The politics of transcription [*]

Mary Bucholtz*

Department of English, Texas A&M University,
College Station, TX 77843-4227, USA

Abstract

Despite its centrality to the methods of discourse analysis, transcription has received disproportionately little attention in its own right. In particular need of discussion is the issue of transcription as a practice inherently embedded in relations of power. Examples from a transcript of a police interrogation, from a newspaper transcript of a radio program, and from a variety of linguistic transcripts demonstrate that transcription involves both interpretive decisions (What is transcribed?) and representational decisions (How is it transcribed?). These decisions ultimately respond to the contextual conditions of the transcription process itself, including the transcriber's own expectations and beliefs about the speakers and the interaction being transcribed; the intended audience of the transcript; and its purpose. The two basic transcription styles, *naturalized transcription*, in which the text conforms to written discourse conventions, and *denaturalized transcription*, in which the text retains links to oral discourse forms, have equal potential to serve as politicized tools of linguistic representation. A reflexive transcription practice, as part of a reflexive discourse analysis, requires awareness and acknowledgment of the limitations of one's own transcriptional choices. © 2000 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

> "Wih A one Boat *yuh::: uhlon dohlenko, – –*
> *etche*ruh *wooooops.*"
> – Stan (Ryave, 1978: 114, cited in Preston
> 1985)

1. Introduction

A number of discourse analysts in a variety of fields are now calling for greater attention to transcription practices, whether motivated by a desire for theoretical clarity (Cook, 1990; Mishler, 1991; Ochs, 1979), methodological adequacy (Edwards and Lampert, 1993; Preston, 1982, 1983, 1985; West, 1996), greater sensitivity to issues of translation and poetics (Becker, 1995; Hymes, 1981; Moerman, 1996; Sherzer, 1994; Tedlock, 1983, 1990), or political responsibility (Green et al., 1997; Roberts, 1997). The latter issue in particular is central to an emerging subfield of pragmatics that I term *reflexive discourse analysis*, which is developing in part as a direct response to a similar trend in anthropology and sociology (e.g. Clifford and Marcus, 1986; DeVault, 1990; Van Maanen, 1988). The reflexive turn in these adjacent social sciences emerges from scholars' increasing awareness that ethnographies, the textual products of their disciplinary practice, are not transparent and unproblematic records of scientific research but are instead creative and politicized documents in which the researcher as author is fully implicated. It was perhaps inevitable that discourse analysts begin to address similar issues, given that their practice, perhaps more than that of any other subfield of linguistics, is based on the production and interpretation of texts. The responsible practice of transcription, then, requires the transcriber's cognizance of her or his own role in the creation of the text and the ideological implications of the resultant product.

All transcripts take sides, enabling certain interpretations, advancing particular interests, favoring specific speakers, and so on. The choices made in transcription link the transcript to the context in which it is intended to be read. Embedded in the details of transcription are indications of purpose, audience, and the position of the transcriber toward the text. Transcripts thus testify to the circumstances of their creation and intended use. As long as we seek a transcription practice that is independent of its own history rather than looking closely at how transcripts operate politically, we will perpetuate the erroneous belief that an objective transcription is possible.

The political issues associated with transcription have often been easier for discourse analysts to see in transcripts produced outside the discipline. I therefore consider two extended examples of nonacademic transcription, one from the legal system and one from the media, along with a number of briefer examples from academia. My purpose in discussing both kinds of transcription in a single article is to emphasize that the practices that create such texts are more alike than different. While it is not difficult for discourse analysts to locate the workings of power in nonacademic transcription, when we cast the same critical eye over transcripts in our own profession, it becomes evident that similar sociopolitical issues are operating in both spheres.

In formulating this discussion, I follow Green et al. (1997) in distinguishing between transcription as an interpretive process and transcription as a representational process. At the interpretive level, the central issue is *what* is transcribed; at the representational level the central issue is *how* it is transcribed. Thus transcription involves both decisions about content (What does the transcriber hear on the recording and include in the transcript?) and decisions about form (How does the transcriber write down what she or he hears?). These levels are not clearly separable because, as will be shown below, decisions of interpretation often involve decisions of representation and vice versa. However, they provide a useful framework for the investigation of the social and political effects of transcription.

2. Interpretive choices in transcription

The first example I offer raises primarily interpretive problems. At issue in interpretation is what is said – and not said – in the discourse represented in the transcript. As discourse analysts know, the transcription of a recording is not a straightforward task. The recording may be of low quality, the speaker may talk quietly or quickly, background noise may cover the words. What may be less obvious is that the interpretation of a recording cannot be neutral; it always has a point of view. The discussion that follows illustrates the point that transcribers must always make decisions about what to include and exclude in our transcripts, and that these choices have political effects.

