Transcripts, Like Shadows on a Wall

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Over the last 50 years the process of producing transcripts of all kinds of interactions has become an important practice for researchers in a wide range of disciplines. Only rarely, however, has transcription been analyzed as a cultural practice. It is here argued that it is precisely the lack of understanding of what is involved in transcribing that has produced a number of epistemological problems, including the tendency to become either virtual-realists or hypercontextualists. By proposing a new interpretation of Plato's famous story of the prisoners in the cave who could only see the shadows of what was happening outside, this article examines the advantages of the selective nature of transcription, unveils some of the cognitive and affective implications of engaging in transcription, and proposes a complementary approach to transcription, in which transcripts are evaluated with respect to what they can (or cannot) reveal within a particular domain of inquiry.

INTRODUCTION

Transcription has become widespread across a number of disciplines within the humanities and the social and behavioral sciences. The practice was pioneered at the turn of the 20th century by linguists and anthropologists working with native speakers of then still unwritten languages in order to document their sound systems and their grammatical patterns (e.g., Boas, 1911). Over time, and with the improvement of recording technologies, transcription has come to be understood as the transformation of either analogical or digital recordings of sounds or moving images into some kind of "text" that can be later examined and/or displayed as evidence of a particular phenomenon under investigation. As the practice of transcription spread to a wider range of disciplines, linguists' preoccupation with phonetic accuracy and adaptability across languages—two concerns that had motivated the creation of the International Phonetic Alphabet—was replaced with the preference for readability and inclusion of as many users and readers as possible. Conversation analysts were among the first to insist on the use of English orthography for the representation of ordinary talk, and others made the same choice, albeit not necessarily following the same criteria, and thus developing their own conventions. Over time, a number of transcription systems developed, each with its own conventions, and standardization has been difficult, if not impossible, to achieve, sometimes even within the same field or discipline. Despite the fact that most researchers use a hybrid system, borrowing what they find useful for their purposes from various traditions, they often

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have strong opinions on what a transcript should look like and what should be included in it. After years spent transcribing and pondering over these issues (e.g., Duranti, 1997, chap. 5), I have come to the conclusion that they cannot be addressed without a general discussion about more fundamental questions implied by the process of creating transcripts. As will become apparent in the rest of this article, I am particularly interested in questions such as these: What kinds of entities are transcripts? What are the consequences of thinking of them in one way instead of another? How can a general theoretical discussion about transcription as a cultural activity and transcripts as sociohistorical (and thus cultural) products help us clarify the epistemological foundations and the scope of our own enterprise, whether it is aimed at the study of speaking, thinking, feeling, or just acting in the world?

If it is true, as some of us believe, that what we variously call language, discourse, talk, communication, or something else plays an enormous role in making us into who we are and in facilitating or hindering our actions, then the choices that we make in representing the unfolding of meaning-making activities that we call social life should be a crucial issue for coming to an understanding of what is involved in such activities. This concern was indeed the focus of Elinor Ochs's 1979 *Transcription as Theory*, an essay that first explicitly articulated the assumptions and implications of the transcription process in general and then for child language in particular. Since then, a number of critiques of transcription conventions (e.g., Edwards & Lampert 1993; Macaulay, 1991; Preston, 1982) and transcription as a sociocultural and political practice (e.g., Bucholtz, 2000; Jaffe & Walton, 2000) have appeared, enriching our sense of what transcribing is or should be about. But the basic claim found in Ochs's essay remains unchallenged. Transcription, she proposed, is a selective process relying on conventions and reflecting theoretical goals and definitions (Ochs, 1979, p. 44). In this article, I expand on this original formulation of transcription, keeping in mind two more of its properties that, in my view, also deserve attention. One is the reliance on expertise in specific areas that transcription presupposes for transcript-makers and transcript-users. The other is the temporal-historical dimension of transcripts as artifacts. They are oriented both toward the past, thus being historical documents, and toward the future, thus being usable to reenact aspects of the interaction captured in the transcript.

