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1. Overview of peer review

A major challenge in academic writing appears to be the issue of struggles over authorial voice (Matsuda/Tardy 2007; Stapleton/Helms-Park 2008). In many cases such struggles arise in contexts where academic writing is to be judged, evaluated, and, more confrontationally, accepted or rejected for inclusion in certain publications. Many accounts of this type of challenge tend to highlight issues of scientific standards and academic excellence. After all, accounts of academic research and authorial creations need to meet the established criteria of disciplines of knowledge in terms of theoretical grounding and validity of the content as well as the method of presentation to the audience of a particular publication venue (Callaham 2002). However, counter arguments to this apparently logical justification would raise the concern that struggle over the disciplinary voice (Hyland 2008) and sifting the voices for the most robust ones to be heard through academic publications in many (if not all) cases is more than a neutral and purely objective scientific involvement (Lipworth 2009; Murray 2005). Underlying such processes there may well be (conscious or otherwise) clashes of preferences, orientations, and identities that may amount to all but bias.

Such challenges are most conspicuously manifested in academic journals that predominantly apply the peer review process as their evaluation mechanism for selecting the voices that they reflect. The process is as old as modern forms of academic publishing and by some accounts dates back more than three centuries (Bazerman 1988; Makropoulos et al. 2006; Spier 2002). Different versions of peer
review are used in the refereeing process of journals. Open reviews are the ones that allow both parties, that is, the author and the reviewer, to know the other side (Gosden 2001). This version, however, is not very common among journals that attempt to project a prestigious scholarly image of themselves, since the process is prone to possible positive or negative sidedness. Blinding is the strategy employed as a guarantee of fairness (Mungra/Webber 2010). One-side blind review or anonymous refereeing discloses the author’s identity to the referee but keeps the referee anonymous (Gosden 2001). In apparently the most robust type of peer review, double blind reviewing does not allow either of the two parties to know the other (Callaham 2002).

The blind peer review process is intended to foster fairness as well as quality (Hirst 2008; Lu 2008). Referee reports as the outcome of peer review processes are meant to serve two general purposes: “to help the editor determine whether to publish the paper or not [...] and to persuade the author to make changes to render the paper suitable for publication in the journal” (Fortanet 2008: 27). Nonetheless, such a seemingly neutral process may be problematized on a diversity of grounds (Enserink 2001; Jefferson et al. 2002; Lawrence 2003; Moran 1998). Possible pitfalls such as different types of prejudice (Salager-Meyer 2008; Wenners/Wold 1997), influence of the language of writing (Bakewell 1992; Duszak/Lewkowicz 2008; El-Malik/Nesi 2008; Nylenna et al. 1994), and consistency among reviewers (Marsh/Ball 1989; Thomas et al. 2009) cause peer review to be viewed as a vulnerable process and a weak link in academic publishing (Makropoulos et al. 2006) that needs to be ‘fixed’ (Kaplan 2005).

Therefore different aspects of peer review have been controversial research topics in diverse academic disciplines ranging from mass communication (Leslie 1990) and library studies (Stilwell 2006) to hydrology (Kundzewicz/Koutsoyiannis 2005). Moreover, entire books (Godlee/Jefferson 2003) and international congresses (International Congress on Peer Review and Biomedical Publication, 2009) have been devoted to the specific issue of peer review in academic publications. Peters/Ceci’s (1982) classic article on academic psychology publications is an instance of challenging peer review. Their study is perhaps the most widely cited investigation of the practice of
peer review in academic journals and raises fundamental questions about the accepted reliance on peer review as a robust mechanism of quality assurance in venues of scholarly publications.

Peters/Ceci selected twelve research articles published in psychology journals, made cosmetic modifications (such as author and institution names) to the articles, and resubmitted them to journals of prestigious status equal to the ones they were originally published in. It was reported that during the review process only three articles were recognized as recently published and out of the remaining nine, eight were rejected because of alleged flaws of design and methodology. Although the journals investigated did not use a blind review process and the study was questioned for protesting too much (Perelman 1982), the findings are illuminative enough to raise concerns, cautions, and considerations as to the underlying realities of the apparently innocent and neutral process of peer review in scholarly publications.

