The Lives Hidden by the Transcript and the Hidden Lives of the Transcript

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Abstract

In this article I explore, firstly, what is left out of interview transcripts and other related forms of transcription. Drawing on the approaches of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis I argue for greater detail in transcribing what is said by all parties to an event and how they say what they say. Secondly, I turn toward how transcripts are used in data sessions because how they feature in analytic work is often overlooked in favour of their accuracy or representational conventions. Examining the revisions, alteration and annotations of transcripts that occur in data sessions then also helps make clear that rendering the details of action does not fix the meaning of transcripts, instead transcripts remain mutable workspaces for trying understand the organisation of earlier events.

Keywords: Transcription, quotation, conversation analysis, data sessions

Taking time with transcripts

It is a regular complaint from my students and colleagues that transcribing is a chore. They are in the middle of weeks spent typing up all their material as fast as their typing fingers can go. It is hard not to be in a hurry with empirical material. It is especially difficult when it is accumulating from a research project that promises to collect a considerable quantity of it. It might be a dozen interviews on mental health, or a hundred on religious identities. It might be twelve hours of video recordings of urban planning meetings or one hundred twenty hours of car journeys. Whatever quantity it is, on whatever project, for those who have gathered recordings, the idea of long, slow hours spent transcribing them feels like valuable time lost. It may then be that a sense of dread will creep over the reader when I propose that even more time ought to be spent transcribing, reading transcripts and then re-transcribing our transcripts.

Some caveats: I am not suggesting we spend more time on all of our transcripts but rather that we devote more attention to shorter fragments of them. Nor am I suggesting the researcher spend more hours alone with their transcripts but rather that they spend time with other researchers looking at transcripts together. Neither am I suggesting re-transcription as a masochistic empiricism but rather that transcripts should evolve. Against the idea of the transcription as the mechanical transfer of the audio-visual into the textual I am proposing that transcripts be responsive to our ideas and imagination, to our willingness to, more closely, listen to and look again at our recordings. In following through on these proposals I nevertheless want to retain those qualities of the transcript that make it a transcript rather than transforming it into a novel or an artwork.

While transcription is unsurprisingly a core concern amongst linguists, very few geographers have written on the practices of transcription and, given these opening remarks on how dull many of us find the process, that absence is hardly surprising. Transcription is mentioned in acknowledging an employee that has done it for the researcher, or, in passing as taking longer than expected (Bennett 2002) or in studies of other professions outsourcing the labour of transcribing (A. Prasad & S. Prasad 2012). When transcription is focused upon more analytically it is in reminding us that the transcript is not a mirror of the research encounter. Anna Secor (2010), for instance, remarks briefly in an edited methodology collection: "the act of transcribing interviews and focus groups is one of interpretation and, often, translation. The transcripts that result are not mere reflections of the interview or focus group encounters, but new texts that have been assembled through these processes' p202. Thereafter the story of the transcript ends and quite what transcripts are used for once they have been created remains an unremarked upon element of the office work of geographers. In this article, alongside re-examining the many features of conversation that the 'quote' misses, I want to trace the transcript's uses in the data sessions that are a routine feature of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (Have 2004).

What the transcript hides

Let us first remind ourselves that to be involved in the creation of transcripts is to become involved in the production of written records. The common pattern in geography and other social sciences is for transcripts to be the textual records of audio and audio-visual recordings of an earlier event. Both the recording of the events and the transcript of the recording, promise the preservation of relevant, reasonable, reportable and recognisable elements of that original event. Institutional records (rather than audio or video recordings) have been heavily drawn upon for studies in human geography though the discipline has tended toward an interest in the archive over the record itself ((Lorimer 2009)). In studies of record-keeping and record-reading practices, the record remains of interest to both the institutions themselves and to researchers as a constant source of 'trouble' for those members of hospitals, businesses, government departments or research projects that create them, keep them and use them for either being too brief or, equally, for being too elaborate (Garfinkel 1967; Heath & Luff 1996). Learning how detailed or how circumscribed the record should be is part of becoming a competent doctor, accountant, parliamentary aide or, indeed, social scientist. The transcript is a distinct form of the record that requires more rather than less detail. That detail is something we will return to.

