

## Editorial

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**Welcome on board! Prefiguring knowledge  
production in the sociology of language**

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The everyday life of an academic journal is punctuated by a series of challenges, tasks, duties, and obligations. We spend most of our time reading papers, deciding who could or should review the work, convincing colleagues to agree to evaluate a piece, collecting comments, then pondering and synthesizing them, communicating the results to the authors, and dealing with bad news (when a paper has been rejected) and good news (when authors are happy with the reviews). We must constantly make decisions, and we often face dilemmas that leave us wondering if we took the right course of action, or if we might have given a paper a second or third chance. In the turmoil of a journal that publishes six issues a year, we are running behind the clock, trying to keep deadlines to make sure papers do not stay too long in review and are published within a reasonable amount of time after they are accepted. We worry about the increase of submissions leading to an increase in rejections. We deal with the frustration that we wish to spend more time on the journal, to dedicate even more energy to it, even if it is a very small part of our professional lives. We are constantly dealing with various constraints: the number of characters (spaces included!), the resolution quality of images, the appropriate usage of the journal style sheet, etc. We also have the pleasure and sometimes the nightmare of dealing with our newly introduced electronic submission system, making sure to click on the right button, and sometimes failing to do so. In many ways, the life of the journal leaves us wondering how much of our work is about

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ideas, content, or intellectual and political debates. In the bustle of our journey, it is not easy to find the space and time to reflect on what we do and why we do it, on the vision we would like to develop for the journal, or on the limitations and problems with academic publishing and how we can unpack them.

As such, this Special Issue constitutes a parenthesis from our daily lives as editors, an attempt to not forget why we do what we do, and a direction for what we should do in the near future with the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* (IJSL). The idea of this Special Issue originated in conjunction with the renewal of our Editorial Board. After many years of service, the term of the previous Editorial Board came to an end in 2020 and coincided, with a slight delay, with the start of the new General Editor and newly appointed Associate Editors.

Our very first task as an editorial team was to select the people we wanted on board. This task was titanic. How to decide? Based on what criteria? What signals did we want to give by choosing an editorial board? What was clear for us was that an editorial board should be more than just a list of names. The choice of an editorial board would be political in many ways. The driving force in choosing the members of the board was locating individuals we wanted to have a conversation with: scholars of various origins, with different intellectual backgrounds, located at different stages of their careers with whom we believed we could expand our vision of the relation between language and society. This search for a kind of “magic formula” (which is a bad metaphor because fortunately there is nothing magical or algorithmic in this process) took time and concerted effort. This process helped us to frame what we wanted to do with IJSL and what IJSL could become. But if we wanted to be serious about the fact that the Editorial Board is not simply a list, nor just a database of potential reviewers (and we do not want to undermine this issue given the difficulty of finding appropriate reviewers for the many papers IJSL deals with on a daily basis), we needed to find a way to include them in the conversation and to hear what they have to say not only about the field, but also more generally about academia and publishing.

The idea of allocating a full Special Issue (that in the end became a double issue) to the Editorial Board hence imposed itself on us. Instead of considering the Editorial Board to be silent evaluators who were merely visible on the website or the front page of the print version of IJSL, we decided to ask them to write their ideas, concerns, and visions about the field, academia, and our understanding of language in society. We asked them to share this not only with us, the editorial team, but also with our readership. In a sense, it was an attempt to put into practice what we imagine IJSL could contribute to – engaging a wide range of members of the scientific community in a debate about some striking challenges that the study of language and society is currently facing, including issues such as what it means to

produce knowledge on those issues and what scientific publication has to offer – or does not have to offer – to social change.

Perhaps because we have been very insistent, because the Editorial Board members liked this idea, or just because they felt obliged to do so, they all responded positively and submitted their essays. And the result is a set of 30 essays that fundamentally, and in diverse ways, question our knowledge production, our practices as academics – teachers and researchers – and citizens, our limitations and possible responsibilities, our dilemmas, and our hopes. The essays speak from various perspectives, from various locations, from various bodies. They document visions for the future while reminding us that the past does continue to impact us, our thinking, and our discourses.

For sure, the essays also allow us to clarify the thematic orientation that we would like to give to IJSL.

As various pieces in this Special Issue remind us, the study of language in society necessitates building a solid theoretical knowledge not only of linguistics but also of the social sciences. Theoretical concepts are crucial for building understanding. But they are also submitted to ongoing reexamination and must be constantly put to the test. They are not neutral; they are the product of historical, ontological, and epistemological contingencies. They can become hegemonic, and they can be instrumentalized to affect what counts as legitimate knowledge, as the legitimate canon, and as legitimate papers to be published. They also can be too easily appropriated, especially when they originate from other fields of research, losing operational strength. In this regard, IJSL aims to fully embrace the necessity of reflecting on our engagement with theories. Not because theory is a *passage obligé* in every scientific endeavor, but because theories constitute the locus of debate, axes of differentiation, and a terrain where hegemonies are reproduced and challenged. We hope that in the future IJSL will be able to ask crucial questions about which theories allow a better grasp of what language does to society and its speakers, and further, about which theories perpetuate ideologies of language and what consequences they may entail for how speakers are located (categorized, stratified, differentiated) in society. In doing so, we might be able to pursue the ongoing endeavor of opening up our understanding of language processes in society through various epistemological stances. We might also be able to move beyond replicative theoretical framing and consider alternative ways of thinking about the interplaying links between what language is and what society does. And, we might truly embrace the necessity of interdisciplinary engagement, where linguistics alone cannot provide the sole theoretical ground of our sociolinguistic analysis, and where social sciences alone cannot explain how language works.

