How I Write, Ireland: An Interview with Tony McEnery

PROFESSOR ANGELA CHAMBERS: Good morning. It's a great honour and a pleasure to introduce Professor Tony McEnery as the second guest on the *How I Write* series. Tony is Professor in English Language and Linguistics in the University of Lancaster and an Adjunct Professor here in the University of Limerick. He is a major figure in research in Corpus Linguistics in the context of both language research and language teaching. He is a particularly good choice of guest to be the second speaker in the series, because he has published very prolifically in his area. He's the author of more than ten books, more than sixteen edited books, over thirty journal articles, and again, over thirty book chapters. So he will obviously have a lot of interesting things to tell us about his writing process.

LAWRENCE CLEARY: OK. Very good. Cheers. Thank you, Angela. Uhm, just to reiterate what we do here, this is the series that we call *How I Write, Ireland*, and the idea is that, ah, you know, it's an ancient tradition in Rhetoric and Composition (Studies) that you would look at models of writing in order to inform your own writing. And, by extension, when we talk to people about how they write, we learn about the strategies that they employ in order to achieve their writing goals. So these interviews are basically designed to ask questions from good writers, writers that we value, in order to understand better procedures that might work better for us. So this is an opportunity to ask a good writer, How do you do it?

Uhm, Hello, Tony.

TONY McENERY: Hello.

LAWRENCE: A pleasure. I just wanted to start by reiterating something that Angela had said in her introduction, which was basically that you have a prolific record. You, ah, you publish a lot. I was looking at, you know, you . . . I was trying to figure out . . . I mean there's a hundred publications in a little over twenty years, if I'm not mistaken. At least that, right? And so I was thinking on average, you're doing about four or five publications a year. That's a pretty good pace. I think we all envy that. 2000 looks really…*busy*. And 2005 looks pretty busy too. And basically what we want to know is, what is your secret? What is your strategy? Em, Sarah Moore, who, em, would be the Dean for the Centre for Teaching and Learning, and also the Vice President Academic, Associate Vice President Academic . . . she has the method of: one in, one out, one on the way. So, basically, one's with the publisher, one's on the table and one's in the back of your head, the next.   Is . . . do you have a strategy that is anything like that? What is your strategy? What is your secret?

TONY: OK. Well, I might be very disappointing to you. I don't have a very conscious strategy about writing . . .

LAWRENCE: Very good.

TONY: . . . and I'm not a highly disciplined writer in the sense that I think I'm going to do five a year and I'll push them out and I'll have this little production line of papers ready. That's certainly not how I write.

LAWRENCE: OK

TONY: How I work tends to be focused on ideas . . . ah . . . there are a set of ideas that I have and they force the writing. So . . . ah . . . the ideas come first and the writing comes second, so I don't set out to artificially create a number of publications in a given year.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: The press of ideas dictate that these pieces are produced.

LAWRENCE: Well obviously the ideas excite you . . .

TONY: Yes.

LAWRENCE: . . .because you like to talk about them . . .

TONY: . . . and they keep me motivated.

LAWRENCE: They do, yeah. I can tell, I can tell! I guess that kind of, like. leads me to the next question. Just as an aside, I think that one of the things that we realise is that a lot of the writers that come to us are not necessarily poor writers, they are just not very conscious of their process, so it doesn't surprise me, you know, when somebody says that they're not conscious of what they do, it's not a conscious process. But there is a process.

TONY: Mmm.

LAWRENCE: One of the things I was going to ask you, and I think some extent you did answer it . . . if you . . . I would like to invite you to characterise your writing process. Some people look at their process as extremely painful. Some people look at it as extremely delightful. How would you characterise your process?

TONY: OK. So when I have to write something, and I must confess that, certainly with short pieces, I'm a terror for letting deadlines loom, and then . . .

LAWRENCE: Sure.

TONY: . . . I start to write. Em, in doing at . . . em

LAWRENCE: There's a lot of us relieved to hear you saying that. [laughter]

TONY: Well there is so many other things to do in life, that deadlines are quite helpful for discipline.

LAWRENCE: It is.

TONY: I'm not saying I write it the night before . . .

LAWRENCE: Sure.

TONY: . . . but, you know, when it's one or two months off, and something's been promised, or when it's one or two months off and something has to be written because the idea's there, then fine, I'll start to write. Em, how I then characterise the process is one largely of thinking a great deal before I write anything.

LAWRENCE: OK.

TONY: So even after the research is done I then try and work out in my mind what are the key points that I want to put across in the piece that I'm going to write about the research I've done.

LAWRENCE: Very good.

TONY: So only, I think, when the thinking is, I wouldn't say complete, but certainly it's at a mature enough stage where I think I've got something to write, that I actually sit down and start to write.

LAWRENCE: OK.

TONY: Is this answering your question?

LAWRENCE: To some extent it is. Actually, it's leading in to other questions that I had down the line, so it's actually perfect, it's great.

TONY: OK, so I shall carry on. Em, so when I do sit down to write, one - I know this sounds foolish, I have to be in the mood to write. I did try and write once on the basis of a thousand words a day.

LAWRENCE: Very good.

TONY: I thought to myself, Oh, if I can just write a thousand words a day I'll get this done. It was agony.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: Some days I didn't want to write a thousand words, other days I wanted to write three or four. So I quickly learned that, for me at least, I shouldn't struggle against my inclinations. If the muse wasn't on my shoulder I didn't write.

LAWRENCE: How does that work for you, I mean once that muse . . once you're in contact with the muse, once you start writing, how do you stop yourself?

TONY: Oh, I don't.

LAWRENCE: OK. You just keep going.

TONY: I just keep going.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: Em, when I'm in the mood to write I will write quite . . . I could write all day when I'm in the mood to do it.

LAWRENCE: That's brilliant, yeah.

TONY: I say mood, I also pretentiously refer to the muse, I actually honestly believe it's that my thoughts are at the point where they dictate to me that they should be written down.

