PART ONE: ISSUES IN TRANSCRIBING SPOKEN DISCOURSE

“There is no such thing as a ‘natural’ mechanism for the representation of speech”. (Atkinson 1992: 23)

1. INTRODUCTION

Discourse analysis of spoken interaction requires transcription. There is no other way, at the moment, anyway, apart from playing back the recordings, of ‘fixing’ and making accessible to scholars and students, the patterns and sequences of actual talk, and the activities which surround it, which the researcher has collected. Because spoken interaction has to be ‘fixed’ through writing down the words and other features of the interaction, it is usually assumed that talk is like writing. And the way we transcribe is, inevitably, biased towards writing. The upshot is that many discourse analysts work entirely from the written transcript once the job of transcribing is seen to be completed.

But transcription is both a great deal more and a great deal less than talk written down.

STOP AND THINK!
List some of the ways in which transcription is both more and less than talk written down

It is a great deal more in the sense that any transcription also reveals the particular stance of the transcriber – their theoretical ‘home’, the purposes of the transcription, their ideological position and so on: ‘transcription procedure is responsive to cultural biases and itself biases readings and inferences’ (Ochs 1979: 44).

Transcription, therefore, cannot be separated off from theory, analysis and interpretation. This means that the same piece of data can be transcribed and so interpreted in different ways depending on the particular theoretical stance of the researcher.
It is also a great deal less than talk written down since it is a double reduction. The audio and video recording is already a reduction from the actual interaction. The transcription is even further removed since it cannot convey on the page all the contextual details which gave that encounter its particular life. And, paradoxically, the more the transcriber tries to depict what they actually hear, the more messy and incoherent it seems. Since talk and interaction are such multi-channelled activities, the transcriber has to show on the page both words, prosodic and paralinguistic features such as intonation, voice quality, rhythm and so on, other non-verbal phenomenon such as coughs and sighs, turn taking and other features of context which are relevant. By the time even some of these phenomena are transcribed, the page looks crowded and the speakers lost in a forest of symbols! But when we return to the original audio or video recording, the interaction usually seems smooth and well orchestrated.

Deborah Cameron makes the important point that when we look at transcribed talk it looks incoherent and repetitive because we work from models of coherence and communicative efficiency which are largely drawn from written discourse:

This is a bias that needs to be unlearned. Analysts of talk must begin from the assumption that if communication is not breaking down in a given instance then participants must be able to make sense of it, no matter how incoherent it must seem; and if certain features recur in spoken language data, they must serve some purpose, however obscure we find it.

(Cameron 2000:33)

However hard we work on producing a complete transcription and an ‘objective’ one, we will never succeed. That is not a reason to be down hearted. But it is a reason to be open and explicit about the process of transcription.
We have to acknowledge:

- purpose and audience for the transcription and how these affect our decisions
- the technical limitations of our transcriptions in terms of accuracy and readability
- the politics of transcription more generally.

In the next sections, each of these issues will be dealt with briefly. All three aspects inter-relate even though they are dealt with separately here. The key issues are highlighted but for a detailed discussion see the annotated references at the end of this section.

These three aspects assume that the process of analysis begins with the transcription. Discourse analysis does not start after the transcription but before it. Indeed, decisions about who and how to record are all part of the interpretive process which culminates in what is generally thought of as discourse analysis. A good example of this is David Langford’s textbook *Analysing Talk*. The title suggests that this book is about analysis but a great deal of emphasis is given to the process of transcription as part of analysis.

Much conversation analysis and linguistic discourse analysis starts with the recording of a particular event, and transcription is seen as the technical process of documenting the recording. This focus on the technical aspects of transcribing has been invaluable. The system developed initially by Gail Jefferson and used with modifications ever since both within Conversation Analysis and beyond (Atkinson and Heritage 1984, Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998) has been one of the most influential innovations in discourse analysis since the tape recorder was invented.

It also forms the basis of more ethnographic approaches to discourse. Such an approach starts with a period of participation and observation in which the researcher learns about what John Gumperz (1999) calls the ‘communicative ecology’ of the research site. Patterns of interaction, the rhythm and movement of individuals or groups, the participant meanings that evolve and so on are all part of the preparation for transcription. This ethnographic preparation will not only affect such obvious concerns such as accuracy but will also influence how participants are represented, what level of transcription the researcher will choose and what aspects of the interaction the participants orientate towards.
2. PURPOSES AND AUDIENCES

What our final transcription should look like – what it should be – will of course depend on the kind of data, the purpose of the transcription and who the audience is.

STOP AND THINK!

Think about two or three different settings in which transcription might be used and think about how the purposes and audience for these transcriptions will affect what kind of transcriptions they are.

A transcription that conveys the first words of a young child for a specialist, academic audience will be very different from a transcription produced by a court transcriber for legal purposes or from a transcription of a classroom for student teachers. So, one of the first questions to ask is: What do we want our transcription to do? Do we want it to be a broad or rough transcription where only the words and the speaker turns are given or do we want a narrow or fine-grained transcription where prosodic analysis, turn taking systems and non-verbal communication are detailed? For example, Gumperz (1982) describes a court case in which a Philippino doctor’s communicative style was crucial in coming to a decision about his conviction for negligence. In this case, prosodic features, pausing, rhythm etc. were all important.

If our concern is with the Discourses of the talk – in the sense of the knowledge that is being produced and circulating in talk – the Foucault sense of Discourse or what Gee (1999) calls big D ‘discourse’, then we may only want to transcribe the words of talk and indicate who the speaker is. We do not need to indicate pauses or overlaps unless we are linking the big D discourses to how they are interactionally produced. (There are plenty of problems in even putting the words down on the page, see below, but on the whole these are not technical problems). If we are also looking for the overall structure or ‘grammar’ of discourse as the early discourse analysts did, then again, getting the words down on the page, with some fairly basic intonational features noted, may be enough.