To explore these themes, I rely on a well-known story as a "model for" (Geertz, 1973, pp. 93–94) the process of transcription.

UNDERSTANDING SELECTION

Although the story that I am about to recount is a story that most if not all of my readers will immediately recognize, I have decided to tell it again because, as always, the devil is in the details. Because the original is a bit long and has details that are potentially distracting from the main points I would like to make, I decided to give you a summary. But instead of attempting to make up my own, I will rely on someone else's summary. It's Karl Jasper's, as translated by Ralph Mannheim and edited by Hannah Arendt, and it goes like this:

> Men live in an underground cave, their legs and necks chained so they cannot move. They can only see straight ahead, for the chains prevent them from turning their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised path, beside which runs a

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low wall. Along the wall men pass carrying all manner of statues and figures. Some of them are talking; others are silent. Of all the things and of each other the prisoners see only the shadows cast by the fire on the wall opposite them. They take the shadows of the objects for the truth and imagine that the words they hear are spoken by the passing shadows. (Jaspers, 1962, p. 32)

As you know, the story, from Plato's *Republic, Book VII*, is not over, but I need to stop here to make a first point and explain to you why I think that the myth of the cave is relevant to the theme of this article.

The first point I want to make is that, contrary to Plato's presentation of shadows as a distortion or obstruction of truth, if one accepts the premise that the protagonists of the story were prisoners and thus unable to go outside, the ability to watch shadows did provide them with some knowledge of the world behind their backs. Shadows have certain properties that do give viewers some potentially useful information. In fact, being iconic and indexical of whatever gives them shape and movement (in addition to a light source), they allow viewers to detect properties of their sources that might escape observation by the naked eye. That's exactly what we want from transcripts. We need them to be selective. As Ochs (1979) pointed out, "[a] transcript that is too detailed is difficult to follow and assess" (p. 44). By being selective, transcription conforms to the classic definition of a *scientific method* precisely because it helps us deal with the problem that all scientists face, namely, that the universe is too big for us to observe and make sense of everything. By being inherently, or, rather, constitutively selective, transcription helps us develop partial theories, which is a reasonable goal in any scientific enterprise. To quote from Stephen Hawking's (1988) *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*:

> It turns out to be very difficult to devise a theory to describe the universe all in one go. Instead, we break the problem up into bits and invent a number of partial theories. Each of these partial theories describes and predicts a certain limited class of observations, neglecting the effects of other quantities, or representing them by simple sets of numbers. It may be that this approach is completely wrong. If everything in the universe depends on everything else in a fundamental way, it might be impossible to get close to a full solution by investigating parts of the problem in isolation. Nevertheless, it is certainly the way that we have made progress in the past. The classic example again is the Newtonian theory of gravity, which tells us that the gravitational force between two bodies depends only on one number associated with each body, its mass, but is otherwise independent of what the bodies are made of. (p. 11)

I know that some of you might not like this parallelism with physics and especially the part about prediction, which seems to conflate the classic distinction between *Naturwissenchaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*. But I believe that we *are* in the business of predicting simply because our subjects, that is, humans, are preoccupied with prediction. Culture, after all, is precisely designed to make predictions possible, even though in some cases, the predictions are wrong.

To say that prediction is possible and should be one of the goals of our analysis does not mean that we are treating humans like rocks, rivers, or planets. Prediction and *Verstehen* not only *can* go together, they *must* go together, and the selective aspect of transcription is what allows us to concentrate on a specific course of action and make hypotheses about where that course of action is coming from and where it is leading to.

The problem is, however, that not everyone accepts selection as a fact of life that needs to be reckoned with. In fact, not everyone complies either with Ochs's (1979) requirement that "the basis for the selective transcription should be clear" (p. 44). In some cases, researchers think that

they can either ignore or bypass the selective quality of transcription. This creates problems. I briefly discuss them in terms of two fallacies. I call the first the *virtual-realist fallacy* and the second the *hypercontextualist fallacy*.