Partially noticeable in Peters/Ceci’s (1982) study is an important issue in peer review that has been the focus of a relatively extensive body of research and discussion, namely, the concern over consistency of judgments among different reviewers and the extent to which reviewers concur in their evaluations of submissions (Kemp 2005). Normally two or three expert referees review submitted manuscripts to journals (Alexander 2001; Stilwell 2006). Agreement among these multiple referees is a key feature contributing to editorial judgments as to the academic significance of submissions and their ultimate acceptance or rejection for publication. This agreement or the inter-referee reliability, however, has been frequently questioned and evaluated as being very low and even possibly due to chance (Inglefinger 1994; Marsh/Ball 1989; Rothwell/Martyn 2000; Thomas et al. 2009).

Reviewers are normally expected to judge submissions on the basis of general guidelines provided to them and of submission guidelines provided to potential contributors. Specific questions may sometimes be provided to reviewers to address in their evaluation of contributions of submissions to the field as well as their stylistic assessment. However, when it comes to the agreement and consistency of judgments based on a single set of guidelines, the commonly accepted notions of worthwhileness of contribution and appropriateness seem to be much more problematic than they appear at first. Judgments
become even more complicated when anonymity or so-called blindness is added to the peer review process (de Beaugrande 2004). It is to these issues of concurrence or conflict in blind scholarly peer review that I turn more specifically in the rest of this chapter.

2. The story of a rejected paper

To depict an authentic instance of blind manuscript review that created questions regarding the extent to which the peer review process is ‘peerless’ (de Beaugrande 2004), in this chapter I explore referee comments as well as journal editor correspondence on a manuscript that I submitted to a leading journal in the area of applied linguistics and language education. This section depicts three rounds of blind peer review through which my submitted manuscript was evaluated before it was finally rejected. Each round took about five months and the entire process amounted to more than one and a half years considering the intervening revision periods.

In round one, two referees reviewed the submission and both decided that the manuscript be revised and resubmitted. In round two, three referees reviewed the manuscript that had been revised in light of the comments by the first two referees. The result was that one of the referees suggested that the manuscript be accepted and two suggested major revisions and resubmission. In the third round, the manuscript was revised in light of the comments of the three reviewers as well as the editor’s encouraging suggestions. The revised manuscript was reviewed by two referees in this third round who both interestingly suggested outright rejection based on reasons and flaws not centrally raised in the previous rounds. Probably at least one of the reviewers was involved in two or perhaps even all three rounds of review but because their identity was not revealed to me, the comments are considered based on seven different reviews regardless of the sameness or difference of the reviewers. The three rounds and seven reviews are illustrated in table 1. I also include a version of the
Discourse practices play a crucial role in shaping the ideological and socio-cultural environment in which social events take place and, therefore, influence how they are actually practiced. Promotional materials and media advertisements are significant instances of such discourses through which understandings of social practices, including language education, are both reflected and shaped. In this study I explore the advertisements of Iranian private language teaching institutes appearing in Hamshahri newspapers to uncover ideologies behind them and to investigate how they represent the social practice of English language teaching (ELT) in Iran. I examine the subtleties of how the advertisements reflect and at the same time reproduce social ideological assumptions regarding teaching and learning English as a foreign language. A critical contextual investigation of ideological presuppositions underlying the discourse of these advertisements reveals that they reproduce a mystified instrumentalist image of language learning. From a critical view of language education, I discuss this simplistic ideological image and the obligation of the profession of applied linguistics and language education to address it.

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<th>Round</th>
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<td>One</td>
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<td>Revise and resubmit</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Revise and resubmit</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>Two</td>
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<td>Accept</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Revise and resubmit</td>
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<td>Three</td>
<td>6</td>
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Table 1. Rounds of review and referee suggestions.

2.1. Round one: It will be given careful consideration

This initial round included the early negotiations with the journal editor and the editorial decision for the article to enter the peer review process. The editor was first contacted on August 16, 2006 and was informed of my intention to submit an article for publication in the journal. Attaching the abstract of the article I asked him to comment on the relevance and suitability of the research issue for publication in
the journal. The response, received two days later, was positive enough to be considered as a welcoming gesture inviting the submission of the manuscript. However, a ‘you must’ type reminder of the prestige of the journal did appear to be highlighted in the message from the editor. (In the excerpts presented in this section, the title of the journal will be replaced by JOURNAL.):

EDITOR, August 18, 2006
Thanks for your interest in submitting your article to JOURNAL. The abstract shows that your study is relevant. However, you must read our guidelines to authors closely as you prepare the manuscript. We expect our articles to have implications for our international readership [...].

