

Recording and Transcribing

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Much of what follows is adapted and abridged from Ives, E. D. (1972). The tape-recorded interview. Knoxville TN: Tennessee University Press, pp. 94-101.

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A: It's a Lot of Work

So now you've got your taped interview in hand--what next? Well here comes the hard part. Like it or not, you are going to have to transcribe your interview to permit analysis and so that other people can read it and gain a sense of how your interview went. Transcribing is a time-consuming and (sometimes) tedious task that is just one of those things you are going to have to do. Indeed, it is my experience that, if this is your first time trying to transcribe, you can count on about a ten to one ratio of time transcribing to actual talk. Put more precisely, you can probably count on somewhere near 150 minutes to transcribe your 15 minute interview! (Imagine what this is like for the graduate researcher who has decided to do 30 two hour interviews.....). This resource has been prepared to answer some of the major questions you might have about transcription. Hopefully some of the information herein will make this an easier task for you.

The Importance of High Quality Recording

Perhaps the best favour you can do yourself for this project is to be certain that you will be able to hear your recording while you are actually transcribing it. This will minimize the number of times you have to rewind the tape in order to try and make out what was said. The following points will help you here (from Patton, 1990, p. 350-351):

B: MAKING THE RECORDING:

1. Equipment

a. Use electrical outlet and outside mike whenever possible.

- b. If you use batteries check them.
- c. Recorder should be clean and in good condition-check before going to an interview.
- d. Take along extra tape cassettes / disks.

2. Before the Interview

- a. Choose a place that's quiet and free from interruptions.
- b. Place microphone close to respondent, then speak loud enough so we hear what you're saying; most important, we want to hear the answer.
- c. Set recorder on stable surface.
- d. Test the recording system.

3. During the interview

- a. Speak clearly and not too fast-respondent is likely to do the same.
- b. Ask respondent to speak clearly.
- c. Make test with respondent: Then rewind and listen so respondent can hear whether she/he is speaking distinctly; if not, say, 'The recorder does not seem to be picking up well. Could you speak up a little?' Whether the problem is mechanical or personal, correct it before continuing.
- d. Don't rustle papers, cups, bottles, and so on near the mike.
- e. Turn off recorder during irrelevant discussion.
- f. Watch for tape breakage and tangling.
- g. Follow all disk/cassette recorder instructions.
- h. Repeat test if tape change is necessary.

At end of interview, say 'This is the end of interview with.'

4. After Interview

- a. Listen to tape-make notes and erase irrelevant discussion (make note of this for transcribers); list proper names and unfamiliar terminology.
- b. Label disks/tapes and return them to appropriate containers.
- c. Keep disk/ tapes and recorder in good condition-do not touch tape or expose it to extreme temperatures.

C: We're Really Doing an Interpretation

In preparing to transcribe, one of the first things you should decide is the level of accuracy at which you intend to work. This decision will be largely dictated by the purpose the material will serve in your research. A dialectician will be concerned with pronunciation, an historian probably will not be. A psychologist doing detailed discourse analysis will be interested in the length of every pause and the exact number and location of every "uh" and "er"; a journalist might not require this kind of detail at all. The project on which you are working may have requirements of its own, of course, which you will have to accept. What follows are instructions that strike a kind of middle level of accuracy that we have found adequate for the Psyc 413 project. Other projects will, no doubt, require other approaches.

Remember too that we consider the tape to be the primary document--the ultimate authority. A transcript of any sort is simply the best representation you can make of what is on the tape, but since it is a representation, it is unavoidably an interpretation. No two people will transcribe the same tape in

exactly the same way, even if they are following the same set of guidelines, nor will the same person transcribe it in the same way on two different occasions (try it and see). We must accept this sort of variation as inherent in the whole process, but accepting it as a limitation in no way invalidates the process itself. Rather, the process is strengthened, because we will use it more intelligently, knowing as we do what can reasonably be expected of it.

Transcribing Machines

We'll assume you are entering your transcript into a computer--which we strongly recommend as the best course of action. You can transcribe a short interview using your tape deck at home or a portable tape recorder. However, you will find that you will have to rewind a bit of tape after each stop as the machine won't stop quite rapidly enough (the "Pause" function on your may be good enough, but frequently you have to go back anyway to get an understanding of what was said).