2.1. Interpretation in forensic transcription

Numerous studies in forensic linguistics (e.g. Bucholtz, 1995; Coulthard, 1996; Green, 1990; Prince, 1984, 1990; Shuy, 1993; Walker, 1990) have pointed out the real-world consequences of choices made during the transcription process in institutional contexts such as police interrogations and courtroom proceedings. Such research often focuses on discrepancies between the transcripts produced by court reporters, law enforcement agencies, and so on and the tape recordings on which these transcripts were purportedly based.

In 1995, I was involved as a pro bono consultant in a criminal case in California in which similar questions about transcription arose. The public defender, believing that linguistic issues might have affected the interrogation process, asked me to examine the videotape of the police interrogation of his client and the police transcript based on the videotape.[1] The interrogation resulted in the client's confession of burglary, but the attorney was of the opinion that the confession had been coerced and that the client's invocation of his Miranda rights – crucially, the right to remain silent – had been ignored.

---

[1] The police transcript was produced by a transcription service that often transcribes such materials for the local police department.

The transcript seemed to me to be inconsistent with the videotape in numerous ways. During the course of the interaction it becomes apparent that the client wants to protect his fiancee, who is also in custody. When the police officer leaves the room briefly, the client delivers a soliloquy that reveals his devotion to his fiancee: he is willing to trade a confession for a kiss from her. 'Just one kiss', he murmurs, 'and I'll tell you the whole thing, man'. It was my opinion that the interrogating officer took advantage of the client's emotional state and expressed uptake of his attempt to strike a deal but that this part of the interaction was systematically erased in the transcript. The places where I located this erasure are highlighted in Example (1):

(1)   *Two versions of a police interrogation*

Police transcript
Q = Police officer, A = Client

Researcher transcript (simplified)
Pol = Police officer, Cli = Client

Police transcript	Researcher transcript (simplified)
1 A. I'll tell you every – every single thing.	1 Cli: I'll tell you every – every single thing.
2 Q. Okay.	2 Pol: Okay.
3 A. I mean what – *see you got to understand*	3 Cli: I mean what –
4 (unintelligible).	4 *Pol: See you got to understand*
5 Q. (Unintelligible.)	5 (unintelligible).
	6 *Cli: Do me one favor, man, that's it.*
	7 *Pol: Yeah?*
6 A. Yeah.	8 Cli: Yeah.
7 Q. Yeah, you've got to understand (unintelligible) house?	9 Pol: Yeah, you've got to understand (unintelligible).
8 A. Yeah.	10 Cli: Yeah.
9 Q. Okay. You've got to understand, I'm not going to *make you deal* with anybody –	11 Pol. Okay. You've got to understand, I'm not going to *make a deal* with anybody –
10 A. Well, I don't want to –	12 Cli: Well, I don't want to –
11 Q. – unless – unless I know what *I'm doing.* You know what I'm saying?	13 Pol: – unless – unless I know what *I'm dealing with.* You know what I'm saying?
...	...
12 *Q. What's the (unintelligible)?*	14 *Pol: Now are we going to talk about it? The other part?*
13 *A. (Unintelligible.)*	15 *Cli: What are you guys going to do for me? Take care of what I ask you to do for me.*
14 Q. What are you going to ask me to do?	16 Pol: What are you going to ask me to do?
15 A. I want to give her a kiss.	17 Cli: I want to give her a kiss.
16 Q. I'll do that for you. (Unintelligible.)	18 Pol: I'll do that for you.
	19 Cli: Promise?
	20 *Pol: Not before we talk.*
17 A. Huh?	21 Cli: Huh?
18 Q. You've got my word.	22 Pol: You've got my word.
19 A. I've got your word?	23 Cli: I've got your word?
20 Q. You've got my word.	24 Pol: You've got my word.

According to my analysis, the transcriber effects the erasure of the officer's words in two ways: (1) through the labeling of certain exchanges as 'unintelligible' and (2) through the mistranscription and misattribution of several utterances. My own

transcription is based on a third-generation recording of poor quality, but even so I felt able to fill in or revise many of these problematic spots in the police transcript.

As can be seen in the parallel transcripts in Example (1), the instances of 'unintelligibility' in the police transcript often coincide in my transcript with the police officer's expressions of interest in and acquiescence to the client's proposal to make a deal. Thus the client's offer *Do me one favor, man, that's it* (line 6, my transcript) and the officer's response *Yeah?* (line 7) are omitted in the police version, as is the officer's reintroduction of the topic after an interruption (line 14: *Now are we going to talk about it? The other part?*) and the client's renewed offer to strike a deal (line 15: *What are you guys going to do for me? Take care of what I ask you to do for me*).

