

## Tribute to Randy Diehl

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It was the spring of 1975, I think it was a Thursday. I spotted Phil Gough walking down the aisle of the auditorium towards where I was sitting. He was walking alongside a tall, gangly-looking guy with dark, over-sized glasses. At first glance he reminded me of a dorky, mid-Western version of Buddy Holly. This must be Randy Diehl I thought to myself. He was a University of Minnesota graduate student interviewing for a faculty position in the Psych dept. Up to this point his only claim to fame was that in Jenkins' lab he was the 'coffee boy', and his cubicle was next to Pat Kuhl's. As they got closer a 'deep thought' entered my mind—I always associated the name "Randy" with a cool-looking, handsome dude, like a tanned life-guard type with wavy blond hair, not this geeky-looking guy. When they reached my row, Phil introduced Randy and said he wanted to meet me as he was very familiar with my 1971 'feature detector' paper. We exchanged pleasantries, I told him I liked his shoes, and as he was walking up onto the stage, I thought to myself *"it's about time someone praised my work."*

Randy laid out his agenda in the first sentence: he was going to (1) critically assess the role of feature detectors in speech perception; and (2) resolve the underlying causality of phoneme boundary shifts in selective adaptation, two topics of particular interest to me. After his second sentence, I had a premonition that he wasn't actually a big fan of feature detectors. By the end of his 3<sup>rd</sup> sentence I wanted to leave the auditorium. He methodically cited results of one speech perception study after another, brilliantly weaving a tapestry of doubt, with each new tidbit of phonetic minutia contributing to the inevitable demise of my beloved feature detectors. I realized at that moment

that this Randy, despite his youth, was already an accomplished scholar— he was in total command of the facts, quite eloquent, and extremely adept at structuring and delivering a fact-filled argument. The mounting negative evidence against feature detectors was effectively accentuated by his use of fancy phrases such as *‘equivocal at best,’* and *‘compelling reasons to reject the notion.’* I thought to myself: *“What graduate student talks like that ?”* He then turned his razor-sharp focus to the phoneme boundary shift in selective attention. I supported a brain-based, and thus, speculative, neural-fatigue/ depletion notion underlying the boundary shift. Naturally, Randy had another explanation, he called it ‘adaptation-level’ theory. ...i.e., judging a stimulus based on other stimuli in the same context. I remember thinking: *“Where does he come up with this stuff?”* He used the term ‘contrast effect’ to make his point, as in *“you call that sorry-ass sound a “ba”?, I’m going with “pa”.* Then he went for the jugular & said something like: *“if adaptation effects could be produced under conditions minimizing sensorineural fatigue, a contrast effect would be favored on grounds of parsimony. “Parsimony ? who gives a shit about parsimony?”* You can guess how that study turned out—phoneme boundary shifts occurred in the absence of any possible neural fatigue. So, by the end of his job talk, this geeky bean pole from Minnesota had systematically destroyed my only two cherished beliefs in the field of speech perception. Self-doubt enveloped me & I began to think that *maybe* I was just making up stuff. If building a case in phonetics was analogous to building a legal case, then Randy was already the Robert Mueller of speech perception.

Well, as you probably have figured out by now the Psych department offered Randy the position. There was now no way I could ignore him. He was going to do his

thing in Mezes Hall, right across the six pack from me in Calhoun Hall. One thing I knew for sure — I wasn't going to engage him in debating these issues. Would you debate a guy who would, a few years down the road, make Carol Fowler cry???

It's now been over four decades since 'Dr. Parsimony' strutted onto that stage in Batts Hall. Despite that rocky start, we soon became close friends. I harbored no ill feelings, only respect for an intellect that I greatly admired. After all, we were both on the same side of the battle against the evil empire in New Haven, Conn.

**Let me tell you about some of Randy's other talents:** He has an uncanny ability to quickly absorb key elements of an experimental study and, most importantly, remember them forever. The man never forgets anything. He wasn't a member of the University of Illinois College Bowl team based solely on his good looks. I bet if you asked Randy today, what were the major findings of William Ganong's study in 1978 entitled "*The selective effects of burst-cued stops*" which appeared in *Perception & Psychophysics*, he could rattle them off, probably in order of statistical significance. As for me, I consider just recognizing the name Ganong as a major memory accomplishment.

Another admirable trait is Randy's *Madison Avenue*-like creative mind, as exemplified in coining the catchy term —the '*auditory enhancement*' effect. It can give one goose pimples just hearing it. He brilliantly turned that phrase into a '*cottage industry*'. One day I asked if he could come up with a catchy phrase to capture the empirical phenomenon of the linearity of LEs — we were standing in my kitchen; he carefully placed his glass of beer on the counter, thought about it for all of 2 seconds, and said: "how about —*the "orderly output constraint."*" Bingo! He did it again, even after hours of drinking.

