on the side of caution. So, desk rejections are for manuscripts that suffer from serious and obvious shortcomings. Oftentimes, such flaws are due to poor planning and are not salvageable at the write-up stage. As a field, I wish we paid greater attention to “frontloading” our research. We need to invest more into evaluating research at the design stage. I believe that one of the most promising

avenues to improve the quality of qualitative research is to seriously engage with the preregistration movement (*Qualitative Research Preregistration* 2019).

Research that is salvageable may also get desk-rejected, and for those cases, I would like to share two pieces of advice. First, don't waste your time – and that of the editorial team – by submitting work that is not yet ready. Space in highly ranked journals is at a premium and if you cannot put 100% into the effort, don't bother. Of course, you may not have enough experience to identify whether your submission is ready. In that case, seek advice in your local networks! There is nothing wrong with asking questions from your mentors, peers, and colleagues, and it is much more efficient – and less demotivating – than taking a trial-and-error approach to submission.

Second, put effort not only into the manuscript but the actual submission. At *Multilingua* our submission requirements are not particularly onerous. Given high rejection rates, I do not believe it makes sense for journals to insist on specific formatting requirements upfront. However, we still require a cover letter, a title, an abstract, keywords, and declarations about research integrity to accompany a submission. These provide affordances to advocate for your manuscript that are often underused by authors. The cover letter, in particular, is your opportunity to pitch your research to the editor. Tell them what makes your submission significant, innovative, exciting, and worth their while!

3 Managing peer review

The editor manages the peer review process, and I spent a lot of time cat-herding.

After the editor has decided that a submission is sufficiently meritorious to be considered for publication, it will proceed to peer review. This means identifying and inviting suitable peer reviewers. The editor identifies potential peer reviewers based on their knowledge of the field, recommendations by the authors, the list of references, and, increasingly, automated suggestions offered by the publication management platform's algorithm.

The platform used by *Multilingua*'s publisher de Gruyter Mouton, ScholarOne, also has a database at the backend that allows the editor to see key metrics of peer reviewer performance: when a colleague last reviewed for our journal and/or for another journal published by de Gruyter Mouton, the frequency with which they accept review invitations, how timely any previous reviews were, and how useful to the editor.

Identifying suitable reviewers is only half the game, though. Coaxing them to volunteer their services is the other half. Over the years I have been in the job, securing peer reviewers has become increasingly difficult. Dealing with around 150

peer reviewers per year has made it painfully obvious to me that the system is overloaded. As a field, we are pumping out many more research publications than we have the capacity to assure the quality of.

Overseeing *Multilingua's* peer review process for 10 years has allowed me to see both the best and the worst of service and collegiality in our field. I am incredibly grateful to all the peer reviewers whose volunteer work is at the heart of the academic enterprise. A huge shout-out to all the colleagues, first and foremost the members of the editorial board, who gave generously of their time and expertise, and provided constructive feedback and helpful recommendations time and again. Academic publishing would collapse without your dedication.

At the other end of the spectrum are the colleagues who never accept a review invitation; or, if they do, never deliver; or, if they do, act like the proverbial “Reviewer 2.”

I am often asked how many invitations to peer review it is reasonable to accept, and my answer is “two to three times the number of manuscripts you submit for review as an author.” It is the golden rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you! An author expects the volunteer labor of two to three prompt and constructive reviews. If everyone puts in as much as they take out, the system works; if a serious imbalance develops, it falls apart.

Overseeing the peer review process is not only about soliciting enough timely reviews per manuscript. The editor’s task also involves overseeing the quality of reviews. Unfortunately, a non-negligible number of peer reviews are of relatively poor quality. Too often reviews only engage with surface phenomena, focus on some idiosyncratic aspect of the manuscript, are too short or too long, or are overly negative or positive.

Overseeing *Multilingua's* peer review process for 10 years has made it clear to me that there is a serious gap in our academic training and professional development. If I had a wish related to peer review, it would be for all colleagues to familiarize themselves with the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) “Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers” (Hames 2013) and for all doctoral programs to include a training module related to peer review. We also need to lobby universities and funding bodies to value peer review service more. The current approach to value publications but to not value peer review will make it increasingly difficult to maintain the integrity of academic publishing.

4 Evaluating and assessing research

The editor makes decisions on research quality, and I spent a lot of time deliberating.

