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In the Profession: Choosing the Right Journal for your Manuscript

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Barbara Johnstone¹

As the editor of *Language in Society*, I'm often asked about the journal's acceptance rate. The short answer is that *Language in Society* eventually accepts a little fewer than 20 percent of the manuscripts that are submitted to us. The longer answer is more surprising. Of the 100 or 120 manuscripts I receive each year, I reject about half out of hand, without sending them to reviewers, because they are quite plainly inappropriate for *Language in Society*. This surprised me when I became editor, and I continue to find it frustrating. Other editors report the same experience with their journals. Scholars who are required to publish quickly, in well-regarded journals, may feel that the most important thing is to get research written up and out the door. Under the pressure of institutional requirements that clearly mandate publishing but are more vague about where publications should appear, they may decide to send their work to the first journal that comes to mind, a journal that's in the university's library, or the journal they think is the most prestigious, and just see what happens. On an annual performance report, being able to say that a manuscript is under review looks better than not being able to list it because it hasn't yet been sent out. But choosing the right journal for your manuscript is a crucial step in the publication process. Taking the time to choose an appropriate journal can in fact speed the process up.

Why do so many people send manuscripts to journals where they have no chance of being published? In my experience, the principal problem is that many would-be authors do not pay sufficient attention to identifying their potential audience. They do not think carefully enough about exactly whom they wish to reach, and they do not ask themselves which journals these people read. This is an easy mistake to make, particularly at the beginning of one's career, when what seems paramount is getting published in the journals that count, and actually having one's work read may seem like a pleasant but inessential side effect. However, thinking about who will want to read your work is a key step in deciding what journal to send it to, and choosing an appropriate journal will greatly increase the chances of having your work published. And ultimately, of course, you do need readers, people who can recommend you for jobs,

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evaluate your work for promotions, work with you on conference panels and edited collections, and the like. So what is involved in choosing a journal?

Be able to articulate the contribution your work makes, and to whom. What is new about what you're doing? What's important about it? Who will care about your findings? When you are deeply involved in the minute details of research (finishing a dissertation, perhaps, or analyzing a new data set), it is easy to lose sight of these larger questions. And yet to get work published it is crucial to have answers to them. For example, say you have done a study that explores whether the officially mandated communicative pedagogy for the teaching of English in Thailand is actually reflected in what goes on in English classrooms there. You have found that students are in fact doing relatively little real communicative work in their classes, spending time instead on exercises that require them to recite memorized material. Who will be interested in this study? To decide, it is useful to ask yourself three questions:

- First, ask yourself who will be interested in the *topic* of your research. One possible audience in this category consists of people interested in evaluating and improving English teaching in Thailand: English teachers, school administrators, and educational policy makers involved with the government. These people should be interested in what you found in this particular setting.
- Second, ask yourself whether you are making a new contribution when it comes to *methods* and to whom your methods will seem novel or significant. Did you conduct the study using innovative methods, or a new combination of methods adapted to your particular research setting? If so, then people who do the same sort of research as you, exploring what goes on in English classrooms, should also be interested.
- Third, ask yourself whether you're making a new *theoretical* contribution. Is there a new theoretical finding here, a finding that challenges or supplements current theory about how things work in your field at large? For example, would scholars of second-language acquisition or language teaching be surprised to find that there could be a mismatch of the sort you are describing between educational policy and educational practice? Do your findings suggest something new about how educational policy should be implemented in other settings? If so, your audience might consist of a larger group of people, those interested in instructed language learning in general.

To take another example, say your project involved exploring the functions of English in print advertisements in China. On the basis of a corpus of ads, you have developed a taxonomy of functions, all of which point to the use of English to index luxury or novelty. You've cited work by other sociolinguists who have studied uses of English in print ads in German and Japanese, so you aren't the first person to ask the kind of question you're asking. Who will be interested in your findings? Again, you need to think about three ways in which your project might make a contribution to some ongoing discussion in your field.

- Are you making a *topical* contribution? Are you the first person, for example, to have studied the use of English in Chinese advertisements? If the answer is yes, then people who are interested in the sociolinguistic situation in China might be interested in what you've done. You might consider sending your work to the *Journal of Chinese Sociolinguistics*, for example, once you've done some research about that journal (see below).
- Have you used any new methods to assemble your corpus of ads or to analyze them? In other words, have you made a *methodological* contribution? For example, have you looked at new kinds of advertisements, or have you combined existing methods of analysis in a new way to categorize them? If the answer is yes, then other people who study linguistic landscapes or language mixing in advertising might be interested in hearing about your project. What journals are addressed to people who do these things? Perhaps *English World-Wide* or the *Journal of Pragmatics* would be a possibility.
- Are you making a *theoretical* contribution? Are you asking questions that others haven't asked because your basic assumptions about how language works, or about how advertising works, are different from others'? Then your audience may be larger, and you may want to address your work to sociolinguists at large and send it to the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*.