LAWRENCE: Sure.

TONY: In other words all the preparatory thinking, or enough of the preparatory thinking, has been done . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: . . . that I then want to write . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: . . . and that's when start to write. I don't try and force the text out before the ideas are ready . . . em . . . I also don't try and stop myself when the flow starts . . .

LAWRENCE: That's great.

TONY: . . . what I do do, is heavily edit what I've written afterwards.

LAWRENCE: OK. Right.

TONY: So, eh, I will write a great deal, some of it will never see the light of day.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: Indeed, I have a whole stack of stuff on my hard drive that I've never published because it just didn't fit the narrative that I finally developed . . . . It wasn't bad . .

LAWRENCE: That's amazing, that you have all that stuff out there and you still have all this stuff in your computer, that hasn't seen the light of day.

TONY: Well, I think it's good discipline in that the worst thing to do, you see this sometimes, especially in PhDs, the worst thing to do is to try and put everything you've written into what you ought to write.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: There is a distinction between the two. Everything you've written are the raw materials that you might then fashion through a narrative into a persuasive piece that you then publish.

LAWRENCE: Very good.

TONY: Em, but sometimes no matter how good the point is that you've made, if it doesn't fit that overall narrative you just have to leave it out.

LAWRENCE: Fair enough.

TONY: And sometimes it never finds its day . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: . . . and just sits on the hard drive forever.

LAWRENCE: You talked about a couple of things that are of interest to me and that I'd like to follow up on in a minute . . . um . . . I'm gonna interrupt my train of thought on those things. I'm thinking about the way you have ideas that you address, that they motivate you to write, and then also, you talked a little bit about how once you start writing you don't stop yourself from writing, and you put it all down on paper, you may not use it, but it's there . . .

TONY: Yeah.

LAWRENCE: . . . which is a drafting issue. I want to come back to that. But before I do, I wanted to just touch on . . . there's, eh, there's strategic issues in the process, things that we have to contend with that, em, either advance or retard our progress on our writing, eh, and I'm thinking about emotional issues, negative thoughts, I'm thinking about planning issues and also social strategies, em, in other words, whether you employ other people and bring other people into your process or whether it's something you do in solitary, you know, do it solitarily . . .

TONY: Yeah.

LAWRENCE: . . . and I guess, one of the things I'm wondering is do you ever encounter writer's block?

TONY: Em. OK. Yes, I do encounter writer's block. It's almost implicit in what I've said so far. There are certain days when I just don't want to write

LAWRENCE: Sure.

TONY: Or I don't feel ready to write, so I don't. It's as simple as that.

LAWRENCE: That's your strategy?

TONY: That's my strategy.

LAWRENCE: You can't . . .

TONY: I say, OK, that's it, I'm not going to do it today.

LAWRENCE: That's brilliant, yeah.

TONY: I have a colleague, actually, that I discuss this with quite often because he tries to force himself very often to write, to produce, and it makes him very unhappy [laughter]

LAWRENCE: You seem like a happy person.

TONY: Ah!

LAWRENCE: You do. Your picture is very happy, by the way. I like your photo.

TONY: It's a great show, it's a great show! So I say to him, you know, don't do it that way. Wait until you are ready to write. But, I've got this deadline, I've got this deadline! OK, you might meet the deadline, but if you meet the deadline with a lot of rubbish . . .

LAWRENCE: Sure.

TONY: . . . it's not gonna do you much good, so just wait. Most editors will understand if you write and ask for a short extension

LAWRENCE: Sure.

TONY: Em, and in terms of the social process of writing, I think that's critical in fact, yes I write a lot, yes I then craft narratives from what I've written, but I don't think, certainly nowadays, I never send anything out to be published until I've had some colleagues read it through.

LAWRENCE: Very good.

TONY: Of course the downside of that, well the upside of it, depending on how you look at it, is that you obviously then to have to pay back your colleagues. . . and that's critical.

LAWRENCE: And this is something that happens before you send it out to a publisher?

TONY: Absolutely.

LAWRENCE: Do you ever include people in your process early in the stage, when you're actually just starting to get ideas about what to write?

TONY: Oh, discussing it, yeah, all the time, either at home - it's an academic house although its home - or with colleagues over coffee at work. Lancaster is a bit like Limerick, which is why I like Limerick, in that it's a campus university . . .

LAWRENCE: Sure.

TONY: . . . just outside town, so there's an enormous amount of social interaction with people, with other academics, and it's very easy to talk through some of your ideas, especially with people outside of your own field, either within linguistics or in other subjects.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: So certainly, early on, sort of if you like when the ideas are being forged, for what they're worth, I tend to discuss them quite widely with anyone who is prepared to listen . . . em . . .

LAWRENCE: That's brilliant.

TONY: . . . in social contexts etc. But then later on, when a draft is produced, em, that would at least be read by one other person and, sometimes, multiple other people, so for example, my new book, the new book that's coming out in CUP very shortly, I think we sent chapters of that to three other readers within Lancaster and three readers beyond Lancaster, and got wonderful and generous feedback.

LAWRENCE: Do you ask for very specific kinds of feedback or are you just say, in general, just tell me what you think?

TONY: Sometimes, sometimes you do suggest that you might like specific types of feedback, but if you've chosen the person to read it well, well you know the type of feedback they're gonna give.

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

TONY: And so there's no point in telling them the type of feedback you know they're gonna give, so you just tell them to give feedback. So, for example, when I wrote, em, *Swearing in English*, a historian read the book. There was very little point in saying to him, Could you comment on this from the perspective of the historian. Because obviously he was going to comment on it from the perspective of a historian, so I just gave it to him. Similarly with somebody in religious studies, I gave one chapter to

them. Again, there was no point asking for specific feedback from religious studies because that is what you're gonna get from someone from religious studies, so choose the person correctly or appropriately . . .

LAWRENCE: Right

TONY: . . . and you get the right type of feedback.