Once the peer reviews are in, the editor makes a publishing decision. The editor's decision is guided by the peer reviewers' reports and their own reading of the manuscript. In the case of *Multilingua*, we allow for four different options: accept, revise with minor revisions, revise with major revisions, and reject. A straight accept in the first round is for brilliant, flawless work, and is exceedingly rare. A revise with minor revisions is for articles that report sound research, but where some improvements are needed to make the article publishable. A revise with major revisions is for articles that report worthwhile research with problems in the framework, methods, findings, or discussion that need to be addressed before the manuscript can be considered for another round of peer review. Reject is for work that has significant problems that cannot be salvaged or cannot be addressed within a six-months' period.

The sheer volume of manuscripts and peer reviews that comes across the editor's desk provides a unique insight into the state of the field. Editing a major journal also constitutes an opportunity to shape the field. I have been privileged to bring to publication a lot of exciting research in the past 10 years – both individual articles and special issues. Special issues, of which we do around three per year, have been particularly enjoyable and allowed me close engagement with guest editors around a particular topic. There were many highlights, but the 2020 special issue devoted to “Linguistic diversity in a time of crisis” is closest to my heart. This was the first systematic exploration of public service communication challenges during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Focusing on linguistic minorities in the Chinese world, I co-edited this special issue with colleagues in Wuhan, the first epicenter of the disease, and Kunming (Piller et al. 2020).

Ultimately, the aim of any editor is to publish the best research in the field and to advance knowledge. One indicator that I have been successful comes from the journal's impact factor, which has risen significantly from 0.226 in 2013 to 1.667 in 2021.

5 Taking affirmative action

The editor decides not only what gets published but also who gets published. Equity considerations have often been at the forefront of my mind.

Academia is a globalized enterprise. Between 2013 and 2022, *Multilingua* received manuscript submissions by researchers based in 76 different countries. During this period, we published manuscripts by researchers based in 48 different countries. That is a significant discrepancy and due to differential rejection rates. Figure 1 shows the numbers of submitted and accepted manuscripts for researchers from all those countries from which we had more than 20 submissions

between 2013 and 2022. Plotted against the rejection rate, three groups can be identified. First, there are three Anglophone countries (USA, Australia, and UK, in order of number of submissions) from which we received a high volume of submissions. With a lower-than-average rejection rate, articles by researchers based in these three countries have dominated the pages of *Multilingua*. Second, there is a group of North-West European countries (Finland, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, in order of number of submissions) from which we received fewer manuscripts. However, in conjunction with high acceptance rates, articles by researchers from these countries also constitute a sizable portion of research published in *Multilingua*. Third, there is a disparate group of countries from which we received many submissions, but which were rejected at disproportionately high numbers. These end up being underrepresented on the pages of our journal (and, I might add, other major journals in our field). Among these, China is in a class of its own. We received 169 submissions by researchers based in China – more than from any other country – but we only published 20 of them. That is an above average rejection rate of 88%. Two other countries were among the top-10 submitters but not among the top-10 accepted, namely Spain (88% rejection rate) and Iran (96% rejection rate). Submissions from three countries (Saudi Arabia, Japan, Pakistan) with more than 20 submitted manuscripts resulted in no publication at all.

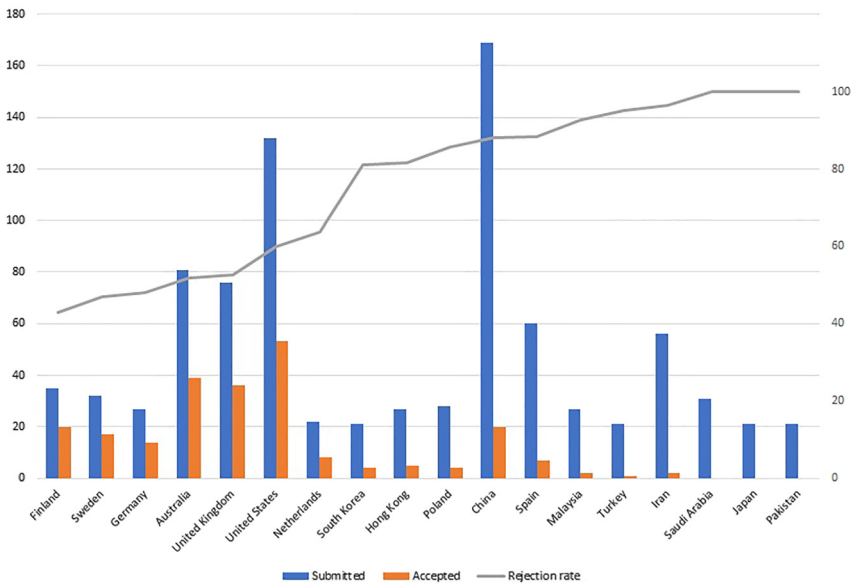


Figure 1: Number of manuscripts submitted and accepted by country (2013–2022; plotted against left axis), ordered by rejection rate (plotted against right axis).