**Randy & I have shared many interesting experiences over the decades:** Here are just a few memorable ones:

After an evening feasting on carnitas in Tijuana, we hailed a taxi to take a group of us back to the ASA meeting in San Diego. The cab driver weaved his way through the crowded streets. In hindsight, the driver bore a striking resemblance to El Chapo Guzman. All of a sudden he turned into a really dark & deserted alley, and shut off the engine. It was not the best of neighborhoods. He sat there for several minutes, without saying a word. It appeared he was waiting for someone. I was sitting in the back seat next to Randy, who was quite nervous & already breaking out in a sweat. We were all mystified by what was going on, and convinced robbery or even mutilation with machetes was only moments away. Out of nowhere Randy broke the eerie silence & shouted out: *"you can have our money and our women."* I believe he meant to offer up Arlene Carney, in a last ditch effort to save the rest of us. I already told you Randy was a *quick thinker*. We never did learn what the driver was doing, but he eventually started the cab & drove us gringos to the train station to get back to San Diego. Luckily for Arlene the driver didn't understand English, but Randy, to this day, maintains he was only kidding.

(2). **Here's another Randy story:** It was the summer of 1991. We were at a small, but select meeting that Bjorn Lindblom had organized in Stockholm as a warm up to the International Congress of Phonetic Sciences in Aix-en-Provence. The bulk of the participants were affiliated with two opposing theoretical camps, with a small contingent of mild-mannered & well behaved Swedes separating us. In a fair and balanced & totally unbiased way, let me characterize one camp, or cult, as maniacally devoted to a

*default-theory* of speech perception, founded on intractable principles of ‘voodoo phonetics.’ The second contingent were brilliant scientists, mostly from UT Austin, whose studies supported the view that (1) stop + vowel production was lawful and orderly, and (2) speech perception was indeed based on an *auditory analysis* of speech. At the end of the conference, and just before we had to leave for a long car ride to catch a night time ferry crossing to Germany, Randy & Michael Studdert-Kennedy started an angry shouting match in the hallway. I’m not exactly sure what specific comment triggered the encounter, but it was quite intense. They were both red-faced, screaming at each other, their noses almost touching. Punches were imminent, and it was obvious that the pride of Freeport Illinois, and the standard-bearer of the auditorialist position, had to be held back from slugging the obnoxious, overly opinionated, motor gesture-loving Brit. Now, it might have been Keith Kluender or Peter MacNeilage who had more of an impact on holding Randy back, (I’m a bit fuzzy on specific details), but I was in the scrum desperately trying to protect my main man. Thankfully the two combatants were pulled apart and things eventually calmed down, with no punches thrown. However, I’ve never seen Randy so upset and angry. His neck veins were bulging. This was totally out of character for him. Much later that evening, in our crowded tiny berth, down in the dark bowels of that giant ferry, heading for the shores of Germany, I softly whispered to Randy, “*you would have kicked the shit out of him*”. I guess he was fast asleep, as he never answered.

Lastly, you have already heard that Randy possessed a unique talent for disagreeing with many of my brilliant views on various theoretical matters. Here is his wisest departure from following my sage advice. I was at Randy’s house watching an

episode of the Sopranos. It had just ended and Randy said he had a question for me: he said he was seriously considering throwing his hat into the ring for deanship of COLA, and wanted to know what I thought about that idea. My immediate response was: “*are you out of your fuckin’ mind?*” Randy wisely ignored my advice, and not only beat out a distinguished field of candidates, but became, in my humble opinion, the best dean the College has ever had. Though the field of speech perception might have lost a few elegant studies, an occasional mini-theoretical breakthrough, another catchy descriptive phrase, or perhaps a rematch of the Studdert-Kennedy/Diehl brouhaha, he did the right thing—starting with the total dismissal of my advice.

Randy, you are now getting close to the end of your immensely successful career, and in your upcoming retirement years, I look forward to continuing my invaluable and indispensable counseling. I promise to provide you with state-of-the-art tips on (1) the pros & cons of various prostate supplements; (2) medicare updates (if it still exists), (3) the best orthopedic foot ware; and (4) the best early bird specials at our favorite restaurants. You have done it all my friend, with class, and in exemplary fashion: (1) the scholar/ researcher/teacher; (2) the journal editor; (3) the department chair; and most notably, (4) the college Dean. Throughout it all, you remained the same special person I first saw walking down that auditorium aisle 43 years ago. The only change is that you somehow morphed into a silver-haired, distinguished, and somewhat handsome dude, now well deserving of that cool name, Randy. Thanks for coming over and introducing yourself all those years ago, and thanks for being a special colleague and loyal friend. One last comment: I still believe a neural-based depletion/fatigue notion is a better explanation for the phoneme boundary shift than a simple-minded ‘contrast

effect', but I realize one doesn't argue with the Dean. However, before you retire I do have one small request: I want to knock on your door in Gebauer, & when you say "come in", enter your office and ask you a question that another famous Dean and professor at Oxford University once uttered: "**Is the Bean dizzy?**" God bless the phoneme & more importantly, God bless Randy Diehl.