Likewise, the places where I disagreed with the police transcript were those where the police officer, on my interpretation, pursues the possibility of making a deal with the client. For example, the utterance preceding the client's offer is attributed to the client in the police transcript and to the police officer in my transcript (lines 3–4). My assignment of this utterance (*See you got to understand*) to the officer is supported by his repeated use of the same formulation in subsequent turns (lines 9, 11 of my transcript). My transcript thus suggests that the officer played a more active role in formulating the deal than the police transcript indicates. Additional discrepancies between the two transcripts are found in the interpretation of individual words and phrases. For example, the interrogating officer's utterance following the client's offer is transcribed in the police transcript as *I'm not going to make you deal with anybody – unless – unless I know what I'm doing* (lines 9–11), but in my transcript the officer says *I'm not going to make a deal with anybody – unless – unless I know what I'm dealing with* (lines 11–13). Where my transcript portrays the officer as attempting to strike a hard bargain, the effect of the police transcript is to portray him as reassuring the client that he will protect him from having to talk to others. Again, I found supporting evidence for my interpretation elsewhere in the transcript, for the police version seemed to me to make nonsense of the conversation's coherence. Why is the officer suddenly concerned with whether the client will have to deal with anyone else? This incoherence, however, is partly masked by the many 'unintelligible' utterances that precede the turn.

The public defender argued in a brief that the officer's behavior had a coercive effect, and a revised transcript was submitted to the court, but the district attorney's argument that the confession was freely given prevailed. The client was convicted of the burglary and is now serving life in prison under California's 'three-strikes-and-you're-out' law, which mandates life sentences to those who have been convicted of three felonies. In this case, the real-world consequences of transcription are clearcut.

The findings here are reminiscent of Coulthard's (1996) and Walker's (1990) research on transcription issues in legal settings. Both researchers report that those with institutional authority, such as police officers, tend to be portrayed favorably in transcripts. Coulthard shows that police transcripts of interrogations often represent the officer as morally upright and caring and the relationship between suspect and officer as friendly and joking, in effect minimizing any coercive police behavior. Walker demonstrates that court reporter transcripts standardize the speech of

judges and attorneys, but not that of lay witnesses and others lacking institutional prestige.[2]

These examples indicate the close relationship between interpretation and representation in the transcription process. The central transcription issues in Example (1) are primarily interpretive, in that they concern the transcriber's judgments about which parts of the text are interpretable and which are not. But they are also representational insofar as they offer a version of events and a portrait of the participants in those events. Through interpretive decisions of utterance attribution, content, and intelligibility, the police transcriber in Example (1) succeeds in creating two archetypal characters: the criminal eagerly confessing to his crime and the compassionate police officer, a man of his word. In the police transcript the officer comes across as an honorable fellow, who even pledges his intention to carry out the request of a suspected felon:

(2a) *Police transcript version*
    15 A. I want to give her a kiss.
    16 Q. I'll do that for you. (Unintelligible.)
    17 A. Huh?
    18 Q. You've got my word.

A less flattering picture is provided by my own transcript, in which the officer's utterance *You've got my word* (line 22) following the client's request for repetition (line 21) allows the officer to avoid repeating his hedge *Not before we talk* (line 20):

(2b) *Researcher version*
    17 Cli: I want to give her a kiss.
    18 Pol: I'll do that for you.
    19 *Cli: Promise?*
    20 *Pol: Not before we talk.*
    21 Cli: Huh?
    22 Pol: You've got my word.

I have argued that the police transcript is not 'objective', but neither is my own. Both transcripts are shaped by particular interests and both show evidence of interpretive choices. For my own part, I was especially interested in making sense of material that the police transcriber deemed unintelligible, and I believed I could do so. I might here invoke the criterion of interlistener reliability to legitimate my transcription, but the second listener who verified my interpretations was the public defender, who was strongly motivated to agree with my version. Additionally, in the transcript that I submitted to the court I did not revise the transcription in places

---

[2]   In the police interrogation transcript I found transcription practices similar to those Walker describes. Thus, for example, when the police transcriber attributes the utterance *See you got to understand* (line 3) to the client, the syntax is represented as nonstandard (*you got*). However, when utterances of the same form are attributed to the officer, they are represented with standard syntax as *you've got* (lines 7, 9).