However, the basic assumption of Conversation Analysis and most discourse analysis is that social reality - and that includes social relations and the wider social order - are created in interaction.
If talk and interaction are so fundamental to our understanding of society, then finding out how talk and interaction are produced and managed moment by moment is essential. Conversations, lessons, interviews, consultations and all the activities which constitute social life are made up of interactional routines and improvisations of which words are only a part. The local interactional organisation of any activity includes how people take turns, how they organise their talk to orientate towards other speakers, how they deal with the social problems of embarrassment and how they integrate the verbal and non-verbal in their talk - to list just a few of the ingredients that make up interaction. Transcriptions, if detailed enough, can display the fine-grained details of interaction and how these feed into the accomplishment of a particular activity.

One of the difficulties is that novice discourse analysts often use a transcription as a text to be interpreted rather like a literary text. From the words of the speakers and the transcriber’s memory of how they sounded, interpretations are made about affect, attitude, intention and so on. Quite often, the transcriptions will be made more ‘scientific’ by including some common notations for pauses, overlap, unclear words and so on, usually borrowed from Conversation Analysis. And CA has done a very good job in drawing attention to these and other phenomena such as hesitation particles, stress, intonation, sound stretching and laughter. However, many of the features in this list, although they appear in the transcription, are not analysed systematically and it is difficult to see the justification for this level of transcription unless they are.

So, the problem for novice transcribers is not so much which type of transcription notation to use, but how far their transcription accords with the theories they are working with. If transcribers are working within the CA tradition, then questions about how to present local interactional organisation will be important. For example, how turns are presented, together with degrees of overlap, latching and so on.

STOP AND THINK!
If you wanted to transcribe some data of very young children talking to their carers, what ways of transcribing and lay-out might you want to use?
Elinor Ochs, for example, looking at early child language development, drew on notions of child communicative competence to drive the transcription decisions. She started to think about transcription in terms of how young children interact together. This meant giving emphasis to non-verbal communication and thinking about ways of showing turn taking which did not assume that each turn followed the last in a relevant sequence (Ochs 1979). The transcriber must be clear about their theoretical goals before they select how to transcribe.

For many people reading these materials, the purpose of transcription is to fulfil the requirements of a particular assignment. The audience will be the tutor and perhaps no one else. However, many students are professionals who may want to use their study with colleagues and the issue of audiences other than tutors is therefore significant. This raises issues of accessibility, readability and flexibility discussed below. If the transcription is just for tutors, they will want to see evidence that the type of transcription fits the analysis and the overall theoretical position the student has taken. They will also want to see some recognition that the way students have represented speakers is appropriate for tutors as the audience.

To sum up, making decisions about purposes and audience involves the transcriber in being selective. It essential that the transcriber selects because a transcription which is too detailed is difficult to read and/or make judgements about (Ochs 1979). But the selection must be based on the particular theories and concerns of the researcher. These issues are taken up under the politics of transcription below but the significance of purpose and audience runs through all of the discussion below.
3. TECHNICAL LIMITATIONS OF TRANSCRIPTIONS: ISSUES OF ACCURACY, ACCESSIBILITY AND FLEXIBILITY

Lay-out
Before looking at how the interaction itself is transcribed, the researcher needs to think about lay-out on the page.

STOP AND THINK!
Think about how the lay-out will affect what you transcribe and how the transcript is interpreted.

How the transcription is laid out will affect:
- how detailed the transcription can be
- the extent to which verbal and non-verbal elements can be integrated
- the extent to which both the speakers and the features of the interaction are relatively highlighted or not
- issues of representation (see below)

The two basic lay-out types are: line by line as in a dialogue with each speaker turn following underneath the last or column lay-out in which speakers are allocated a separate column and there may also be a separate column for non-verbal communication:

Data Example 1:

A = baby; M = mum

[A taking empty cup from M]  baby/
[A sneezes]  
God bless you!
[A looking into empty cup]  baby cup/
Baby cup?
[A holding out cup to M]  Mommy/
Mommy what?

baby
(from Bloom 1973 quoted in Ochs: 1979:53)
In the lay-out here, the non-verbal information is placed to the left of the child’s utterances. As Ochs points out (op. cit.) leftness is associated both with prominence and with temporal priority in English transcripts.

Bloom deliberately puts the non-verbal aspects to the left to show their importance in child-adult interaction. (and see below for further discussion of lay out as ideologically influenced representation.)

**Notation**
For students relatively new to transcription, it is unlikely that they would want to develop their own system of notation and indeed they should be warned off doing it. But it is important that the novice transcriber has some clear criteria for selecting the right transcription system for their purposes. This is particularly important if they are involved in transcribing a corpus which will be analysed on line. Du Bois (1991: 78) suggests five design principles for his Discourse Transcription system which are given below in a slightly modified form (and see also Edwards 1992):

1. Define good categories: make sure the different conventions are clearly distinct from each other e.g. Do not use colons- :: - to mean stretching out a sound if a colon is used to distinguish between the speaker and their utterance as in:-

**Data Example 2**

J: are you coming?
T: not ye::t

2. Make the system accessible: ensure that the diacritics used are relatively familiar and easy to use. There is a tension here between a system where punctuation is used because it is familiar and the problem of over-familiarity. A reader may read a comma or a full stop as they would in a written text when it means something slightly different when used as a transcription convention. This is particularly problematic with using the question mark to indicate rising intonation when questions do not necessarily have a rising intonation and utterances with rising intonation are not always questions.
3. Make the system robust: This is important if the transcribed data is to be available online. Conventions should not be used if they are going to be lost when transferred to other types of software.

4. Make the system economical: Do not use a system which is too verbose. This, again, is particularly important when transcribing long passages for computer retrieval. Du Bois, for example, suggests using @ for laughter because it is so common in conversations but writing COUGH because it is much less so (p.91). However, if the transcription is to be analysed by the transcriber and is not a huge corpus, the principle of accessibility and readability is probably more important and writing out non-verbal and paralinguistic aspects in full is recommended. For example, using @ for laughter is difficult to ‘read’ and adds more ‘noise’ to the interpreting of the transcript.

5. Make the system adaptable: Ensure that new features can be added in. Also, as we shall see in the discussion of representation below, it is important to be flexible in how the data can be presented on the page.