After formatting the article according to the journal guidelines, I attached the paper to an email message to the journal editor. The email also asked him for information on the review process and the time it could possibly take before the result could be known. The assistant to the editor replied and forwarded the editor’s acknowledgement including a tentative estimation of the review period and asking for some confirmations that authors are usually asked for. At this very early stage, naturally the author was asked for commitments without being offered much beyond a promise of ‘careful consideration’:

EDITOR, December 21, 2006
This letter acknowledges receipt of your manuscript submitted to the JOURNAL. It will be given careful consideration. Every effort will be made to inform you of our decision within 3 to 5 months. Please confirm that your manuscript does not contain any personally identifying references in the body of the paper, as the presence of such information compromises the blind review process. It is understood that manuscripts submitted to the JOURNAL have not been previously published and are not under consideration for publication elsewhere.

About nearly five months after the initial submission, I wrote to inquire about the status of the submission and the assistant to the editor replied, saying that the reviewers’ comments and the editor’s decision had already been sent but apparently not received. She sent them again. The editor informed me of the decision, summarized the
reviewers’ comments, and reminded me of the implications of a resubmission:

EDITOR, March 14, 2007
Thank you for your patience during the review of your manuscript. I now have two reviewers’ comments in hand. I regret to inform you that the manuscript has not been accepted for publication.
The referees point out that the analysis has to be more rigorous. They also find the need for a more appropriate theoretical framework and a thorough literature review of studies related to this genre of text […]. Please bear in mind that revision does not guarantee acceptance. Should you decide to submit a revised version of your manuscript, it will once again be sent out for review.

The first reviewer suggested the revision and resubmission of the paper. The reviewer found that the manuscript satisfied the journal guidelines about being ‘of general interest and accessible to the readership’, having ‘practical value’, and being ‘well written’ but not acceptable based on guidelines related to the ‘theoretical grounding’. The three main suggestions were to ‘refocus the message’, ‘beef up the data analysis’, and ‘abandon the claim to a critical discourse analytical framework’. Further comments were also given that would contrast with the second reviewer’s ideas presented later (the date is, in fact, the date that the editor attached reviewer comments to his letter of decision rather than the original date when the comments were written):

REVIEW 1, March 14, 2007
Specifically, this work could only be called a “critical” analysis in a very loose sense of the term. According to van Dijk’s definitional criteria and the general understanding of the field, critical discourse studies are socio-politically situated and deal with the perpetuation of unequal power relationships in society […]. In contrast, the present study is a generalized critique of misleading advertising practice by entrepreneurs for whom English language teaching is a commodity […].

The second reviewer also found the paper addressing ‘an important issue that is of interest to the general readership’ of the journal and believed that it enjoyed ‘novelty and originality’. This reviewer, too,
suggested revision and resubmission, but on grounds different from
the first reviewer. In fact, the core of the assessment of the two
reviewers appeared to be basically different. The suggestions included
some rather marginal issues like more ‘references to some studies
done in this area’ and ‘a little bit more about the context’. The
suggestions also included some concerns regarding the interpretation
of results like the ‘need to explore the commercial side of the
phenomenon’ and including it in the analysis as well as the need to
suggesting remedies for the situation illustrated by the study. In
contrast with the comments of the first reviewer, the analytical
framework was evaluated as a strength of the study:

REVIEW 2, March 14, 2007
There is a clear elaboration on the critical discourse analysis (CDA) chosen as
a theoretical framework for this study. The author is knowledgeable of the
main tenets of CDA […].
Overall, your study is interesting and reflects sound scholarship. It also makes
a significant contribution to the field.

