

Thanks and remarks
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I am honored and grateful to be receiving the Distinguished Graduate Student Alumni Award today from you, and you have my deepest thanks and appreciation. I am also more than happy to have the occasion to say a few words about my graduate experience here. The University of California at Santa Cruz is a remarkable place, for many reasons, which it's a pleasure to help acknowledge and celebrate today. Before I can explain specifically why, in my case, it *is* so remarkable, I have to give you a bit of scientific background.

In 1967, one of the most brilliant and creative linguists and cognitive scientists ever, John Ross, at MIT, made what is arguably the most important discovery in 20th century syntax after constituent structure itself: he discovered the universal hierarchical and structural locality conditions on syntactic displacement, now known as syntactic islands. This discovery ranks with the discovery that the universe is expanding, that gravity affects near and distant objects equally, and of DNA as the locus of genes.

Just two years later, fifty years ago this month, Ross dropped a bomb on his discovery. He presented a short paper at a regional linguistics conference in Chicago in which he reported on new data showing that ellipsis—the deletion of syntactic structure—could violate those universal locality conditions. This was the equivalent in biology of showing that in some cases, DNA alone didn't work to explain heritability; or finding that sometimes the strength of gravity varied. Although the work that followed in the next 30 years, by Noam Chomsky and many others, on Ross's original discovery developed precise mathematical models of syntactic locality, these models all had a huge Achilles' heel: they could not account for Ross's second discovery, the repair effects of ellipsis.

So that's the background. As with many problems in science, people dealt with the counterevidence of repair effects by a mix of baseless optimism and studied neglect. There was so much exciting cross-linguistic work being done on syntactic locality that one could be forgiven for not worrying about the puzzling exception that repair effects under ellipsis represented.

Fast forward to 1995, when three Santa Cruz linguists, Jim McCloskey, Sandy Chung, and Bill Ladusaw, published a field-changing paper that for the first time managed to model how such repair effects could be understood. I was in my second year of the PhD program when this paper came out, and it changed my life. I abandoned my plans to study phonology (also, the other grad student doing phonology was so much better at it than I was) and began working on the interface between syntax and semantics, trying to understand this new model my three professors had proposed. The beauty of their proposal was not just that it made sense of one of the biggest problems in syntactic theory, but that it made further predictions.

Well, you can imagine what happened next: I decided I wanted to do the research for a dissertation testing these predictions, and buffing the shining star of my professors' great achievement. So I got to work collecting data from dozens of languages, working with speakers and communities around the world. I spent two years here and one in the Netherlands collecting data and trying to analyze it. There was only one problem: the major prediction of their model I had set out to test came out the wrong way. Of course when the experiment comes out the opposite of what the theory says, you get back to work on a modification of the theory. So that's what I had to do, under the guidance of a dissertation committee consisting of exactly the three people who had proposed the original theory. This might have been a problem at less free-thinking schools, but not at Santa Cruz. It is still with wonderment that I look back on those last two years of grad school and imagine how amazingly generous and helpful my committee was.

It's a wonderful and too rare pleasure to be able to publicly express one's gratitude to the individuals and institutions that made it possible to do the work one wants to do and be the person one wants to be. Outside of wedding speeches and eulogies, we have few such occasions.

So let me quote from the acknowledgments I wrote at the time, twenty years ago:

I must also thank these three in particular for their willingness to generously entertain, and then to cheerfully encourage, the analysis ... presented below, which runs counter to their own; few committees are faced with such a challenge, and none, I am sure, would have handled it with more grace and enthusiasm. I feel honored and privileged to have written this dissertation under their guidance, and to have spent five wonderful years learning from them.

Grace and enthusiasm—those are the hallmarks of graduate study at Santa Cruz, I believe, in addition to the requisite scholarly excellence.

Enthusiasm—we expect that.

Grace—that's something extra. Jim knew that I was a first-generation college student, and that I lacked the financial resources to continue without additional funding, though I was working part-time off campus and full-time during summers and breaks. Luckily, the eligibility guidelines for the University of California Presidential Dissertation Fellowships had just been changed to include students with my background, and Jim wrote a moving letter in support of my application for one, which allowed me to finish my work here.

Last year, I had the particular pleasure of writing a paper for and co-editing a festschrift in Jim's honor. I think it's appropriate to quote part of my acknowledgments here:

It is more than a pleasure and an honor to present this small piece in gratitude to Jim, whose personal and professional example has inspired me for the better part of three decades. His brilliant combination of painstaking data collection, insightful formal analysis, and scrupulous scholarship is a model for us all. ... He has also been more than a model citizen of the field, with an unmatched gentility and good-naturedness.

But it is not just world-class professors that make an outstanding graduate education what it is—that much is obvious. It is also the other students, both in one's cohort and in the program, who you learn from and with. It is also the unsung and usually unknown administrators who help create the conditions and policies that allow a program to thrive. And finally it is the staff of the university at all levels, from those in the registrar's and bursar's offices, to the library, to divisional and departmental coordinators and administrators who are the ones that are both crucial to the success and well-being of students (and of faculty!). I would be remiss if I didn't mention the most important one while I was here, for me and for generations of students, Tanya Honig. She was the very embodiment of her last name, which means "honey" in German—always ready with help and good will offered with a sweetness of humane spirit.

Given the occasion, I've spoken entirely about the superlative graduate education at UCSC, and about my gratitude to this University and the people who made and make it up in particular. But I'd like to end with remarks on the idea and role of graduate education itself.

Graduate education is more important now than ever. The shifting landscape not just of higher education but of our societies requires that we renew our commitment to and be vocal about its importance in ways we may have taken for granted in the past.

Graduate education is not just important for the training it imparts, but for the fact that the degrees granted by graduate education programs represent the highest degrees that universities confer, and they represent the intersection, the cutting edge, of the discovery of new knowledge with its dissemination, the very *raison d'être* of universities. People with graduate degrees are experts—at a time when expertise and evidence itself is under attack, in areas from the geophysical sciences and medicine to economics and other social sciences: there is unwarranted skepticism about climate change, vaccines, the fact that early childhood education is a good idea and rent control isn't, and many other topics where experts—the scholars and scientists produced by graduate education—have achieved essential consensus.

So as pleased as I am to receive this award, and of the opportunity it's given me to thank the individuals involved in my graduate education, I more than anything want to take the opportunity to celebrate the system, and this university as an instantiation and model of that system—the only system humans have created that is solely dedicated to the discovery, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge. For this, and for my opportunity to recognize those who make it possible, I say thanks.