

Aix Marks the Spot—and Marseille, 2024: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Sometimes, people want to know why I go to academic conferences, usually at my own expense, and certainly with my own material to present at the conferences, material that requires a good deal of effort to develop: sorting through mountains of data, having ideas about the data that are original and relevant, organizing the data and material so that it makes sense to other linguists who might not have the same areas of expertise I have, and making it all look pretty so that during long days of conferring people can come up with another twenty minutes of attention for my data and ideas.

The prescriptivism conference—a conference centering on linguistic considerations of ideas about what language(s) “should” be—was the first conference I went to in person since the plague. I had been to a couple of conferences online, but online is not the same as in-person. In part because my laptop is not the same as Aix-en-Provence.

The Saint Jean de Malta cathedral in Aix, with a narrow medieval street, and sign for a store that has the same name as one of my favorite authors.



Aix Marks the Spot—and Marseille, 2024: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

To get back on the horse again, so to write, during 2024, I've prioritized conferences that I know are great, because I've previously been to conferences run by their respective organizations, and those prior conferences were great, so I would expect the current conferences to be great. So far, so good. The prescriptivism conference was great: interesting people, fascinating and important ideas, insights I can sort out to do better in the future. All great.

Great like Paul Cezanne. I passed him at least twice every day in Aix, on the way between the conference and the hostel. A guy with a backpack, art supplies, and a willingness to hike all over the hills. Paul and I could have been best friends in another timeline. But Paul was not popular in Aix. In fact, he pissed off somebody important in town, who arranged, beyond both his and Cezanne's deaths, to make sure that there was no collection of Cezanne's art in Cezanne's home town. A museum in town has managed to acquire a few of Paul's arts, but if we want to see Paul's productions, we can go almost anywhere else for more and better material. The anti-Cezanne guy won. Or maybe we all won—we can't all get to Aix, but most of us live within reach of a museum with a better collection of Cezanne's works than there is in Aix.



I go to linguistics conferences to speak my own language. Why can't I speak my language with people who are not linguists?

- A. Because linguists are a bunch of self-selecting weirdos, as one of my bosses put it. People don't handle difference of any kind well—not sex differences, not gender differences, not appearance differences, not economic differences, not social differences, not geographic differences, not religious differences—none of the differences. People don't like difference. Somebody told me that people will tolerate up to 15% difference. How would we measure that? And beyond that percentage, people will not tolerate difference but will have crusades and start wars and exploit one another, etc. That's a long etc., unfortunately. And where did that number come from? I suspect it's one of the 86% of statistics that people just make up on the spot, like that one. Apparently, I'm more than 15% different. I'm weird. I'm not popular. The best I get from at least 77% people is a sort of low-level hostility that they disguise as indifference because it's currently illegal to stone people, burn them at the stake, or draw and quarter them.
- B. Because we live in an era during which intellectual difference is the least tolerable difference. Use your mind, think critically, develop an area of expertise: you're as bad as the genocidal tyrants of the 20th century. Call somebody fat, and you're body-shaming. Notice a different level of melanin, and you're a racist. Decide for women what they can and cannot do for their lives, and you're on your way to high office and heaven—I'm not sure those are different things, to the people who are ambitious in that direction. Or you're a misogynist. But call somebody a nerd, and everybody laughs. Anti-intellectualism remains a culturally acceptable form of hostile discrimination. I suspect it's the fundamental hostile discrimination—people who can think more clearly might make the case that all of this hostility toward difference is a problem.

I love how sacrilegious pigeons are. I haven't found sacred site anywhere in the world that pigeons haven't shat upon, and I'm using 'sacred' in the broadest possible sense—art can be sacred, antibiotics can be sacred, etc. (Another extensive etc.)



Aix Marks the Spot—and Marseille, 2024: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

So I try to be an acceptable level of capable without being an unacceptable level of analytical. I get this wrong frequently, and bad things happen.

Writing of which, I used the phrase *in medias res* at work the other day. I was tired, and it just slipped out. Time to start looking for another job.

