While free-writing to prepare for this autobiography, I realized that my attitude towards writing has changed in the last few years. Where my writing was once a form of personal self-expression, it is now supposed to be rather impersonal and selfless. And where writing was once an escape for me, a way to release tension, it now causes a degree of tension in me. It is easy to locate the main reasons for these changes. When I moved from writing fiction to working as a theoretical linguist, I traded personal self-expression for more objective, precise results. In deciding to become a linguistics professor, I forfeited my carefree amateur status and made writing both highly public and integral to my professional success. These are not complaints. I am just acknowledging that writing this autobiography now feels strangely nostalgic and somewhat self-indulgent, because it is just the sort of writing that I have not done for years. At the same time, I am glad to have the chance to do it. It has been too long since my goal at the keyboard was simply to express myself, with little at stake and a small audience in mind. If someone asked me to describe myself as a writer, I would begin by acknowledging these mixed emotions. They seem to capture my current relationship with writing.

My life as a thinking person began when I conceived of myself as a writer, at the start of high school. Before that, I led an active mental life, but the thinking was inward-looking. A minutely examined, though disengaged, life. The first serious writing I did of my own accord was fiction. It proved an excellent way to articulate and externalize my thoughts. Though our situations and motivations seem different, I experienced some of the emotions that Malcolm X describes in ‘Coming to an awareness of language’ (p. 65). Like
him, I felt empowered by my writing, and thus wrote exuberantly and extensively — enough to fill a large file drawer, mostly with short stories. I have not looked at this work in years. I hesitate to confirm my suspicions that it’s not particularly good stuff.

I no longer write fiction; it was always an unnatural fit. My brain is designed for writing nonfiction. Even while churning out a short story a week, I found writing essays to be more absorbing, the results more satisfying. I seemed also to be making more progress with this form. My nonfiction improved steadily, and my passion for it increased. I felt at home in this “community of discourse” (Williams, p. 11). What’s more, the old stuff, while of lesser quality, sometimes still pleased me, at the level of phrasing and the level of content. I sensed that my fiction was wallowing at an amateur level, unlikely to move upwards.

The next few years had me casting about for just the right sort of writing. I considered becoming a journalist. But there were too many reminders, in the instruction, that writing is merely a tool for journalists. In ‘How to write with style’, Kurt Vonnegut calls journalists “freaks in the world of writers” (p. 150). My sense is that this is because they inhabit the world of writers only by accident. It happens that people communicate complex ideas in language. One can imagine better systems, systems that would not reveal as much about their users as written language does. But such systems aren’t available to humans in this age. Thus, reporters expend much energy attempting “to reveal almost nothing about themselves in their writings” (Vonnegut, p. 150). In this setting, my love of language was not welcome. This signaled to me that I should look elsewhere. The “elements of style” that Vonnegut describes attracted much of my attention.

Analyzing the media absorbed me, because it called for close attention to rhetorical styles and patterns. I enjoyed building arguments and negotiating theoretical proposals. But the field of critical theory struck me as too much in love with its own style and jargon, and it seemed also to require hours a day reading People magazine and watching network news programs. So I
moved to analytic philosophy. This was nearly ideal. The research was serious and precise, and the philosophy of language was a hot topic. But here as elsewhere in philosophy, one finds no strong common goal and no movement forward. There is only argument and counterargument. After all, philosophers openly admit that whenever an area of study solidifies around common goals, it is no longer considered philosophy. Newton brought physics out of philosophy, and Darwin did the same for biology. The most recent field to leave philosophy and head out on its own? Natural language semantics, now a lively subfield of linguistics. When I learned of this recent change, I headed off as well. Luckily, the linguistics and philosophy departments at NYU were fairly close in spirit and location. I moved to theoretical linguistics, which led me to graduate studies at UCSC, and will next year take me to UMass, Amherst.