As has already been suggested, there are plenty of conflicts for the transcriber to acknowledge even if they cannot be dealt with. Many of them revolve around the difference between the participants’ understanding of what is going on and the transcribers. This can be at a very straightforward level - for example, the speaker hears the words he or she utters but the transcriber cannot always. So even the apparently simple task of transcribing the words of the speaker in the order they spoke them may not be so easy. And of course in multi-party talk, this can become impossible. If the transcriber has to leave lots of gaps or has to guess at possible words, the speaker may appear less competent than they actually are. In these cases, the researcher’s failure as a data collector or transcriber are projected on to the informant. A much more problematic area is that of how to represent accurately the words and prosodic features of speakers.
Accuracy of speech

The whole notion of the extent to which we can make transcriptions scientifically accurate is still open to debate. While qualitative analysis is still subject to attack for lacking rigour, objectivity and so on, a piece of transcribed data heavily garnished with transcription diacritics, use of IPA conventions and pauses timed to the micro second may appear satisfyingly scientific. However, complete and absolute accuracy is a chimera and indeed, outsider categories and measurements do not necessarily depict how the interactants themselves experienced the encounter. This is certainly true of how to represent pausing. (see below)

Writing down words

The wider political issues of representation are taken up in detail below, but here it is worth flagging up the problem of how to represent, accurately, the sounds we hear as we write them down. The problem is we have no means of using our writing system to convey anything other than a standard variety of speech without drawing the reader’s attention to its non-standardness in some marked way. For example, as soon as we write ‘aint’ instead of ‘isn’t’ or ‘becuz’ instead of ‘because’ we mark the speech as aberrant.

STOP AND THINK!
Make a list of some examples that you remember where speech is marked as non-standard, a dialect or a colloquial way of talking. This may be from other transcriptions, from novels or comics or any other texts. Are these ways of marking non-standard, dialect or colloquial speech consistent?

Of course, no speaker speaks in exactly the same way but most transcribers do not want to display the subtle differences in speech of each person’s idiolect. What tends to happen is that transcribers write down words as they understand them and only re-spell words which strike them as not conforming to their expectations of what is ‘normal’. And these words tend to come from a very restricted list of verb forms, prepositions and certain colloquialisms.
Bucholtz suggests that the most frequent linguistic phenomenon which are respelled are:

- reduced vowels e.g. ‘ascent ‘v man’ (ascent of man)
- flaps e.g. ‘gotta new teacher
- voiced alveolar fricatives e.g. ‘iz’, ‘b’cuz’
- non-phonetic English orthography e.g. ‘elecshun’ ‘enuf’.

(Bucholtz 1999)

In the last case, the writing is quite fanciful since ‘election’ always sounds like ‘elecshun’ and enough as ‘enuff’.

These types of respellings are easily noticeable and act to stigmatise speakers as coming from a particular social group. Interestingly, work on court transcribers in the USA has shown that they tend to notice non-standard forms among defendants but not among barristers (Coulthard 1996, Walker 1990).

Many transcribers use re-spellings and what has come to be known as eye-dialect. This is transcribers’ attempts to present visually the non-standard varieties of language so that they read as they sound e.g. hwaryuh for how are you. It is reminiscent of the comic strip ‘words’ to capture strange noises on the page. Denis Preston has been particularly concerned with how folklorists, who inevitably are collecting a great range of dialect material, use misspellings and eye dialect. Here are examples from his analysis of folklore studies of ‘black’ American English (1982):

wanna, git, would of been, a yella gal, ya lookin’ for, sure ‘nuff, ain’t gon be.

This type of re-spelling and eye dialect is also frequently used in Conversation Analysis. Given that CA notations were developed by sociologists rather than linguists, it is hardly surprising that they would avoid technical linguistic solutions. However, in sacrificing accuracy to readability, they create a new set of problems.
Data Example 3:

[HG:11.1]

N:  H’lllo:?  
H:  Hi,.  
N:  HI::.  
H:  Hwaryuhr =  
N:  Fi:ne how’r you  
H:  Oka: y  
N:  Goo:d  
H:  mkhh hhh  
N:  What’s doin

(Atkinson and Heritage 1984: xxx)

Here common expressions such as ‘hello’ and ‘how are you’ are respelled to look as they apparently sounded. But other words are given the standard spelling. The point here is that there is such a variety of ways of saying common phrases that there is no obvious point at which to decide that there should be a re-spelling. For example, very few speakers of whatever variety of English are likely to say ‘would HAVE been’ . They are much more likely to use the schwa. Jefferson (1996) has tried to defend the CA approach to respelling and eye dialect by trying to capture, with increasing accuracy, the range of varieties.

STOP AND THINK!

How many different ways can you think of pronouncing and transcribing the word ‘of’?

In one set of tapes, Jefferson identifies seven different pronunciations of the word ‘of’: of, uff, ohv, awv, off, awf, and aff’ (Jefferson 1996: 161). Although, this a much greater range than is usually given, it is not very clear how these seven varieties are meant to sound and how many other varieties might need to be added to this list.
And this is only one of the problems. As Preston and other linguists such as Jane Edwards (1992) have pointed out respellings and eye -dialect are inaccurate, ambiguous, inconsistent and difficult to read. Preston (1985) gives the following as an example:

**Data Example 4:**
“With A one boat yuh: : uhlon dohlenko”.

This represents the words “With, uh, one boat you hold on : don’t let go”.
And this seems to contain all of the four problems that Edwards and Preston have identified.

STOP AND THINK!
Can you identify the four problems in this one small piece of data ?

Unless we are familiar with this speaker’s dialect, we cannot be sure that we are pronouncing it accurately. It is ambiguous, in that we have to assume that the speaker's words’ with’, ‘one; and ‘boat’ are pronounced in a standard form since no alternative respelling is given. If they are not spoken in a standard form, then the transcriber is being inconsistent.
And, finally, most people find this example so difficult to read, that they cannot reconstruct what the speaker actually said!