where the police version did not jeopardize the client, even when I disagreed with the transcriber's interpretation. This decision drew on what Mishler (1991) has called 'the rhetoric of transcription', that is, consideration of the persuasive effect of the transcript on its audience. In this case, the intended audience was the judge, and the public defender and I did not want to distract him from the central point of the analysis by including a wealth of detail. We chose to call the judge's attention only to those points of interpretive disagreement that had legal consequences.[3]

But perhaps the greatest limitation of the transcript I produced, from a political standpoint, is that I did not seek corroboration of my interpretations and representations from the client himself. This oversight is a result of the common practice among public defenders (and their consultants) of drawing on the defense strategy that appears most promising, regardless of the client's own wishes. The client is thus stripped of her or his agency, becoming an object in an interaction controlled by attorneys and judges. Although I do not know what the client's wishes would have been, it is clear to me in retrospect that discourse analysts must be as conscious of the client's interaction with her or his own legal team as with the rest of the legal system (cf. Cunningham and McElhinny, 1995).

2.2. Interpretation in academic transcription

Similar interpretive problems are familiar to discourse analysts from their own experiences with transcription, but they are more often the stuff of anecdote or pedagogy than of academic analysis. A notable exception is Wald's (1995) review of *The emergence of Black English: Texts and commentary* (Bailey et al., 1991). The book is a collection of transcribed interviews with former slaves along with analyses by specialists in the development of African American Vernacular English. Wald focuses his review on the problems associated with the transcription of the recordings, the most recent of which are at least two decades old. The editors transcribed these recordings and presented the transcripts to the specialists for analysis. Some of the scholars who contributed to the volume disputed various details of the editors' transcriptions, and as Wald shows, these interpretive differences often have theoretical consequences.

Wald argues convincingly for certain interpretive choices over others on scholarly grounds, but to some extent whose transcript to believe may depend on whose theory

---

[3] My transcription of the interrogation also shows evidence of representational choices. Because I was concerned to locate instances in which the client's rights may have been violated, the transcript in Example (1) highlights with italics what seemed to me to be such instances. Certainly, I might have represented the discourse differently. In my initial analysis, for example, I was exploring the public defender's suggestion that dialect differences between the client, a speaker of African American Vernacular English, and the Western American English-speaking officer might have led to rights violations. That earlier transcript shows more attention to the details of pronunciation than the version presented here. And in another example of the rhetorical goals of transcription, the version of my transcript submitted to the court follows the transcription conventions of the police transcriber rather than an academic transcription system. I chose to conform to the police style in order to emphasize the differences between the two texts by making the two transcripts as parallel as possible.

we believe. Because we all bring our subjectivity to the task of transcription, it may be impossible to come to agreement that one version is ultimately 'correct'. In any case, a preoccupation with accuracy may prevent us from examining the equally important question of what is at stake in a particular transcription (cf. Slembrouck, 1992). Much work on the question of the purposes of transcription remains to be done.

Although the above examples suggest that there is no such thing as a disinterested transcript, transcribers are not necessarily conscious of every interpretive choice and its representational consequences. It is unlikely that the police transcriber set out to present the officer in a positive light by 'misinterpreting' his speech, and my own transcript, despite my commitment to assist the client, certainly attempts to interpret the officer's words accurately, although the officer himself might not agree with what I heard. Likewise, researchers on different sides of an academic debate do not purposely select the interpretation of a recording that best fits their own theoretical orientation. Their choices are usually guided by their 'scholarly predisposition', as Wald (1995) terms it, which frequently operates below the level of consciousness.

In such cases, some analysts recommend repeated listenings to make sense of difficult recordings, especially in the company of other listeners (e.g. Psathas and Anderson, 1990). The results of this method are nevertheless shaped by the theoretical orientation of the listeners and the social and political dynamics that obtain among them. Researchers cannot escape either our social world or our own subjectivity, and methods that aim to overcome one or the other may do no more than obscure the workings of social and subjective factors.

3. Representational choices in transcription

The preceding discussion demonstrates that a transcriber's interpretive decisions about what is said and by whom are decisions of representation that shape how the speakers (and the speech) in a transcribed conversation are understood by readers. In the next example, I show that transcribers may also influence the portrayal of speakers through decisions of representation concerning how what has been heard is represented on the printed page, in the form of the transcript itself.

