To: Helen Goodluck (Review editor for *Language*)
cc.: Greg Carlson (Editor of *Language*), the linguistics community
Date: 5th January 2016

Re. Open Letter, regarding my invited response article on *The Language Myth*, solicited by *Language*

Dear Helen,

This is an open reply to your letter, (which I append below), informing me of your decision to decline to publish my invited response to peer commentaries solicited for publication in *Language*. As your decision in this matter relates to notions such as fair play, the purported theoretical impartiality of *Language*—a major journal in our field—and the spectre of censorship, I have decided to make my reply to you open to all. I believe all linguists, no matter their stripe, have a vested interest in these issues, and being informed, they will then be able, and of course, entitled, to form their own opinions on these and other matters.

Some context: you approached me in 2015 with the idea to solicit five peer commentaries on my 2014 book, *The Language Myth*, and offered me the opportunity to nominate five potential reviewers. Moreover, you also invited a response article from me.   You selected one peer commentator, from my proposed list, Adele Goldberg, and solicited peer commentaries from four others. The five commentaries, together with my response, were due to appear in the December 2015 issue of *Language*. But, as I was preparing my response, you informed me that you had received an unsolicited offer from a sixth reviewer to provide a commentary; you decided to accept this, from Iris Berent, and further, decided to delay publication until the March 2016 issue.

You recently wrote to me (see below), informing me that you decline to publish my response article. Instead, you have invited me to submit a new response, and placed constraints on what I should address, prescribing the sorts of things you would have me say, and limiting the number of words at my disposal. So, for the first time, in its history—*Language* will feature a part-issue dedicated to a single book—yet, this will be marked by the peculiar distinction of not including a response from the book's author.

Your rationale appears to be that I raise issues in my response that are not addressed in the peer commentaries. This seems to me to be disingenuous. I took care, in drafting my response, to firmly ground the issues I address directly in responses to *The Language Myth* by the peer commentators. I used specific quotes from the various perspectives presented in order to respond to the various issues raised. For instance, you claim that my final section, 'What's the alternative?' represents a statement, by me, on my general philosophy on what is important in linguistics. On the contrary, this directly responds to the commentary by Hinzen who seeks to rebut the alternative to the Universal Grammar hypothesis I offer in *The Language Myth*. The purpose of that section is to clarify exactly what my claims are in the book, in this regard. Moreover, each of the four substantive sections in my response article relate to central concerns and themes that recur across the reviews.

For instance, the section 'Squaring the Chomskyan Circle', directly addresses an issue that gets to the heart of the debate: minimalists appear to believe that the case for Universal Grammar (UG) has been demonstrated—that's the point of the quotation by Neil Smith, that you refer to below—that UG is a conclusion based on detailed and sustained evidence. The position advocated by *The Language Myth* is that this is not the case: UG is a presumption without any strong empirical support; moreover, it is, at its core, especially under the aegis of so-called 'biolinguistics', a biological claim, rather than a linguistic one; moreover, it is one, therefore that linguistic data alone cannot

shed light on. This issue is explicitly raised by the reviewer that I cite and refer to in that section, and is surely one of the central concerns that readers of *Language* are entitled to hear my response to, in order to make up their own minds.

Another issue concerns the tone and presentation of the book—again, a recurring theme of the commentaries. To address this, I give my perspective on the nature of linguistics as constituted of potentially competing scientific paradigms. I chose to do so because, and regardless of whether individual readers of *Language* agree with my theoretical stance, I assume that linguists of whatever stripe would wish to be appraised of my perspective, and my rationale for the presentation adopted in the book, in order to be fully informed; this is, presumably, a prerequisite to be in a position to take their own, informed view of this, and other matters pertaining to the book, and the wider theoretical debate.

You also wish to censor my discussion of the labelling of a theoretical opponent, by Chomsky, as a "charlatan". You suggest that by raising this I am being tendentious and unhelpful. On the contrary, this would only be tendentious if the attribution of this to Chomsky were not a matter of public record—and I provide the evidence in my response article. While you may find this issue unpalatable, the discussion of this serves to make the point that intellectual argumentation in theoretical linguistics has, unfortunately, too often resorted to ad hominem attacks—one only has to peruse some of the fevered debate across linguistics social media, where opinions are shared and increasingly formed, in response to *The Language Myth*, to see evidence of this. My point is to illustrate that some of the reaction to *The Language Myth*, including in some of the commentaries—I am accused of being tendentious, and derogatory, for instance, by one of the commentators—is as much a consequence of scientific paradigms being socio-cultural entities, as it is about objectively weighing evidence for or against a particular position. Surely, the LSA, as the sponsoring organisation for *Language* has a duty to consider the way in which debate proceeds, in general terms, in the best interests and reputation of the field. But you wish to censor my observations here.