In an early analysis of medical record-keeping practices, Raffel (1979) argues that the record and the event appear to have an asymmetric relationship with one another:

> (1) The events are not seen as produced by the record, but the record is seen as produced by the events.
> (2) The events can occur and remain unrecorded, but the record cannot occur without the events. (Raffel 1979: 19)

As he begins to expose the grounds of making records of events what Raffel highlights is the passivity of the observer that creates the record. A passivity which turns upon the idea that rather than observer actively producing the event, the event shows itself. It is self-disclosing. In the intervening decades since Raffel's work on medical records, the idea of the passive observer and an event which appears and merely then needs recorded has been questioned further from a number of quarters, not least in human geography (M. Crang & Cook 2007; McDowell 1992; Bailey et al. 1999). Perhaps the most conspicuous has emerged from the idea of researcher reflexivity in the research process (Rose 1997; England 2005) and the allied movements in reflexive writing strategies (P. Crang 1992). However reflexivity, as Latour (2007) and others (Lynch 2000) have argued, was not a straightforward step up, and out, of the problems of raised by the critique of the passive observer and the self-disclosing event. What remained in common out of these responses to the record, is that the event is constructed in, and through, the recording of it (Ashmore 2004).

In sociology, sociocultural linguistics and discursive psychology, transcripts have become a target for a related critique. Quotes from interviewees appear, like events in the observer's notebook as if they were self-disclosing. The interviewees are "conceived as passive vessels of answers to whom interviewers direct their questions. They are repositories of facts, reflections, opinions, and other traces of experience" (Holstein & Gubrium 2004)p144. Through the editing practices of the researcher the quotations from interviews or focus groups appear to be self-disclosed by the interviewee without the questions, expansions and encouragements of the interviewer (Bucholtz 2007). Bucholtz provides a relevant example of this form of transcribed quote from her own work:

(1a)
Fred: We're always the nerds. We like it. We're glad to be the nerds and the squares. We don't drink, we don't do any drugs, we just get naturally high, we do insane funny things. And we're smart. We get good grades. (Bucholtz, 1998: 122)

Fig 1.Bucholtz (2007) - *original transcript*

While we might assume from the quote that there was an interviewer asking a question that Fred's statement was a reply to, nevertheless his words appear to stand well enough by themselves. The quote can be read as a self-definition of a certain youth identity. Fred has been the "passive vessel" that delivered these "traces of experience" back to the research community. In Fig 1 there is no evidence of the interviewer encouraging, assessing, interrupting, agreeing, disagreeing and so on. Consequently, in figure 1, with the interviewer's part in the co-production of the interview removed, the words then also appear to more firmly belong to the interviewee. This form of self-standing and neatly encapsulated quote exemplified by fig. 1 is by far the most common form of reporting what was said by research subjects in human geography. Bucholtz provides a more detailed re-transcription of the same interview in fig 2 and, with further elements of the original event translated into text, the self-definition of nerds is less easily encapsulated. The interviewer and interviewee both appear as active co-producers of the meaning of nerds. In fact the transcript itself interrupts our work of reading the text because it is quite unlike the text around it.

(1b)

1	Mary:	[So]
2	Fred:	[We're al]ways the nerds.
3		We like it.
4	Mary:	You@'re the nerds?
5	Fred:	We're <creaky> {glad} to be the ner:ds.
6		a@nd the squa:res and.
7	Mary:	Is that what
8	Fred:	[we don't–]
9	Mary:	[you say] you are?
10	Fred:	<[iʔ]> Well.
11		we don't exactly s:–
12		We don't always say it.=
13		=I say it. n@
14	Mary:	@@[@!]
15	Fred:	[But-]
16	Mary:	@ You're [[prou:d.]]
17	Fred:	[[you]] know.
18	Mary:	[@@]
19	Fred:	[we don't–]
20		We just don't (0.5) drink.
21		we d[on't (.) <rapid> {d]o
22	Mary:	[Mm.]
23	Fred:	any drugs.}

