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# On the future of IJSL: trans-collaboration and how to overcome the structural constraints on knowledge production, distribution and dissemination

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**Abstract:** In this essay, using as a point of departure his dilemma to accept or not the invitation to be a member of IJSL's Editorial Board, del Valle discusses the limitations that academic publishing places on scholars in the humanities and interpretive social sciences: their choice of objects and analytical protocols, and the modes of distribution and dissemination of their production. The constraints imposed by highly bureaucratized universities and publishing companies are set against the intellectual imperative to build academic fields grounded in equality and inclusion. The essay concludes with some thinly drawn goals towards more dynamic *trans-collaborative* forms of knowledge production, distribution and dissemination.

**Keywords:** academic genres; academic publishing; knowledge production; trans-collaboration

When Alexandre Duchêne invited me to become a member of IJSL's Editorial Board, I felt honored, of course, to be asked to collaborate with one of the signature publications in the field with which I associate the most. However, I was, at first, overcome by doubt. Over the years, I have grown weary of academic publishing; of the burdens and formal restrictions imposed by the new streamlining of article submission, review and publication; of the limitations such restrictions end up imposing on our ability as scholars to productively reimagine the observational, descriptive and explanatory protocols that shape our disciplines. I have often felt constrained in particular by the rigid requirements of academic writing and the barriers it forces its practitioners to place in their efforts to reach beyond the communities of practice that emerge from disciplines and subdisciplines. Behind this problem, of course, lies a structurally deeper one: universities – certainly in

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the US – are increasingly conceived of as sets of professional schools that provide students with the range of skills demanded by the existing job market. In the process – unequivocally linked to neoliberal practices and the dominant ethos of late capitalism – government agencies in charge of the accreditation of institutions of post-secondary education organize their evaluation system around the very Spartan concept of *metrics*, pushing universities to reward easily quantifiable forms of production, distribution and dissemination of knowledge. The natural sciences and their protocols – historically developed in response to the nature of their objects of study and the perceived social needs to which they were supposed to respond – are now the yardstick by which to measure the value of all research outcomes, regardless of the area in which scholarly activity may be located. Thus, the humanities and the interpretive social sciences – whose objects and even social positioning lie somewhat far from those of the natural sciences – get caught in this whirlwind, placed at the service of a redefined university and limited in their potential to develop adequate research modalities. And so do journals serving our fields. Increasingly anchored in the private sector – as a result, at least in part, of the defunding of universities' publishing divisions – journals ground their operations in dynamics where the pursuit of profit weights as much as, if not more than, the pursuit of knowledge. To this we must add the fact that the more-than-understandable incorporation of computer technology to the editorial process is granting greater influence to an editorial bureaucracy.

My views and vision of academic publishing have been shaped, of course, by my personal experience as a student, an academic and a scholar forged in Spain and the US, as member of several editorial boards over the years, and as co-editor of another De Gruyter publication, the *Journal of Historical Sociolinguistics*. Unquestionably, these experiences have been most gratifying to me and have undoubtedly contributed to my professional advancement through the professorial ranks, as well as to the accumulation of whatever amount of symbolic capital I may have. However, I have reached a point where the personal benefits I am reaping from my participation in this system are outweighed by a strong desire to experiment with forms of knowledge production, distribution and dissemination that are – at least to me – more collaborative, equitable and inclusive. As a tenured professor in a North American public university, I am in a privileged position (a position that is unavailable to newer scholars who must first secure their livelihood within the existing system) to engage in transgressive experimentation (which will come, anyway, at a very small cost to me, if any at all). For me, committing to projects that foster greater collaboration, equity and inclusion is of the essence not only on ethical grounds, but also on the basis of functional criteria, in as much as the implication of a diverse set of actors lies behind the development

of a truly thriving intellectual community and its potential to be perceived by other social actors as "important" (i.e. worthy of support).

This process, however, requires a determined struggle against multiple structural hurdles, of which I will mention two. First, there is a clear access differential to the now globally hegemonic system of academic validation between, on the one hand, scholars trained in Europe, the US and institutions that, while operating in other parts of the world, have managed to acquire the required material and symbolic capital, and, on the other hand, scholars working in different geoacademic locations and even in under-resourced institutions within Europe and the US. It is a matter of access to materials such as books, digital resources, appropriate physical spaces for intellectual work, adequate working conditions, and, of course, money. But it is also a matter of access to more subtle resources: in some cases, glottopolitical assets such as knowledge of English or command of the dominant system's preferred textual genres; in others, culturally acquired predispositions (we may call it, with Bourdieu, *habitus*) to engage in the type of research that matches the requirements of the hegemonic paradigm.