LAWRENCE: Good stuff! I actually saw that title, when I was looking through your titles I saw that and I was thinking, Jeeze, I gotta get that book. I really honestly think that I came from a long line of merchant marines, because I've got a mouth like a sailor and I'm sure that I could benefit from that book.

TONY: Oh, I must warn you that one of my students once came along to one of my lectures on this subject and afterwards paid me the greatest compliment because they said, Do you know Tony, you've made swearing boring. [laughter] I said, Thank you! I have clearly succeeded! [more laughter]

LAWRENCE: Well maybe that will tone me down! That's brilliant.

TONY: They said it in jest, of course!

LAWRENCE: That's brilliant. That is really good. Em, that's great that you have this part of your process, as something that you would recommend, both the conversation at the beginning and also feedback at the end.

TONY: Absolutely, because otherwise, when you get, say for example, especially with journal articles, when you get to the point where they send it out to reviewers, it's the first time a set of human eyes other than your own have looked at it . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: . . . so if several other people have looked at it by that point, and weeded out all the really obvious stuff, you're going to get much better quality feedback from the journal reviewers.

LAWRENCE: Sure.

TONY: You're going to be more confident, if you feel that the reviewers have not really got the point of it . . .

LAWRENCE: Right

TONY: . . . and you're just more likely to succeed.

LAWRENCE: Right. Great. Excellent. You've kinda, eh, brought me to, back to those places that I wanted to go eventually here. Em, I was thinking again about your, the ideas, and how conversations early in the process will help you to develop these ideas . . . I guess one of the things that we always . . . I think sometimes people have difficulty defining something to talk about, and some people, um, who may be more like you, have a million things to talk about, how do you keep, it's sounds like you're bombarded with ideas, because you have a large number of publications, em, how do you kinda, like, keep them at bay while you're trying to get one down?

TONY: Em, I don't. I don't think people should.

LAWRENCE: Do you write multiple texts at the same time? Two or three going at the same time?

TONY: Sometimes. Yes. So, for example, the book I just talked about, which is finished, overlaps with another book that I've just been finishing here . . .

LAWRENCE: Sure.

TONY: . . . em, in great solitude in the west of Clare, for the last few days. It's been very helpful.

LAWRENCE: Yes, sure, and the weather has helped too, I'm sure!

TONY: Somewhat, it must be said. But, em, the other thing is, be generous with your ideas. If you've got lots of ideas, share them . . .

LAWRENCE: Sure.

TONY: . . . and if somebody else picks up on it, fine.

LAWRENCE: You've never, you've never struggled to find an idea or something to talk about?

TONY: Eh, it would probably sound immodest of me if I said no, but the answer is no.

LAWRENCE: I can understand how that would happen, I really can. There's always things that you want to say, but sometimes you just get too many things . . . for some people that would be . . .

TONY: But I always encourage people towards a generosity of spirit with their writing and if they can't pursue them tell other people about them, and if they can pursue them, great.

LAWRENCE: That's a good strategy too, to get more information out there and to get more people talking about the issues that are out there.

TONY: Yeah.

LAWRENCE: That's great. I wanted to ask you, and I must watch time here, so that I don't, I want to make sure that the audience has time to come in on this, I guess one of the things I wanted to find out, what is, in terms of the, eh, process, what role does drafting play? Em, I heard you say earlier that you, em, that you sometimes use drafting in order to develop your ideas, is that the case?

TONY: To an extent, em, although I certainly don't start to write before I have a very rough idea of what I want a whole chapter, em, or a paper, to look like. So, working from an initial idea you write out a paper or a chapter, em, leave it for a time . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: . . . re-read it. It's amazing how just a couple of days can change the way you view a text . . .

LAWRENCE: Sure.

TONY: . . . em, especially from the point of view of modelling the reader, because of course when you read the text you know what you wanted to say, you have the, em, overwhelming impulse to see what you wanted to say in the text . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

 TONY: . . . and if you've said what you said you wanted to say, leave it a couple of days and when you come back to a text not really get the gist of the argument at all . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: . . . and so you've failed from the point of view of the reader who, in fact, is the only important person in the process.

LAWRENCE: Exactly, and it's good that you brought that in. I actually hadn't planned to ask questions about this, but it is an important part of your context . . . the context that you write into, and I guess I was thinking about this, believe it or not, a lot of the questions that I've been thinking about asking you have been happening at night when I'm sleeping, it's unfortunate but it does happen . . . [laughter] Yeah, you see you do . . .

TONY: People have dreams and nightmares about me! [laughter]

LAWRENCE: There was no nightmares, I promise you! [laughter] But I was thinking, Jeeze, one of the things I was wondering was, like, what makes the writing that you do, like for instance when you are writing for *Corpus Linguistics*, it's pretty technical, and I was thinking how technical it was and, like, how difficult is it to describe, or to explain, concepts and processes that you go to in order to extract data to identify patterns and trends and things like that?   Em, when you are thinking about the reader, you are trying to give them a sense of how to think through this . . .

TONY: Yeah.

LAWRENCE: . . . is that a really . . . is that a long writing process for you, do you have to write it multiple times or, do you feel like you got it?

TONY: OK. I think I did, em, and to a certain extent I still do, em, but a key influence on me was, eh, the other linguist from Lancaster, Geoffrey Leech . . .

LAWRENCE: Oh, yes.

TONY: Geoff has a very clear and concise writing style . . .

LAWRENCE: Yes.

TONY: . . . and he supervised me towards the end of my PhD . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: . . . and it was a very valuable six months, eh, because he heavily edited a lot of what I wrote.

LAWRENCE: Oh, OK.

TONY: Eh, and peering into it, I thought to myself, what he's actually doing here is simplifying what I'm saying.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: A lot of the time, I suppose, being self critical, I was trying to hide behind complicated sentences . . .

LAWRENCE: Mm-hmm.