3.1. Representation in media transcription

The data in Example (3) are taken from a radio panel discussion that was aired in response to the Los Angeles uprising of 1992. The data include both an audio recording of the original radio program broadcast on public radio and a transcription of the program that subsequently appeared in the major metropolitan daily newspaper sponsoring the panel discussion. The nature of the data is somewhat exceptional in media discourse, because newspapers rarely present their representations of discourse as transcriptions, instead favoring reporting clauses with direct and indirect quotation. Transcripts differ from ordinary represented discourse in print media in that they suggest a greater adherence to the prior discourse. Because all transcribed

speech is rendered as direct discourse with no reporting clauses (other than the attribution line and colon), transcripts are maximally removed from the intertextuality of indirect discourse, in which the voices of quoted and quoter blend (cf. Bakhtin, 1984). In this way transcripts present themselves as 'verbatim' accounts of what was said.[4]

The Los Angeles uprising was triggered when an all-white jury acquitted white police officers charged with brutality against a black motorist, Rodney King. The event serves as a starting point for the panel discussion, which focuses on race relations in the United States. The panelists are prominent commentators and activists on African American issues; five of the six are themselves black. One of the panelists, whom I will call JM, also speaks African American Vernacular English (AAVE) during the discussion. In the recording of the transcription, it becomes clear that the written version of JM's speech involves two sorts of transcriber decisions: those concerning the representation of his discourse style, and those concerning the representation of AAVE structural features. The lefthand column of Example (3) reproduces the full newspaper transcript of one of JM's turns at talk; the righthand column is my own transcription of the same turn. It is immediately apparent that JM's turn has been sizably reduced in the newspaper's version, in part due to the omission of discourse markers that he uses to structure his turn and to elicit feedback from listeners. Another reason for the diminished size of his turn is the omission of over sixty lines of his speech. Their exclusion reduces not only the space allotted to JM in the newspaper transcript but the coherence of his discourse as well.

(3) *Two versions of an AAVE speaker's contributions to a panel discussion*[5]

Newspaper transcript

[JM]: I agree and that's why I think it ain't going to go away.

Researcher transcript

JM: Yeah see- I agree with him and
    that's why I think it ain't
    going to ([gʌnə]) go away.

---

[4]   In this case, the transcript was accompanied by a summarizing article, in which both direct and indirect discourse are used. I do not examine the article's representation of prior discourse here.

[5]   Transcription conventions are as follows:
Each line represents an intonation unit.

.	end of intonation unit; falling intonation
,	end of intonation unit; fall-rise intonation
?	end of intonation unit; rising intonation
–	self-interruption; break in the intonational unit
-	self-interruption; break in the word, sound abruptly cut off
:	length
underline	emphatic stress or increased amplitude
(.)	pause of 0.5 seconds or less
(n.n)	pause of greater than 0.5 seconds, measured by a stopwatch
h	exhalation (e.g., laughter, sigh); each token marks one pulse
( )	transcriber comment
< >	uncertain transcription
(( ))	nonvocal noise
[ ]	overlap beginning and end

Everybody saw it.

It's going to be here for a while, and I think it's going to focus a lot of folks.

→
They can play that videotape from now until the end of time, and it's going to be like, 'I still can't believe it! I still can't believe this!'

→
I'm not talking about the riot.

The focus here is police brutality and the judicial system.

For me, the (rioting) is the result of that.

Everybody saw this! And if you can't get a conviction – did they have to kill him?

Then it would have been justifiable homicide, right?

What do you got to do to get a conviction?

```
< >:  [Hhhhh.]
LF:  [That  ] it [[what?  ]]
JM:              [[Because]]  every-
     body saw it.
     It's not going to ([gʌnə]) go
     away,
     it's going to ([gʌnə]) be here
     for a while and I think it's
     going to ([gʌnə]) focus (0.9) a
     lot of folks.

(12 lines omitted)
     And they can play that video
     tape from now until the end of
     time, (0.6) and it's going to
     ([gɔ̃:]) be like (0.9) I still
     can't believe it I still can't
     believe it.
(55 lines omitted)
JM:  And (.) and I'm not talking
     about th- the riot it w- it was
     it it it because again the
     focus here is police brutality?
EP:  That's [right.]
JM:         [And  ]  the  judicial
     system.
     That's what it is.
     For me.
     And the other stuff is a
     result.
     Okay?
     Of of that.
     And those –
     but – (1.2)
     I agree with him.
     Everybody saw this.
     Now if you if you c- if you
     can't get a convictio-
     O:h did they have to kill him?
     Then it would have been justi-
     fiable homicide=
EP:                =Right.=
JM:  =What you got to ([gara]) do
     (0.7) [seriously(.)]
< >:       [< > Mhm.    ]
```

[[ ]]   second overlap in proximity to the first
([ ])   phonetic transcription
=   latching (no pause between speaker turns)
My inclusion of these conventions in a note rather than in the main text is not meant to marginalize their significance. Because my discussion hinges on my global transcription of these data rather than individual details of representation, the inclusion of the conventions in the main text would be needlessly unwieldy and distracting.