2.2. Round two: I encourage you to resubmit

In the second round, the contrasting views of the two referees were
combined and the paper was revised accordingly. In my submission
message to the editor, I attached the statement of my understanding of
the two reviewers’ comments and recommendations and my description
of the changes made to the paper. The statement partly read:

I elaborated on my theoretical 'critical discourse study' approach; an entirely
new subsection of Critical Discourse Studies was added under the Background
section; the Discussion section was revised with the aim of mending the gaps
that the reviewers observed in my discussion; and the Conclusion section was
basically re-organized.

The second round of review took more than five months because of a
delayed response by one of the referees and also because, according to
the editorial assistant of the journal, the editor and the journal office
moved to another university. Finally the editor wrote back:
EDITOR, September 6, 2007
Our reviewers feel that more work should be done before this paper can be published in this journal. After perusing your submission, I feel that some of the concerns of the referees might derive from your lack of familiarity with the publishing conventions of JOURNAL […].
A member of our editorial board, Professor […] has agreed to make herself available to answer specific questions you might have […]. Feel free to write to her for advice.
I would encourage you to revise your article in light of the reviewers' comments and resubmit […].

The comments of the three reviewers were attached to the message. One of the reviewers suggested revision, stating that “the topic was interesting but the analysis and the findings needed to be deepened and connected more with other larger socioeconomic issues, specifically in the society of Iran”. Mostly focusing on a situated perspective, the reviewer found it necessary for the article to address some questions about the specific context of the study. This reviewer’s concerns included questions like “why do people desire English in Iran?”; “what kinds of English do they desire?”; and “who desire them?”. The reviewer’s conclusion was as follows:

REVIEW 3, September 6, 2007
I’d therefore recommend shortening the piece… (e.g., cutting out much of the CDA lit review). The author also needs to situate the analysis of the data in the specific context of Iran much more than it is done now in the article.

Another reviewer of this round suggested acceptance of the manuscript contingent on a number of minor revisions. The other reviewer suggested “substantial” revision but ironically stated that the article did “meet most of the requirement criteria for JOURNAL”. While the second reviewer found that the revisions “particularly” addressed the theoretical concerns, this third reviewer found that “the theoretical grounding” constituted “THE major weakness in this article”:

REVIEW 4, September 6, 2007
This revision has addressed the concerns raised by the first two reviewers, particularly those concerning its theoretical framework.
The following suggestions are more to do with word choice and phrasing that render the article's meaning less clear […].
The article does meet most of the requirement criteria for JOURNAL [...]. [...] the major concern, the theoretical grounding, raised by [first round] reviewer # 1 does not seem to have been (properly) addressed. This is THE major weakness in this article.

2.3. Round three: I don't think it offers anything significant

Although inconsistencies among reviewers were confusing, the acceptance of the submission by one reviewer and the encouraging note by the journal editor seemed promising enough for me to attempt to reconcile the diverging referee comments and to revise the paper. Moreover, I was encouraged by the fact that in this round of revision an editorial board member was assigned by the editor to help with the revision process and could potentially enhance the article up to the final acceptance threshold. I revised the paper two times and each time the supporting editorial board member commented on different aspects of the paper and on how the suggestions of the reviewers were accounted for in the revised versions of the article. One of her final comments read: “Congratulations on your revision – I think it goes a long way towards addressing the concerns of the reviewers”. The revised paper was submitted for the third time and underwent another five-month period of review. When the editor came back with the decision of this round, he wrote about very fundamental problems with the article as if it was the first time that the manuscript was submitted:

EDITOR, April 12, 2008
The reviewers find that the article has not reached the standard for publication in JOURNAL. The study is not rigorous enough and fails to produce new findings of significance for the whole field [...]. You can also send the article to regional journals [...] as the discussion is of more relevance to language teaching in the region.

This time two referees reviewed the revised manuscript and interestingly both of the reviewers suggested outright rejection of the paper on grounds that could have been detected and raised in the very first round of review but had not been mentioned in the previous
rounds. Whatever the quality of the article, it was clearly improved compared with the first round submission. However, the third round reviewers, obviously not moving along the lines of comments of the previous rounds, focused on basic aspects of the article as if they did not exist in the early version and emerged after several rounds of revision. The excerpts of the third round reviewer comments are telling enough about the inconsistent, divergent, and idiosyncratic nature of interconnections and concurrences among the views of different referees:

REVIEW 6, April 28, 2008
Recommendation: Reject.
Unfortunately, the main concern […] about] the theoretical grounding of the paper in critical discourse analysis (CDA), has not been addressed.
Other Important Issues:
1. The Study/Methodology section […]]: Half of this section […] doesn’t really belong to the Method section, rather it belongs to the Introduction or Discussion part.
2. There is no Results/Findings section in the article.
3. The Discussion section is a mix of the Results and Discussion parts of the article.