Fig 2. Bucholtz (Bucholtz 2007) - *re-transcription, abbreviated.*

One of the consequences of this simple and stark comparison, for the uses of subject's speech in human geography, is that we have destroyed the original dialogic events in a desire for quotes that are legible, tidy and quotable. In her article Bucholtz (2007), while appalled by her earlier selective transcription, is keen not to dismiss the quote entirely because, as she argues, it fits well to the purposes of studies interested in the content of what interviewees have said, rather than the structures of speech. However dividing content from structure, while solving Bucholtz's transcriptional dilemma then raises a far more troubling departure from the original speech event. How words are said can always reshape what their recipients understand by them. Indeed, in her later research, Bucholtz (2009) points toward the dangers of pursuing the gist of what is said when it is carried out by the FBI on wiretap evidence. What Bucholtz is calling the "content" of a research subject's words is produced both by how the person speaking says it (slowly, with laughter, through tears etc.) and by its structuring as an event by multiple speakers (and hearers).

Bucholtz now using transcription conventions from sociolinguistics, makes visible where the interviewer was laughing (lines 4, 14,16, 18), where she was speaking at the same time as he was (lines 1, 8, 16, 22) and more simply that Fred's words were interwoven with hers. The interwovenness of interviews is familiar to all of us that do interviews from either side. The "interview" is the viewing of each other, it is not testimony nor testament. It is also the listening to and the hearing of each other and thus in using a detailed transcript we can pursue not just speaking but also hearing by the participants of the original event. There are a spectrum of transcription possibilities between the two extremes of the self-standing quotation and the levels of detail that can be pursued through additional transcription symbols from conversation analysis, linguistics, or other sources. In his useful book on interviewing Rapley (Rapley 2007) shows examples of slightly less detailed forms of interview transcription, however in each, his aim is to avoid deleting some sense of the interviewer's actions. The transcript in figure 2 allows us to see a palpable instance of how the knowledge gathered by the interview process is co-constructed (Rapley 2001).

The desire for accuracy and detail in transcripts of recordings has drawn careful critiques from those committed to reflexivity and constructionist critiques while also sympathetic to EMCA (Hammersley 2010; Ashmore 2000)). They pick up on the danger of treating transcripts as if they are themselves data that is independent of the investigator's accomplishments of hearing, of interpreting, of having to be selective with quite what is entextualised and what is not. Bogen offers the critique that the complex notations of detailed transcriptions in conversation analysis are "a methodic designification of the event-in-question, swallowing-up all that is "memorable," "dramatic," "expressive," and so on, in a sea of endless detail" (Bogen 1999: 97) Replying to Bucholtz's article on transcription, Mondada (2007) demonstrates through transcribing the same recording in five slightly different formats the discoveries made possible by elaborating certain features in the transcript through re-listening and re-watching the original recording. In doing so Mondada responds to the critiques of detailed transcription by accepting that transcripts are variable according to the inquiry that they form a resource but shows that this variability is not across a divide between form and content it is instead:

> reflexively tied to the context of their production and to the practical purposes of their accomplishment. Thus, a transcript is an evolving flexible object; it changes as the transcriber engages in listening and looking again at the tape, endlessly checking, revising, reformatting it. These changes are not simply cumulative steps towards an increasingly better transcript: they can involve adding but also subtracting details for the purposes of a specific analysis, of a particular recipient-oriented presentation, or of compliance with editorial constraints. (Mondada 2007: 810)

The "sea of endless detail" that Bogen bemoans remains in Mondada's five transcriptions, yet what is also clear is that some detail is removed and some is retained as necessary in recovering how the expressive, dramatic and memorable are accomplished during events by participants. Quite what counts as becoming "endless" versus becoming "detailed enough" varies according to what the researcher finds themselves inquiring into (Hammersley 2010). The transcriber's task is about learning what counts as detailed enough for their analysis and this is where we might accept and element of Bucholtz's defence of the lone quote because fig .1 is indeed accurate enough for a particular concept of reporting that sunders speech from dialogue and from event, that produces 'a quote' even if the original speaker themselves was not trying to produce 'a quote'. Pursuing accuracy is about not precision for scientific purposes but is closer to a coming near to the original event, it is about an intimacy with what happened and a search for its original contingency where we might think of following the action during events rather than emptying the vessels of their contents.

