

Language Sciences

Half a century on the linguistic frontiers

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Language Sciences

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Language sciences: Half a century on the linguistic frontiers



1. A short history of *Language Sciences*

With this January 2017 issue of *Language Sciences*, the journal enters its 50th year as an outlet for research on the rich, heterogeneous phenomenon we have come to know, and love, as *language*. The very first issue that bore the words “Language Sciences” on its cover appeared in May 1968. At the time it was a publication of the *Research Center for the Language Sciences* at Indiana University, instigated by the chair of the Center, Thomas Albert Sebeok (1920–2001), who also wrote the very first piece in the journal: “Linguistics Here And Now” (Sebeok, 1968). The editor of the first issue was Bernard Spolsky, but, when he left Indiana for a position at the University of New Mexico, Kathleen Fenton took over, holding the position as editor until Indiana University discontinued the publication with the last issue in December 1977. Even if the journal in its first decade was mainly an in-house publication, its reputation among scholars in linguistics was so good that its resurrection was announced even before the termination of the journal. Thus, on the very last page of the very last issue, an announcement appeared: “After this issue, the publication of *Language Sciences* will be taken over by the International Christian University Language Sciences Summer Institute. The Director of the Institute, Fred C.C. Peng has announced that he plans to establish an interdisciplinary editorial board to oversee the publication, so that the quality of the journal will be maintained.”

In March 1979 the journal reappeared, with two issues per year, this time published by the International Christian University Language Sciences Summer Institute, based in Tokyo, and edited by Fred C.C. Peng. To gauge how far-reaching the impact that the Indiana-based journal had been, one only has to take a look at the list of 28 Associate Editors: it included some of the world’s finest linguists, many of whom have made a lasting impact across linguistic disciplines. One name stands out: Thomas A. Sebeok successfully made the transition from Indiana to Tokyo, and he was thus both the journal’s midwife and part of its resuscitation team.

In 1988 the journal was taken over by Pergamon Press, making *Language Sciences*, vol. 10, no. 1, the first issue to be published in Europe – after a decade in America and a decade in Asia. The handover of the journal was not due to commercial interests or pressures of the marketplace (as tends to be the primary motivations today). Rather, the initiative came from a scholar whose name has since been associated with the journal: Roy Harris. It was he who, while teaching in Hong Kong in the late 1980s got to know the editor of *Language Sciences* at the time, and it was he who recommended to Pergamon Press—based in Harris’ hometown of Oxford, UK—that they should buy it (Nigel Love, personal communication). And so they did.

Having increased the number of annual issues from two to four in 1989, Pergamon Press was taken over by Elsevier, in 1991, and in 1994, the journal was transferred from the imprint of Pergamon Press to Elsevier. Elsevier has thus been the publisher of the journal for the past 22 years, further increasing the number of annual issues to six in 2001.

In the period from 1979 to 2015, or more precisely from *Language Sciences*, 1(1), to *Language Sciences*, 50, four Editors in Chief have served the journal: Fred C.C. Peng (1979–1992), Paul J. Hopper (1993–1997), Nigel Love (1998–2014), and Umberto Ansaldo (2012–2015).

2. Why does history matter?

The reader may wonder why such a historical overview is relevant for the journal anno 2017. The answer is simple: When the current editorial team took over in July 2015, we did so with veneration for a journal that has held a unique position in the scholarly landscape, but also with the aspiration of sharpening the journal’s profile. Not only did we see a need for updating the journal’s *Aims & Scopes* in order to emphasise the uniqueness of the journal, we also saw a need for connecting to the journal’s historical trajectory as it has unfurled since 1968.

First of all, though the journal has undergone many changes since its first appearance, the heritage of Sebeok is still visible in the journal’s current incarnation. Sebeok instigated the journal in the heyday of Chomskyan formalism, that is, in a period where the pursuit of Universal Grammar had overshadowed what [Martinet \(1984:32\)](#) called “*une linguistique des langues*”

where the focus is on the diversity of languages—and potentially the diversity of speech communities. After all, languages and communities are inseparable—or with Wittgenstein (1958:§21): “Und eine Sprache vorstellen heißt, sich eine Lebensform vorstellen” [“And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life”].

Witnessing the steep rise of research in formal linguistics, Sebeok’s ambition was to establish a forum multifarious scholarship in the language sciences. Indeed, the editor at the time, Nigel Love, stated in an editorial celebrating the journal’s 25th anniversary in its post-Indiana era that *Language Sciences* anno 2003 had “in common with its first [Indiana] incarnation a refusal to be doctrinaire or to toe some particular academic-political line” (Love, 2003). Sebeok himself was a magnificent example of unorthodoxy: his research interests spanned linguistics, semiotics, anthropology, philosophy, biosemiotics and biology—and probably a few more areas. This vision of non-specialisation was further promoted by the journal’s first editor, Fred C.C. Peng. Together with the editorial board, he vowed in an editorial statement in the very first issue to “make the Journal interdisciplinary in nature, broad in orientation, and greatly enhanced in depth” (Peng, 1979).