Second, my participation in several academic and intellectual networks in Latin America – many of which operated with a high degree of autonomy from the global hegemonic system of academic validation – has exposed me to modes of scholarly work, as well as to a plethora of materials and recorded social experiences, that are by and large unknown to the European and North American academic systems in which my career – especially the more institutional side of it – has developed. I see a two-way loss in this scenario; and an unequal one at that. The "North" is limited by our ignorance of "southern" production, and the "South" is limited by access barriers to "northern" resources. However, as university systems in the South adopt ideas coming from the North, only the limitation affecting the South is deemed worthy of correction. In other words, the non-reciprocal southern "adoption" of northern ideas and systems of validation is, as it were, one more manifestation of a structure of colonization that prioritizes the values and interests of certain groups – mostly well-off white heterosexual men (like me) – at the expense of others.

As I grew aware of how my professional field – and I myself – is complicit with the reproduction of these and other inequalities (such as those based on ethnicity and race, gender and sexuality), I strove to participate in and support networks that help bypass the above-mentioned North-South partition through specific practices. Among the many goals associated with this type of project, I will foreground the following two. First, engagement in what I will call *trans-collaboration*, that is, the constitution of teams of research actors whose intellectual identities cross not only disciplinary boundaries but also geographic distances, social disparities and diverse traditions of knowledge and related textual production.

Second, the development of a more open system of academic validation that moves beyond, for example, the unquestioned hegemony of the double-blind review model or the strict formal requirements that indexing agencies impose on texts. In this respect, resistance to change is, as mentioned above, harnessed by university systems all over the world that have caved in to these modes of research and academic expression, and by journals owned by companies that see in those universities their main client and revenue stream.

This is the socio-emotional context in which I received IJSL's invitation. Evidently, everything – my mindset and my projects – conspired against my acceptance. And yet, here I am, serving on the editorial board of a journal fully embedded in the system that I have just placed under critical scrutiny. The fact is I have reasons to be hopeful (I take hope to be, as I recently heard Gloria Steinem say, a form of planning) and trust that this new era in the journal's history will make a dent in the mold that shaped it, and slowly hammer that dent out of shape and into an alternative model. First, if I know anyone who can negotiate between a publisher's defence of its interests and a bunch of restless and fastidious academics, that person is Alexandre Duchêne, with his proven professional trajectory, the inclusive ethos he brings to his undertakings, and his ability to embrace discomfort as an epistemological stance. Second, there is the team of Associate Editors, who, beyond their rock-solid intellectual and academic heft, position the IJSL within a vigorous, diverse, and stimulating geo-academic map (they are based, when these lines are written, in Amherst, Botswana, Buenos Aires and Singapore). Third, the initial steps – the present dossier being a vivid example – already offer hard evidence of a commitment to critical self-reflection.

As a team, we face the challenges that I outlined above, among others. We must strive to break the language barriers (in fact, we were given the choice to write this essay in English, French, German or Spanish; so, writing mine in English is my sin and only mine – I will not reveal as of yet how I plan to redeem myself). We must free ourselves from the dependence on the protocols established by the natural sciences by reviewing the extent to which formal requirements for article structure (i.e. inscription within one particular textual genre) constrain the types of sociolinguistic experiences that can be legitimately observed, described and analyzed. We should stay alert to which scholars we reach and why; and, in the process, we should reach out – and out, and farther out – and hope to be transformed by those we reach, by their own traditions of knowledge acquisition and intellectual exchange. While respecting and improving on the inherited tradition of textual genres appropriate to the sociology of language, we should open the journal to new and transgressive forms of knowledge presentation and representation in order to create actual practices where a wide range of intellectual actors may feel at ease.

Who knows? Maybe, inspired by new collaborators whose academic and scholarly practices place us in a position of discomfort, we may discover new, valuable ways to be not just scholars but scholars who are organically connected with the multiple social actors that thread the fabric of any community's life. We, as sociologists of language, may thus deserve and legitimately demand their respect and support.