TONY: . . . abstract terminology, etc.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: And he seemed to be an editor saying to me, there's no harm in expressing this simply and clearly, in short sentences.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: In fact, from the point of view of the reader, there's a great advantage to that, because they understand it. Now, the criticism, in fact it happened to one of Geoff's books once, that you get for this sometimes is, It's simplistic, you know, that the idea that you're presenting is simplistic. It's a bit like, eh, Huxley's objection to the theory of evolution: Oh, it's so simple. [laughter] But in fact for me, that isn't a challenge, it's actually a compliment . . .

LAWRENCE: Sure.

TONY: . . . that you've actually reduced an essentially complex idea into a form that most readers could understand . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: . . .then that's a success . . .

LAWRENCE: Yes.

TONY: . . . and not a failure , and therefore I get quite impatient with a lot of writing which seems to be written in a deliberately obscure style . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: . . . where, in fact, what they are actually saying is relatively simple and straight-forward and could be communicated as such.

LAWRENCE: Right. Yeah. You kinda wonder what the motivation is to keep it complicated?

TONY: Well, I think sometimes people are embarrassed about their ideas.

LAWRENCE: It's too simple?

TONY: It's too simple. They're hoping for objection and so they joosh it up, but in fact if the idea is fundamentally simple and strong . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: . . . it should be represented as simple and strong.

LAWRENCE: Right, very good. I have to say, I have to thank Angela in the last week or two, because she has been doing for me what Geoffrey was doing for you, she is trying to tell me to uncomplicated my ideas, because I do have a tendency toward that, and it's like . . . so she . . . it is a good lesson . . .

TONY: It is a good lesson . . . I referred, I alluded to a story about one of Geoff's books so I'll tell you it. I had been reading his book on semantics, many, many, many, many, many years ago, when actually I was working at Liverpool University and I went in and said to someone, It's extremely well written. I read it today going to work on the bus and, you know, it all made sense. And this person said, Oh, you read it on the bus, it can't be of any value. [laughter] But that's just intellectual snobbery.

LAWRENCE: Sure, it is, yeah.

TONY: This is a complex subject, presented well . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: . . . and the fact that I could read it on the bus was a triumph for the text.

LAWRENCE: Sure. You know, one thing that I was thinking as you were saying that, was that one of the things that we do when we teach is actually do for, em . . . what we are trying to teach . . . what we don't do for what we try to say in our writing. Like a lot of times the writing is pretty overly complicated, whereas when we try to teach it we tend to simplify it, partly because we need for them to contain it well . . .

TONY: Yeah.

LAWRENCE: . . . to be able to pack it and unpack it and so forth and so, maybe, I think there's probably some benefits. I don't know if you've ever benefited from teaching something before you've written about it?

TONY: Yes, actually, the book called *Between Linguistics*, grew out of a course on the topic that I taught at Lancaster from '92 to 90-whatever it was, but certainly the outline of that course was pretty much the outline of the book . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: . . . and it was the experience of trying to explain the ideas to students that I think, the book has been helped, helped the book, and that was in the days when you did a lab session, and the first session started off with how to use the keyboard and the mouse, because students weren't that aware of computers in those days.

LAWRENCE: I remember that. I had to go to that. It took me twenty minutes to turn one on once because I didn't know where the button was. [laughter] That was back in the early '90s.

TONY: So in a context like that, presenting technical ideas clearly and simply was a challenge.

LAWRENCE: Sure. OK. Great.

TONY: Not so much nowadays.

LAWRENCE: Right. Well, you've developed some sort of way into that, I guess maybe that's it, huh?

TONY: Well that's it also, but also the audience, there's less of a gap in terms of technical expertise between the writer and the audience in that case . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: . . . so, if you say things like, text on a computer, people get it . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: . . . whereas back in those days you had to explain, sometimes, you know, people didn't use metal type and things like that, to produce print . . . you could get that . . . you don't have to explain that now.

LAWRENCE: Exactly. That's great. That's good. Em, let me see. What else can I talk to you about? I want to watch the time again. OK. I'm just going to ask you one more question and then I'm gong to open it up, em, to the floor. Em, I guess one of the . . . I, I have a choice here between one or two questions.

TONY: Ask them both!

LAWRENCE: Well, think one of them you have already answered, I was thinking in terms of editing and proofreading strategies, and do you ask others to open up and look at your papers and you said that you did . . . em, uh, em, I, eh, what I also wanted to ask you was, em, have you ever written a paper, have you ever completed a paper, and then you say that you put it down and you walk away from it, and so forth, and I know that you send it to other people as well, but have you ever completed a paper and looked at it later and thought, this is all wrong and then rewritten it?

TONY: Em, no. [laughter] I can remember writing an essay like that when I was an undergraduate . . .

LAWRENCE: OK, right.

TONY: . . . where I got all the way through it and at the very end I realised I'd completely got the wrong end of the stick.

LAWRENCE: Very good.

TONY: Utterly.

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

TONY: Eh, and I had one day to rewrite it.

LAWRENCE: Right. I wonder if it's part of your process to gestate, you gestate, you put, you do a lot of . . . I remember . . .

TONY: Oh, absolutely.

LAWRENCE: Right. And so I think maybe that might be why, I'm guessing, I'm trying to figure out why it is that, you know, a revision isn't necessarily something where you go, Oh my God, this is completely wrong!

TONY: No, a revision often is that a reader will point out something where you think, OK that section has got to change, or an argument has got to change, or a claim has got to change, and thank you for that, eh, said sincerely. Em, so that happens. But yes, thinking about writing before writing takes a great deal of time, much more time than writing

LAWRENCE: I agree, it does.

TONY: So, certainly in the last ten or eleven years, when I've been doing a lot of administrative work . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: . . . people have said, Oh how do you get the time for writing, and I say the time for writing isn't the issue, it's the time for thinking about writing, what I call the head time . . .

LAWRENCE: Sure.