Language Sciences anno 2017 shares the vision of a journal that is “interdisciplinary in nature, broad in orientation, and greatly enhanced in depth.” It is not wedded to any single linguistic area (be it pragmatics, semantics, phonetics, syntax, or one of the many hyphenated disciplines), not in the Feyerabendian sense that “anything goes,” but precisely in the sense that the journal’s selection criteria do not follow disciplinary boundaries.

In recent years, this editorial attitude has been even more noticeable, as *Language Sciences* has welcomed contributions, not only from the plethora of linguistic disciplines, but also from anthropologists, biologists, philosophers, psychologists, primatologists, and sociologists, among others. The reason for this policy has been (and still is) that such contributions have the potential to prompt the readership to suspend its basic assumptions about what language is and what the language sciences are all about. Again, we see how the historical trajectory has shaped the current journal. Thus, when Roy Harris encouraged Pergamon to acquire *Language Sciences*, his long-time commitment to wrestling with some of the most persistent and ingrained assumptions (or, using Harris’ (1981) term, “myths”) in linguistics also seeped into the journal’s identity—well in line with Sebeok’s vision.

One example will suffice: a key point in Harris’ thinking is his critique of a premise that has run through western linguistics for at least four centuries, namely that there are such things as ‘languages’, i.e. separable, countable entities that can be ‘known’ and ‘used’ by speakers, allowing speakers to encode thoughts in a physical medium which in turn allows the listener to decode the meaning of the utterance. Peng’s successor as editor, Paul J. Hopper, famously countered this model of, in his term, *a priori grammar*, contrasting it with his own *Emergent Grammar Hypothesis* (Hopper, 1988), and the same theme plays out in the work of Hopper’s successor, Nigel Love—to date the longest-serving Editor of *Language Sciences*.¹ Love was a student of Harris’, and, developing Harris’ ideas, he presented the view that “a language is a second-order construct arising from an idea about first-order utterances: namely, that they are repeatable” (Love, 1990:100).

In recent years, the editorial policy of encouraging unorthodox, post-code views in linguistics has led to the publication of several Special Issues on the Distributed Language Movement, including the Special Issues “Distributed cognition and integrational linguistics” (Spurrett, 2004), “Cognitive Dynamics in Language” (Cowley, 2007), “Caring and Conversing: The Distributed Dynamics of Language” (Hodges et al., 2012), as well as a forthcoming Special Issue on “Language, Human Agency and Biological Complexity” (edited by Cowley & Gahrn-Andersen). Likewise, *Language Sciences* has published a couple of Special Issues that propagate *ecological* approaches to language: “Ecolinguistics: the Ecology of Language and the Ecology of Science” (Fill and Steffensen, 2014) and “Action, Culture, and Metaphor in Language Use” (Fowler and Hodges, 2016). While consistent with the journal’s historical background, this development is a result of Nigel Love’s editorial visions, and the journal as we know it today is to a large degree the result of his untiring effort to position the journal at the forefront of the language sciences.

Language Sciences is dedicated to its history and to the formative traditions that have moulded the journal as we know it today. Marshall McLuhan once said that “only the traditionalist can be radical” (Kuhns, 1996); he used that dictum to connect his scholarly agenda to a rich intellectual history. We borrow his wise words to express our vision for a journal that, based on its history and heritage, welcomes radical new ideas in the language sciences. This tradition has made us what we are today, and it has paved the way for what we will become in the future.

3. The future of *Language Sciences* – and the language sciences

So what is then the future of *Language Sciences*? As the remarks in the previous section should make clear, this question is inseparable from the question of what the future of the language sciences is. The ambition of the current editorial team is that *Language Sciences* continue to be, and even more significantly so, a forum for scholarly debates that will shape the future of the discipline(s) devoted to the study of the rich complexity of phenomena that we have come to know as ‘language(s)’. In accordance with this ambition, the editors and the publisher have formulated a modified version of the journal’s *Aims & Scope*:

Language Sciences is a forum for debate, conducted so as to be of interest to the widest possible audience, on key issues pertaining to the study of language, languaging, and linguistic interaction. The journal focuses on innovative and radical

¹ Nigel Love is celebrated in a forthcoming *Language Sciences* Special Issue on “Orders of Language,” edited by Talbot Taylor.

developments in linguistics and related disciplines. The Editors particularly welcome interdisciplinary contributions that connect the study of language to relevant areas of anthropology, biology, cognitive science, psychology, and philosophy. In addition, we encourage the submission of essays on topics in the epistemology of the language sciences.

