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Linguistic writing for publication

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The following, which concerns linguistic writing, counseling of writers of linguistic papers, and submission of papers for publication, is taken from a letter written by David Thomas, Viet Nam Branch, to Richard Roe, Chairman of the Linguistics Committee, Philippine Branch.

I. Basic Principles:

1) Every linguistic member can write acceptable articles.

This we have demonstrated in Vietnam, where 90-95 per cent of our linguistic personnel have articles in preparation or in print, including some members whom I think some branches would have discharged as incompetent. Some members of course need more help in writing and analysis than others, but given sufficient sympathetic help all can produce.

2) Every article is publishable. I have worked on the assumption that for every article there is an interested editor somewhere; a couple of articles have had to go to 3 or 4 journals before meeting their editor, but we haven't had a single article that hasn't been able to be placed. 2 or 3 seem to be being sat on by editors (including one of my own), but none have been rejected to the point of being unplaceable.

II. Principles of writing: (I am sure these have all been better stated elsewhere by others. Strunk and White is good.)

1) The basic goal I strive for in polishing an article is to make the article easy for the reader to follow. All the other principles should be aimed toward this goal.

2. State the objective of the paper clearly at the beginning of the paper. A condensed outline at the beginning of the paper also helps to show the reader what direction the article will be going; I consider it a tremendous aid to the reader.

3) Cut out everything that does not lead toward the objective of the paper. Bypaths are interesting to the writer but confusing to the reader. They can sometimes be put in footnotes.

4) Consistency of terminology and phrasing, parallel statements for parallel situations, help the reader to see what is parallel and what is new.

5) Clear and consistent outline. The outline should lead clearly toward the stated objective, so that both writer and reader always know just where they stand in their progress toward that objective.

6) Simple word and sentence structure reduces the load on

the reader. Avoid technical terms and polysyllabic words and involved sentence structure wherever possible. What is simple for the author is difficult for everybody else; so rather than trying to make it sound technical to impress people, make it simple so people can easily understand it.

7) Brevity aids clarity usually. The longer and more involved the discussion the more likely the reader is to get lost, even though the discussion is trying to clarify things.

8) The more important a point the more space it should take, and the less important the point the less space it should be allowed. It seems to be a natural tendency to reverse this, to argue minor points in detail and run rapidly through the main point. This can be irritating.

9) Check the antecedent of every pronoun or relative to see if it is clear what is being referred to. A lot of fuzzy thinking is hidden under antecedentless pronouns.

10) Each word and each formula should be tested to see if it really means exactly what it says. Generalized formulas should be labelled as such, otherwise the reader has just cause for calling the writer's bluff if by following the formula he can come up with wrong sentences.

11) A rule of thumb which I think is valid for writing, reading, exegesis, and other such activities is that if you can't restate a sentence in other words, you probably don't really understand the sentence yourself. Forcing oneself to restate a sentence in other words often helps to clarify fuzzy thinking or fuzzy understanding.

III. Consultant.

1) Only one official consultant should work with a member on his paper. Consultants seldom agree with each other, and the poor author not infrequently gets caught in the cross-fire, hurting both him and his paper. A recent note from Otis Leal mentioned that this is one thing that kept him from publishing much, when his attempts mostly ended up in consultant crossfire. And I have seen it happen elsewhere too. So we have now made a rule here in Vietnam of only one consultant per paper unless the author specifically and knowingly requests other people to comment.

2) The function of a consultant, as implied under the Basic Principles, is to help to improve (not pass on) the publishability of a paper. This implies sympathetic and sensitive working with the author, encouraging him and trying to make helpful suggestions. The type of help given would of course be geared to the needs of the author.

3) Comments should be specific and positive. Comments such as 'Fuzzy' or 'Rewrite this' or '?' are not helpful. If something needs to be rewritten I usually write it out the way I think it should be; then the author can either accept my rewrite or else can alter it to say what he wants.

4) The author has the final say on how the paper is written. A consultant should never force his own opinions or viewpoint on an author.

5) A hesitant author is likely to become confused or discouraged if the consultant suggests a radically different approach from what he has taken. Better to try to make the best of the approach already taken. Radical changes should be suggested only to confident authors.

6) There can be junior consultants at a workshop. (I wouldn't consider this a violation of principle 1).

IV. Writing workshop.

I was thinking for our proposed writing workshop that we would have a long seminar the first day in which we would discuss the goals of criticism of articles (creative helpfulness), the principles of criticism and of writing, and manuscript format. Then the workshopers would have a better idea of how to help each other, as well as understanding what the consultant is trying to do. The first draft of their papers (which I assume they would be bringing with them) would be passed on to a fellow-workshopper and a consultant for comments. The second draft would be duplicated and presented to a seminar session for comments as well as going to the consultant again. We have found that workshopers actually look forward to presenting their papers to the seminar if the sessions are presented as collective brainstorming sessions in which everybody pools their wits and imaginations to try to suggest ways to the author in which he might be able to improve his write-up. The third and final draft would then be the final form to send to a publisher.

Writers should be encouraged to bring individual sections along to show to their consultant rather than waiting until the whole paper has been retyped. Some sections will need to be revised and retyped 4 or 5 times, while other sections may need very little revision. One consultee I had used to bring me every afternoon whatever pages he had typed that day, so that I was able to look them over and get them back to him the first thing next morning with my comments, so he could retype them before going on further. This worked out very satisfactorily. And writers shouldn't be afraid of leaving large blank spaces when retyping sections or inserts;

better half-full pages than crowded pages.

The degree of polish expected in a paper would depend on the ability of the author. With some authors of less ability a final result of poorer quality will have to be accepted, otherwise an inordinate amount of the author's time will be consumed trying to achieve a higher level of polish. And slow writers should be cautioned against trying to tackle too big a subject.

V. Submitting for Publication.

Acceptance of the final draft by the consultant clears the way for immediate publication. The decision on where to submit an article would be governed by the contents of the article, to local, national, or international journals of various interests.

As a rule I never send more than one article at a time to an editor; this enhances the value of the article in the eyes of the editor. And with the article I always send a letter recommending the article to the editor, drawing attention to some point which I think will interest the editor. If the article is handed personally to the editor there should be an oral recommendation.

If one editor returns a manuscript, send it to another editor, trying to match the article to the interests of the journal.

With a large backlog of articles like you have, you may have to publish a couple of monograph volumes on your own in order to work off the backlog, but I presume that you have a monograph fund that would underwrite it. We are running our own series here.

As a rule of thumb, with general linguistic magazines I try not to send more than one article per year to each journal, keeping our welcome fresh but not wearing our welcome out. Area journals (like Oceanic Linguistics) or local journals would probably take up to several articles a year.