TONY: . . . that is the issue.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: Because if, you know, you're thinking about budgets, or who's going to do next week's teaching . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: . . . you're not thinking about the writing you're going to do, so when you sit down on your writing day, and your head's empty of ideas, you can't write.

LAWRENCE: Oh, you're lost, yeah, sure.

TONY: So thinking for me, the discipline of thinking a great deal, and sketching out ideas in my head about writing, before I write, is critical.

LAWRENCE: Do you ever use maps, like to you ever draw . . .

TONY: No.

LAWRENCE: . . . figures or anything . . .

TONY: No. I don't visualise ideas . . .

LAWRENCE: You don't. Yeah, yeah. It's just pure, em, language . . .

TONY: Yes.

LAWRENCE: . . . you have delivered.

TONY: I sort of remember the little arguments in my head, but . . .

LAWRENCE: Sure.

TONY: . . . I'm terrible at visualising things.

LAWRENCE: Very good. Sure. Everybody is different. Everybody's process is different, so we can benefit . . . that' why we have multiple interviews, partly because we learn a little bit from everybody, em, and so, em, that's fine, that's great, em, that's great.

TONY: I feel like a hypocrite, actually, because in exams, when students are writing essays, I've always told them to write essay plans: Before you do anything else write out an essay plan, and I do do it in my head . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

 . . . to be fair to myself . . .

LAWRENCE: Sure.

TONY: But, I always told them that they'd get extra credit in their exams if they've written out an essay plan before they start writing, but I don't do that. [laughter] So if you're listening, I'm sorry. [laughter]

LAWRENCE: I have to say that one of my strategies is to actually outline it after I've written it. [laughter]

TONY: Oh yeah, I usually write the introduction, introduction and conclusion, last.

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

TONY: The conclusion seems more logical, but the introduction less so. But often . . . unless you want to be tricking about with the introduction all the time when you're actually changing the main text . . .

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

TONY: . . the best thing to do is to write out the full argument first, wait until it's relatively mature . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: . . . and then write the introduction.

LAWRENCE: Come back and get the . . . it's like the bread in the sandwich.

TONY: Yes.

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

TONY: Yes. Certainly abstracts, you definitely write those at the end.

LAWRENCE: Right, yes, you have to, sure. Well I want to open this up to the floor, so I want to give you folks time to ask Tony some questions about his process, his writing process. The temptation is always, especially if you are in discipline, is to ask questions about the discipline, and there's nothing

wrong with that as long as it's in terms of how things are written. This is about writing and writing processes, and so I'd like to keep you focused on the process itself So, can I ask anybody if they'd like to ask a question? Frieda, Frieda?

TONY: Oh Right.

FRIEDA: Em, OK, start with the first one, I'm sure I won't be allowed to ask more two. [laughter] First one I think is, em, and it's something that's bothered me, I've thought about it a lot, when I've had time, em, which is the influence of the word processor on our writing process. And I'm sure a lot, I know a lot of people have written about this, but I'm just fascinated to know what your, I suppose, experience or thoughts are about that.

TONY: Em, I'm a great fan of word processors and I was a relatively early adopter of them. I got a computer for my twenty-first birthday off my dad and I started up, my third year at university I actually started word processing everything. Em, and I thought it was a revelation. Em, so I am an enormous fan of the word processor. However, when I say I am an enormous fan, I think they are very useful for saving documents, presenting them clearly on screen, eliminating handwriting as an issue, to a certain degree spell checking as well, though not automated, you know, I approve of the human intervention. Ah, grammar checking, things like that, I have no time for. Often, ctually, I think it's just deeply unhelpful. Similarly, thesauri, I think those things are a curse. You can tell student essays, for example, in particular, which have used thesauri, because you suddenly see words which are atypical of the writer. I remember once sitting down with a student saying, Billy, do you know what this word actually means? And he says, oh, it's the same as xxxxx, and I say No, no, no. It has different connotations. Eh, so things like that I'm not a great fan of. Em, but it's quite nice. It makes things look pretty, it's easier than handwriting. It's certainly easier than typing. So, I don't think it has influenced my writing unduly, but if it has, the influence is now so long that I can't even remember what it was like before that.

LAWRENCE: OK. Good question.

TONY: Actually, it really does help with drafting and revising as well. That used to be an absolute pain when you were using handwriting and a typewriter, so in some ways it really is facilitative of improvement to text.

LAWRENCE: Do you use the versions mechanism in Microsoft Word? Do you use Microsoft Word?

TONY: I do use Microsoft Word. I don't use the versions mechanism but I do keep versions of files just by putting v1, v2 or v-whatever at the end.

LAWRENCE: Excellent. Yeah, I think a lot of people, that's what they do, yeah.

TONY: Yeah.

LAWRENCE: Yeah, it seems less complicated. Another question?

QUESTION FROM THE FLOOR: You say your ideas come in all the time. What do you do with them? Do you just keep them in your head, or do you have notebooks everywhere or do you wait . . . what do you do with the ideas?

TONY: Em, generally I keep them in my head and don't talk to friends about them. Em, there are occasions when, em, I do use a notebook. I can think of about three or four occasions where I've used a notebook because they've sort of . . . it sounds pretentious, but they've taken on a complexity, where actually I've wanted to start writing bits of them out, and I've been on a plane or a train or something like that, so doing it on computer hasn't been viable. But by and large, no, I just keep them rattling around in the noggin, em, or out in conversation. You get the most wonderful and charitable feedback from colleagues when you talk to them about your ideas, or you can give it to them when they talk about theirs. So I keep them alive, if you like, in the discourse, as well as in your head. But every now and again I have used notebooks, especially if I'm doing a lot of reading around an idea. I have used notebooks on occasion just to keep note of ideas. Or sometimes, of course, I'm very naughty, I just scribble on books, not library books I would hasten to add, but books that I have purchased myself, I do tend to write on them.

IDÉ: Does keeping it all in your head not pose other problems?