I mean, police are always messing with me! I'm
45 years old now. I get stopped all the time.

'Is this your car?'

What do you mean, *'Is this my car?'* Of course
it's my car.

But now there's videotape.

There's no middle ground now. You've got to
choose your side, you see. You are either part of
the problem or you are part of the solution.

Folks just ain't going to forget this and they're
going to do something.

```
JM: to get a conviction-
    I mean police always messing
    with me.
    I'm forty-five years old now
    right?
    I get stopped all the time
    ([bæs]) says "Is this your
    car?"
    What you mean is this my car?
    Of course it's my car.
    This happened to me when I was
    sixteen years old walking the
    streets of Los Angeles.
    This is crazy but now okay,
    it's videotaped,
    everybody can see it,=
<EP>:                      =Uh huh.=
JM:                               =
    like he said, and then to have
    - (0.6)
    I mean that's serious m(h)an.=
EP: =It is.=
JM:           =So you're ([yə]) going
    to ([gʌnə]) have - (.)
    it's like I told you you got to
    -
    there's no middle ground now.
    You got to ([gɑɾə]) choose your
    side you see.
    You go either here you're
    either part of the problem or
    [you're part of the solution.]
EP: [That's right. That's right.]
JM: And it's going to ([gɔ̃ː]) be I
    really feel it's going ([gɔ̃]:])
    -
    ((TAPPING)) folks ([ɨz]) ain't
    going to ([gɔ̃]:]) forget this
    and they're ([ðej]) going to
    ([gɔ̃ː]) do something.
```

JM organizes his turn at talk by means of topic association, a practice that is char-
acteristic of many AAVE speakers (Erickson, 1984; Michaels and Collins, 1984).
Each topic flows logically from the one that precedes it with few overt cohesive
devices to link the chain of ideas. Cohesion is achieved through the use of discourse
markers and repetition. The precise nature of the connection between ideas must be
inferred by listeners, a characteristic of African American discourse style that has
been described by Morgan (1991). Although such a discourse strategy may be
viewed by speech-community outsiders as 'impossible' or 'tricky' to interpret
(Gumperz et al., 1984: 16), topic association is in fact highly effective, provided that
its structure is recognized. However, because topics are linked by adjacency, their

deletion, especially in the middle of a sustained argument, as indicated by the arrows in Example (3) and the blank spaces in Table 1, reduces the coherence of the discourse. Table 1 presents a schematic view of topic organization in the news transcript and in my version.

Table 1
Discourse organization in two versions of an AAVE speaker's turn at talk

Sequence of topics in newspaper transcript	Sequence of topics in researcher transcript
TOPIC 1: The effects of the beating of Rodney King will not go away because everybody saw it on video.	TOPIC 1: The effects of the beating of Rodney King will not go away because everybody saw it on video.
TOPIC 2: One specific effect will be to focus people on racial injustice.	TOPIC 2: One specific effect will be to focus people on racial injustice.
(12 lines deleted)	TOPIC 3: An example of this is the fact that well-to-do Blacks who are out of touch with community issues have been calling JM about the incident.
(55 lines deleted)	TOPIC 4: But it is elderly African Americans who have worked for justice for a long time who have been hurt most by the verdict.
TOPIC 3: What caused this hurt is not the riots but police brutality and an unjust legal system.	TOPIC 5: What caused this hurt is not the riots but police brutality and an unjust legal system.
TOPIC 4: The legal system is so unjust that the police officers would have been acquitted even if they had killed Rodney King.	TOPIC 6: The legal system is so unjust that the police officers would have been acquitted even if they had killed Rodney King.
TOPIC 5: Mistreatment of African Americans by the police is common; it has happened to JM throughout his life.	TOPIC 7: Mistreatment of African Americans by the police is common; it has happened to JM throughout his life.
TOPIC 6 (= TOPIC 1): This injustice has finally been documented on videotape.	TOPIC 8 (= TOPIC 1): This injustice has finally been documented on videotape.
TOPIC 7: As a consequence, people must take a stand on the issue of racism.	TOPIC 9: As a consequence, people must take a stand on the issue of racism.
TOPIC 8 (= TOPIC 2): People will take action against racial injustice.	TOPIC 10 (= TOPIC 2): People will take action against racial injustice.