REVIEW 7, April 28, 2008
The analysis of the news advertisements appears to be vague and impressionistic.
The author should do a literature review of language teaching in private contexts around the world to situate this study. Has the author searched the literature to find if there are other studies of this context? I don't think the article offers anything significant to the field in terms of new pedagogical approaches, theoretical orientations, or policy considerations. The article is simply newsworthy.

2.4. Sound scholarship of no significance

Aiming at a more elaborate illustration of the inconsistencies and contradictions among different reviewers, who are, otherwise, considered to observe consistent evaluative criteria, in this section I refer to five specific sets of contradictory remarks presented in the above quoted extracts. First, regarding the overall significance and
relevance of the article, while the reviewers in the first two rounds had a positive position variously stated in the following excerpts, after two rounds of review, a referee in the third round mentioned new points that contradicted the previous rounds of evaluation:

REVIEW 1: […] of general interest and accessible to the readership…has practical value […].
REVIEW 2: […] an important issue that is of interest to the general readership […]. It also makes a significant contribution to the field… this article has an added value of novelty and originality.
REVIEW 3: […] the topic was interesting […].
REVIEW 7: I don't think the article offers anything significant to the field in terms of new pedagogical approaches, theoretical orientations, or policy considerations. The article is simply newsworthy.

Second, as for the style, organization, and presentation of the article, while two reviewers evaluated the paper as a ‘well written’ one that met most of the journal criteria, one of them found fundamental problems with very basic stylistic aspects of the paper apparently interpreted as evidence of the author’s unfamiliarity with the fundamentals of writing research papers:

REVIEW 1: […] well written […].
REVIEW 3: […] does meet most of the requirement criteria for JOURNAL […].
REVIEW 6: There is no Results/Findings section in the article […]. The Discussion section is a mix of the Results and Discussion parts of the article.

Third, the methodological aspect and the theoretical basis of the article, also received contradictory assessments. This is particularly reminiscent of Peters/Ceci’s (1982) finding (above) about the rejection of resubmitted papers based on their alleged ‘methodological flaws’. In the very first round the two referees seemed to be disagreeing in their comments on the theoretical basis of the study:

REVIEW 1: […] this work could only be called a “critical” analysis in a very loose sense of the term […]. […] abandon the claim to a critical discourse analytical framework […].
REVIEW 2: There is a clear elaboration on the critical discourse analysis (CDA) chosen as a theoretical framework for this study [...]. [The study] reflects sound scholarship.

Fourth, following the challenge over the theoretical foundations and the methodology of the reported research, there was divergence as to the evaluation of how the comments by the previous round referees were considered in the revision of the paper:

REVIEW 4: This revision has addressed the concerns raised by the first two reviewers, particularly those concerning its theoretical framework.
REVIEW 5: [...] the major concern, the theoretical grounding, raised by [first round] reviewer # 1 does not seem to have been (properly) addressed. This is THE major weakness in this article.

Fifth, the editor, relying on inconsistent reviewer evaluations and comments, and taking an overly neutral and sidelined position in contrast with his, otherwise, prestigious status, appeared to contradict himself. In his comments, he did, of course, mention referee notes as the reference point of his judgments by stating that “reviewers find that...”:

EDITOR: I would encourage you to revise your article in light of the reviewers' comments and resubmit [...].
EDITOR: The study is not rigorous enough and fails to produce new findings of significance for the whole field [...].

