

## A List of Ideas for Talks and Papers

Probably written in 1990

1 Silent Letters. This problem is left open in AES, at least it is not closed off. Why is it better to say that in *comb* /m/ = <mb> rather than /m/ = <m> with the <b> being silent? (Later, 2020: Silent letters do get discussed more, especially in the teaching materials, but I don't think I've ever tried to justify handling them the way I do, beyond saying that it seems better to avoid a kind of ghostly unit of silence floating about and landing here and there. I think that now I would argue that using the notion of **simplification** as discussed in the *Compendium* does a more informative job of reflecting the actual history of the language. Also it (almost) explains things like the fact that the pronunciation of the <mb> in, say, *bomb* simplifies to /m/ but in the derivations *bombard*, *bombardment*, *bombardier* it does not. Rather than a ghostly (and fickle) unit of silence, we're dealing with larger principles of pronunciation in which whether or not the <mb> simplifies is determined by the placement of stress and syllable divisions.)

2. Variation leading to increased regularity. If we could demonstrate convincingly that those variants that survive are usually more regular than the forms they replace and that regular variants tend to persevere in a way that less regular ones do not, we would have a start on a theory of language change that takes into account the psychological reality and perhaps the accessibility of orthographic patterns and rules.

3. Explication as Utilitarianism. The greatest good for the greatest number? The new notion that the best question of descriptions and analyses is not whether they are true but rather whether they work. A kind of pragmatic functionalism. If the function of explication is the uncovering of accessible information that may prove useful to teaching and learning our written language, then we have explication as utilitarianism. And there should be the hints in there for a set of criteria for proper explication.

4. Two or three times a week I spend my lunch hour in the gym, working out a bit -- partially out of the vanity of mid-life crisis, partly out of a genuine concern for a general loss of flexibility and nagging lower-back problems. The workout consists of some rather enthusiastic stretching exercises and a quick but nicely exhausting workout with the weights on the universal gym. I was advised to run a couple of easy laps to warm up for the stretching, which in turn warms me for the weights. There are a number of guys in the locker room each day who are serious runners -- four miles, ten miles, twenty-six miles; one of them even entered a one-hundred-mile cross country race through the Sierra Madre of California. These fellows

all spend some time in the locker room stretching themselves carefully, in preparation for their running. I go into the fieldhouse and run carefully in preparation for my stretching. It struck me one day (while stretching) that you can stretch to warm up for running, or you can run to warm up for stretching. Ignoring for the time-being the threat of infinite regression in that state of affairs, I think there is a symbol in there somewhere. And it can serve us well as we think about writing as process.

5. Living at the end of a blind road in the country in a valley in the foothills, living at an altitude of 1500 feet with the nearest accessible summit at 3000 feet -- living such gives you a special sensitivity to the word *mediocre*, "halfway up the mountain."