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Working with Transcripts and Translated Data

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Transcribing talk originating from various interactional contexts into a written form is an integral part of qualitative research practice. Transcripts are produced for particular analytic purposes and therefore range in detail, from broad verbatim transcripts in more content-oriented analysis to extremely refined and detailed transcriptions on interaction-oriented analysis of naturally occurring data. Learning to master transcription skills, and solving the practical, technical and theoretical considerations and decisions that go into the process of producing good quality transcripts is something that both students, teachers of qualitative methods and researchers within the field equally struggle with. Discussion on transcription practice is all the more important given that qualitative research sees transcripts as a central means of securing the validity and guaranteeing the publicly verifiable, transparent and cumulative nature of its claims and findings (e.g., Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Peräkylä, 1997; Seale, 1999).

This paper offers a concise review on working with and producing ‘good quality transcripts.’ In addition and perhaps more importantly, it discusses the often-neglected question of translating data from another language for (typically) an English speaking academic audience and looks at the range of choices scholars make when presenting their work. Opening the question of transcription and the art of translation to a wider and more detailed discussion is crucial as qualitative research is increasingly conducted in an international environment. Students, scholars, and data travel across national boundaries and new language areas join in. This means that guidelines on how data are translated in an accessible yet precise fashion, how data should ideally be presented to the reading audience, and how analytic transparency is secured are in increasing demand.

Keywords: data analysis; data translation; discourse analysis; transcription; translated data; validity

Existing transcription practice

The most commonly mentioned rationale for working with transcripts is that recordings and transcripts based on them provide a highly detailed and accessible representation of the phenomenon or social action in focus (Peräkylä, 1997, p. 203). Qualitative material is ideally presented in a form that allows readers and fellow researchers to “to make their own checks and judgments” (Potter & Edwards, 2001, p. 108). Transcripts bring immediacy and transparency to the phenomena under study by allowing the audience access to inspect the data on which the analysis is based. In addition, the analysis of transcripts, particularly conversation analysis, is “rigorous in its requirement of an empirical grounding for any description to be accepted as valid” (Peräkylä, 1997, p. 202). Anchoring analytic observations firmly in data is similarly imperative in all qualitative analysis.

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The methods literature includes several excellent overviews on the practices in producing transcripts, discussions on the rationale of not producing tidied-up versions of them, and on using specific transcription notations. The literature includes thorough methodological, ideological, and practical discussions (e.g., Jefferson, 1996, 2004; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Ochs, 1999; O’Connell & Kowal, 1995; Silverman, 2005; ten Have, 1999, 2004), discussion on established, good practice (e.g., Atkinson & Heritage, 1999; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Nikander, 2008), discussion on inaccuracy when quoting from data transcripts (Kitzinger, 1998) as well as critical overviews (Ashmore and Reed, 2000). One finds meticulous analysis and transcription of emotional expression including crying (Hepburn, 2004), laughter (Jefferson, 1985; Oswaldsson, 2004; see also Nikander, 2007), and nonverbal interaction (e.g., Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori, 2006), and most textbooks cover the issue of transcription on a routine basis (e.g., Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; ten Have, 2004; Silverman, 2005).

The transcription system developed principally by Gail Jefferson (1988, 2004) is increasingly mentioned to be in use in many countries and across published texts. It has been described as the canonical transcription a ‘common language’ with some dialects (ten Have, 1999, p. 77). Despite technical guidelines, transcription remains a time consuming, messy, and imperfect process that constructs a textual version of the original interaction. It is described as a theory-laden practice of textualization, as ‘obscure and unstable’ (Jefferson, 1985, p. 25) and as based on a ‘selective rendering of the data’ (Heritage & Atkinson, 1984, p. 12). Practical compromises are typically made between the ideals of faithfulness to the original, the readability and accessibility of the final transcript, as well as time and space issues.

**Lost in translation?**

One largely overlooked question in the qualitative methods literature concerns the fact that an increasing proportion of empirical and analytic work is done on languages other than English. As discussions on translating remain a rarity in the literature (for an exception, see ten Have, 1999, pp. 93–4), teachers and international students of qualitative methods wishing to analyze data in their own mother tongue, are left to cope and come up with their own solutions. What then are the additional complications brought in by having to both transcribe the original data and then translate them into another language?

