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An Interview with Professor Susan Gass

Interview by: *Karim Sadeghi*



Background

Susan Gass is University Distinguished Professor in the Department of Linguistics and Germanic, Slavic, Asian and African Languages at Michigan State University. Her research is in Second Language Acquisition and includes the areas of Input and Interaction, Language Universals and Language Transfer. More recently she has become interested in the area of attention and how it relates to acquisition. She has written/edited a number of books on second language acquisition and has taught and lectured in various parts of the world. Currently at MSU, she is the Director of the English Language Center, Co-Director of the Center for Language Education And Research, Co-Director of the Center for Language Teaching Advancement and Director of the Second Language Studies Ph.D. Program. She recently served as President of the International Association of Applied Linguistics (2002-2008). In the following interview, Susan Gass (SG) answers questions asked by Karim Sadeghi (KS) on her role as co-editor of *SSLA*.

KS: Thank you very much Prof. Gass for so kindly accepting my invitation to take part in this interview despite your very busy schedule. Most of our readers would probably associate you with your two most recent books (with Alison Mackey) on Second Language Research and Research Methods in Second Language Acquisition and your leadership role in the flagship journal on SSLA (Studies in Second Language Acquisition) that you co-edit with Bill VanPatten. I would first invite you to talk about your academic and professional life highlighting how and when you started developing an interest in SLA.

SG: I have recently written two articles on my own initial interest in SSLA. I refer the reader to these articles.

- a. (Gass, S. (2016). The road travelled. In R. Ellis (ed.). *Becoming and being an Applied Linguistic: The Life Histories of Some Applied Linguists* (pp. 253-274). Amsterdam. John Benjamins.
- b. Gass, S. (2016). The path I took. *Language Teaching: Surveys and Studies*. 49, 578-591 doi:10.1017/S0261444816000185

Very simply put, I became interested in language when I was about 13 years old, but when I was studying my language of choice (Italian), the emphasis was always on literature and not on language. After completing an MA in Italian literature, I 'found' the field of Linguistics and pursued further work in that area, but it wasn't until I began studying at Indiana University and took a course in testing that I realized that this was a field that I felt passionate about. This was in the 1970s and there was not truly a discipline of SLA so those of us who were active at that time tried to piece together what we knew and create a body of knowledge called SLA (see the early textbooks by Ellis, and Gass & Selinker, and Larsen-Freeman & Long).

KS: Could you talk more about your scholarly products? Please tell us how many publications you have and what the major focuses of these publications have been. How do you compare your first and last publications in terms of focus and topics covered? Do you consider your recent interest in attention and acquisition a shift from your past research that centered on input and interaction?

SG: In terms of publications, I have more than 30 books and another 5 under contract. Some of my books have been translated into Korean, Arabic, Chinese. I also have nearly 140 articles, with others at various stages of readiness.

I had two basic research strands in my early work. One was based on my dissertation work that looked at the intersection of language universals and language transfer and the other (initially co-authored with Evangeline Varonis) was based on input and interaction. More recently my work has taken on what might appear to be a different direction, but which in reality are an extension of my earlier work on input and interaction. In particular, my work on interaction considered the underpinnings of what learners were doing when they are engaged in conversational interactions. The major thrust was how feedback to learners focused their attention on parts of their interlanguage where there was a problem (for example, a grammatical error or a pronunciation error). This led me quite naturally to consider issues of attention and what it is that learners are able to focus on when there is feedback. This has led me to consider a broad range of issues, such as working memory and interaction and what makes some learners able to utilize feedback whereas others are not. It has also taken me out of the area of interaction to consider the role of captions in foreign language learning and how attention to captions might vary depending on orthographic differences between the native language and the target language. This area, too, has taken me into the realm of working memory to understand the ability to utilize captions for learning purposes.

I recently received a grant to do large-scale proficiency assessment and this has led me down a path of considering learning outcomes as a function of curriculum and other variables such as study abroad. In other words, what characteristics contribute to learner success?

Over the years, I have been interested in research methods and research design. This has been an interest of mine that has gone side-by-side with my empirical research.

KS: In the rest of the interview I would like to focus on your role as co-editor of SSLA. You are perhaps one of the most prolific editors serving in the same position (for 20 years now). Could you please tell us more about how you became an editor for this journal and what the selection criteria were at the time of your appointment?

