

Writing

Chris Potts, Ling 797a: Third-Year Seminar

Sep 4

1 Some quotations and illusions

- (1) **Sympathy** (T. S. Eliot. ‘The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock’.)

It is impossible to say just what I mean!

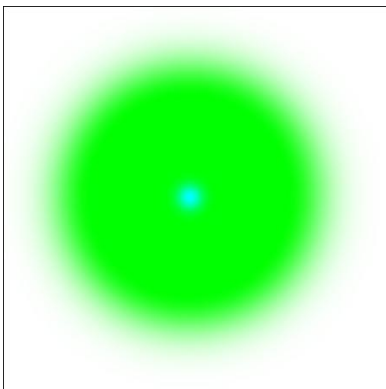
- (2) **BAD advice** (Walter Benjamin)

“Keep your pen aloof from inspiration, which it will then attract with magnetic power. The more circumspectly you delay writing down an idea, the more maturely developed it will be on surrendering itself. Speech conquers thought, but writing commands it.”

- (3) **Good advice**



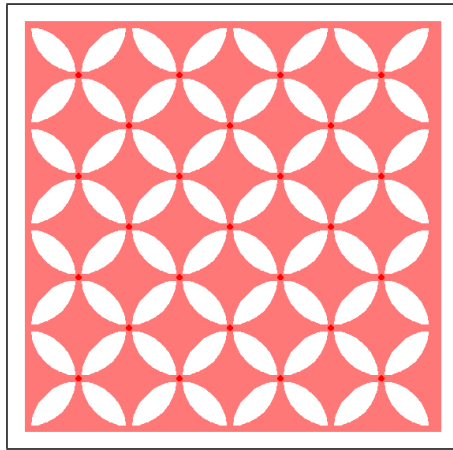
- (4) **Good advice**



“Stare at the bluish dot for awhile without moving your eyes or your head. The dot will gradually fade into the field of green. Even though you’re not aware of it, your eye is always making tiny jittery movements. Each time your eye moves it receives new information and sends it to your brain. You need this constant new information to see images.”¹

¹http://www.exploratorium.edu/exhibits/fading_dot/fading_dot.html

- (5) “The red dots placed off the center of sight appear to vanish.”² (Focus too hard too quickly and you might miss important things.)



- (6) **Inspiration** (Cat Stevens, ‘The wind’)
 “I let my music take me where my heart wants to go.”

2 Topics in linguistics

- (7) **Three broad classes of work in linguistics**
- a. In-depth descriptions (“explanations”!) of a phenomenon.
 - b. Explorations of a broad factual domain.
 - c. Explorations of a theoretical innovation.

Which most appeals to you? Combinations are of course possible. There is a fourth: Problems with existing analyses. Very risky.

- (8) **Uncertainty**
- a. At present, theoretical linguistics lacks a set of accepted standards for what counts as a result.
 - b. So how do you know whether you’re on the right track?
 - c. In a sense, you don’t . . . but neither does anyone else.
 - d. So you are free to experiment with new techniques, new data, and your work is never done.
 - e. This is a leading cause of writer’s block.
 - f. So you need to get yourself to a mental space in which this feels liberating.

²<http://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/~akitaoka/kieru-e.html>

- (9) “The medium is the message” (Walter Benjamin)
- It’s not enough to have the truth. You also need to find a persuasive way to say it.
 - Scholarship includes knowing about the rhetorical moves that persuade people in our field.

3 The actual writing part

- (10) An outline can help.

The screenshot shows a LaTeX editor window titled 'potts-schwarz-ucsc08-exclamatives.tex'. On the left is a table of contents with '1.2 Pragmatic phenomena' highlighted. On the right is the corresponding LaTeX source code:

```

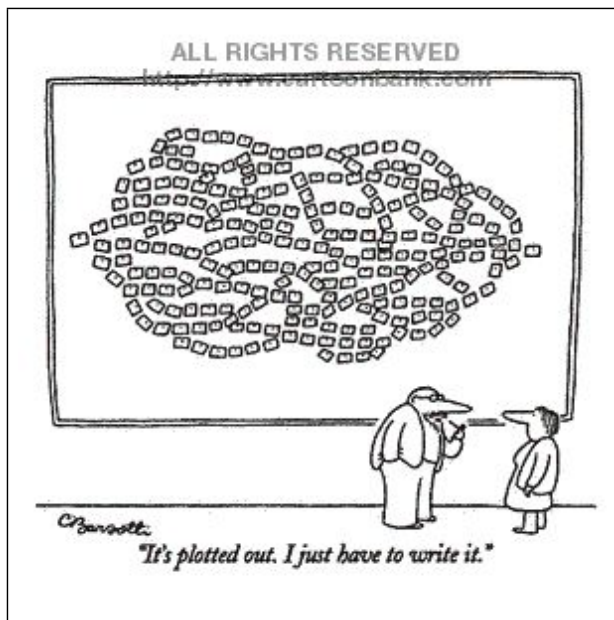
%-----
\section{Data sets}
\subsection{Data sets, by the numbers}
\begin{frame}
\frametitle{Data sets, by the numbers}

\begin{block}{Amazon.com}
\begin{itemize}
\item $53,557$ reviews of hotels
\item $277,111$ words in the review summaries
\item $8,134,985$ words in the reviews themselves
\item Over $40,000$ authors
\end{itemize}
\end{block}

\begin{block}{Tripadvisor.com}
\begin{itemize}
\item $55,849$ reviews of hotels
\item $256,870$ words in the review summaries
\item $8,761,892$ words in the reviews themselves
\item Over $35,000$ authors
\end{itemize}
\end{block}
\end{frame}

