

A response to Ellen Kaisse

Introduction

Recently I submitted an article to the journal *Phonology* . The article was rejected with what I felt were rather poor comments. In an email to me, the editor, Ellen Kaisse, had this to say to me:

However, if you're not interested in writing in the reader-friendly, background-rich, and reference-intensive fashion that makes for a good journal article, it's good to know that.

What follows is my response.

My response

I respectfully disagree with the implication. I find that background-rich and reference-intensive writing just reflects a lack of separation of concerns: I am a strong believer in modularization. The history of ternary rhythm was irrelevant to my point, and thus it would be imprudent to discuss it just for the sake of being more “journalistic” . Similarly, the large body of literature on gradability was irrelevant to my point, and so I did not discuss it.

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I honestly did not find the quality of the comments I received to be of a very high standard.

One of the commenters suggested, for example, that I read Paula Aden’s ROA manuscript “to see if it encountered the same problems” . Ms Aden’s manuscript spans something like 50 pages, and 40 references. I have no idea if her analysis encounters the same problems, because I can barely tell if her analysis is correct. On the other hand, my point is made simply over the course of about 5 pages, and is completely self-contained. (The references to my unpublished manuscript are tangential, and for the record only. Peccavi.) Thus, Ms Aden should have no problem explaining simply how her analysis sidesteps the problems with Kager’s analysis. But in fact in my discussions with her she offered no such explanation, but simply asserted that her analysis correctly handles all ternary languages.

As another example, one of the commenters suggested that I was trying to show “McCarthy wrong” , thereby painting my position as being overly simplistic. But I never made that claim. I said only that certain of Kager’s rankings did not make the appropriate predictions, and that this was problematic for McCarthy’s analysis, which used Kager’s analyses as supporting evidence.

As another example, the same commenter said: “Puzzlingly, the paper seems to want to be an answer to McCarthy (2003) , but ends up tangling more with Kager’s unpublished work, at least, in terms of the paper’s exposition.” . If the commenter is puzzled, then perhaps he did not read my submission closely enough. I state very clearly, even in the abstract, the connection between the two authors, and why my focus is on Kager’s work.

And so forth. The majority of the comments repeat the same point, namely that I did not “engage the literature” . I had no desire to do this, as it would only dilute my point; any strengthening would be rhetorical.

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In my small paper I tried to isolate a particular theoretical problem and comment on it in isolation. I think that makes for a good journal article: a small but significant point that does not require scouring a library to understand. I felt that I showed, briefly and succinctly, with certain tableaux, how certain classes of constraints failed to make correct judgements with any ranking. I also felt that I made the connection between McCarthy and Kager clear: McCarthy used Kager’s analysis, and the most recent work along Kager’s lines was flawed. That seems simple enough to me, but then again I have often been accused of being too naive.

So no wonder the commenters found my writing unfriendly: I did not address the particular concerns which they felt were relevant, and which I did not. Edsger Dijkstra once commented: “It is very strange, disconcerting even, to see people disturbed when questions are left open whose answers are irrelevant.” . If my writing was not crisp enough, I would welcome suggestions on how to improve my arguments. But I do not see how engaging the literature would accomplish this.

I accept, however, that we are playing different games. It is part of the modern journal “style” to be all-embracing, to reference and touch on any tangential point, in the name of connecting up all the disconnected points in the scientific world. I agree that the scientific world is too fragmented —this is a consequence of intense specialization— , and I would like to see that problem addressed. But I do not think the individual journal article is an appropriate place to do this.

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Thank you for your time, and I hope you do not take any of this personally.

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