TONY: Such as?

IDÉ: Keeping you awake at night?

TONY: Oh yes it certainly does that, but that, that's a pleasure, you know.

IDÉ: You don't think that you lose them because you haven't them stored or documented? You obviously can manage processes in your head very well.

TONY: Em.

IDÉ: Some people don't.

TONY: I can't comment on other people's minds but no, I've never had a problem with keeping ideas in my head, or coming up with them. But I think one thing that, if you like a memory strategy, if you want to call it that, is talking about the ideas. But if I just kept them up there and didn't talk to anybody about them, that would be awful.

IDÉ: Yes, they would drive you mad.

TONY: They would drive me mad.

LAWRENCE: Do you ever talk to yourself?

TONY: Yes, I do talk to myself.

LAWRENCE: Good for you. Phew! [laughter]

TONY: As I said, I've just spent a week on my own in a cottage [laughter] so I've had the odd conversation. Stupid idea! Stupid idea! [laughter]

LAWRENCE: Brilliant.

TONY: But certainly talking to colleagues . . .

IDÉ: Yeah, will keep them alive.

TONY: And it's a strategy for remembering them. It's not consciously a strategy for remembering them, but it ends up that way, because you remember a conversation you had with X or with Y, and what they said about your ideas, and that keeps them going.

LAWRENCE: Brilliant.

FRIEDA: One last question, this is partly, em, from the point of view of a student, you know that the step really from a student to a writer is one of confidence, you know, of believing in your own ideas, and it's something that I, well, that I have experienced myself, and I have to help students with, which is, this is your own idea, and you're allowed to put down your own ideas, to have the confidence, and I think that's just an interesting step which you have, you have all your wonderful ideas, and you're quite happy to share them with people, and you've got the confidence to do that obviously, but it's just a step that I find quite hard to, I suppose, instil in students, as I do myself.

TONY: Mmm. Yeah, that's certainly true, but you can do it, certainly in the context of PhD supervisions. You can do it as a long, slow process of building up their confidence, and then you use departmental seminars, a conference presentation etc, where you are gradually getting them to lift off. Em, I don't think it's very wise to get students to write before they're ready to, and certainly it's not very wise to get them to write before you have confidence in their ideas. Em, so I think for me, students' writing is almost exclusively the preserve of PGR students,
though I've known one or two MA students, in fact I've worked with them, so that we've published something together from it. Em, but for doctorial students, I think, you know, by their second or third year, you should have been able, if they're good enough, you should have been able to build them up that they can start to venture out in little sallies and conferences and starting to write working papers, or conference papers, or book chapters, or something like that. But it is a long, slow process, for most people, of confidence building.

And, you know, you can get the most terrible knocks to your confidence. I remember standing, I'll give you another anecdote, I remember giving a talk on my PhD topic at an International Pragmatics Association Conference, many years ago, the first, no the second, talk I had ever done at a conference. And I was talking about a quote from a book, Bach and Harnish, and I got this quote and I said that this showed this. At the end of the presentation a guy at the back put his hand up and said, I'm Gerry Bach and I didn't mean that! [laughter] That's what I said. I said, Well, this is the quote, this is how I've read the quote and I think it's a reasonable interpretation of what you've written. In other words, if you didn't mean it, you wrote it wrong mate! [laughter] But actually, to be fair to Gerry, he was very good about it and we had a nice conversation about it afterwards. But, you know, if you didn't have much confidence at that point, that one could have floored you.

LAWRENCE: Sure.

TONY: So yes, building up . . . my supervisor was there, so that helped, and she thought . . . I had talked about this with her so I knew at least she agreed with me, and had the cavalry in the room if it all went horribly wrong! So I think building up a student's confidence so that they can reach that lift-off point, but then if you like provide a kind of scaffolding framework for that, as they're sort of progressing to, em, doing presentations and writing, and being there for them on occasions if you need to be . . . eh, even if you're watching a car crash, I think it's terrifically important to be supportive.

LAWRENCE: Mmm.

ANGELA: Em, this is sort of leading to the question I was going to ask. You've written a lot corroboratively, McEnery and Wilson, in particular, is a very familiar phrase in many bibliographies. Em, does that arise out of post-graduate supervision, or what you were saying about talking through ideas, come from talking to colleagues?

TONY: Both actually. Em, certainly two or three pieces I've written have been, four actually, I can think of off the top of my head, have been written because of a very close relationship with a post-graduate that I was working with. One, eh, was with a post-graduate who was working in Eritrea, Nazareth Kifle, and she did this lovely study with me, eh, looking at English language text books in Eritrea. It was a very natural little experiment, because the only input they had got on English was from the text books, so just for once you could perfectly judge the input of the text book. So that was a wonderful piece of work, we did that together. So, on occasion you sort of get so close that you eventually, for me it's always the student that says, Look, this is a joint piece of work, do you want to publish it with me? And then, yes.

On other occasions, of course, it is through talking to colleagues. Sandra Wilson was a colleague, for example. Andrew Hardie, who's co-authored the new book coming out for CUP next month [laughter] is a colleague etc, although he was a student of mine in the past, but anyway, certainly, yes, working with colleagues.

The other critical thing as well for me, eh, in terms of collaborative writing, is working in cross-disciplinary contexts, which almost requires it. So, em, working with computer scientists, em, although I did do some computing in the past, there's no point in me pretending to be a computer scientist. I should work with computer scientists and we should work together and write together. Eh, I have a book plan for few years time where I'll be working with a scholar in religious studies. Eh, we want to do something on language and religion, so, you know, should I actually bone up on religious studies and turn myself into a religious xxxx and linguist xxx? [0:40: 07] No. Work with somebody that does that already, who you can talk to and work with, and write it together is my view. So, when you want to work cross disciplinary, I think, collaborative writing is the way to go, otherwise you'll get mired in this issue of having to learn a new subject every time you want to work across boundaries. So that would be the only thing I'd add to your little list of two that I can think of . . . Also, actually, I quite like it. I think some people are terrifically solitary writers, eh, but actually I quite like working with other people and writing with other people, and rowing with other people about what we're going to say next in this chapter. I quite like all of that.

