

Transcribing Now: Representations of Discourse in Anthropology

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At the present moment in the history of our field, researchers from a diverse array of theoretical approaches and subfields within anthropology and related disciplines find themselves compelled to reconsider the nature of their relationship to an ostensibly shared object of attention: discourse. Discourse stands as a defining focus of inquiry for many researchers, whether it is known under this label or some other. Yet what discourse is understood to be cannot be separated from how it is represented, because acts of representation define how it will be demarcated as an object of attention in the first place, and how it will be captured to be brought under the methodological gaze of the practitioner of anthropological and related approaches to the use of language. This motivates the revisiting of a mundane and apparently self-evident evidentiary practice: the transcription of recordings of social interaction. This session will bring together scholars from a broad range of perspectives within anthropology and related disciplines to take stock of some of the key cross-cutting issues in transcription--theory and practice, analysis and politics--that continue to have such important, if often unnoticed, implications for how we come to an understanding of the phenomena which are to be discovered in interaction.

The panel considers both the representational issues that researchers face in constructing transcripts and the sociopolitical meanings of transcripts as they circulate as texts--as new instances of discourse themselves. Du Bois opens the session by engaging transcription as contestable professional practice, demonstrating that the very meaning of the object of "discourse" is laden with discipline-bound ideological assumptions. Tedlock analyzes a Zuni narrative performance to argue for the inclusion of intonational details in transcripts in order to avoid privileging Western literary modes in representing other cultures' oral discourse genres. Similarly, Haviland investigates the question of which embodied communicative actions count as interactionally significant in the production of a research transcript--speech, gesture, orientation, gaze--and shows that analysts may demonstrate that some such actions are interactionally significant despite native exegesis to the contrary. Shifting to the transcript as textual product rather than transcription as textual production, Blommaert considers the meanings, values, and interpretations that attach to transcripts as they circulate between researchers as seemingly unproblematic "shared data." Park analyzes the semiotic and ideological issues that inform the subtling of English in Korean popular television and film, looking at what happens when discourse is moved to another linguistic context, where it finds itself framed as the speech of the other. Preston asks how transcripts are read by (professional) strangers: how do readers evaluate speakers based on the researcher's representation of their speech? Finally, Bucholtz treats representation and interpretation as political issues through a reflexive analysis of academic researcher transcripts as well as legal transcripts of suspect confessions and FBI wiretap recordings. Together, these papers demonstrate that the practices of representation of discourse in anthropology shape how we look at the practices of culture in social interaction, and what we see, hear, say, and understand about them.

Titles and Participants (in order of presentation)

“Introduction: “Why Transcribing This Matters Now,” Mary Bucholtz, University of California, Santa Barbara, and John W. Du Bois, University of California, Santa Barbara

“What Does a Transcription Represent?,” John W. Du Bois, University of California, Santa Barbara

“Transcription as Performance,” Dennis Tedlock, SUNY Buffalo

“Transcribing Social Space: Bodies in (Inter)action,” John Haviland, Reed College

“Data Sharing,” Jan Blommaert, University of Gent (not presented)

“Subtitles as Representations of Discourse in Korean Television,” Joseph Sung-Yul Park, Northern Arizona University

“Getting It Down in Black and White,” Dennis Preston, Michigan State University

“Captured on Tape: Professional Hearing and Transcriptional Coercion in the Criminal Justice System,” Mary Bucholtz, University of California, Santa Barbara