When we act as virtual-realists, we start from a strong and defensible assumption: Direct experience is not always the best route to truth. Our solution is to create a parallel reality that reproduces some of the same properties of the real world while allowing for their manipulation. Through technology, an event can be repeated, and thus we can reexperience some of its aspects, albeit under different conditions. For example, a recorded event can be slowed down, shortened, recolored, lightened, darkened, or muted, and some details can be magnified or reduced. As virtual-realists, in other words, we start out as skeptics with respect to the advantage of direct access to the *Ding an sich*, and we act like physicists who manipulate subatomic particles to better see what they are doing. But our fascination with and trust of technology ends up getting us to see a particularly detailed but mediated record of what went on (e.g., a video recording) for the things themselves. In this sense, we become like the prisoners in the cave, who thought that the words they heard were spoken by the shadows.

As virtual-realists, we relate to the moving pictures on the computer screen or to the voices coming out of our headphones as if someone were moving and talking in front of us. We call those moving pictures on the screen by the names of real people. We laugh with them; we empathize with their problems; we even question their actions and wish that they had done other things, sometimes for their own good, other times for our own.

Instead, when we act as hypercontextualists, we start from another strong and potentially defensible assumption: Direct, unmediated experience is indispensable in attempting to understand what is going on in the real world. In this mode of thinking, we are sensitive to and critical of the mediated quality of recording technologies and its potential distortions or shortcomings, but we do not fully subject our own method to the same type of critical inspection. We recognize that our own presence and actions (e.g., our various forms of feedback or our questions) can alter the world out there (the participant-observer's paradox). But we continue to take these intrusions and manipulations to be ultimately more insightful (and in some cases even morally superior) than the *kino*-eye of the videographer.

I believe that virtual-realism and hypercontextualism are but two forms of naturalism by which the product of our epistemology is reified. Albeit in different ways, neither mode is capable of fully analyzing and theorizing the mediated and negotiated nature of what we consider to be our "data." As in the cases of the physicists and other scientists criticized by phenomenologists in the first part of the 20th century and by historians of science more recently, as virtual-realists and hypercontextualists, instead of thematizing the conditions of our interpretive process, we end up naturalizing them. This is a common interpretive practice around the world, but we must be able to step back and distinguish between different types of phenomena.

How do we become more sophisticated in understanding the ontology of transcription and avoid naturalism without having to reject a *techné* that has been so powerful for the growth of our disciplines? Some inspiration, I suggest, comes from returning to Plato's cave. Here is the rest of the story:

> And now a wonderful thing happens. The prisoners are unchained. When one of them is compelled to stand up and turn his neck, he suffers sharp pains. His eyes are blinded by the glare of the fire. He is unable to recognize the things whose shadows he saw before. He believes that the shadows were more real

and true than what is shown him now. If he were compelled to look at the fire, his eyes would hurt. He would turn away and take refuge in the things to which he is accustomed. And these would indeed seem clearer to him.

But he … is dragged up the steep slope issuing from the cave. He comes out into the sunlight. But he feels only pain, he is dazzled, and he cannot distinguish anything at all in the light of the sun. He must grow used to it gradually. Then he sees the things of the outer world. … Now he sees not mere reflections but all things in their full reality. … And now he considers himself fortunate, when he remembers his former abode. Their honors and distinctions were conferred on those who most clearly perceived the shadows of the passing objects, who best remembered them, and were thereby best enabled to predict what would happen in the future. But now he would rather do anything than be enslaved to such false notions and live in such a way.