LAWRENCE: That's great. Another one?

QUESTION FROM THE FLOOR: At what point in the writing process do you stop reading and researching articles?

TONY: Right, OK. Well. Eh, this sounds like a terrific confession that's about to come forward. I usually have the ideas first and do the reading around later. Em, you have a sort of background reading that you're doing all the time, eh, but say for example, to talk very speculatively about a book which isn't even under contract yet, on language and religion, I had some ideas about language and religion, so I sort of chatted to people about them, and then went out and looked at some context and thought about language again in church and things like that, and went back and talked to some people, then sketched out a few ideas, and it was only really at that point that I did a literature review to find out what other people had said about this, because I didn't want their ideas crowding out my own at that very early stage.

Now, it can happen sometimes, when you do that, that you discover that everything that you've thought about has already been said, but that's incredibly rare. Em, often what happens at that stage is that you then start to amend your views, and sometimes you do find pretty much empty niches. Oddly, swearing is quite an empty niche, I discovered. There are books on it, but not as many as you'd imagine. So actually when I have the initial thoughts about that and then did the reading, the reading was quite easy to do, because there wasn't that much, certainly a book length, written on the topic. Em, so that's what you should find out. So that's the way I tend to do it. I tend to have the ideas, let the ideas mature a little and find their own feet, and then expose them to the literature.

Going back to the example of Nazareth Kifle and Eritrea, we looked at the school text books and I looked at the section on the epistemic modalities, and said, That's all wrong. I'm sure of it, it's pretty much wrong. And it was then, from talking about, that we then went off and reviewed the literature on epistemic modality etc, and then designed the experiment xxxx. [0: 43: 03] But first of all it was actually just a sort of perusal of the materials. It wasn't going to the literature and saying, Ooh, a big topic is X. It was looking at the materials and saying, A big problem here is X, and let's think that through and then check the literature.

LAWRENCE: Go for it, go for it.

FRIEDA: Just a short one, then. Head time, and thinking. Em, if you can answer this. Where do you best think, how, you know, where do you do that thinking?

TONY: Anywhere. It's em . . . it tends to . . . I wouldn't say it just comes upon me, but, em, if you've got a lively intellectual life you tend to find your mind wandering most times on to odd topics, so it can be almost anywhere, there isn't a particular place or space, eh, that I use to think. I mean, supermarkets, on the bus, whatever, em, in the bath traditionally, em, but I usually snooze in the bath rather than [laughter] . . .

LAWRENCE: It's hard to keep awake. That's really interesting. I was thinking, one of the things that I've noticed about myself is that I do my best thinking in very noisy places where there is white noise, where it is just so noisy that I can only hear myself.

TONY: Yes. Oh yes, that's right. Cinema, theatre, things like that. I can wander off. No, not theatre so much, but music concerts, things like that. I can wander off quite easily at a concert and have a happy think. So, nowhere in particular and everywhere in general, I suppose.

LAWRENCE: He pays all that money for the ticket and then he goes off and has a happy think. [laughter]

IDÉ: Does the same apply to your writing then, anywhere?

TONY: No. Em, for writing then, I must say, I'm a great one for being in quiet places and doing it in quiet places. Em, or, listening to music while I write, I listen to a lot of music while I'm writing. Em, so, no, I don't write anywhere. I tend to write in my study, or in little cottages in the middle of nowhere . . .

IDÉ: Or in west Clare.

TONY: . . . or in west Clare. [laughter] They're brilliant for that, that type of thing. So no, I do find I need much more focus and concentration when I'm writing than when I'm thinking. (inaudible) [0: 45: 29]

LAWRENCE: Did you say you listen to music?

TONY: Yes.

LAWRENCE: Any particular kind of music?

TONY: Whatever I fancy listening to at the time. Em . . .

LAWRENCE: I used to get highly motivated by Muppet Movie songs.

TONY: Muppet Movie songs! [laughter].

LAWRENCE: I know that's terrible. But I used to sit . . . da-ra-da-ra-da-ra-da-da-da. What is that one, the Treasure Island one, that was just . . . I always got a lot done with that!

TONY: I must give that a go!

LAWRENCE: It's amazing, it is.

TONY: I'll give it a try. [laughter] See if it works.

LAWRENCE: Any other question? You've been quiet, is there anything that you wanted to ask? No? Joanne? Anything that you want to ask? No? Well I have one last question to ask you, it's a ridiculous question.

TONY: Yes.

LAWRENCE: But we have to ask ridiculous questions, em, I'm kinda like wondering, I was thinking about Jo Slade, this was the last interview . . . is with a poet, a Limerick poet, and I had spoken to her about her process, and one of the things . . .

TONY: Is it very different from mine?

LAWRENCE: Oh yes, oh yeah.

TONY: That's very interesting.

LAWRENCE: We try and interview people from different disciplines and from different backgrounds. She was not an academic. She was just . . . she was actually the poet laureate in Limerick for a few years, and a really, really, em, minimalist kind of poet in the sense that she doesn't, she's not very flowery with her wording, but when she says things it's very visual, so wow!

TONY: Mmm.

LAWRENCE: And she's a painter, as well, as it turns out. But one of the things that I wanted to find out from her was how does she set the scene? Like you were saying that the environment that you need to write in needs to be quiet. Are there things that you have to have in place before you can start to write, like do you have, like a smoking jacket, or furry slippers, or a pipe, or . . .

TONY: . . . a velvet cap? [laughter] No.

LAWRENCE: Special pen?

TONY: No. I do. . . No. No, I don't think so. I have . . I have a very old, I have chair that I've always had 'cause my grandfather gave it to me and I usually sit in that.