Where JM has produced a carefully reasoned and well-supported argument about the effects of the jury's verdict on members of the African American community – this is the substance of the 67 missing lines – the newspaper transcript presents a string of sentences whose relationship to one another is unclear. The character of JM created by the newspaper transcriber thus appears less rational and logical than JM seems in my own complete transcript or on the audiotape. This effect was no doubt unintentional, and the deletions were presumably motivated by considerations of length, for column inches are always a limited resource in the print media. But in accommodating to the discourse patterns of the Standard English speakers on the

panel and not to those of the AAVE speaker, the newspaper transcript represents the speech of members of these two groups in different ways, and it is the AAVE speaker whose discourse is adversely affected. The decision of how to represent JM's talk in writing is therefore not only editorial and practical but social and political.

Less damaging to the structure of JM's argument but perhaps more noticeable to readers is the transcriber's representation of JM's phonology and syntax. On the one hand the transcript shows a shift away from AAVE and toward Standard English. Here the transcriber seems to have operated according to the principle *Insert 'missing' forms*. That is, she or he renders in Standard English orthography and syntax those linguistic forms that are reduced or absent in AAVE as compared to Standard English. Thus both colloquial *gonna* ([gʌnə]) in (4a) in the newspaper transcript and AAVE *gon* ([gɔ̃:]) (4b) are spelled as going to:

(4) a. It's *going to* be here for a while, and I think it's *going to* focus a lot of folks.
    b. Folks just ain't *going to* forget this and they're *going to* do something.

This representation is reasonable, since the details of pronunciation are not the purpose of the news transcript. Likewise, since grammatical details are presumably irrelevant to the newspaper's goals, syntactic forms that are obligatory in Standard English but optional in AAVE are standardized. For example, the transcriber inserts a copula form in (4c), where JM's original utterance uses a zero copula:

(4) c. I mean, police *are* always messing with me!

And in (4d) and (4e) the auxiliaries *have* (in reduced form) and *do* are inserted:

(4) d. You*'ve* got to choose your side, you see.
    e. What *do* you got to do to get a conviction?

In fact, the transcriber's tendency to standardize occasionally goes beyond revising nonstandard phonology and syntax. Even reduced forms that are considered acceptable in Standard English, such as copula contraction, may be changed, as in (4f):

(4) f. You *are* either part of the problem or you *are* part of the solution.

This change, which produces an oddly stilted supercorrect syntax, gives some indication of how the transcriber orients to JM's speech: not merely as a nonstandard oral discourse that must be standardized for publication, but as a problematic discourse that requires revision, perhaps even beyond standardization.

But not all nonstandard forms are replaced in the news transcript. In (5a) JM's use of *ain't* is preserved, as is nonstandard *got* in (5b):

(5) a. I agree and that's why I think it *ain't* going to go away.
    b. What do you *got* to do to get a conviction?

We might then guess that the transcriber's policy is to produce a Standard English text whenever possible by inserting or expanding morphemes, but to leave nonstandard forms unchanged if a morpheme must be replaced. In (5a), however, the transcriber chooses the nonstandard form that JM first produces – *ain't* – instead of the standard form that he substitutes in his repetition, *It's not going to go away*. If the transcriber is attempting to retain as much of JM's original form as possible, one might expect the second, standard, utterance to be used instead of the first, nonstandard, version.

Noticing these inconsistencies, I contacted the newspaper's copy editor to discover what principle, if any, was guiding the transcription process. The editor assured me that when sources use 'broken English' the newspaper staff attempts to 'turn it into the best English possible'. Yet this prescriptive attitude has not extended to JM's use of nonstandard forms like *ain't*. It seems that the transcriber followed two sometimes contradictory principles: (1) *Standardize nonstandard English* (especially by replacing 'missing' forms); but (2) *Preserve the 'flavor' of the original speech*. Nonstandard forms are sprinkled through the text much as they might be scattered through the dialogue of a novel: not to systematically describe a linguistic variety but to evoke a character, in this case the simple, plain-talking man on the street. JM's intellectual credentials – as a doctoral candidate who went on to write a well-regarded book and receive a MacArthur 'genius' grant – are incompatible with the newspaper's representation of AAVE speakers as colorful but perhaps not very rational.

Again, it is important to recognize that this representation is not likely to have been consciously intended by the transcriber. The process whereby JM's speech was reshaped is not qualitatively different from other transcription practices in the media, although it is perhaps more extreme in its effects given that the represented spoken variety is nonstandard and that the transcript, even more than the representations of direct and indirect speech commonly used in newspaper discourse, sets itself up as a verbatim text. Slembrouck's (1992) observation regarding political transcription applies equally to media transcripts: the transformation of spoken language into its written representation is part of media practice, not a conscious act of misrepresentation. Indeed, given that in the media ideational meaning is privileged over interpersonal meaning (Fairclough, 1988) and that prescriptivism continues to inform media language use (Bell, 1991: 82–83), those who represent spoken discourse according to written norms often consider themselves to be doing the original speaker a favor by 'cleaning up' her or his speech.