Now he returns to the cave to set the others free. At first his eyes, full of darkness, see nothing. He would make himself ridiculous if he tried to compete with the prisoners in interpreting the shadows. They would say that his ascent was to blame, that it had ruined his eyesight, and that any such attempt to rise was folly. And if he attempted to unchain them and lead them upward, they would kill him. (Jaspers, 1962, pp. 32–33)

I hope you can see now that the liberated prisoner, the one who has gone out to see the real world, is a little bit of a hypercontextualist. When he comes back into the cave, he has no longer any interest in the representations (the shadows) and has even lost his ability to make sense of them. His fellow prisoners, in turn, are so much into shadow-interpretation as a task with its own merits that they do not want to leave their premises. They prefer representations to the experience of meeting the natives. They are virtual-realists. But there is much more in this story than the parallelism I have just drawn. As Jaspers reminds us in his commentary, the myth of the cave contains a number of well-known Platonic themes. I focus on two of them here: (a) the turning around (*metastrophē, periagōgē*) to obtain insights, and (b) the stages of knowledge, which foregrounds the otherwise usually unnoticed temporality of human practices. Although I cannot possibly do justice to these very rich topics here, I nevertheless use them in the rest of the article to further reflect on our predicament as transcription practitioners. At the end of the article, I also add a few comments about the vulnerability of exposing our transcripts to the scrutiny of others.

TURNING AROUND

The movement of turning back and forth, from the limited, selected, partial representations found in transcripts to the open-ended experiential-historical world of "what (really) happened out there" is a cyclical, rhythmic adjustment and fine-tuning that characterizes any transcription activity as an embodied sociocognitive practice that resembles any other hermeneutical enterprise. It is easy for us to recognize that we are trying to represent on paper or a computer screen what was a flux of experiences into a fixed, inscribed world of forms-as-types (see Ricoeur's, 1971, definition of *inscription*). But the ways in which we go about performing such a powerful and consequential transformation might not be easily accessible to our inspection. I suspect that this is partly due to some fundamental misunderstanding, a real epistemological fog, that surrounds us not haphazardly but as part of a very human tendency to *objectify* (as Benjamin Lee Whorf would have said) our representations. The source of the confusion for us may derive from our tendency to believe that we are trying to transcribe exactly what went on. But a brief reflection on our own actions will reveal to us that that's not what we are doing. In transcribing we are assuming and simultaneously constituting

what Charles Goodwin (1994) called "professional vision." This is done, by the way, not by fixing (e.g., through writing) some immediately observable actions of people who happen to be in our surroundings. More typically, we are transcribing an analogic or digital record of what went on some time ago somewhere (else). To return to the metaphor from which I started this section, our turning is a different turning from that of Plato's enlightened and yet most unfortunate prisoner who was forced to step out into the daylight. We do not turn to see what people are doing and then formulate some account about what they do (i.e., the "truth"). We turn, or maybe just slightly adjust our eye-gaze, from one kind of inscription (images on a television or computer screen) to another kind of inscription, that is, a transcript in progress (e.g., on a computer screen).

Our turning to the source of our knowledge and insights about human social life, then, is always from a technology-mediated inscription to (a sometimes different, sometimes the same) technology-mediated representation. This is not a small achievement, and considerable technological, methodological, and theoretical efforts have gone into making it possible and partly standardized. It is precisely on the basis of such rich and yet always selected information that we, as a community of transcription practitioners, have produced a considerable body of observations, generalizations, and even predictions about what people, languages, and cultural practices can do. There is no question that despite the still vast unknown areas of human communication, we know today a great deal more about language as a cultural practice or about face-to-face interaction than we did 100 or 50 years ago. But precisely because of its inherently selective quality, our transcription process and its products should not become ground for moral superiority. On the contrary, the recognition of the inherently selective nature of recording first and transcribing later should alert us to the fact that the real (or what Plato called "truth") must be approached, approximated, simulated, and even induced and seduced by means of multiple selective processes that are *complementary* to one another and not substitutes for one another. Whereas, when he returns to the cave, the prisoner who is forced to go out cannot see or understand that his former mates get pleasure and knowledge out of watching the shadows on the wall, the prisoners who stayed inside the cave do not want to recognize that there could be other ways of knowing besides shadow-reading. Conversely, whereas Plato does not seem to recognize any value in watching shadows, we have made a profession out of it.