In the final analysis, I believe *Language* has a moral obligation to allow me to respond—a right to reply—without undue censorship, to the largely hostile commentaries you have solicited. In 2015, for instance, the journal *Lingua* extended me exactly that courtesy, publishing my co-authored response article to a negative review. The former editor-in-chief of *Lingua*, and despite not sharing my theoretical perspective, understood that I am entitled, in the spirit of scientific discourse, and fair play, to present my response, without undue editorial interference. But in contrast, *Language* has been cowed by pressure from some members of the minimalist community: you now seek to constrain how I am to be allowed to reply. Moreover, while you have assembled six commentaries, amounting to circa 15,000 words, you say below you will afford me only 2,500 words to reply. And, you are now prescribing what I should cover in this meagre word count. For instance, you propose that I address Neil Smith's arguments for UG. I do not believe that it is my responsibility, in a response article, to present arguments in support of UG on behalf of those whom I argue against.

In imposing what I perceive to be unreasonable constraints on my response, you are evidencing bias towards the minimalist perspective, whether you accept that or not. And you are setting a dangerous precedent, in acceding to the pressure that has been applied to you by leading opponents of *The Language Myth,* those who would shut down any debate, and self-evidently do not believe in the principle of fair play in scientific discourse. This is dangerous for the pluralism of our discipline, and does great damage to the standing of *Language* as an impartial arbiter on theoretical matters. Needless to say, I will not be submitting a revised response article. Overall, your refusal to publish has little to do with objective concerns as to whether I have engaged with issues addressed by the peer commentators—and I expressly sought to present my perspective in a way that, I felt, would be

of potential interest to readers of *Language*. Rather it is a rather obvious excuse to decline to publish something under the aegis of *Language* that will cause you potential discomfort with a shrill minority of linguists; you fear it will draw the ire of those who have been pressurising you not to permit me the courtesy of a meaningful opportunity to respond, and thus to face further opprobrium from the same community for proposing the commentaries and my response article in the first place.

My original, uncensored response article is now published on my website here: http://www.vyvevans.net/ChallengingIllConceivedDogma.pdf. Interested readers can refer to it, should they wish, together with this correspondence—which also appears on my website—either in conjunction with the peer commentaries, if you proceed to publication of those. And it can also be read as stand-alone piece, which presents my perspective in response to some of the objections that have been raised with respect to *The Language Myth*. I hope that both sides of the debate will at least benefit from having access to my response to some of the relevant issues raised by the peer commentators, as well as the wider aspects of the theoretical debate. And I hope that *Language*, in the future, has more courage, and sees a way to act with greater honour, and equity, than it has on this occasion.

Sincerely,

Vyvyan Evans
Professor of Linguistics
www.vyvevans.net

From: helen.goodluck@york.ac.uk [mailto:helen.goodluck@york.ac.uk] **On Behalf Of** Helen Goodluck
Sent: 30 December 2015 20:31
To: Vyv Evans
Subject: response to commentary papers

Dear Vyv,

Thank you for your response paper. I am afraid that Language cannot publish it in its present form. If you choose to rewrite it, we will be happy to consider it again for publication in the June issue. A rewrite should not be a cutting and pasting job, but a more thorough revision that addresses the issues raising in the commentaries and avoids going into issues that are not raised (for example, your general philosophy on what is important in linguistics, as in the final section 'What's the alternative?'). A revised paper might address:
--the merits and demerits of bottom-up (data driven) vs. top-down (theory driven) research (it seems that that is the important issue that concerns you in your comments on Ackerman and Malouf) .
--the evidence aside from poverty of the stimulus arguments in favour of an innate programming. You quote from Smith 2005 but fail to mention the body of work (including Smith's own work on phonology and on language in special circumstances) in favour of the relative independence of language development from input.

If you decide to rewrite, please try to avoid potentially tendentious words/phrases and statements. And so, for example, whether or not Chomsky called Everett a charlatan is not really helpful to the discussion.

I know that it is always easier to write a long piece than a short one, but we suggest a maximum of 2500 words for your response (one commentary went over that limit, but we hope you do not follow the example).

Sincerely,

 Helen