The transcript behind closed doors

Up until this point I have treated the transcript as object, and examined how certain forms hide and reveal elements of the original event. What I would like to turn to in this section of the article is the hidden life of the transcript that Mondada (2007) begins to describe in her article. For most researchers there are three stages of transcription:

1. Listening to a recording and transforming this into a text
2. Re-examining that same transcript as part of ongoing analysis
3. Presenting one or another fragment of that transcript as part of an argument in a paper/talk

It has already become apparent that I am proposing that we spend much more time shuttling back and forth between stages 1 and 2. Before describing the places where that shuttling occurs what I would like to relate briefly is an alternate workflow at stage 1. To balance out the time demands that working with transcripts requires, using a logging sheet as a proto-transcript can help identify what sections of recordings are worth returning to. The logging sheet is a commonplace office tool that allows film editors (amongst others) to organise and assess their audio and video-clips and it is a tool that can serve transcribers as effectively. The logging sheet has a timecode in one column, notes on sections of the recording in the middle column and is evaluated with stars or ticks according to how interesting it is found to be (see a more elaborate and tailored form in (Heath & Hindmarsh 2002)). From the logging sheet the researcher picks out short sections that they want to begin transcribing. The very activity of logging rather than transcribing at this stage should mean that the researcher is listening attentively to what is being said and watching attentively to what is visually accomplished. Listening to recordings for the sole purposes of lengthy transcribing all but incapacitates the researcher's imagination, usually after only few minutes.

Timecode	Comments	Interest
34:14	Falling off bike on ice on main road - tall stories	**
36:10	Almost being crushed by loose hay bale - tall story getting bigger	***
38:05	How bikes have changed since J was a kid	*

Table 1. Excerpt from logging sheet of conversations between car-sharers

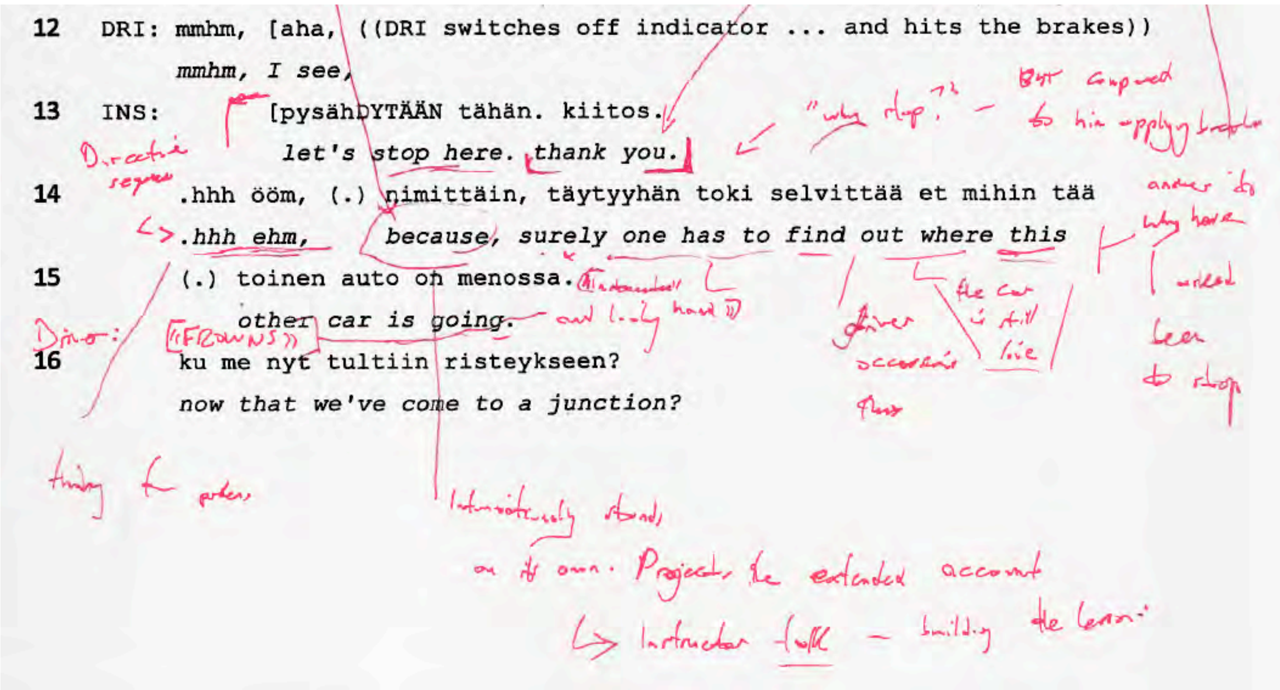
To return to the work in, on and around the transcript: a routine element of the collective manner in which researchers in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis draw upon their transcripts is that they meet to do their studies of recordings of this, or that, phenomenon in small groups. Inverting the solitary tendencies of many geographers with their transcripts, they almost always try and analyse them with other researchers in what are usually called 'data sessions'. These sessions bring the analytic knowledge and imaginations of other scholars to a scholar's empirical material before that material itself has been analysed. For many geographers that might seem like turning up to work in your pyjamas rather than well-dressed in non-representational theory, Marxism and/or Foucauldian discourse analysis. Outside of a formal collaborative project it might also seem self-sacrificing given that most of the time one is offering to do analytic work for another and on materials that might be quite distant from one's own. At one level the data session does encourage a spirit of analysis for and with others rather than analysis for oneself. In another sense it provides a space to practice, extend and learn on material where one has less at stake. Human geography lacks shared rehearsal spaces like these. For who bring the empirical lumber, then the benefits are more obvious, a community has come together and built a barn of analysis for them.