Abstracts

Data Sharing

Jan Blommaert

This paper discusses methodological issues surrounding the practice of 'data sharing', common in some branches of discourse and conversation analysis. Data sharing rests on the assumption that 'data' can be 'shared': analysts circulate carefully transcribed pieces of spoken text, often with minimal or no background information, and invite peers to examine the data and exchange views on it. The central tool of data sharing is the transcript - a text artefact based on rigid and rigorously applied conventions and suggesting an exact replica of the spoken talk. 'Background context' is not needed, because the mechanics of interaction that can be detected in the transcript are seen as generative of context, not as a result of context. The absence of 'background' to 'data' is therefore a methodological principle. Using a case analysis of a conversation-analytic workshop in which data sharing was central, I will examine these methodological assumptions, showing that a wide range of 'background' facts and assumptions were circulated along the 'bare' data. The information retrieved from the shared data rested as much on interpretations of these background facts and assumptions as on the bare transcript itself. The case illustrates some of the basic problems in dominant 'artefactual' ideologies of textuality in discourse analysis, notably the suggestion that interpretive knowledge can be extracted from a uniformized and artefactualized text.

Captured on Tape: Professional Hearing and Transcriptional Coercion in the Criminal Justice System

Mary Bucholtz

The question of how to represent spoken language in written form is fraught with political as well as theoretical and methodological problems; yet before transcribers can decide how to represent what was said, an even more fundamental issue must be confronted: how to determine what was said in the first place. In the transcription of legal evidence in criminal justice cases, questions of interpretation are powerfully shaped by the uses to which transcripts are put. That is, by virtue of the practices of professional hearing that they acquire within the justice system, legal transcribers are able to coerce a recording to say what they want it to say. The mechanisms of this power and the questionable hearings that result are illustrated using two different criminal cases in which transcripts were crucial evidence for the prosecution. In the first example, FBI logs of wiretapped phone calls of a group of suspected drug dealers were taken as sufficient evidence to support the extension of the wiretap warrant. In the second example, a three-strikes case in California, a video interrogation of a robbery suspect was reinterpreted in the legal transcript in more benign terms through the strategic omission or reattribution of key utterances. Like the professional vision documented by Goodwin (1994) in the trial against the Los Angeles police officers who beat African American motorist Rodney King, these forms of professional hearing bias the outcomes of the legal process in ways that systematically disadvantage the speakers whose words are subject to professional transcription.

What Does a Transcription Represent?

John W. Du Bois

The titular question can be posed as a merely practical matter regarding which categories and symbols are to be included when a recorded moment of spoken interaction is transcribed. More problematically, the question brings with it layers of ambiguity which may point toward a more challenging, yet potentially fruitful, problematization of the practice of creating representations of discourse. This paper seeks to bring both levels into focus at once, exploring how each sheds

light on the other. On the one hand, routine professional practices of transcription within anthropology, linguistics, and related disciplines are examined to show how different scholarly practitioners of the transcribing arts hold themselves characteristically accountable, within a given professional domain, for representing certain kinds of phenomena, and certain classes of information about these phenomena, once they take on the claim to have transcribed a piece of discourse. On the other hand, the deeper problem is plumbed as to what discourse itself is. Here, a multi-layered picture begins to emerge from the various representations of discourse. Juxtapositions of diverging representations of the "same" discourse lead us to a reconsideration of the various assumptions and ideologies of language and discourse that have been invoked, explicitly or implicitly, in the process of making certain representations of discourse self-evident, and hence apparently authoritative. Finally, the question is raised as to how the transcribing practice itself, regardless of the production of any transcription object, may shape the various disciplinary understandings of what discourse is and how it is to be interpreted.

Transcribing Social Space: Bodies in (Inter)action
John B. Haviland

I will consider problems in how to entextualize interaction in its full multi-modal glory. There are obvious technical issues about how to render in a non-ephemeral, reproducible, and publicly re-examinable format, bodily aspects of social life not easily reducible to graphic notations. Such aspects include everything from speech to gesture to orientation and gaze, as just a start; and there are levels of interconnection, structure, and (as)symmetry within and between such domains difficult to capture with linear, conceptually digital orthographies. There is a further semiotic issue about what sorts of action count as interactionally significant in the first place, and thus what one ought to notate if the object of study is sociocultural meaning. There is finally a familiar but theoretically thorny issue long recognized for speech itself: a cultural or ideological conundrum about what Silverstein has called "the limits of awareness." For example, certain aspects of "gesture" may be explicitly recognized by interactants as having interactional (for example, informational) significance, whereas other aspects can be shown to be significant despite native exegesis to the contrary. I will draw my exemplary material from videotaped interactions involving narrative and conversation in several languages?including Tzotzil speakers from Mexico and Guugu Yimithirr speakers from Aboriginal Australia--as well as other sorts of non-conversational performances, with musicians and street vendors.