So what is the answer to representing non-standard varieties accurately? There is, of course, a technical solution which is to transcribe all the data in the international phonetic alphabet (IPA). Linguists and phoneticians have used the IPA for small and often constructed examples but it is hard to imagine long chunks of discourse being transcribed in this way. And it would make the transcription virtually unreadable to all but the most skilful and determined of linguists. Elinor Ochs, in her seminal paper, suggests, quoting from Ron Scollon, that in child language acquisition and socialisation single words should be transcribed phonetically. This is workable if the transcripts are of children in the early stages of learning to use language but would not work with other sorts of data. Preston suggests that only unpredictable realisations of a phoneme should be shown phonetically. However, this assumes that the transcriber knows what is stable and what is not in any variety. This is extremely difficult to know in multilingual, intercultural settings where speakers’ variety is in a state of change.
Other research, motivated by an interest in code-switching and language crossing in just these kinds of settings, looks at those moments of discourse when speakers switch or take on a new voice (Hewitt 1986, Rampton 1995). These brief instances can be transcribed accurately using IPA since they are the focus of attention and stand out from the rest of the discourse for particular analytic attention.

**Data Example 5:**
In this example two young British Asian adolescents ‘cross’ between London English and a stylised Asian English (SAE):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BR</th>
<th>attention gents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asif</td>
<td>yeah alright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>alright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asif</td>
<td>yeh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazim (in SAE)</td>
<td>I AM VERY SORRY BEN JAAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[æɪ æm veri sɔrɪ ben dʒə:d ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asif (in SAE)</td>
<td>ATTENTION BENJAMIN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[æθenʃa:n bændʒəmɪn ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Rampton 1995:)

However, there are criticisms that IPA is not an ‘objective’ system. Becker (1995) reminds us that the IPA is based on the Roman alphabet and that the phonetic values of many of its symbols are based on the orthographic systems of European languages. This tends to make even such an apparently technical and neutral tool as the IPA subject to a Eurocentric bias.

In many cases the main focus of the analysis is not to do with dialectical and non-standard forms of words, grammar and phonology. In these cases, there seems little justification for transcribing the sounds accurately. Since it is impossible to do a complete transcription, the transcriber needs to do a fine-grained analysis only of those aspects of the interaction which are significant for their particular focus.
For example, if the research is on the way in which children avoid answering questions in class but still want to appear to be contributors, the rhythmic placing of their contributions and their non-verbal communication in relation to the teacher’s elicitations may be important but not their particular accent or use of syntax. (see McDermott and Gospodinoff 1979)

Where the focus is on a particular linguistic variety or style of communicating, then Du Bois’ criteria of economy may be sacrificed to readability and explicitness.

For example, the transcriber may want to comment in brackets on a particular realisation of an utterance below a standard transcription of it as in the following example:

**Data Example 6**

Ahma git me a gig
(Rough gloss: I’m going to get myself some support)

Here a male Afro-American student switches from a standard variety to a Black English variety ‘Ahma git me a gig’. This code-switching is an example of a ‘contextualisation cue’, designed to alert the other Black English speakers in the group to the fact that he was having to play the white man’s game in order to get some financial support.

(Gumperz 1982: 30-32)

**Writing down the organisation of talk**

Accuracy in relation to the management of talk, such as turn taking, pausing etc, appears less problematic in terms of an attempt at an objective means of transcribing. It is quite possible, for example, to time pauses, to show overlaps and so on. But, when it comes to the more general problem of transcribing from participants’ perspective, again there are difficulties. Pausing is a good example to take. It is quite common to use a stopwatch to time pauses both within utterances and between turns - for example (0.5) is half second pause, (1.00) is a one second pause and even to time in tenths of a second. But recent thinking (see Jefferson 1989 and Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 1996) suggests that this accuracy and objectivity is unwarranted. Stopwatch timing does not necessarily bear any relation to how silences and pauses are *identified* by participants. What an analyst measures as a pause as a result of a moment of silence may not be perceived as a pause by the participants. The analyst measures it and writes in the pause, say, (1.5) and this element of the transcription gives a salience to pausing in the interaction which the participants may not have perceived at all.
Jefferson suggests counting such as ‘one one thousand, two one thousand’ etc. consistent with the rhythm of the interaction is a more participant friendly way of timing pauses. Couper-Kuhlen (1993) has argued that it is the rhythm of the surrounding talk which tends to determine whether a moment of silence is perceived as long or short. Similarly, it is the rhythmic timing which is crucial in the next speaker gauging their entry point and yet most transcription systems ignore the rhythmic element.

There is another area where accuracy is a problem if only CA transcription techniques are used and these relate to the accuracy of prosodic transcription. These are dealt with in the ‘Notes on Prosody’.

Another problem which relates to the tension between analyst and participant perspective has been raised by Cook (1990, 1995). This is the question of context. There are two difficulties here. The first is trying to work out how much of the context the participants orientate to. The analyst may want to transcribe all the features in a piece of data as determined by a well known transcription notation. In other words take note of all the local contextual features which are considered significant in what are sometimes elaborate systems. But if the participants do not orientate to them, there seems little point.

For example, the positioning of a blackboard in the class may be relevant to how the children orientate to each other or it may not be. Similarly, features of turn taking may be transcribed but if the researcher is focusing on narrative style, turn taking may be relatively unimportant.

The second difficulty is trying to capture all the features of context which are relevant but are not readily observable. For example, participant knowledge and attitudes and feelings and features of the situation which are not ‘captured’ by audio or video taping. Since the process of transcribing involves both analysis and interpretation, inevitably the transcriber has to guess at some of the subjective reality of the participants in deciding what to transcribe and what leave out.

Conversation analysts would claim they have solved this problem by only looking at the features which the participants display, in some way, that they are attending to.
Similarly, since they would argue that setting, context, roles and so on are not given but accomplished in the interaction, notions of subjectivity, wider context and so on are irrelevant. These arguments are persuasive in the many research sites that CA workers study where the routines and patterns of large data sets provide warrants for the interpretation of what is going on. For example, in a data set of hundreds of doctor-patient interactions, transcribing and interpreting a doctor’s orientation towards the patient’s perspective can be straightforward since it routinely occurs in many consultations.

However, making sense of participant perspectives in unfamiliar encounters where the interactants and analysts do not share similar ways of showing conversational involvement, takes us back to the problems Cook raises.

