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ABSTRACT Variation in transcription is due in large part to variability in transcribers' theoretical and methodological commitments and goals. This reply addresses issues raised in the commentaries on the article 'Variation in Transcription' concerning problems of representing different discourse genres in transcripts, the question of how research relationships shape the transcription process, the intellectual and institutional contexts in which transcription occurs and circulates, and the injunction to consider the practices as opposed to the products of transcription.

KEY WORDS: *context, genre, practice, research relationship, technology*

Introduction

The contributors to this discussion offer thoughtful comments on a wide range of theoretical, methodological, and political issues surrounding variation in transcription. In this response, I engage with each interlocutor in turn, because for the most part the issues they address are different enough to merit individual responses. This diversity in the themes and concerns introduced by each author suggests that the variation in transcription that I examined in the original article is due, at the most fundamental level, to variability in transcribers – and especially to variability in our personal and professional backgrounds, our theoretical investments, our research questions, and the uses to which we put our transcripts. Blommaert's analytic interest in narrative, Jaffe's ethnographic orientation, Slembrouck's focus on institutional contexts of discourse production, and Mondada's concern with multimodal interaction engender complementary perspectives on variation in transcription (and of course, several of these scholars share more than one of the above perspectives). One of my own commitments, which remains implicit rather than explicit in the original article, is thus to some extent realized by bringing this group of commentators into dialogue: to explore

and learn from diverse analytic perspectives on the activities that unite us as researchers, despite differences in our approaches or goals.

Transcribing genres

In his commentary, Jan Blommaert notes the importance of attending to genre in the transcription of interaction; he highlights in particular the different transcription practices that may be required of conversation on the one hand and of narrative on the other. This is not a simple distinction between interactional (or dialogic) and non-interactional (or monologic) forms of discourse: Blommaert proposes that we might want to treat certain kinds of discourse as 'interactionally organized narrative', a formulation that makes clear that narratives are not simply bounded 'texts' that may be analyzed separately from the interactional context that gave rise to them (as they have unfortunately too often been viewed in some traditions of narrative analysis). Blommaert's concern is instead that an analytic focus on linguistic interaction in general may be reduced to an approach that privileges conversational interaction in particular. This is a serious and important issue, and one that deserves more discussion from scholars concerned with the analytic consequences of specific transcription practices. The transcription techniques of conversation analysis, which have been imported into many other fields as well, have been applied to a wide variety of non-conversational interactional data, including news interviews, medical interaction, courtroom discourse, and other institutional settings (e.g. Drew and Heritage, 1992). As is well known, in a number of these discourse genres, the turn-taking principles of conversation (Sacks et al., 1974) that conversation-analytic transcription is designed to highlight have been suspended in favor of an institutionally imposed distribution of participant roles. Many conversation analysts would argue that one advantage of using the same transcription system for both conversation and other forms of interaction is precisely to reveal this difference in the turn-taking system in other genres of spoken discourse. But it is analytically useful to contemplate how other ways of representing such exchanges might treat them not as deviations from a conversational norm but rather as distinct genres having their own interactional logic.

At times, however, Blommaert's commentary does not maintain this key distinction between conversation and interaction. He notes that in his own analysis of research interactions in which narratives were central, 'a conversational transcript did not explain adequately what happened in terms of function and effect' and that his research team therefore 'had to devise transcription formats that blended conversational patterns, narrative patterns, and very often also phonetic patterns . . .'. As he convincingly argues, such 'hybrid' formats allow us to extend the range of our professional vision as analysts of spoken discourse. But what exactly is the nature of the hybridity in this particular case? Although Blommaert characterizes his research interactions as conversations, the two are distinct (though often intertwined) genres: while interviewees and interviewers alike may often draw on interactional resources characteristic

of conversation, the information-seeking goals of research-driven encounters may produce different interactional patterns from those found in conversations not shaped by a researcher's agenda. Both kinds of discourse are of scholarly interest, but they cannot be assumed a priori to be analytically equivalent. Thus, while I wholeheartedly endorse Blommaert's recommendation that we give greater attention to genre in our transcribing decisions, which may help us to view different types of discourse on their own terms, doing so is by no means a straightforward task. To implement this recommendation, from the outset of the transcribing process we must make at least provisional determinations regarding which genre we are dealing with and how best to represent it in order to shed light on its inner workings. Such representational and analytic choices regarding genre do not solve our transcription problems, then, but instead add an important element to the set of decisions transcribers and analysts should consider in their written representations of spoken discourse.

Transcribing relationships

Alexandra Jaffe's commentary points to a variety of other factors that complicate transcription, such as the myriad relationships between the researcher and the research participants, between the transcript and its audience, and between transcribers and their disciplines. In each case, she demonstrates that transcribing decisions are never neutral: every choice establishes a particular configuration of research participants, recorded data, transcriber(s), and users of the transcript vis-à-vis the original event, and thus it is important to consider how such choices realign the relationships among these entities. Jaffe's suggestion to involve speakers in transcription decisions (a recommendation she makes specifically regarding the identification of socially salient phonological variation, but one that could easily be extended to include other aspects of representation) is one useful way to reexamine these relationships and at least partially to realize the ethnographer's goal of privileging research participants' views. Indeed, some researchers have already taken this approach as part of an ethnographic perspective on transcription (e.g. Haviland, 1996; Vigouroux, 2007).