Very few articles make contributions of all three kinds, and few journal editors would expect yours to. What is important, before you choose a journal, is simply to be able to describe what is new about what you are doing and to whom it is new and to be aware of what is not new. Many research projects, particularly at the beginning of people's careers, make primarily topical contributions. Using existing method and theory, they explore a familiar concept or process in a yet-unstudied setting. There is nothing wrong with doing this, as long as it's acceptable to your mentors and/or evaluators. It does mean, however, that the journal you select to submit your work to probably needs to be different than the one you would select if you're making contributions to method or theory. Again, you will have a much better chance of having your work reviewed and eventually accepted if you choose a journal that is meant for the audience you are writing to. To do this, you have to do some careful research about the journals in your field.

Know the journals. Never send a manuscript to a journal you have chosen solely on the basis of its name. The boundaries between subfields of linguistics are blurry, and different people define subfields differently. Does "sociolinguistics" include research on language planning and language policy? Is scholarship about language in the courtroom a kind of "applied" linguistics? If the language in question were English, would it qualify as "English linguistics"? Would a journal called *Language Variation and Change* be interested in a manuscript about historical change in language ideology? (Answer: probably not.) Many journal names label a very broad area of possible study, but their editors are not necessarily interested in everything that might fall into this area.

For example, there are many, many lines of research, in many academic disciplines, that touch on “language” and “society.” Most of these lines of work are not actually represented in the journal *Language in Society*, however, which was founded to publish work by people in a specific set of intersecting research areas in linguistics, sociology, and anthropology. Not all the articles published in *Language in Society* are written by people in these three fields, by any means, but successful authors have a deep, up-to-date familiarity with how people in one or more of these areas talk about language and society. So, for example, even the strongest work in critical discourse analysis may be inappropriate for *Language in Society* if it doesn’t support textual interpretations with historical or ethnographic evidence, the way anthropologists do, or if it relies on paraphrase rather than systematic linguistic analysis of the kind linguists do. More specifically, *Language in Society* is probably not the place for a manuscript about “women’s language” whose author seems to be unaware that most sociolinguists no longer talk about language and gender in this binary, deterministic way or for a quantitative analysis of sociolinguistic variation that doesn’t use up-to-date statistical tools. Likewise, there is a great deal of research that is about English linguistics in one way or another but is not appropriate for the *Journal of English Linguistics*. For example, research focused solely on the teaching of English as a second or foreign language does not fall under the purview of the *Journal of English Linguistics*, even though it is about English. Other journal names may not seem to specify any particular research field. What sorts of research would you expect to read in a *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, for example, or a journal called *Language*?

The only way to find out what kinds of research a journal publishes is to do some research about the journal. Read the journal’s editorial policy, which is almost always available online. Far more importantly, read the journal. Look carefully at as many issues as you can to get a sense of what kinds of work are published there. What topics are represented? What sorts of contributions do the authors make, topical, methodological, theoretical, or all three? Which academic fields are the authors affiliated with? Have you already read and cited articles that appeared in that journal, in connection with your own work? Would the authors who publish in that journal be interested in reading your work, and why? Journal editors have to keep their own audiences in mind: we need to make sure people will keep reading our journals, so publishers will keep publishing them. Even the most brilliant piece of work may not be appropriate for a particular journal if that journal’s readers would not find it interesting.

Ask for advice and use it carefully. Talk to your advisors, mentors, supervisors, and/or colleagues. Find out where they have published their own work and what journals they regularly read. Ask them which journals they would recommend for your work. Find out which journals are taken seriously in decisions about hiring, tenure, and promotion at your institution or the kinds of institutions you will be aiming for when you look for a job. If you are required to publish in an “international” journal, don’t assume that this category includes only the top journals in the field. There are dozens of international

linguistics journals; find out which ones will count in your particular case. At the same time, keep in mind that not all advice is equally realistic. If you are advised to send your first graduate-student term paper to the top journal in your field, you may really be the most brilliant student ever, or your teacher may be a little overenthusiastic. No advice can substitute for doing your own careful research into journals and what they actually publish.

If, even after doing this research, you are still unsure whether your work is suitable for a particular journal, you can ask the journal's editor. Some editors are willing to take a look at an abstract and tell you whether it represents the kind of work their journals publish. However, many editors will simply encourage you to submit your manuscript so they can see it before deciding whether it is appropriate for the journal. If you have chosen the wrong journal, you will have wasted the time it takes for the editor to read your manuscript. And since you can submit a manuscript to only one journal at a time and some editors take a long time to make decisions, you will have wasted your own time, too. So do your own research about the journal first.

Write for your own colleagues. If you are a linguist, publish your work (particularly your early work) in linguistics journals. If you are a psychologist, talk to psychologists. And so on. Particularly at the beginning of your career, and often throughout it, the people you need to share your work with are people in your own discipline. Writing for people in another discipline is difficult, and outsiders who claim to have new, important things to say to insiders tend to have to work very hard to establish their right to do so.

The same rule applies when it comes to subfields. If you are working in the history of the English language, for example, think about publishing first in a journal that specializes in English linguistics or historical linguistics rather than in a general linguistics journal. After all, the contacts you most need early in your career are people in your own subfield, people who really understand your work and can evaluate it fairly. Aiming for a specialized audience and having your work accepted and read by that audience are crucial steps on the way to publishing in the "top" journals, which are less specialized and require that you make a much larger contribution.

Good luck!

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Bio

Barbara Johnstone is professor of rhetoric and linguistics at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, PA.