```

- (11)



(12) “Have mercy on the reader” (David Goss)³

(13) **Attitude**

- a. “One should avoid giving the reader the impression that the subject matter can be mastered only with great pain. In fact, this is an ideal way to lose readers (or audiences!).” —David Goss
- b. Don’t call anything “trivial”.
- c. Don’t leave things “as an exercise for the reader”.
- d. Don’t use “what’s standard and accepted” as an argument. Things often acquire these properties for sociological, rather than intellectual, reasons.
- e. Never invoke Occam’s Razor. You aren’t in a position to do the calculations. No one is.

(14) **Formalization**

- a. The formalism is not the message. It’s a tool for conveying the message. Use it in all and only the places where it is absolutely necessary.
- b. Simplicity in logic is not the same as simplicity in human cognition. (It is mildly interesting that propositional logic can be done with just one connective. But don’t actually do it that way.)

To formalize

- when your generalization has more than one quantifier in it (natural language is ambiguous!)
- when your proposal has a nonobvious but essential property (e.g., compositionality, context-freeness, nonderivationality)
- when it can reveal distinctions that are blurred by regular description

Not to formalize

- when there isn’t space to explain the formalism’s interpretation ($R(A, f(y), w)$ helps no one unless you explain what R and its arguments are like)
- when it would require knowledge your audience is unlikely to possess
- when it would distract attention from your linguistics, rather than highlighting it

³David Goss. Some hints on mathematical style. <http://www.math.ohio-state.edu/~goss/style.html>

(15) **Editing**

- a. Sadly, you won't say it right the first time (or the second).
- b. When you finally say it right (enough), you'll look back and think, "What was I thinking? Why didn't I just do it this way the first time?"

*And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions
Before the taking of a toast and tea.*

[...]

*In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.*

—T. S. Eliot, 'The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock'

(16) **The benefits of an empty buffer** (Bill Ladusaw)

- a. In the early stages, you should write endlessly and without attention to polish, consistency, coherence. (This is the most time and labor intensive aspect of writing.)
- b. When you've got it all out, open a new document in your favorite word-processing program. (The empty buffer.)
- c. Now begin to construct a more coherent, consistent, polished draft, using your wild and crazy document as a source.
- d. Repeat as necessary.

4 Some of the nitty-gritty

(17) Presentation (formatting, spell-checking, etc.) matters.

(18) Formulae are delicate. Don't hang footnotes off of them. Don't let line-breaks fall randomly inside them. Be consistent with fonts. (For \LaTeX users: Go into math-mode and trust the typesetting algorithm.)

(19) **References**

- a. References to books should have chapter or page numbers.
- b. Every abstract, paper, and handout that you make public should have a bibliography.
- c. The function from in-text references to bibliography entries should be total (no in-text citations without bibliographic support) and onto (no entries in the bibliography that aren't cited in the text).
- d. Use full first and last names in the bibliography. (Why? Ask an E. Keenan or anyone from Iceland or Korea.)
- e. Respect the author's publication name (up to and including middle initials).

5 Time management

(20) What we're all about

- a. You are here to do research, develop a portfolio of work, and go on to bigger things.
- b. Your teaching might suffer a bit. Don't worry, your students will survive. If you tell them why you look so groggy, they will understand.
- c. As you move through the program you'll have to loose touch with the daily life of the department. A fifth-year student has no business knowing the names of all the newbies. For potlucks, bring drinks.

(21) Conference presentations are great

- a. They bring you into contact with people who can help you with your work . . .
- b. . . . and perhaps hire you.
- c. But they are demanding. You have to write the abstract, make the handout, practice the talk, deliver the talk, write the proceedings paper, . . . these things are often distractions from the real tasks.

(22) So now we've cleared your schedule.

- a. Some people need long, uninterrupted stretches of quiet.
- b. Others can work only in short bursts.

Figure out which type of person you are, and go with it.