Graffiti pretending to be cave art, in Marseilles



Aix Marks the Spot—and Marseille, 2024: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

If the relatively more capable are pretending to be less capable in order not to be the modern equivalent of tarred and feathered, haven't the relatively more capable already done the job of the relatively less capable in ostracizing themselves—from themselves? As if Gulliver tied himself up before the Lilliputians got to him.

Couldn't we let the people who are good at things do those things, even/especially if those people are better at those things than other people are? I enjoy swimming, but I'm never going to swim professionally because other people are vastly better at it than I am. This works in sports, but in other domains nobody seems to understand this point. What comes along with an intolerance of difference is forcing people to do what the job description says, even if people could do better than the job description or do better making their own jobs. People are worried that robots will replace them at their jobs. We already do the algorithm=job description=policy following, because if we did anything else, we'd be fired. We've made ourselves into the cogs in the machinery, because we'd starve to death if we tried to be people at work. The robots are already here, and they are we.

France is a popular tourist destination in the summer. Yikes! I have no postcards or refrigerator magnets from Marseilles because I didn't stand in the line that wrapped around the Notre Dame de la Garde tower from which this picture was taken.



Aix Marks the Spot—and Marseille, 2024: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

So I go to academic conferences because I can be myself, without negative consequences. It's not just the linguistics, either. Any of the discussions are safe for me to participate in, including discussions of swimming in the Mediterranean, which actually happened. We like facts, we know the difference between facts and opinions and where that distinction can become fuzzy, we recognize expertise and take in as much of the expertise as we can while tracking the source so as to provide appropriate acknowledgement, and we don't get attached to a particular outcome because the outcome has not yet happened (we develop hypotheses from data, rather than finding data to accommodate already-in-place conclusions).

Some of us did get to swim in the Mediterranean. We self-selected the swimmers. We found a time slot. We elicited information from people who knew the area and the beaches (the experts). We collected data on bus schedules and routes. We discussed costs. We sorted through the complexities of the information and formulated a plan (hypothesis). Then we ran the experiment: could we do this? Yes. We could and did (hypothesis supported).

That fortress off the coast of Marseilles, the Château d'If, was where the Count of Monte Cristo was imprisoned.



Aix Marks the Spot—and Marseille, 2024: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

It's okay to stay in the assigned box if you're a floor tile. The newer portion of the Notre Dame de la Garde is Neo-Byzantine in style, which is why there are mosaics on walls, floors, ceilings, and archways.



Aix Marks the Spot—and Marseille, 2024: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

The broad bands of color on the tower of Notre Dame de la Garde are somewhat similar to the broad bands of color in the grand mosque in Córdoba, Spain. There, the builders used red stone with the lighter stone over Romanesque arches and up the pillars supporting the arches.



Aix Marks the Spot—and Marseille, 2024: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Why is there a giant sculpture of an orange teddy bear, by the French sculptor Jayet, in front of the Cathédrale de la Major in Marseille? It was supposed to cheer people up while almost 100% of people were under house arrest (the people in charge were never under house arrest) for an infectious disease that killed .4% of the people who were known to have the disease. (Maybe house arrest prevented some deaths? Maybe, but in Sweden, where they ran the experiment of not putting everyone under house arrest, the disease killed .9% of the people who were known to have the disease: twice as many of a still small number, and maybe better/more testing.) But part of the reason that the architecture of the building in the background is beautiful is that it incorporates design ideas from the Moors, the Romans, and the Byzantines in functional and aesthetically exceptional ways. I'm not a specialist in architecture. I'm sure a specialist could identify more influences. Differences are beautiful. I'd like to aim for being a cosmopolitan architect, not an inquisitor or jailer.



Aix Marks the Spot—and Marseille, 2024: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

I was impressed, recently, when an actress stayed in character for the 90-minute duration of a one-woman play. When I'm out and about, I try to stay in character for much longer periods of time, and as slipping into *in medias res* shows, I'm not always successful. The conference allowed me to be myself and out of character for several days. It was a real vacation.

A train station clock in Paris