3. Discussion and conclusion

The story of this rejected paper in its three rounds of review depicts a telling image of what previous studies have variously called inconsistency among reviewers (Thomas et al. 2009), poor inter-referee reliability (Cole et al. 1981), low referee agreement and inter-judgmental reliability (Marsh/Ball 1989), and even chance effect in reviewer consensus (Cole et al. 1981; Rothwell/Martyn 2000). Academic journals insist on their apparent adherence to the so-called
high standards of evaluation and clear criteria of quality in terms of content and style and they also frequently claim to use highly knowledgeable referees pursuing meticulous reviewing processes. Nonetheless, the actual outcome of peer review practices may appear to be questionable – among other things – on the grounds of the overall (in)consistency of manuscript evaluation among different reviewers.

When submitting manuscripts for publication and before journals consider submissions for the refereeing process, authors of scholarly articles are required to make pledges as to some features of their papers. Among these requirements, a very crucial one is the confirmation that the paper is not under review by any other journal. Understandably, this is aimed at avoiding waste of time over a submission that may be simply accepted for publication in another venue. It sounds reasonable to save time and resources of journals and reviewers. However, authors who put their time, energy, and scholarly resources into their writings are given no guarantee beyond promises for “careful consideration” of their submissions. Moreover, in later rounds of review they are clearly reminded that “revision does not guarantee acceptance”. Perhaps that is why after an encouragement for resubmission of a paper, an editor would not find it troubling to later evaluate the same paper as failing “to produce new findings of significance”.

As editors rely on referee comments in their decisions about the paper, blind peer review might act to reduce the probability of outright bias. Nevertheless, conventional peer review, as suggested in this chapter, may well leave plenty of room for other equally important types of bias. As de Beaugrande (2004) would argue, while authors may remain anonymous in the review process, ideas, theoretical orientations, and academic approaches do not. Comments by different reviewers presented earlier in this chapter clearly showcase dramatically different evaluative perspectives from referees who, despite their probably equal scholarly status, obviously diverge in their theoretical stances and preferred research approaches and even in their conceptions of the presentation format of research articles. The inconveniences created by an inconsistent peer review is perhaps the reason why there have been various calls for fixing peer review and for finding alternatives (Godlee 2002; Kaplan 2005; Persaud 1995;
Shen 2009) so that peer review can move beyond a mere ‘game of chance’ (Neff/Olden 2006).

This chapter also provides further evidence for previous observations that peer review challenges are exacerbated by the central notion of blindness (de Beaugrande 2004; Godlee 2002; Kundzewicz/Koutsoyiannis 2006; Schumann 2006). Blocking negotiations between authors and reviewers through anonymity and blindness may act to blind reviewers to many important considerations in their judgments. These considerations may, otherwise, be vital to interpreting, evaluating, and deciding about papers. Moreover, the idea of blindness, despite its contended logic of promoting frankness and impartiality (Hirst 2008), is ironically founded on distrust in referees. Underlying blind review is the idea that reviewers are not able to retain their impartiality if the authors are known to them. This is obviously not a viable assumption in the case of many academics who act as reviewers. On the other hand, for some reviewers the very anonymity imposed by the double blind situation might cause loose and careless reading and evaluation without the obligation of taking personal responsibility for their judgments (de Beaugrande 2004).

The virtual (non)interaction between reviewers and authors (Hirschauer 2010) in blind peer review is a ‘displaced mode of communication’ (de Beaugrande 2004) between authors and referees oddly mediated by editors. The key to resolving many concerns raised by blind peer review may well lie in more meaningful and open interaction and communication between the two sides of review as well as among the reviewers before their comments are sent to the journal editor. In an atmosphere of mutual trust, responsibility, and accountability, more visibility of authors on the one hand, and of reviewers on the other (Godlee 2002), does not necessarily lead to bias. Rather, the possibility of frank dialogue in a context of both openness and rigor may well contribute to the enhanced quality of scholarly publications at the same time that it prevents many unpredictable inconveniences, frustrations, and much mistrust. Obviously, author-reviewer negotiation does not necessarily involve ‘unblinding’ the review process by revealing names. I would therefore, call for sighted peer review which, through providing the opportunity of negotiation over (mis)interpretations and (mis)understandings between authors and
referees, can meaningfully enhance the quality of publications. Though obviously not a quick fix to all problems of peer review, sightedness in the sense of possibility for negotiations among authors, editors, and referees (and not necessarily simply revealing referee identities) may create space for alternative voices and *words* to survive the *crossing* force of criticism and to be heard and seen in academic publications.

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