The writing one does for linguistics is almost exactly what I had been searching for since high school. It is (or should be!) nonfiction. The task is to produce careful, rigorous arguments, as in analytic philosophy. But there is a fairly clear common goal: an accurate description of the world’s languages in abstract enough terms that the result is of value to theoretical computer scientists, cognitive scientists, sociologists, and others. I work on the natural language semantics part of this project; my job is to understand how meaningful expressions combine with each other to form more complex meaningful expressions.

Why is this almost exactly what I had been searching for in a mode of writing? What is missing? The answer is creative self-expression. My papers cannot be filled with stylistic frills and personal idiosyncracies, because this would distract from the goal of communicating my results to others. For this task, writing is perhaps not ideal. Perhaps it would be more accurate and efficient to download the information directly to others’ brains. These possibilities seem attractive in linguistics (and in science more generally). They are absurd and inappropriate when it comes to fiction or poetry or song, where we would miss the point entirely if we turned the reader into a mere information receptacle.
There is a tension here. I agree with the consensus opinion that linguistics work should be cold and impersonal. The object of study is the language. If the study itself constantly calls attention to the language (to itself) at a meta-level, then the result is likely to be confusion. On the other hand, I’ve got to produce this stuff! It’s got to keep me stimulated. It’s got to compel me to spend untold hours banging on my keyboard, and leave me satisfied enough to pick up the work of others when I’m done. I often worry: Have I lost the ability to produce, or even recognize, beautiful writing? Since leaving New York to become a graduate student, I have read fewer and fewer novels. My reading time is instead devoted to technical articles and monographs. Similarly, as I said, this is the first personal writing I have done in quite some time.

Some habits survive from my days as a fiction writer. I do most of my thinking at my keyboard, for instance, in the form of loosely composed essays. I am incapable of sustained thinking outside the form of the essay. This slows me up considerably, since even terrible ideas must be articulated in my most polished prose just so I can see that they are terrible. I found this nerve-wracking when I began working in earnest on my dissertation. I would set to work improving a paragraph, or a few lines, attempting to avoid the “shoddily constructed” sentences that, as Zinsser observes (p. 52), can put off even the most determined readers. But I would then be struck by a creeping anxiety: “This thing needs to be like 300 pages! There isn’t time for individual sentences. Move!” I had found a job for the next fall. But it was (and is) contingent upon my getting the dissertation defended and filed this year.

Here, in my dissertation’s composition, we have a prime example of how writing is now a source of tension, rather than a relief from it, as it was in high school. It’s not the only such example, nor is it the first. The change happened in my second year of graduate school, when I first felt pressure to publish my research. I wrote some serious linguistics as an undergraduate. However, at that point in my career, the mere fact that I was doing such work sufficed. It did not much matter whether it was top-notch. My responsibility was simply to get out of college in fine form. That changed in the middle of my time as a graduate student. The UCSC graduate
program is research-oriented; one’s progress in the department is measured in large part by how
many major research papers one has produced and then published or presented at a conference.

As a result, my thoughts and feelings as I sit at my keyboard differ from those of my high
school and college days. When I write now, I often have an audience of my peers in mind. I
hear their potential challenges. I hear their work, especially when it is in conflict with what I
am proposing. I worry that this chorus could freeze me up, prevent me from continuing to think
and write freely. At the same time, I know that freezing up would be bad for my career. Could
that knowledge freeze me up? I have a strategy for preventing this. So far it has been successful.
I do my best to write my first draft without worrying what others would think about it. Then I
revise with my audience in mind. I find revising easier than composition, in large part because
the draft exists at that point. I feel freed to linger over small points, to look at the ideas from
new perspectives. In a pinch, I could read it for typos, print it, and be done with it.

So, at present, and probably for the whole of my future, I am a writer of impersonal linguistics
rather than personal essays. Both modes depend entirely on the author’s creativity; I have not
slipped into journalistic mode. Linguistics engages me analytically in a way that my personal
writing never did. I am looking forward to this course because it will provide me with a way to
combine these two modes of expression. My essays can contain some linguistics, but they can
also contain a visible and important element of me and my style.