Transcribing non-verbal aspects of interaction

There has been a tendency (outside of Conversation Analysis) to privilege verbal over non-verbal communication and indeed where only audio tape recordings are made, researchers may only have field notes to supplement the verbal. But clearly, where there are video recordings and/or detailed notes have been taken, then non-verbal communication will need to be transcribed where the participants orientate to it. Ochs (1979) discusses the different ways in which NVC can be described and the extent to which it should be integrated with the speech or described (as prose) in a separate column. She discusses the various advantages and disadvantages to writing a descriptive account of NVC or using a notation system. Both have problems where there is a great deal of NVC to transcribe, for example, when young children are interacting together. Where a researcher’s theoretical interest is in the ways in which verbal and non-verbal work together, then conventions which tie them together are necessary:
**Data example 7**

D reads records

D: ---------------------, -------------------, --- what can I do for you?

↑

P lands and posture and posture shifts then gaze away shift towards D.

(Heath 1984: 249)

While the doctor is reading his notes, the patient lands in the chair and moves back. The patient then moves towards the doctor and shifts his gaze toward the doctor. Immediately the doctor initiates the topic by asking the patient, ‘What can I do for you?’. Heath makes the point that who gets to talk and when depends crucially upon posture and gaze.

**Transcribing and Translating**

Many researchers are working in one language but having to write and publish in another. Frequently, this means recording and transcribing in one language and then presenting the data and the analysis in English. Some publishers insist on only using the English translation in the publication. This dominance of English may influence the transcriber’s practice. They may decide to translate as they make a rough transcription and analyse from the translation. However, they are then working at a further remove from the original. A recording is already an abstraction from the actual event and people talking. A transcription is another remove and a translation yet another. For both reasons of accuracy and representation (see below), it is important that the researcher works from the original speakers’ voices and includes the transcription of the original in anything they write or publish.
Working and publishing only an English version makes a significant ideological statement about the power of English to represent everyone and everything.

Many of the issues in this section may seem tiresome or unnecessarily agonising. Another way of looking at them is to see how interesting the process of transcription is. It is not just a chore or an attempt to put a bit of science into the data analysts work. Issues of transcription are a microcosm for the many issues that face the qualitative researcher. These range from questions of purpose, of fit, and entanglement of theory and method, of the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research methods to matters of rigour and accountability.

4. THE POLITICS OF TRANSCRIPTION

Mary Bucholtz (1999) argues that applied linguists need to develop a reflexive approach to transcription as part of a wider reflexive discourse analysis. The notion of reflexivity borrowed from anthropology and sociology asks how do the researchers’ interpretations come to be produced?

Take, for example, a study of a multilingual classroom which shows certain minority groups as being offered less conceptually demanding instruction than other groups. Such a study is not an objective, neutral or transparent account. It is the product of the researchers’ particular interests and orientation and of the political context within which such research can be carried out. It is a construction of knowledge rather than a transmission of knowledge. It assumes that categorising students in certain ways is important, that certain methods are both appropriate and allowable, that the data collected and its analysis are sufficient for grounding general interpretations in the data and so on.

Similarly, the process and outcomes of transcription - the transcribed data and the analysis and interpretations from them - need to be looked at reflexively. Transcription is as much a political act as a scientific one. It is part of what Mehan (1993) calls the ‘politics of representation’. In other words, transcription is always a representation based on the transcriber’s theoretical orientation, political beliefs and understanding of their particular audience. There are two aspects to transcription as representation: how we interpret the data and how we present the speaker, although the line between them is very fuzzy.
**Representation as Interpretation**

We need to be reflexive about our own role in making choices about what and how we transcribe. We need to be aware of how our own theoretical interests, knowledge of the discourse practices of the language or particular variety that we are transcribing and political orientations affect how we make these choices (Green et al. 1997, Bucholtz 1999). And these choices begin with whom we chose to record and how we record them.

**STOP AND THINK!**

If you put a radio mic on a teacher but not on the students what might be the technical and representational issues that confront you?

What are you going to do about utterances or words that are not intelligible to you?

Putting a radio mic on the teacher and not on students shows that our orientation is towards the teacher and her interactions with students rather than towards the students. When we transcribe the student voices and many of the utterances/words are unintelligible, we can convey, unwittingly, a sense of muffled or incoherent student voices. We also have to make interpretations about the students based on much less evidence than we have for the teacher.

**Data Example 8**

This transcription is part of an oral examination. The examiner is asking about the use of computers and the possible replacement of hand written notes by computers. The candidate is Spanish and the examiners do not rate her very highly, citing the fact that she does not speak English as her first language as a problem. So the evaluation of her communicative performance is vital.

First attempt

\[ C \] = (.um (.some people have (.tried to bypass that by (.uh writing in the records (.see computer (.erm (.but (.I think that’s still a bit

\[ E4 \] or what do you think about that

\[ C \] well I think (.((laughs))) I mean it’s like not having written records really if you only write see computer (.erm (.I think the problem

→ with records is (.written records is that they are (wonky) and [(.)]]
In the first attempt, the candidate’s apparent use of the word ‘wonky’ suggests an inappropriate register and a somewhat irrelevant response. In the second attempt, the candidate’s word is reinterpreted as ‘bulky’. This is both appropriate and relevant to the argument. So she comes across quite differently. The conclusion we can draw from this is that giving up on words as unintelligible or guessing at a word may be a serious misrepresentation of the informant. We need to listen again and again to try and avoid such misrepresentations.

Similarly, our own theories and orientations may make us hear one version as correct even if we are not knowingly slanting the transcription in a particular way. Bucholtz, for example, discusses one case where she was asked to re-transcribe an interview between a police officer and a suspect which had been transcribed by the police. She found that the way in which it had been transcribed gave the interpretation of a compassionate police officer and a suspect willing to confess.
Her re-transcription presented the police officer as coercive in his attempts to extract a confession. How could these differences in interpretation be accounted for? Bucholtz identifies three aspects of the transcription process which led to these differences:

1) what is counted as unintelligible
2) the level of accuracy in terms of content
3) the level of accuracy in terms of attributing utterances to a speaker

She found that several ‘unintelligible’ words spoken by the police officer were intelligible to her and their inclusion affected how he came across. Inaccuracies, as she heard them, on several occasions also affected how the police officer and the suspect presented themselves. And, finally, attributing some utterances to one speaker rather than the other affected how these utterances were understood in their local context.