A significant number of the essays collected here ask crucial questions about the role of language in producing and reproducing inequalities. This is clearly not a

new theme for the field of sociolinguistics. However, the renewed interest in these matters is important to acknowledge. Indeed, social, political, and economic transformations as well as the persistence of regimenting patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist practices and ideologies force us to make issues of inequalities a crucial component of our academic agenda. We are reminded constantly that language is part of the way we see and hear race, gender, class, and other forms of difference. We are reminded that language is a terrain of struggle for access, selection, and the uneven distribution of symbolic and material goods. We are reminded how much language is tied to imperialist enterprises of various kinds, in older and newer shapes. We believe that IJSL could be a crucial space for pursuing our understanding of the ways in which language articulates with inequalities by soliciting contributions that explore various forms of difference and by inviting contributors to share a solid reflection on the intersectional components of the making of inequalities. At the same time, as some essays invite us to do, IJSL could also be a space where we can better understand how language participates in emancipatory practices, what hopes and expectations people and communities put in language practices, and further, what language can provide in terms of political emancipation, reclamation, resistance, and redistribution.

Framing IJSL around inequalities and emancipation means also that we get back to our own practices as a journal. Indeed, as many of our board members adequately pinpoint, academia is part of the problem, and academic publishing is presumably an instrument for both the reproduction of inequalities and a potential terrain for imagining alternatives to hegemonic forms of knowledge production. This call resonates a lot with what we do as an editorial team, with the way we handle submissions, how we position IJSL, and how we decide who and what gets to be published. Hence it is clearly not enough to allocate space for research on language, inequalities, and emancipation. We need to fundamentally work harder on how to operate within the realm of uneven access to knowledge production and hegemonic western visions of language and society. And yet again the board members provide some ideas that we will need to take seriously into account.

IJSL has a long tradition of providing space for less studied sociolinguistic situations with a clear emphasis on minority languages and sociolinguistic practices that have been left out of the canon of our westernized gaze. We would like this space and emphasis to continue in the future. And yet, we might also want to think further by not just displaying and recognizing diversity but by engaging in a transnational conversation around the discipline and the agenda of the discipline. We might also consider doing this with other journals across the globe, sharing our research goals, and confronting epistemologies as well as publishing practices.

Furthermore, as an editorial team, we are currently embarking on a reexamination of our reviewing practices. This includes the way we select reviewers (how to

find the right balance between experts on a particular situation and scholars who could provide a more distanced evaluation, while trying not to reduce the evaluators to their geographic location and embodiment (which often results in colleagues evaluating only papers on a particular region), the instruction we provide to the reviewers (including the evaluation grid that structures the reviewing process), and the guidance we give to authors while receiving their evaluations. More generally, we should think harder about the interactions between authors, reviewers, and editors. We should not be afraid to call into question or explore alternatives to the sacrality of double-blind peer-reviewing as THE only way of guaranteeing the suitability of a publication. Since peer-review constitutes the main form of gate-keeping for a journal, it is crucial that we engage in this process.

We are also currently discussing issues related to the languages in which we publish. Besides English, IJSL has been one of the few journals allowing publication in French, Spanish, German, and sometimes even Italian. But as we know, those languages remain very much tied to hegemonic centers. This Special Issue features papers in Arabic and Malaysian, in addition to Spanish, French, and English. Clearly this is an exception, and we doubt this will be common practice for IJSL. And we know multilingualism alone does not solve the problem of structural inequalities where the rich do not need to speak and learn languages of the less wealthy. It does not solve the problem of access to the main languages of academic publication nor of the cost entailed by publishing in a language in which an author has to spend time and money to ensure appropriate editing. More needs to be done in this matter if we continue to publish in dominant languages, by for instance exploring forms of solidarity between researchers (crowdsourcing editing, for instance) or by putting more pressure on publishing houses to edit papers not only for superficial orthographic correction but also for extensive stylistic revisions or even translations.

When it comes to scientific publication, we also inherit a particular tradition of writing. Very often the papers we receive look very similar in their architecture and often reviewers operate with this very same tradition that tends to reject non-canonical ways of writing. We are not saying that such writing canons have no value. However, we wish to also explore different approaches to writing. This Special Issue is an example of this, where we privilege short essays instead of empirical texts. By considering other academic genres, we hope to open up IJSL to scholars who feel the need to write differently and we also think that it will open up the way we understand language in society. A politics of writing should as well be accompanied by a politics of reading. Indeed, IJSL could do a better job in being attentive to who gets quoted and cited. Editors and reviewers are in a good position to indicate shortcomings in terms of citation and acknowledgment. They are also in a good position to propose alternative readings in an attempt to partly disrupt the white male western canon.

Such ideas are just examples of possible actions and applications a journal can take. And they are unsatisfactory... by definition. Such action will also require a lot of time. Many of these orientations and practices might only become possible in many years since a journal like IJSL does its planning far in advance. We also face the constraints inherent to a journal that is part of the capitalist competition of scholarly publication. We are not naïve about this, and we also know the internal contradiction between what we want to achieve and the very existence of a journal that relies on unpaid labor and expensive subscriptions that only wealthy organizations and individuals can afford. We might even in the end consider this contradiction to be impossible to overcome. But what we believe at this stage is that we want to test our very politics of operation. We do not consider that everything is possible within this frame. But we also do not believe that nothing can be done at all. Hence, we are ready to push the boundaries the best we can and see what happens.

The advantage of our point of departure, we hope, is that IJSL is an old journal. It was created in 1973 and published its very first paper in 1974. As such, we do not have to fight for the establishment of the journal, and it is already available in many university libraries. We do hope that this particular position will allow us to acknowledge the call that Joshua Fishman expressed in the inaugural editorial of this journal: “the sociology of language (and IJSL) must not shrink from APPLICATIONS, for without the test of the real world of social complexity it is even impossible to evaluate THEORIES properly, let alone come to grips with social responsibilities.”