SG: This is a difficult question because I don't remember (and perhaps never knew) what went into my selection as Associate Editor of *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*. As you know, Albert Valdman (Indiana University) founded the journal in the late 1970s. At that time, I was a student at Indiana University and took courses from Professor Valdman. He served as a committee member and became interested in my work. At a certain point he invited me to serve as Review Editor which I did for a number of years. That position then turned into the position of Associate Editor (Professor Valdman continued to serve as Editor) and my responsibilities expanded, most notably serving in a consultanship capacity in cases where there was not a clear-cut decision of acceptance.

When Professor Valdman retired, Cambridge University Press conducted an open search for a new Editor. I was contacted by the Press to serve as Co-Editor.

KS: What do you think are an editor's main duties? Has your role as co-editor changed over these 20 years? What does it mean to be a co-editor or an associate editor (and whether these are different terms – indeed you are titled as co-editor in Journal's site but an associate editor in your university webpage) and how do you share editorial tasks with your co-editor?

SG: When I served as Associate Editor, I was not part of the decision process for articles submitted, unless, as mentioned above, there was a difficult decision that had to be made. My main responsibilities involved the entire reviews section. As co-editor (together with Bill VanPatten), we share responsibility for all aspects of the journal. All decisions are joint decisions. We have four Associate Editors as part of the administrative team. When an article is submitted, it is assigned to one of the four Associate Editors or to one of the two Co-Editors. Each one of us is responsible for finding reviewers and for evaluating the reviewers' comments. Associate Editors submit their evaluations to the Co-Editors and we jointly make decisions about the outcome.

KS: Who decides on the Journal policies as well as its aims and scope? How are editorial board members selected? What are the roles and duties of editorial board members? What are the benefits for members? Does membership follow an open application procedure?

SG: Policies, including aims and scope, are the ultimate responsibility of the Co-Editors, although any change in policy would be discussed with Cambridge University Press.

Editorial board members serve in an advisory capacity. They evaluate manuscripts and make recommendations for the Albert Valdman Award and for the annual Special Issue topics. They meet annually with the Co-Editors to provide policy advice and to give feedback on publication statistics. Among other factors, we select Board Members to represent a variety of disciplines and to represent geographic diversity.

KS: Could you briefly explain what happens after a paper is submitted for potential publication? Does it go through initial screening, for example, for scope and style fit, etc.; and who does this? Does the journal screen the paper for potential plagiarism and breach of ethical issues? If so, how is this done? How long does the process take on average? How many papers do you receive and process each month on average?

SG: After submission, a decision is made by the Co-Editors as whether the journal fits the scope of the journal and if it meets certain minimum requirements. Those requirements include an appropriate section that motivates the research questions, an appropriate research design, and an interpretation of the results that is consistent with the results. On the website, we outline what should be included in an article that deals with quantitative data:

- research questions and/or hypotheses being tested;
- whether and how statistical power was considered in determining the sample size;
- reliability coefficients for all instruments employed;
- whether the assumptions of all statistical tests were met and, if not, whether any adjustments were made to the data;
- means, standard deviations, and confidence intervals for all analyses based on mean scores;
- exact *p* values for all statistical tests;
- effect sizes for all statistical tests along with a meaningful, contextualized interpretation.

Further, it is also stated that statistical results must be interpreted “in ways that add to the manuscript's substantive contribution”.

During the time that I have been Co-Editor we have not been made aware of issues of plagiarism. In general, we try to do the first round of ‘in-house’ decisions within a week or so following submission. If the article is sent out for external review, it can take another 6 weeks, depending on how long individual reviewers take to return their evaluations.

We receive approximately 200 manuscripts per year. Submissions are not regular; some months receive more submissions than others.

KS: How are reviewers selected? What instructions do they receive for reviewing? Why does review process take so much time? What happens if reviewers disagree on the fit of a paper for publication? What percentage of papers is sent out for external review? How many rounds of review does a paper go through? What percentage of papers is accepted for publication? Are any papers accepted for publication without being sent out for external review?