**Data Example 9**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Police transcript</th>
<th>Researcher transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9. Q. Okay. You’ve got to understand, I’m not going to make you deal with anybody</td>
<td>11. P. Okay. You’ve got to understand, I’m not going to make a deal with anybody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. A. Well, I don’t want to -</td>
<td>12. C. Well, I don’t want to</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q = police officer, A = client  
P = police officer, C = client

(Bucholtz 1999)

This is an example of what Mishler (1991) calls the ‘rhetoric of transcription’ where how a passage is transcribed will have a particular effect on the audience. Bucholtz, following Mishler, is also honest about her own political stance.
She ‘corrected’ those elements of the transcript which were advantageous to the suspect but left ‘incorrect’ those elements of the transcription which did not jeopardise the suspect. It is also worth noting here that although we have a separate section on accuracy, it is not possible to separate issues of accuracy from the politics of transcription.

In a somewhat similar case involving a speaker of limited English whose answers in the interrogation were seen to be apparently contradictory and therefore self implicating, I took a similar political stance. I highlighted the apparent incoherence of a defendant’s style of communicating to show that the customs officer, who transcribed the interrogation, had turned the suspect’s variety of English into standard English. My argument was that the defendant’s poor English meant that he came across as inconsistent in his responses and therefore was believed by the customs officer to be suspect. But I did not highlight all the examples where the suspect’s English was coherent. So, again purpose and audience are not just matters of appropriacy and flexibility but are political considerations.

**Representation and speaker presentation**

These examples move us on to more overtly ideological or political choices when it comes to how the speakers transcribed should be ‘read’ by specific audiences. And again there is the tension between readability, accuracy and ideology which is a particularly difficult one to manage when speakers are from a different language group from the transcriber, when varieties (particularly unfamiliar varieties) of the language spoken are being transcribed or in multilingual settings. The transcriber has to think about his or her own purpose since as Clifford (1986) says “Stories are built into the representational process itself (1986:100).

Every decision about how to transcribe tells a story. The question is whose story and for what purpose? Should the transcribed speakers come across as the transcriber hears them? Or how the speakers themselves feel they come across? Should, for example, the fact that they are language learners, speak Black English, speak ‘posh’ when no one else does and so on be highlighted or not? The transcriber also has to think about their audience: how will the transcription ‘speak’ to the readers? What judgements will they bring to the way voices have been represented? However inexpert readers may be as linguists, they still come to the act of reading with some firm language ideologies in place (Cameron 1995, Gal 1989, Woolard 1993).
As we have seen above in data example 8, the assumptions by the examiners about a non-native speaker of English influenced how they judged her and so it was a particularly important to represent her as coherent as the recording showed she was.

*Representing grammar and accent*

Transcribers also have to make a decision about how to present an individual speaker’s lines. Should they be presented as written prose with conventional use of capitalisation and punctuation or should they be presented to display some of the non-standard features of the speaker’s organisation of talk? It would certainly be stigmatising if the speakers of a standard variety were transcribed with standard written conventions and speakers, who used another variety, were transcribed with notations which marked the speakers as aberrant.

The issue of representing ‘otherness’ is a hot topic in anthropology (Clifford and Marcus 1986, Hallam and Street 2000) and there is now increasing interest, in a number of disciplines, in the difficult choices transcribers have to make when representing others. Clifford and Marcus’s book *Writing Culture* (1986) forces us to be reflexive about how ‘others’ come to be constructed in writing. Similarly, sociolinguists such as Preston are concerned about ‘writing people’: how minority and disadvantaged groups are stigmatised by being misrepresented through non-standard spellings and eye dialect (*See the discussion above on accuracy*). Atkinson (1992) and Tedlock (1983) are similarly concerned with stigmatisation and, more broadly, with the issue of how informants can convey their identity through the filter of transcription - in other words how they can convey an emic (insider) perspective.

The problem here is how to produce a technically adequate representation and also convey the experience of the interaction for its participants. This may mean looking for ways of evoking the experience - perhaps using experimental forms of writing to do this. Tyler, writing about the ethnographic voice, argues that the voice cannot be presented by the ethnographer. It is always ‘stolen’ (Tyler 1986 :128).
Ethnographies, he argues, should be about evoking rather than representation since, like poetry, they are a break with common-sense life and an evocation of the ethos of a community. In other words, a transcriber’s job is to try to capture the feeling and atmosphere of an interaction and not just the words and other behaviour of speakers. This means using some experimental forms to critique over naturalised conventions and to convey something of the fragmented, uncertain quality of lived experience (Marcus 1986:190). But then we come up against those powerful criteria du Bois developed. If we start experimenting with new ways of evoking the character and feel of the interaction, readers’ patience and forbearance may be tested to the limits. There is the added dimension of transcribing the talk of varieties of a language, of learner varieties and of the talk in intercultural communication.

Some theoretical and methodological approaches have ways around this impasse. The example of ‘crossing’ (Data Example 5, above) manages to convey technical accuracy without stigmatisation. The stylised Asian English which is conveyed phonetically does not stigmatise the speakers as inadequate because SAE is presented in Rampton’s theoretical framework as a resource to be used among equals to subvert the ideology of the dominant local variety of English.

Here are two examples which address some of the problems of representing otherness.

**Data Example 10**

Bucholtz discusses, in some detail, her attempts to contrast the transcription by a journalist of a speaker of Black American vernacular English with her own transcription. She makes the following points:

1. By standardising certain non-standard word forms and phonology, the newspaper article avoids stigmatising the speaker (assuming that the readership would read non-standard varieties as inadequate.)
2. However, this is not done consistently e.g. ‘aint’ is retained as if the writer wishes to convey something of the ‘flavour’ of the original (i.e. to evoke the original).
3. Standardising could be seen as stigmatising since it suggests that the variety used is inadequate. It also rubs out variety as the standard form is the unmarked from and so the reader does not pay attention to the possibility of variety.
4. Her solution (since her transcription and the discussion is for an academic readership) is to balance her desire to ‘represent AAVE (African-American Vernacular English) as a legitimate linguistic variety’ with her recognition that ‘to call attention to non-standard forms introduces problems of social evaluation’ (p16).