These parallelisms are meant to highlight the fact that the proclamation of the absolute superiority of one way of knowing over another is not going to take us very far. It might produce willing and skillful soldiers, ready to fight a holy war, but they might also turn out to be researchers either unable to learn from the experiences of their neighbors who had gone out of the metaphorical cave or unable to see that the selection and reproduction allowed by technology can enhance our ability to see and hear certain details and have new intuitions. It is perhaps not surprising that I find myself supporting a complementary approach. We need to find out and then clarify what one type of inscription can or cannot capture and what another type of transcription can or cannot reveal. In openly criticizing others we must be ready to make ourselves vulnerable to others' criticism and to our own. The meaning of turning, then, is broadened. We must at times turn toward the person who is transcribing at the next desk or in the next office or the next building or somewhere else on earth. We must, in other words, periodically reassess the principles, conditions and consequences of our ways of seeing, hearing, and reporting, just as we routinely reassess our hypotheses about why the world we live in is the way it is. This type of turning is not merely an exercise in reflexivity, albeit reflexivity is certainly involved. It is also an exercise in quality control and, more precisely, descriptive adequacy. By descriptive adequacy here I mean a level and manner of

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The introduction of the concept of adequacy is important for making clear that complementarity does not mean that everything goes. The acceptance of a multiplicity of methods and points of view on what can be categorized as the same phenomena must come with evaluative procedures. In our case, this means that we must have ways of deciding which one among several alternative transcripts can show what we are interested in seeing (and hypothesizing about). Such evaluations must be based on specific research goals and particular research questions. Only once we make clear what this transcript is meant to be good for can we decide whether it is doing what it was meant to do or whether there are other, better ways of achieving the original goal. This principle does not exclude the possibility that a transcript (and a way of producing it) might achieve other, unforeseen research goals, for example, making readers aware of a phenomenon that leads to new hypotheses. This is in fact routinely the case among those researchers who treat transcription first and foremost as a discovery procedure.

STAGES OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE TEMPORALITY OF TRANSCRIPTS

I reframe the issue of stages of knowledge in terms of temporality. One obvious aspect of the temporal property of transcripts as artifacts is that involvement in their production induces nostalgia. Take a dinnertime interaction or a phone call or a political debate. By the time we sit down to start transcribing any of these events, they are gone. They are even more gone by the time a transcript is produced and made available for analysis. This property of being gone has emotional effects, and it can produce nostalgia. In the midst of transcribing, we often long for the time when the world was the way it is shown on the tape. Especially when we knew the people we recorded, transcripts are like photo albums and letters stored in the attic. They are a form of collective memory, a way to re-present rather than represent.

More generally, transcripts have a life or, rather, we give them a life. Transcripts are born, get longer and fatter, and change in character, sometimes through our revisions, other times by simply sitting in a drawer for a few years. When we pick them up again, they read differently. We should be aware of these changes and thematize them. The different versions or interpretations of the same transcript provide us with a record of our epistemological and theoretical changes. In some cases, we might even call these changes "progress."

When transcripts are modified over time, this does not necessarily happen because earlier versions were factually wrong (although sometimes they are judged to be so) but because either the transcriber changes or the transcriber's interest shifts, and consequently different details are foregrounded while other ones suddenly appear superfluous, or even confusing. In some cases, an earlier transcript can be seen as no longer valid or as outdated if a new orthography or a new transcription system is adopted. The process of revising transcripts is thus similar to the activity of revising translations. We change our translations when our understanding of what gives meaning to the words has changed, when we have a new cultural, historical, or biographical frame for what had been on the page for a long time.

The temporal unfolding of repeated listening and viewing of the same strip of interaction, as Erving Goffman used to say, makes our transcription process a classic hermeneutical circle, or ac-

tually a spiral, in which each loop gives us a new listening, a new viewing, exposing us to the possibility of a new interpretation, which happens at a different time.

VULNERABILITY

It is often said that providing transcripts of the data on which we have been working (e.g., by reproducing them inside an article or in an appendix) can allow our audience to be included in our own thought processes, to relive with us the problem solving that went on while we were analyzing the transcripts and looking for interesting phenomena and patterns. This exposure of the stuff out of which we came up with hypotheses has the scientific advantage of making our analytical process open to verification. But it has the disadvantage that our audience might have a completely different take not just on the analysis, but on the whole enterprise that the analysis is based on.