(23) Life

- a. It's probably a sign of maturity to realize that Thoreau got it all wrong when exclaimed⁴

As if we could kill time without injuring eternity!

—Henry David Thoreau. *Walden*.⁵

- b. That said, this is *supposed* to be an intense time in your life. Expect to make some sacrifices for the sake of moving forward as a linguist.

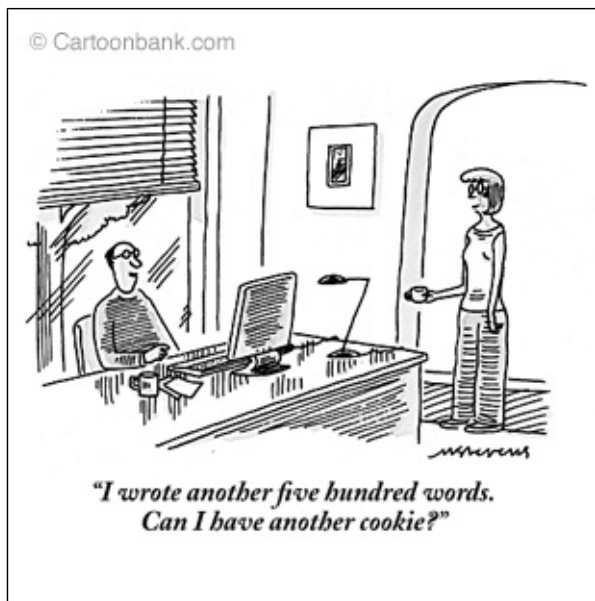
⁴I can't find this in the book right now, so I must violate maxim (19a).

6 Sharing your work

- (24) It is scary to share your work around.
- (25) It is hard to know when it is ready to share.
- (26) Share first with colleagues. Try to read your colleagues' work and give honest feedback. These relationships can benefit you for your entire career.
- (27) It is worth doing, though, and it can be exhilarating.
- (28) Do not send out mass email messages announcing your papers.
- (29) Do send targeted messages to individual scholars, with a note explaining why you are sending the work to them and which sections they will find most rewarding. Don't presuppose that they will have time to read it.⁶
- (30) Email silence is not a reliable signal of anything in particular.
- (31) It's a scientific enterprise, bigger than each one of us. Withholding work is selfish. Distributing work that other people find problems with is progress for all of us.

7 Conclusion

(32)



- (33) "Someday, everything's gonna be smooth like a rhapsody when I paint my masterpiece!"
—Bob Dylan. 'When I paint my masterpiece'.

⁶Targeted messages create individual obligations, so you are more likely to get feedback. It's a version of the bystander phenomenon.

From: Chung-chieh Shan
To: Christopher Potts
Subject: Re: Three kinds of paper

----- Forwarded message from Stuart Shieber -----

Some general comments on organizing a paper:

Different people have different styles for overall organization of a technical paper. There is the "continental" style, in which one states the solution with as little introduction or motivation as possible, sometimes not even saying what the problem was. Papers in this style tend to start like this: "Consider a seven-dimensional manifold Q , and define its hyper-diagonal as the" This style is designed to convince the reader that the author is very smart; how else could he or she have come up with the answer out of the blue. Readers will have no clue as to whether you are right or not without incredible efforts in close reading of the paper, but at least they'll think you're a genius.

Of course, the author didn't come up with the solution out of the blue. There was a whole history of false starts, wrong attempts, near misses, redefinitions of the problem. The "historical" style involves recapitulating all of this history in chronological order. "First I tried this. That didn't work because of this, so I tried this other way. That turned out to be stupid. Then I tried this other way..." This is much better, because a careful reader can probably follow the line of reasoning that the author went through, and use this as motivation. But the reader will probably think you are a bit addle-headed. Why would you even think of trying half the stuff you talked about?

The ideal style is the "rational reconstruction" style. In this style, you don't present the actual history that you went through, but rather an idealized history that perfectly motivates each step in the solution. "We consider the problem of XXX. The obvious thing to try is X. But such-and-such a pithy example shows that that fails miserably. Nonetheless, the example points the way naturally to solution Y. This works better, except for such-and-such an obscure case. We patch solution Y to handle this case, forming solution Z. Voila." Of course, the author doesn't tell you that he came up with solution Y before solution X, which only occurred to him after he came up with solution Z, and he skips solutions A, B, and C because, in retrospect, they are nowhere on the natural path to Z, even though at the time he was completely convinced they were on the right track. The goal in pursuing the rational reconstruction style is not to convince the reader that you are brilliant (or addle-headed for that matter) but that **your solution is trivial**. It takes a certain strength of character to take that as one's goal. But the advantage of the reader thinking your solution is trivial or obvious is that it necessarily comes along with the notion that **you are correct**.