Fig. 3 Data Session on football fans watching a game at home

The transcript and the recording are central to being able to share the materials that form research projects. What has been less remarked upon is how the transcript features in the organisation of data sessions and what work is done with and upon the transcript (though see (Ashmore 2000; Ashmore 2004)). As different tasks are undertaken in a data session the transcript provides distinct forms of support. The data sessions I am describing here are ones where there are larger groups (somewhere between five and twenty five) gathered together. Data sessions involving two to four researchers are equally common though they usually lack the more formalised five stages of organisation that I will now describe briefly.

In the first stage of a data session the person that brings their data usually primes the members of the session around the status of the recording and their transcription. These range across a spectrum between the only-just-transcribed that is often only minimally detailed, error-ridden, to the paper-ready. For early transcripts the researcher whose project the material arises out of, may have done little more than select what seems, from a glance, to be an interesting fragment to transcribe. Researchers may come with up to half-a-dozen fragments from a collection assembled from what appear to be the same phenomena (e.g. disclosures during a therapy session, or donations to big issue seller). The researchers in presenting their data for a few minutes or so at the outset usually alert other members of the group to their interest in it and thus provide some guidelines as what the other members of the group might focus on.

In the second stage, to begin to examine any recording it is usually played two or three, or four, or more, times right through. On the first play-through, members of the group listen (and watch), on the second some begin reading the transcript while listening and on a third and fourth they may listen and/or read while listening more closely having identified a section they find interesting. As Mondada (2007) describes, the recording and transcript each help make the other intelligible but, more than that, they make one another memorable, navigable and focused. In the cycle of repeats where the analyst wants to listen more closely on the next replay, the transcript is highlighted or otherwise marked for a next listen (see the underline on line 14, fig. 4). It serves then to help anticipating the upcoming play of the recording and to then attend to it more closely as it passes. With the controls of the playback device usually in the hands of the researcher whose data it is, the transcript allows the analytic work to be distributed.



```
12   DRI: mmhm, [aha, ((DRI switches off indicator ... and hits the brakes))
          mmhm, I see,
13   INS:        [pysähDYTÄÄN tähän. kiitos.
                  let's stop here. thank you.
14        .hhh ööm, (.) nimittäin, täytyyhän toki selvittää et mihin tää
          .hhh ehm,     because, surely one has to find out where this
15        (.) toinen auto on menossa.
              other car is going.
16        ku me nyt tultiin risteykseen?
          now that we've come to a junction?
```

Fig 4 Extract from annotated transcript on older drivers re-learning to drive (from original research by Mirka Rauniomaa)