Just like those of us working on audio recording of conversational interaction or interviews used to *show* the rest of the world samples of the typed transcripts on which we based our analysis (e.g., on a handout, on an overhead), now it has become common practice to show the audiovisual source of our transcripts and our analysis. In so doing, however, we do not always realize that we are testing the extent to which members of our audience share our professional culture. We take our professional vision so much for granted that we act surprised when members of the audience ask existential-ethnographic questions, such as, "Who are these people? What are they up to? Why are they there? Why did they allow you into their life?" Or questions that seem to presuppose some level of technical expertise: "What about the height of the camera, the lens, the angle, the panning and zooming?" Or questions on the unequal distribution of professional attention: "What about the privileging of the dinner table over the kitchen counter? Why are the parents in the center of the screen and the children on the sides? Why is the blasting television kept off screen?"

Although these challenging questions seem to be about the validity of the claims that can be made about our data, they are often based on fallacies of the kind I discussed previously.

A recording first and a transcript later should not be presented or seen as attempts to reproduce the entire original experience. Nothing could ever do that. We forget that in some contexts, this needs to be made clear for the audience, especially when we face a professionally mixed audience. Otherwise the hypercontextualists (as well as the experimentalists) will feel entitled, perhaps even compelled, to expose what they see as the illusion of direct access to reality via electronic recording. Similarly, virtual-realists (or those who tend to go in that direction) should not assume that everything that has not been recorded is not true or that anything that is only audible (and not visible) is a poor source of data. Unless we have a systematic way of measuring the relative weight of talk versus other codes and channels for particular types of phenomena, it is not possible to argue on a priori grounds that the lack of a visual record makes an analysis deficient. Were such a criticism valid for visual records over aural ones, the same argument would be valid for a 360-degree angle over a 72-degree angle, or for a single camera over two, and so on. Validity must be measured on the basis of payoffs, and payoffs are theoretical beasts.

CONCLUSION

I have here started from the assumption that transcription is a cultural activity used for creating and sustaining a science of the particular slice of the universe that interests us, which is, in my

case, the role of speaking and other communicative practices in the constitution of persons and communities.

Transcription is practiced in different ways and on the basis of different forms of inscriptions. I have proposed that when we rely on audiovisual recordings, we must be able to thematize, on the one hand, the relationship between those recordings and the events that they provide information on and, on the other, the relationship between recordings and transcripts.

If we accept that transcripts are representations, and that as such they can only give us, through a combination of symbolic, iconic, and indexical signs, a restricted, selected perspective—a stance, a point of view, often with an attitude, on what the world was like at a particular moment, then transcripts and even shadows on the wall of a cave are the kinds of objects we need in order to see properties and recurring patterns that we might (and usually do) miss with other observational techniques. Being partial and essentialized renditions of the phenomena themselves, transcripts and shadows are rarefied on the way to being typified renditions of the phenomenal world. In other words, whether or not we like to use the word, transcripts have properties of models (Duranti, 2005). It is such model-like properties that can allow us to argue through them and about them. It is their model-like properties that make them good to think with.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the fall of 1975 I was expected to go to the John Hopkins University to study psycholinguistics with Alfonso Caramazza, whom I had met the year before at the Linguistics Institute in Amherst, Massachusetts. Instead, due to a series of unforeseen circumstances, I found myself at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles in the newly formed department of linguistics chaired by Larry M. Hyman. One of the courses I took that fall was an advanced seminar on discourse analysis taught by Elinor Ochs. Early in the semester, a guest speaker came to our class with a Marantz Superscope tape recorder and showed us how to transcribe, or rather, showed us why it matters to transcribe and in particular why it matters to transcribe certain details that at the time were usually not found in transcripts. That guest speaker was Manny Schegloff. I would like to dedicate this article to Elinor and Manny. Regardless of their intentions, they sure are somehow responsible for what I have to say now about transcription.

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