SG: The individual who is responsible for a particular article makes the selection. At times the Co-Editor might make suggestions if they are aware of an individual who has conducted research in the area of the article. Reviewers are selected for their expertise in the particular area of the article. We also consider the recency of an evaluation (we do not want to overburden reviewers). It does happen that reviewers disagree. The editor who is responsible for the article might consider the nature of the content of the review. For example, if it is a matter of something that could be easily adjusted (something important missing from the background section), she or he might recommend that the article be revised and resubmitted. If, on the other hand, the reviewer points to a design flaw, the recommendation might fall on the side of reject because nothing can be done to remedy the problem. There may be times when the article might be sent out for an additional review. In the past year, the rejection rate was about 85%. No papers are ever accepted without going out for external review.

KS: Who makes final decisions as to accept or reject a reviewed paper? Sometimes reviewers recommend revision but the editor rejects the paper (and the reverse may also be true). Are there any reasons for this? Can authors appeal against editor's decisions, and if yes, are these taken seriously and attended to?

SG: The final decision to accept or reject a paper is made by the Co-Editors. In most instances, the Co-Editors follow the recommendation of the reviewers. All correspondence from authors is taken very seriously.

KS: Which one of the following affect an editor's decision at different stages of processing the paper (from sending it out for review to a final accept/reject decision): a professional cover letter; authors' names and affiliations; authors' geographic origin; authors' academic qualifications; paper having single or multiple authors; authors' citation from your journal; study's novelty and significance of contributions; design of the study; standard of language? Any other important criteria not named here?

SG: The only ones in your listing that are taken into account are: study's novelty and significance of contributions; design of the study. There are cases where we recommend to writers that they should hire a professional editor to help with issues of style. On the *SSLA* website, is a suggestion for authors who might want editing assistance: Cambridge Language Services: <https://www.cambridge.org/core>.

KS: Some authors think journal policies are not transparent enough and there are some 'hidden' policies that some journals follow. Do you also follow similar unwritten principles?

SG: We try to be as transparent as possible. I am not aware of any hidden policies.

KS: What are some of the challenges of being an editor of a prestigious journal such as the one you edit? Do you have any good or bad memory in working with authors that you would like to share with our readers (such as an author's persisting for his work to get published despite being recommended otherwise by reviewers)?

SG: One challenge is to find appropriate reviewers. Reviewers are not compensated for their efforts and many are in 'high demand' by other journals. There are times when authors are unhappy with a reject decision. However, it is rare that a decision would be reversed, but, as mentioned earlier, we take all correspondence seriously.

KS: Many thanks again Prof. Gass for so humbly taking part in this interview. It is a great pleasure for me and the IJLTR readers to bear your voice on editorial policies of SSLA. Do you have any specific recommendations for junior researchers wishing to get published in your journal?

Junior researchers should pay attention to what is written on our website. In particular, should make sure that the article:

- 1) fits within the scope of the journal;
- 2) is well organized;
- 3) has research questions that are clearly articulated and motivated by the background;
- 4) has appropriate statistical analyses with data that are clearly laid out;
- 5) has a discussion section that sticks close to the data and does not go beyond them. Additionally, the discussion ties back to the background, motivation, and research questions;
- 6) strictly follows the *APA* manual (latest edition).

We further point out some reasons for rejection:

Major Reasons for Rejection

- 1) The paper does not fit within the mission or the scope of the journal.
- 2) There is a major shortcoming in the research design (i.e., the study cannot address what it claims to address).
- 3) The paper is poorly written and/or suffers from poor organization.
- 4) The paper does not address current research issues.

Further Considerations

- 1) providing a "Literature Review," as opposed to a "Background and Motivation" that is appropriate in content and length;
- 2) lacking in explicit research questions or hypotheses;
- 3) a discussion section that is too long, or does not adequately provide for an appropriate interpretation of the results and/or does not connect back to the motivation section;
- 4) selective reporting of data, or inappropriate interpretation.
- 5) authors are strongly encouraged to consult the latest *APA Manual* for considerations of what makes for a good manuscript in terms of appropriate length and scope of the background and motivation section, explicit research questions and hypotheses, and the nature and scope of the discussion section.

One final piece of advice to authors is to take seriously reviewers' comments, even when the paper has been rejected. In those instances, authors turn to another journal for consideration. However, it is important that the author take the reviewers' comments seriously because it is highly likely that the same reviewer will receive the journal from the second journal. This has happened to me as a reviewer and I have not been pleased to be asked to review the same article (without revisions). Authors need to understand the amount of time that reviewers put into the reviewing process and should weigh carefully the comments.