These disparities between submissions and acceptances, and the high rejection rates of manuscripts from outside the Anglosphere and North-West Europe are troubling, even if not surprising. They reflect global material, epistemic, and linguistic inequalities. That I have been the decision maker resulting in this pattern of inequality has been distressing to me. As the overall inequalities undergirding these decisions are outside my control, I have put in place several affirmative action measures that have supported a small number of authors from low-resource countries to get their manuscripts published. These supports have included extensive editorial feedback, allowance for more than one round of major revisions, and targeted extra copy-editing support. A fuller account of the role of the editor in challenging epistemic and linguistic exclusion from global knowledge production is available in Piller et al. (2022) and Piller (2022).

6 Solving problems and setting directions

The editor is a manager, and I spent a lot of time on operational and strategic tasks.

Manuscripts come in randomly, and an issue needs to be put together every two months. Each manuscript and each issue generate a specific workflow and a set of communications – with authors, peer reviewers, editorial and production staff, and sometimes others. Most of these communications are managed through ScholarOne. ScholarOne (along with a few other similar submission platforms) has become an indispensable tool to manage the process and to keep everything ticking along. *Multilingua* transitioned to the use of ScholarOne when I took over in 2013 and I cannot even imagine how the previous editor managed the workload without it. A related innovation that significantly increased timely publication was the introduction of ahead-of-print publication in 2014. This means that our manuscripts are now published within less than a month of acceptance.

In many ways, success for an established journal like *Multilingua*, which was founded in 1982 (Kaal 2021), is when the process hums along nicely: authors do not have to wait too long for decisions, strong research gets published on a regular basis, and readers appreciate those publications. Even so, journal success has become highly metricized during the years in which I have been at the helm of *Multilingua*. In addition to journal impact factor, which, as mentioned above, has pleasingly increased, key performance indicators include number of subscriptions, downloads, and citations.

On all these measures, *Multilingua* is doing well. In the past 12 months, our articles have been downloaded over 40,000 times. This is a strong figure for an academic journal in our field. However, it becomes slightly less impressive when you realize that only two articles account for over a third of all these downloads:

Omidire and Ayob (2022) and Piller et al. (2020). This reminds us that journal metrics are too often taken as proxies for research quality (see also *Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA)* 2012). *DORA* urges publishers not to emphasize journal impact factor in journal promotion. Instead, it recommends the publication of article metrics to shift focus on individual quality.

In the day-to-day running of an editorial office, such strategic considerations are vastly outnumbered by the everyday operational tasks I outlined above. These are largely predictable and the unexpected mostly comes in the form of disgruntled authors. Given the high number of rejections we dish out, disappointment is inevitable, and communicating disappointing decisions has been a significant aspect of my work. I have tried to communicate rejections with constructive feedback, with fairness, and with compassion. Nonetheless, I have regularly been the target of authors' ire. I have been surprised to be offered a bribe to publish an article, to be threatened with litigation by an author who felt that rejection violated their rights, and to be suspected of conspiring against the promotion of a colleague who I did not know and with whose institution I had no connection.

So, editing *Multilingua* has also given me a store of stories about the foibles and insanities of academia with which I can regale my graduate students. First and foremost, however, it has provided me with a deep sense of gratitude and respect for all the colleagues whose work, dedication and commitment keeps the journal and the wider academic community going. A big thank you to everyone who has been part of my editorial journey! Special thanks go to the two editorial assistants I worked with, Hanna Torsh and Angela Turzynski-Azimi, to the members of the commissioning, editing, managing, and production teams at de Gruyter Mouton, to the members of the editorial board, to all the authors, guest editors, and peer reviewers I interacted with, and to fellow editors and colleagues who provided sage advice on a great variety of matters. There are too many people to name individually: academia is a collaborative endeavor, and we all stand on each other's shoulders.

7 What's next?

Despite my quip about the boat owner above, I am not entirely done with editing. While leaving *Multilingua*, I will continue as editor of *Language on the Move* (<https://www.languageonthemove.org/>). A fully digital and more flexible research dissemination platform, *Language on the Move* allows for greater scope of experimentation with new formats, for more flexible curation of targeted content, and for a less constrained engagement with the open science movement. Operating at

smaller scale, it is also more effective at community building, and, ultimately, that is what I believe editorial work to be about.

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