The readership of the journal will notice that the implementation of this *Aims & Scope* will lead to some changes in what the journal publishes in the future. We emphasise that the journal has two principal ambitions going forward.

The first ambition is to become the leading journal for meta-theoretical and meta-methodological debates in the language sciences: What is the purpose of the study of language? What are the guiding ontological and epistemological assumptions in the field? What are the alternatives, and what ought they be? We welcome contributions that contemplate such issues seriously and with the highest scholarly integrity. The second ambition, in line with the journal's tradition of rejecting doctrinaire party lines, is to aspire to make *Language Sciences* a forum for contemporary developments in the language sciences that amalgamate critical examination of current linguistic thinking with theoretical and methodological innovation. This includes empirical studies that relate to neighbouring (and less neighbouring) disciplines, such as anthropology, biology, cognitive science, psychology, and philosophy. The editorial team welcomes contributions that aspire to overcome isolationistic tendencies in the language sciences, and that engage empirically with the rich complexities of language, be it through experimental, observational, or analytical methods. While we fully acknowledge the importance of reporting facts about (more or less isolated) linguistic phenomena, we do not see *Language Sciences* as the forum for such reports, unless they are consistent with the two ambitions stated here.

These two ambitions of the journal are closely related, both in the sense of a yin-yang'ish whole and in the sense of a wave/particle-like complementarity. In fact, the very name of the journal has the same ambiguity: it may be read as the name of a journal *about* the language sciences, and it may be read as the name of journal that promotes various developments *in* the language sciences. It should be clear by now that we happily endorse both readings.

Finally, the observant reader has probably noticed that the first 20 words of the scope is a verbatim copy of the previous *Aims & Scope*: "*Language Sciences* is a forum for debate, conducted so as to be of interest to the widest possible audience, on [...]" We have kept these words because we will not allow the journal to become an in-house organ for any group, and we insist that articles in *Language Sciences* be written in a way that is accessible to scholars from the language sciences generally. This insistence is well in line with the journal's past aspiration to "make the Journal interdisciplinary in nature, broad in orientation, and greatly enhanced in depth." (Peng, 1979). Such breadth in orientation clearly presupposes that authors reach out to a non-specialised audience.

4. The Sebeok-Love Award for best paper in *Language Sciences*

As part of the initiative to relaunch the journal with a new, modified *Aims & Scope* formulation, our publisher, *Elsevier*, has most kindly provided the fiscal means for us to introduce an annual award for the best paper in *Language Sciences* in the previous year. We are happy to announce that the publisher and the editors have agreed to use this award to also honour the five decades of history that moulded the journal as we know it today. We do so by naming the award after two key figures in this history: the initiator of the journal, the chair of the *Research Center for the Language Sciences* at Indiana University, Thomas Albert Sebeok, and the longest-serving, and arguably most influential, editor in the journal's history, Professor Emeritus Nigel Love (University of Cape Town). Accordingly, we are happy to announce *the Sebeok-Love Award for Best Paper in Language Sciences*.

The purpose of the award is to stimulate scholars around the world to contribute to the scholarly debate on the theoretical and methodological challenges in the language sciences, through the publication of ground-breaking empirical or conceptual work and excellent scholarship. The criteria for the award are broad. The award goes to an article that: (1) critically scrutinises basic assumptions in contemporary language sciences, (2) moves the field forward by exploring and debating unorthodox positions in the language sciences, and/or (3) exemplifies scholarly excellence in the language sciences.

Each year, the editorial team and the editorial board will collaboratively nominate three articles, and the winner will be selected via votes by members of the editorial board. The three nominees and the winner will be announced in the first issue of the following year. Accordingly, in this issue the reader will find an editorial announcement of the winner of *the Sebeok-Love Award for Best Paper in Language Sciences* in 2016.

5. Concluding remarks

In the very first issue of *Language Sciences*, Fred W. Householder Jr. opened his magnificently titled paper, "The Ultimate Goals" with five questions: "Why become a linguist? What is a linguistics? What good is it? What is a linguist? What does he hope to learn?" (Householder, 1968:7). Five decades later, the same questions flourish, except that today we would probably omit the 'a' in the second question and add a gender-neutralising 's' in the last. But apart from that we still see *Language Sciences* as a journal that asks grand questions. We hope that our readership will join us in this endeavour and in the scholarly conversations that will point us in new directions in the field. Reaching "Ultimate Goals" is probably beyond us, but much more modestly we offer to our readers and to our colleagues a journal that for half a century has been, and will continue to be, dedicated to, in the words of the very first 1979 editorial statement, "the promotion, advancement, and dissemination throughout the world of knowledge in language sciences for the benefit of mankind" (Peng, 1979).

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