So she opts for the following:

- Focus on the technical e.g. use of Courier font with a fixed character width which appears more scientific and allows precise aligning of overlaps and latching to show the importance of these interactive features in AAVE.

- Be explicit about the problems this solution, in turn, produces i.e. the danger of making AAVE appear exotic and alien and utterly different from the standard variety of English.

- Be flexible: be ready to use different layers of transcription for different purposes. So, in an academic paper the transcribed speaker may seem to speak a relatively arcane and ‘difficult’ language and in a popular paper, their specific style of speaking may be rubbed out in the interests of readability.

**Data example 11**

This second example comes from the European Science Foundation project on natural second language acquisition among adult migrant workers (Perdue 1993). Paula (P) has recently arrived from Chile and she is talking to a native speaker researcher (N):

```
1 P: je entre et je vu une madame et do do do personnes *mas* eh plus et
+ je le + je le viens eh ++ de an question *por* un un radio-cassette +
elle me dit que ah je oblié que je suis très nerviou pasque madame je le
5 vi le face (mimics)
i entered and i saw a woman and two two people more er more and + i
+ and i come to them er + + with a question for a radio cassette + and she
told me that ah i forgot that i am very nervous because madam i saw them
their face (mimics)
```

```
N: hm c’est à dire ↑ sérieux ↑
that’s to say serious
```
P: oui oui eh je/
years yes er i

N: qu’est ce que tu veux dire par sérieux ↑ c’est à dire euh
what do you mean by serious is it er

P: eh méch/ comment ↑ méchant
eh nast/ how is it ↑ nasty

10 N: méchante donc tu l’as trouvée méchante ↑
nasty so you thought she was nasty ↑

P: oui oui et je suis très nervou
yes yes and i am very nervous

N: ah oui
so

P: elle appelle son mari
she call her husband

N: oui
yes

15 P: et le me dit ah madame quelle nationalité ↑
and she told me ah what nationality ↑

N: tu disais que il fait hm une expression du visage il a eu une expression du visage qui t’a/
you were saying that he made mhm an expression, he had an expression on his face which did not

P: oui
yes

N: qui t’a pas plu ↑

20 P: oui
yes

(Bremer, Roberts et al 1996)
The following issues were discussed at our meetings on how to transcribe the data:

1. The informants had had little or no language instruction and their use of the target language varied enormously across research settings and within an interaction as well as over time. It was difficult to talk of their use of the target language as a stable variety in which certain uses were predictable and therefore did not need to be marked. (This is Preston’s solution, see the section on Accuracy above).

2. They were both politically and communicatively marginalised and stigmatised and the use of respellings and eye dialect would stigmatise them further. Also, we wanted the reader to have some kind of emic experience i.e. what kind of identity did the informants want to convey about themselves? (Presumably they did not want to appear incompetent but perhaps also they wanted to present themselves as non-native speakers so that they might attract at least some measure of tolerance from the speakers from the majority group).

3. Our studies were concerned with how migrant workers ‘accomplished understanding’ in their interactions with native speakers so issues of how well speakers were intelligible to each other were important.

Paula is from Chile and her use of French at this point and with this listener draws quite considerably on her Spanish. As researchers, we had to decide how far to show this Spanishness in the transcription? We experimented with eye dialect and respellings but were unhappy with them. Also we were aware that the speakers from the majority group were themselves often speaking a local vernacular. Should this be represented as well? In the end our solution was:

- to retain standard orthography most of the time but to show the influence of Spanish in grammar and pronunciation when it was telling - for example, the spelling of ‘do’ (two) in line 1 and of ‘nerv(i)ou’ (nervous) in line 5; the ‘le’ (she) instead of ‘elle’ in line 15.
- to try to retain a balance between showing Paula, and others, as struggling to express themselves in a new language but without stigmatising them with too much respelling and eye dialect.
- to try to represent Paula’s voice as she would wish to be heard.
- to be clear about issues of purpose as part of the politicised decision making of the transcriber. If we were using Paula’s narrative as an example of routine racism rather than example of her struggles with the language (if it is possible to separate the two) then there seems little justification for not standardising her speech in the transcription.
- next time to work with the informants on how they wished themselves to be represented in transcriptions.

Representing interaction

The way in which transcriptions are laid out is also a political matter. Again it was Eleanor Ochs (1979) who first raised awareness of the cultural, and we could say here ideological, power of lay-out in her studies of child language socialisation. As we have seen (above) she challenged the orthodoxy of putting adults’ speech in the left hand column and children’s in the right.

She argued that since we read left to right, we are more likely to see what we read first as pre-eminent. So the adult would be seen as the more powerful and the topic initiator, which was not necessarily the case.

Most transcriptions lay out the words in a linear way as if it was a set dramatic piece with each one taking their turn. This can mask the multi-layered and overlapping nature of much interaction and down play the complexities of roles and relationships in claiming the floor, giving way and so on (cf. Green, Franquiz and Dixon 1997). And, as Ochs, says, it may make children appear more orientated to others’ speech than in fact they are. An alternative lay out is one devised by James Gee in which, borrowing from Dell Hymes’ lay out of stories, narratives are set out as stanzas of a poem (Gee 1999).
Linear prose like transcription can also downplay features of coherence and cohesion in some varieties of, for example, English, where repetition, rhythm and other prosodic cues play a more significant role than in the standard variety (see also section two on prosody).

For example, Fred Erickson has always been particularly interested in the role of rhythm and prosody in intercultural encounters. He has examined the rhythmic co-ordination of speakers who share the same communicative style (Erickson and Shultz 1982) and ways in which white gatekeepers ‘talk down’ to speakers of Black vernacular English because of different ways of signalling understanding and turn-taking (see prosody section). One way of highlighting the importance of prosody in establishing coherence and cohesion is to set out speech more like poetry than prose. In this example, a young graduate medical student describes a patient:

**Data Example 12**

1. ended up in E.R. (emergency room) on the
2. ninth. six-nine-ninety-four . .