The third stage of a data session typically involves individual members looking at their transcripts in more detail. Members of the session are left up somewhere between twenty and thirty minutes to begin to make sense of what they just listened to (and perhaps looked at). With the transcript in front of them they develop preliminary noticings. Depending on their interests in EMCA these might be around what sorts categories were used by which party (Lepper 2000), what saying that did or/and to whom it did, how they organised their actions in sequences (Schegloff 2006), what sorts of social object they were building (Have 2004), the visual organisation of the setting (Laurier 2013), how material objects were configured in action (Heath & Hindmarsh 2002) and so on. Other sorts of researchers would bring other sorts of interests to their transcripts and these might be more traditional problems of power, identity, gender and so on. The fact that there are transcripts for each member of the session means that each can then work alone for a while. The recording by itself fails to provide this distributed workspace. The transcript provides enough detail not to be simply working from recall alone of the unfolding events in the recording. However the transcript also has lost enough of what members of the session witnessed in the video recording that it raises puzzles that mean that they then return to the video clip with questions around how such and such could have happened, or whether they had misheard something and so on. The accuracy of the transcript is thus also something that is re-considered through the data sessions and in re-hearings by members of these sessions. This pursuit of what happened and how it happened can risk fetishising the original recording (Ashmore 2004) and thus requires the exercise of imagination as much as fidelity.

In the fourth stage the members of the data session go round the table reporting on their analyses so far, the annotated transcripts provide a resource for that reporting. The recording is often requested to be played again in relation to the particular section of the transcript that a group member has been working on. The reading aloud of line numbers rapidly locates the features that each person wants to direct the attention of the group toward. Depending on the software being used it may also locate the section of the original recording too (Mondada 2007). Once the fourth stage is complete, if there is still time, a fifth stage is entered where individual noticings are followed up with further re-playing and analysis.

The annotation of the transcript is not finished during reporting and discussion in stages four and five because that very discussion serves to elaborate existing annotations and be transferred on to the transcripts of others. While fig. 4 is richly annotated and illustrates how much work can become transferred on to the transcript, as often the markings are only underlinings, arrows and the briefest remarks. Annotations that only to serve to remind a member of a data session of what they wish to talk about during their reporting. Or they might be the annotations made by the researcher whose data it is, that wishes to write it up later. Their annotations will try to preserve enough detail for that later writing-up. We gain a sense then of the transcript as something to be worked from, worked on and worked up. It is a script in transit as much as a finished transcript.

Concluding remarks

Transcripts are workspaces with distinct purposes and changing qualities as they shift through our inquiries. What I have tried to provide a sketch of here are the reasons for trying more detailed and dialogical transcription formats than the self-standing quote, the textual equivalent of the broadcastable soundbite. Primary amongst these is a concern with understanding the original words as part of an event and as a joint undertaking with other speakers and hearers. In addition I have also hinted at the uses to which more detailed transcripts can be put in working-up empirical materials as part of a community and in further dialogue as to what can be heard and described in, and by, transcripts of talk. There is always a danger that transcription collapses into a technical and mechanical exercise rather than an attempt to respond imaginatively to the music of human action but that turns upon what is done with the transcript rather than the transcript itself.

> "The modern transcript no longer pretends to describe events at all. Rather, the job of the transcript is to provide an orthographic "emplotment" of the relevant acoustic and videographic phenomena. This respecification of the transcript's work dissolves the classical question of "descriptive adequacy" by transferring the duties and entitlements of descriptive representation to the electromagnetic record." (Bogen 1999: 97).

Bogen's critical critical comments on 'the electromagnetic record' are a useful reminder of how transcription can become cut adrift from adequate descriptions of the original events. Transcripts become judged in relation to the excessive details of the recording medium and risk losing the capacity to differentiate the trivial from the significant detail. However to describe is not the same as to transcribe, though the two are clearly, and closely related, the good description is not the same as the good transcription. Ethnomusicologists can fail to describe improvised music when they transcribe from recordings into staff notation. The transcription is there, for ethnomusicologists and ethnomethodologists to emplot the acoustic phenomena and allow parties schooled in reading the notation systems to reproduce the sounds of this speech later because the sounds of it were central to how and what it meant (Have 2004). While the transcriptional details may not be to the taste of most human geographers nor a number of ethnomethodologists, they have however grown a large community of researchers that can follow the songs that they carry.

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