LAWRENCE: Right

TONY: But that's just because it happens to be the chair in my study. I don't think it has special properties . . . [laughter]

LAWRENCE: You never know!

TONY: . . . or psychological potential for me. Em, but music, actually, I do listen to a lot of music.

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

TONY: But it has to be familiar music, familiar, not new. I can't . . . that distracts me, if I'm trying to listen to a new opera or something while writing, it's a disaster.

LAWRENCE: So this is background

TONY: It's got to be background. It's got to be something I'm incredibly familiar with.

LAWRENCE: Sure.

TONY: So anything, the Beatles to Bach, that type of cliché, I'm afraid . . .

LAWRENCE: Brilliant. Sure.

TONY: . . . then that's fine. It can just bubble away in the background and I can write. But, eh, new music, no. It distracts me hugely.

LAWRENCE: That's one thing anyway. That's something that, like, your neighbours would realise, OK, he's writing.

TONY: Yes. I doubt if I listen to the music that loud. I don't listen to it that loud. [laughter]

LAWRENCE: OK, fair enough. Right.

TONY: Em, one thing actually that I'm surprised about, not surprised you haven't asked, because this is about the process of writing, but in the UK, of course, if we had conversation like this, there would be questions about, Which journals do you target, and which of the quality presses and things like that . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: Em, and for me I don't think about that too much.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: But sometimes . . .

LAWRENCE: I guess that is, it's a big concern in the sense that, em, I think you hear post-graduates saying, especially in the sciences, they seem to be very motivated to publish in journals that are almost impossible to publish in, partly because their ratings are so high . . .

TONY: Yes.

LAWRENCE: . . .and they feel this pressure to do that. And of course, not everyone is going to get published in that journal, so it's almost absurd to think that everybody would, so, em, they don't have any back-up.

TONY: Yes.

LAWRENCE: Em, but also it may not be appropriate to the journal itself. Do you investigate the journals that you're about to publish into, to see if they're publishing articles . . .

TONY: Yeah, I will have a look at it. There's no point in sending something to a journal when it will just be turned down on ideological grounds . . .

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: . . . or it doesn't fit with their publishing strategy.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: Same with em, publishers of books. Eh, if you've got a monograph, and that publisher only publishes text books, don't bother them. Don't waste your time.

LAWRENCE: Do you ever write to the editor, to see if they'd be interested in an article about A or B or C?

TONY: Em, if I know the editor of the journal I will send along a brief synopsis and say, I wrote a paper like this, do you think it would fit?

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: And then they might write back, but only if I know them.

LAWRENCE: You're not asking for a commitment . . .

TONY: No.

LAWRENCE: . . . you're just asking if this is something that would be . . .

TONY: . . . just, In principle, would this type of topic fit with your journal?

LARENCE: Right.

TONY: And no promises at this stage.

LAWRENCE: Idé?

IDÉ: Do you write with that target in mind or do you decide on that target after you have written?

TONY: Afterwards. Em, it depends. Sometimes you are commissioned to write pieces which actually, I must confess, tend to be the more the joyless pieces, because somebody will say, Tony will you write yet another introduction to *Corpus Linguistics* in twenty pages. [laughter] How many times, you think to yourself. Well, OK. So there you know where it's going in advance. Eh, on other occasions you've got ideas and you think, What size . . . how big is the idea? Is it book length? Is it short? Eh, so there you sort of work out whether you need a book contract or not. So, for *Swearing in English*, I thought, This is definitely book length. There are so many ideas around this, I need to write a book. With the thing in Eritrea, it was a neat little study of epistemic modality, learners and the influence of text books. So it's out there like a neat little thing, athough, actually, that went into an edited collection because John Clarity [0: 51: 5] was doing an edited collection, just pretty much on academic writing and text books and it was just absolutely the right fit, so we put it in there.

Eh, but on other occasions, I must confess, you have an idea and you think, This one's so strong, we'll go for one of the bigger journals with it. It's journal article length. Em, it's strong, it should be of general interest to people and it will help to get the idea out to as large a number of people as possible. So then you send it off *Applied Linguistics* or something like that. On other occasions you think , OK, this idea might be very strong, but actually it's right up the street of *English Linguistics*, so I'll send it to that. So em, usually, em, early on in the process, you've got an idea of where you're sending it, or indeed at the very start of the process you've been told how many words you've got to write, and on what topic, so you know exactly where it's going.

LAWRENCE: I'm conscious of the time and I need to make sure that everyone has the chance to get to their next, em, their next class or whatever, that they're going to. I'm heading across the river to another county to go to class, I have to do a lecture over there with the engineers, so I'm, I'm gonna have to get out of here myself. But I wanted to thank you Tony.

TONY: Well, thank you.

LAWRENCE: This is brilliant. And I don't know if you've looked at our website, the Writing Centre website, but there's a link to *How I Write, Ireland* in it, and this video will be posted up there, with the transcripts, and we'll put together a learning outcome, some kind of learning outcome, some kind of lesson plan to go along with this.

TONY: OK.

LAWRENCE: So that this will be available to . . . it will be uploaded to the National Digital . . . em . . . Learning Resource, and other teachers and students from around the country, and I think it's in the UK as well, will be able to access this . . .

TONY: OK.

LAWRENCE: . . . and hopefully people will see this, and use this in classes as a way of developing writers. That's the goal!

TONY: Great!

LAWRENCE: And I wanna thank you for your contribution. It was fascinating talking to you. I really enjoyed it.

TONY: Well, thank you. Actually it's a privilege, it's a privilege to be asked to do it. I've not really thought about it, or reflected so consciously upon it, before.

LAWRENCE: Right.

TONY: So it was a privilege to talk about it. Thank you.

LAWRENCE: Thank you. And thank you, Angela, for facilitating this, and thank you to, em, to the School of Literature and Languages, and Culture and Communications for sponsoring this as well. So, we appreciated it. And thank you all for coming. Cheers. [applause]