   (The student describes a dip-stick urine test in E.R.)
3. but anyway he describes . . its a very poor/very poorly
4. characterised like a pressure or cramping abdominal
5. pain . . it waxes and wanes . . its usually worse during the
6. day . . its better . . in the morning or the
7. evening. . and ah it gets worse during the
8. day ah its . . ah it does never wake him up at
9. night . . . .

(Erickson 1999: 116)

Here, instead of ending the line at the right hand margin or at a clause or sentence type boundary as transcripts so often do, utterances are transcribed as breath groups. The most stressed syllable containing the nucleus of the breath (or information) group is placed on the left hand side. In this way it is possible to read the transcript with the stresses without adding additional diacritics and to be aware of the speaker’s rhythm.
As with other aspects of the transcription process, it is important to be reflexive about the layout on the page and how to divide up speaker utterances since the visual presentation directs the readers’ attention in certain ways and calls up certain values and assumptions about who is powerful, competent, coherent and so on.

To sum up, transcribing is a political act. It is part of the wider concern with language ideology (Woolard 1993) in that the transcriber has to be conscious of how they are representing informants - what voice they are allowing them to have, what messages are conveyed about their lives and identities. These issues are just as important as technical discussions related to accuracy, robustness of systems and so on (Roberts 1997).

5. GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR TRANSCRIBING

Reflexivity

- Acknowledge the politics of transcription.
- Be reflexive about the whole process of transcribing from initial decisions to record to the fine-grained detail of lay-out, spellings, notations etc. Write about this process openly but do not let your discussion dominate the representation of the informants.
- Acknowledge that all transcriptions are representing others and that the choices you make affect how they are represented. If possible, find out how they wish to be represented as well as discussing with colleagues and others how they think the tape should be transcribed. Remember that when you are transcribing talk, you are transcribing people.
- Be aware of the theoretical, political and individual assumptions which determine your choices and acknowledge that there is no such thing as an objective, neutral, complete and accurate transcription. It is always ideologically motivated and it is always a compromise.
- Take particular care with issues of lay out and respellings and eye dialect since the way these are used are particularly prone to social evaluation by readers.
- Be open and explicit, in any writing, about how your transcriptions came to be made the way they are. Explain why they are relatively naturalised (i.e. the transcription process is made less visible) or denaturalised (i.e. faithful to the actual oral experience) in which case it appears unfamiliar and difficult to read (West 1996: 335).
• Be aware of the tension between readability, accuracy and representation since choices between these competing demands are political as well as scientific e.g. Whether something is heard as intelligible or not can skew the way in which speakers are presented to readers; for example, including all the hesitations, false starts, repairs and overlaps can make the reader unfamiliar with the transcripts and read them as disjointed and lacking fluency.

Technical issues

• Select data to be transcribed and a notation system which fits with your theoretical and methodological concerns.
• Chose (and if necessary adapt) a transcription system which is robust i.e. ensures consistency, flexibility, readability, economy and (at least some measure of) accuracy.
• Do not be beguiled into an apparently scientific system which measures aspects of the data if these measurements are not significant and relevant to the speakers. So, adopt at least a partially emic (or insider) perspective.
• Design your transcriptions for a particular audience. Take a multi-layered approach with rougher transcriptions for some audiences and a narrower transcription for others
• Be aware that in designing your transcription for different audiences you may have to sacrifice some of the robust elements of your system for others e.g. Readability may conflict with economy.
• Consider issues of clarity, readability and accuracy (as well as the politics of representation) when making difficult decisions about representing speech i.e. IPA, versus respellings and eye-dialect and issues of lay-out.
• Be aware of what is ‘invisible’ in the transcription which needs to be explained more i.e. Those aspects of context which help the reader to make sense of the transcription (although there will always be an arbitrary decision at which point enough is enough).
• Do not necessarily transcribe what is more readily transcribable. For example, pauses are relatively easy to note and measure but may be less salient than rhythm in understanding conversational involvement or miscommunication.
• Remember to keep going back to the original tape recording to refine and modify your transcription. It is easy to interpret a transcription in a way that suits your particular research interest but repeated listenings/viewings may well show that you have made exaggerated claims. There needs to be a constant dialogue between the original recording and the emergent transcription.

CONCLUSION
This section has raised several of the problems of transcription and has perhaps left the reader feeling that it is all too demanding and fraught with difficulty. But as was said at the beginning, as long as the transcriber has thought through some of paradoxes and theoretical and ideological problems and has been explicit about them, then they should feel less bowed down with all the complications.

The central process of transcribing is what Ben Rampton calls a ‘discovery procedure’. However many guidelines and warnings are given, what matters most is the researcher’s careful and thoughtful listening and notating over and over again. Each time you listen to a tape and watch/ listen to a video recording there is more to be discovered. Working slowly on small pieces of data will teach you as much and perhaps more than working more rapidly through larger stretches of data. So take time, train your ears and find the patience and the tolerance to go back again and again to the original data.

Suggested Reading
There are several short reader friendly pieces on basic issues of transcription:


For a full discussion of a range of transcription procedures see Appendix 2 in Deborah Schiffrin’s Approaches to Discourse (1994) and Roger and Bull’s Conversation. For those with some background in phonetics, Local, Wells and Sebba (1985) suggest a way of transcribing which they call ‘impressionistic phonetics’.
For a full description of Conversation Analysis notations see the introduction to Atkinson and Heritage’s *Structures of Social Action* (1984) with numerous examples of this system in use on a range of data types. David Langford’s *Analyzing Talk* is a good workbook for students who need to start from the basics in transcribing and analysing talk and is largely based on CA principles. For a notation system for Interactional Sociolinguistics (the system used in section 2 and for the CD-ROM) see Gumperz and Berenz 1993 ‘Transcribing conversational exchanges’.

The seminal text on the theories of transcription is Eleanor Ochs’ ‘Transcription as Theory’ (1979). On issues related to representation and the politics of transcription, Mary Bucholtz’s article (1999) and two short pieces in *TESOL* journal by Green et al and Roberts (1997) are useful starting points.

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