Translating data extracts is not merely a question of ‘adopting’ or ‘following’ a ‘transcription technique’ but rather includes a range of practical and ideological questions concerning the level of detail chosen in the transcription, and of the way in which the translations are physically presented in print. The mundane and practical choices made as well as their analytic and theoretical implications are, however, often hidden from the reader and only rarely explicitly dealt with in research reports and written analyses. Instead, scholars presenting translated data in international journals with strict word limits are forced to discuss the matter in brief, in the following way for example:

Translation

‘The number of overlaps, pauses, hesitation, hedges, self-editings, and so forth are kept constant, as is their location in relation to turn junctures. The translation from Swedish has been kept as literal as possible, except where minor modifications have been necessary in order to preserve conversational style.’

(Aronsson and Cederborg, 1997, p. 85)

At times, space allows for more detailed discussion on the practicalities concerning the translation, the differences between language groups, the word order, and so
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Publication policy thus often gets to dictate how data translations are produced and presented. Each choice carries not only practical but also ideological implications of language primacy. Qualitative research in psychology develops as an international, multilingual process, and publication policy should ideally reflect this diversity. In practice, however, writers may only present the translation from the original (e.g., Aronsson and Cederborg, 1997), or to mainly discuss the translation while producing the original in appendix (e.g., Bergmann, 1992). It is perhaps easy to agree with ten Have (1999, p. 93) who says these are not satisfactory as the writer should always seek to provide the reader with as much information on the original as possible. Hiding the original data from the reader’s view clearly violates the ‘validity through transparency and access’ principle.

When the original data is shown, the spatial organization of the transcript may still carry across notions of bias and primacy (Ochs, 1999, p. 169, originally 1979). The layout of the transcript guides the reader to notice some items of talk before others and steers how the units that make up the whole are perceived. According to Ochs (1999), for example, our European culture of literacy socializes us to encode ideas not only from top to bottom, but also from left to right on a page. Leftness is thus linked with priority and associated with prominence in written expression (1999, pp. 170–171). The order in which original and translated data are organized on the page is thus neither an innocent nor a straight-forward pragmatic business but rather also constructs priority orders between languages.

In published empirical work, several practices co-exist. The author may present the original transcript immediately below, or as a separate block of text (e.g., Paoletti 1998). Another possibility is to alternate between the original and the translation in a subsequent line-by-line manner. Below, for example, the exchange between the principal (prin), Linda’s social worker (soc) and a chair is brought to the reader one line at a time first in English and then in the original Swedish with both sharing the same line number.

1 prin should she get summer vacation? (.5) >I mean< ska hon ha sommarlov? (.5)>Jag menar<
2 she’s skipped so much [that she] should= hon har skubbat sa° mycket [så hon ] borde=
3 soc [teheheh ] [täheheh ]
4 prin =really be studying here now. Make up for the time(.) she’s(.) wasted =gentligen läsa nu va. Ta igen den tiden(.) som’on () skubbat bort
5 chair “unhuh° “mmeh°
6 prin shouldn’t you [Linda?] ((looks at Linda)) eller hur [Linda?] ((tittar på Linda))

Another translation/transcription convention goes further by offering extensive information on the structure, semantics and syntax on the original language. In these cases, the
transcribed spate of talk is followed by a detailed morpheme-by-morpheme gloss-line that explicates the grammatical structure of the language in question after which a free translation follows. One example comes from Sorjonen’s data where the original language is Finnish (1996, p. 295).


01 P: Hän o-li anta-nu tämmöse-n nime-n ku
she/he be-PST give-PPC this kind-ACC name-ACC as
She had given a name like

02 Ii:ris,hh Rau:tto,hh tai Rau:kko-ko se on.=
nameF surname or surname-Q it is
Ii:ris,hh Rau:tto,hh or is it tai Rau:kko,=

03 M: =Raukko,hhh

04 P: Raukko,

05 M: Joo:,=.hhh Hän on me i-llä< tämmöse-nä<
PRT she/he is we-ADE this kind-ESS
Joo:,=.hhh She is with us< as a kind’v<

06 tunti-opettaja-na.hh
hour-teacher-ESS
temporary teacher.hh

Note how the second line provides the reader with detailed information on the grammatical workings, on the conjugation of words and on other structural detail of speech practices of the language in question (e.g., case ending abbreviations: ACC = accusative, tense indicators like be PTS for past tense, etc.). The three line-format is undoubtedly the most inclusive and informative way of conveying not only the meaning content, but also word order, semantic, and grammatical detail on the original. It may be most useful when dealing with dissimilar languages in relation to English. The format also requires both considerable space and linguistic expertise from the transcriber and from the reader and is mostly used in more linguistically oriented conversation analysis.