By the same token, Jaffe warns against researchers' reuse of others' transcripts or recorded data in the absence of the deeper contextual knowledge that ethnography affords (see also Blommaert, 1997). In this regard she offers a distinction between 'transcripts as *data* versus as *representations* of data' (original emphasis) which, while extremely useful conceptually, is anything but tidy in practice. Clearly, the transcripts included in scholarly publications are meant to illustrate analytic claims and are not usually intended to be subject to further analysis by other researchers, and just as clearly, the transcripts that researchers use as analytic tools are generally employed in conjunction with data recordings, which are taken to be primary. Nevertheless, it is not unusual for researchers to draw on others' published transcripts to make their own analytic points (this is especially common in textbooks, but it also occurs in research articles and monographs), and in some discourse-analytic traditions researchers conduct

most of their analysis on the basis of the written transcript, not the recording. In instances like these the distinction between data and representation blurs. Researchers who engage in such practices – and obviously my own meta-analysis of others' transcripts in the original article puts me in this category – should therefore proceed with caution, mindful of Jaffe's larger point, that the representation and analysis of discourse without attention to the context from which it emerges risks producing accounts that ignore local sociocultural meanings.

Transcribing contexts

Concern with context also informs Slembrouck's commentary, which foregrounds some of the intellectual, technological, and political-economic issues that must be taken into account in weighing one's own and others' transcription decisions. Slembrouck begins by reminding us (and particularly me, given the recriminations I heaped upon myself in my original article for the shortcomings of one of my early transcripts) that data and its interpretation have histories that are bound up with the researcher's goals, and that a complete hearing is therefore never possible. Other contexts that Slembrouck brings into view include the role of technology in constraining and enabling transcription practices both in earlier historical periods (i.e. before the advent of the personal computer) and in the present era, and the economically motivated page-length restrictions on transcripts imposed by editors, publishers, and authors themselves, particularly with regard to transcripts that require translation. As Slembrouck points out, transcripts in languages other than that of the publication are increasingly marginalized in academic publishing, sometimes relegated to footnotes or appendices or omitted altogether (thus although, as Jaffe remarks, some transcribers may view translations as secondary to the data in the original language, such second-order representations are becoming more and more central in research publications). These developments, Slembrouck emphasizes, have serious consequences for the clarity of the researcher's argument. His discussion reveals that the little-acknowledged but very real pragmatic pressures that shape transcripts are no less significant than explicitly articulated transcribing practices grounded in theoretical or methodological principles.

Transcribing practices

At the end of his comments, Slembrouck holds out the hope that new technologies will allow for more access to researchers' original data and hence will prevent exclusive reliance on transcripts as vehicles for representing discourse data. Yet Lorenza Mondada's discussion indicates that problems of transcription become not less but more complex and pressing as technology advances. Mondada distinguishes between variability between transcripts – as static textual representations of embodied talk – and variability between transcribing practices, which are subject to malleability based both on the form of

technological mediation the analyst employs in the transcription process and the analytic motivation driving the representation of talk in transcript form. Mondada suggests that the latter phenomenon is where transcribers should focus their attention, for it is there that the relationship between talk and its visual representation is anchored (see also Vigouroux, 2007, which offers an analysis along these lines). She presents a detailed discussion in support of this position, offering close analyses of multimodal interaction as represented by different annotation software programs to demonstrate that the medium through which the analyst perceives the recorded data is fundamental to the sort of transcript – and hence the sort of analysis – that is possible.

This point is a valuable contribution to the ongoing discussion of transcribing as an epistemological practice of linguistic and interactional research; the questions Mondada raises concerning the role of technology in training our professional practices of seeing, hearing, and representing are becoming increasingly urgent as growing numbers of researchers undertake investigations of multimodal social interaction. Yet to acknowledge that transcription is never finished and that it emerges in the first instance from always partial technological recordings does not fully address the problem of exactly what the author ultimately decides to put on the page (or on the screen). A representation is no less so for being contingent, and while we as transcribers may be acutely aware of the representational incompleteness of our transcripts, those who read them may not be equally cognizant of their limitations. My goal in examining variation in transcripts is therefore less philological (to use Mondada's term) than archaeological. That is, the purpose is not to collate variant versions in order to arrive at an *Ur*-text and its stemmata but rather to excavate transcripts as interpretable sites containing traces of the rich human activities that came before – activities both of the transcriber and of the speakers whose voices are represented in textual form (see also Duranti's [2007] characterization of transcripts as 'shadows on a wall'). In short, there is no choosing between transcribing as practice and the transcript as its product; one cannot exist without the other.

Conclusion

As the last two commentators note, changes in technology alter the way that researchers interact with data. Yet the issue of variation in the scholarly representation of spoken discourse is not thereby displaced, or even deferred; instead, transcription becomes implicated in a wider set of representational resources, including video images, digital tools for the representation and analysis of prosody, and software that automatically reformats transcripts as play scripts, musical scores, or other layouts. Although it is unlikely that the variety and flexibility of these new resources will open up endless variation in transcription, or alternatively that their use will eliminate variation altogether by regimenting transcription practice, they will certainly shape both the process and the product: how computer-based transcription tools are designed and for what purposes, as

well as their technological limits (e.g. on the size or format of data), all leave their imprint in both transcribing practices and the resulting transcript.

Nevertheless, the choice of how and whether to use such tools ultimately lies with individual researchers. Slembrouck suggests that rather than relying on pre-established practices, 'every scholar entering the arenas of interactional analysis is better encouraged to engage afresh with the question of notational conventions and representational-interpretative priorities'. This is a recommendation that transcribers would be wise to follow, regardless of whether or not they are committed to a codified transcription system or a standardized transcription program. Such engagement does not demand that researchers reinvent our transcription practices with every new transcript or constantly rethink our previous transcription decisions. Rather, it invites us to reflect on those practices in all their variations, the basis on which they are established and implemented, and their consequences for the representation of speakers and their language.

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