There are transcription machines that are essentially tape play back units with very fast stop functions that can be controlled with a foot pedal. These make a tremendous difference as you don't have to remove your hands from the key board to push the pause button. You can also rewind the tape using the foot pedal.

D: Formatting

Here are some ideas that will help to format your transcript to make it readable and useable for further analysis etc.:

Double-space everything

Leave good one-inch margins all around.

Don't give your transcript a crowded look at it will make it harder to work with--leave lots of space.

Use a highly readable font like Arial 12 point

Have a descriptive header at the top of each page which includes page number as well as the date it was printed.

The First Page

A

t the top of the first page of your transcription, set down essentially all information related to the interview including:

Interviewee's name, and contemporary contact information (get email addresses, home phone etc., just in case you have to consult with them for clarification)

Your name

Date and location of the interview

Observer's name and contact information

Timer's name and contact information

A legend indicating what initials or acronyms you are using to label the talker (e.g., K = interviewer Keevil; J = participant Jensen)

Clear explanations of any conventions you are using (e.g., how you are noting pauses, see below, etc.)

Any other information that you think will help a reader understand the context of the interview and the transcription processes you've used

E: Transcribing the Talk

Now begin the transcription proper, using dialogue or script form. This is an example of a conversation with a logger from New Brunswick.

K: Did you ever have any uh close shaves?

*J: Close shaves? You mean like was I, did I almost ever get my self killed? Well, only once that I can recall, but that was enough.
[laughs]*

K: What happened that time?

J: You want to hear about that, do you? All right, etc.

For all material not actually on the tape, follow the same format you would use if you were making a complete catalogue: enclose it in brackets and underline it. You may want to explain an extraneous sound [loud bang at this point: caused by cow exploding outside the window], or describe a gesture [demonstrating: clasps hands over head]. Or you may wish to indicate that the participant directed a remark to someone else [calls to wife in kitchen]. One of the most important functions of such "stage directions" is to explain why certain passages are unintelligible. It may be that something went wrong with the tape recorder or that the participant's granddaughter came into the room and turned the television set on, drowning out the interview. In all such cases, your note should be full enough to really explain what happened:

B: What did you use for that?

J: Well, you'd use a crimper. I think I've got one right here in this [at this point, Mrs. Jones started looking through a lot of utensils in a drawer in the table we were sitting at, and the noise makes it impossible to hear what she is saying for about 10 seconds] used to be right in there. Well, anyway, etc....

Even under the most ideal circumstances though, there will inevitably be words, phrases, and even longer passages that you simply will not be able to understand, in spite of the fact that you conducted the interview yourself. A rule-of-thumb here is to listen three times, then move on, leaving a blank that is at least as long as-and preferably longer than-the unintelligible passage. If you think you know what was said, or if you hear what is said but it just does not make any sense to you, type it in italics. You will clarify a lot of this material as you review your transcript by going through the tape a second time, or some future listener will be able to make it out. This possibility

prompts a final suggestion: Get a friend to listen to the puzzling passage; it is amazing how often all that is required is a fresh pair of ears! Failing that, though, three times and move on is a good working rule. Thus, in places, your transcript might look something like this:

K:We'd come downstream as far as where Allen's Brook comes in and Charlie hollered to me to get my hearse out of there or I'd get myself killed. So I reached out, etc.

Level of detail

Inevitably comes the question: *must everything be transcribed?* The answer is yes, but a qualified yes: transcribe everything in accordance with the level of accuracy at which intend to work. In some situations you should transcribe of all "uh's," all backing-and-filling, all false starts, and tag questions ("you see?" or "know what I mean?"). Here's a detailed example

K:Did you ever work on, well, on other rivers besides the Penobscot?

J:Did I what uh, did I uh well, let me think uh yeah now sure yeah sure I uh drove the uh uh the Kennebec River one no it was one spring yes.

We would suggest that passage be transcribed this way:

K:Did you ever work on other rivers besides the Penobscot?

J:Well, let me think. Yeah, I drove the Kennebec River one spring.

The passage may be a bit extreme to begin with, but not all that extreme: you will get many like it. If you do have a participant who responds in this halting manner, it is a good plan to say something about it in a headnote to the transcription:

[Note: Mr. Jensen's speech is so full of hesitations, haltings, false starts, and tag questions that occasionally I have had to exercise some judgement in deciding what to put in, what to leave out.]

Usually, though, such omissions can be taken for granted.