Yet another possibility is a parallel transcription using a side-by-side column layout. Below is an example where the English translation of the data is presented in the left hand column, followed by the original Finnish.

Example 3. A parallel translation/transcription format (from Nikander, 2002, p. 142)

1. A: No I mean I (.) have said No ei kun mää (.) oon sanonu
2. that I live my life and accept että mää elän elämääni ja hyväksyn
3. that I’m (0.2) fifty years old sen että mää oon (0.2) viiskytvyotias
4. and (.) that I’m just as old ja (.) ett mä oon juuri niin vanha
5. as I (.) happen to be at a time and kuin mää (.) kulloinkin olen
6. I don’t (.) imagine being (0.4) enkä mää (.) kuvittele olevani (0.4)
7. younger or older nuorempi taikka vanhempi
8. but like I don’t (.) nonetheless mutta että en mää (.) siitä huolimatta
9. behave the way in which a fifty- silti käytätdy sillai niin kun viiskyt-
10. year-old should (.) behave like vuotiaana pitäis (.) käyttäytyä että
11. I don’t go to symphony concerts en minä käy sinfoniakonserteissa
12. PN: heh heh heh heh
13. (1.0) (1.0)
In this type of transcript, the verbal content in English on a single line seeks to follow that of the original. The differences in syntax, length of expression and word order in between languages as well as the technical limitations of this mode of layout can sometimes make it difficult to match the verbal contents from one line to the next. Attentive readers, with or without knowledge of the original language, should, however, be able to look for equivalent contents in the Finnish for the English, should they wish to do so.

The example above can be criticized for foregrounding the translation into English by placing it in the left-hand column. In fact, examples of parallel transcription layouts where the original, nontranslated data is given primacy through left-handness can also be found in use (see, e.g., Evaldsson, 2005). The choice made in example 3 is a compromise of practical convenience that takes both readership and accessibility into account. The order, in other words, makes it easier for the international readership to follow the line numbers, etc., when going through the data while also making the data accessible to Finnish speaking readers. It should be added that the actual analysis on any translated data is always done on the original.

**Good enough transcripts and translations?**

Using audio and video taped data provides qualitative researchers with a transportable, repeatable resource that allows multiple hearings or viewings as well as access to other readers. The result of transcription is however, always a non-mechanically produced and determined product, which can hardly be straightforwardly judged correct or incorrect. Transcription and translation as a process of ‘double rendering’ adds yet another layer of complication. Translation as Richards (1932, p. 7, ref. Moerman, 1988, p. 6) points out, is “an indirectly controlled guess” and consequently something that readers from other language areas end up taking and accepting with a certain degree of faith.

It is the degree of faith, however, that qualitative researchers should have some say in. In case we wish to guarantee the publicly verifiable nature of qualitative research, generally agreed upon rules concerning the layout, the (increased) word count, and other publication practices concerning translated data should be in place. Providing space and access both to the original and the translated materials favors transparency and makes the author directly accountable for the translation. This way, the acceptability of the translation constructed remains, at least potentially open to challenge and suggestions of alternative improved versions.

Transcription should also be made an integral part of the curriculum when teaching qualitative methods. Much frustration (e.g., Bird, 2005) is avoided if students are taught to grasp the vital role of transcription as interpretative practical rendering, if the rationale behind different levels in transcription detail is explained to them, and if they are provided with practical examples and lessons. Overseas students and students of different ethnic background should be supported in conducting analysis on data in their mother tongue and encouraged to publish their own work internationally. In practice the teaching of transcription and translation consists of learning by doing. Friendly supervision (ten Have, 1999, p. 97), comparing and refining transcripts and translations in groups often provide a practical starting point. Transcription as part of the qualitative research process does not need to seek, or claim perfection. Rather, acknowledging, embracing and discussing the dilemmas of translation and transcription may slowly help us produce good enough transcripts.
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