Subtitles as Representations of Discourse in Korean Television
Joseph Sung-Yul Park

While subtitles on television and film are often considered to be neutral translated representations of the speech in the audio track, this paper argues that subtitling constitutes a social practice of interpreting and regimenting languages. Based on an analysis of Korean subtitling of English speech on South Korean television entertainment shows, it suggests how the politics of representing discourse in nonacademic cultural contexts can illuminate the process of metalinguistic reproduction of language ideologies (Silverstein 1993, Woolard 1998, Coupland and Jaworski 2004), and thus should be made an object of inquiry for anthropological study of language ideology and discourse.

As in the general practice of transcription, subtitlers are faced with both interpretive and representational choices (Green et al 1997, Bucholtz 2000); in the case of Korean television, the former involves what level of English should be subject to subtitling, while the latter includes issues of font choice and subtitle location. The data show that such choices reflect ideological interpretations of the social meaning of languages, identifying certain languages as comprehensible/incomprehensible or familiar/unfamiliar, and certain speakers of English as

good/bad or legitimate/illegitimate speakers. This constitutive force of subtitles is most clearly demonstrated in cases where subtitles are employed as metalinguistic objects of play, not simply translating humor in language, but in itself constituting the humor. This suggests that subtitles should not be seen as mere translations, but as cultural texts guiding the viewer to a particular reading of the subtitled segment, thus as an integral part of the represented discourse itself.

Getting It Down in Black and White

Dennis R. Preston

When we write down what people say, we must choose what that representation will look like. Our choice involves at least the following general areas:

1) Accuracy — how well does the written representation reflect what the speaker actually said? What linguistic levels of what was said are involved in the representation? Are any nonlinguistic aspects of the event represented?

2) Tradition — whose means of written representation do we choose to carry out the task? There are (at least) literary, popular culture, media, discourse analysis, and linguistic means available, and there is variation even within these traditions. How good are these various traditions at carrying out 1) above in general or with specific reference to a linguistic level?

3) Function — what does a written representation of speech have as its goal or goals? The answer to 2) will surely help in answering this question, but more specific consideration of function may shed further light on how the relationship between 2) and 1) is accounted for.

4) Affect — what impression of the speaker does a written representation cause to arise in the reader? Is that impression intended by the writer? How are the choices in 1), 2), and 3) involved in this last concern.

Each of these areas of concern will be discussed, and examples will be drawn from current practice and/or investigations. The discussion will show that there is considerable variation in practice, variation that can be linked to attending to any one of these areas or any combination of them.

Transcription as Performance

Dennis Tedlock

The first step in the transcription of an oral/aural performance is the making of a sound recording, which is itself a kind of text. Beyond that, the making of a visible transcription may begin with a striving for phonemic accuracy and a recognition of syntactic boundaries. To follow such an effort with nothing more than a reduction to paragraphed prose or to lines of verse based on some kind of structural scansion is to reduce the original verbal art to the most conservative categories of Western typography, which are heavily sedimented with a particular literary history. While it is true that no visible transcription can be a complete and transparent representation of a sound recording, the contemporary critique of representations should not serve as an excuse to continue turning the perceptions of a selectively deaf ear into a selectively blind transcription. Examples will be drawn from a Zuni narrative performance with passages that identify particular characters by means of intonational contours similar to those of operatic recitative; Sapir described a similar phenomenon in Paiute narratives.