Yet the solution to the problem presented by this example is not automatically to advocate that transcripts of spoken discourse, and especially discourse by speakers of nonstandard varieties, adhere more closely to the original. Because written English is underdeveloped in its ability to represent nonstandard varieties, approximations of pronunciation are usually marked as deviant through nonstandard spellings and special punctuation. Even if phonology is not represented, syntactic and lexical differences are similarly stigmatized. And although some linguistic activists have tried to introduce AAVE into media discourse as a political statement (e.g., Jordan, 1985), in the absence of explanation such representations are likely to be misunderstood.

But it is also a political act to standardize nonstandard linguistic forms, for such revisions can imply that the original is inadequate. My own transcript attempts to balance my desire to represent AAVE as a legitimate linguistic variety with my recognition that to call attention to nonstandard forms introduces problems of social evaluation. I elected to represent the transcript in a highly technical way, indicating the details of discourse according to a set of conventions so elaborate that they require a separate legend (footnote 5). I also used a special font, Courier, which has a fixed character width like the fonts used in technical documents such as computer programs. Hence the print appears more 'scientific' than the reader-friendly proportional-width fonts used in most nontechnical written discourse. Part of my reason for this choice was to display the interactive nature of AAVE discourse as clearly as possible (e.g., by precisely aligning overlaps and latching, which is facilitated with a fixed-width font), but I was also conscious that the use of discourse-analytic conventions as well as the phonetic alphabet lends the represented discourse a technical aura. Whereas in the interrogation transcript I sought to parallel the police version as closely as possible, in the panel-discussion transcript my aim was to suggest an entirely different way of viewing AAVE discourse than the one presented by the newspaper.

This strategy, however, is not without its perils. By representing JM's discourse in a technical style, I risk implying that his language is exotic and alien, accessible only to those with special training. This perspective works against my goal to problematize the treatment of AAVE as utterly different from Standard English, as something to be managed before it can be represented in written form. I felt that in the end the merits of technical transcription in the context of a scholarly article outweighed its problems, but these merits would not carry over to a mass-media context. No representation of AAVE in the mass media – and, indeed, no representation of discourse in any context – is entirely free from ideology.

3.2. Representation in academic transcription

As discourse analysts, we may hope that, despite the problematic transcription methods we see outside academia, we ourselves, with the advantages of rigorous training and scholarly objectivity, have managed to produce accurate and scientific transcripts. Unfortunately, as the above discussion indicates, this hope is not justified by the evidence. Discourse analysts, no less than other transcribers, do not merely reproduce the spoken word in written form, but produce new texts that bear the mark of our authorship. My purpose in scrutinizing academic transcription is not, however, to distribute praise and blame nor to offer a definitive guide to 'correct transcription practices' but to make researchers more aware of the complexity of the transcription process. Each transcriber must weigh these conflicting issues for herself or himself in the context of the specific goals of particular transcripts.

3.2.1. Representations of pronunciation

Perhaps the most thorough critiques of academic transcription have been carried out by Preston. Preston's position and those of his opponents are documented at

length by Luebs (1996) in her pioneering dissertation on transcription debates within discourse analysis. In a series of articles initially aimed at folklorists, Preston (1982, 1983, 1985) rejects the use of nonstandard orthography in academic writing to represent colloquial and vernacular speech. He argues that such spellings call up a negative image of the speaker from which even trained scholars may not be entirely immune. Instead of the unsystematic approach taken by researchers who employ unconventional orthography, Preston proposes a set of guidelines for the sociolinguistically informed transcription of folklore. These guidelines are summed up in Preston's declaration, "I believe that morphological accuracy is the appropriate level [of representation] and that phonetic precision should be sought only when that level is pertinent to the lore or the clarity" (1982: 323).

Preston's arguments are persuasive to many sociolinguists, but they may be less compelling to their intended audience in other fields. In a response to Preston's first article, folklorist Fine (1983) challenges Preston's assertion that the use of 'literary dialect' is inherently problematic. Fine objects that Preston's proposal places an undue burden both on readers, through the use of phonetic transcription, and on researchers, through the need to appeal to sociolinguistic theory during the transcription process. Although few linguists would be sympathetic to this complaint, which rejects the tools of our discipline as too difficult to bother with, Fine does offer another argument that is closer to linguists' concerns. She notes that to decide whether to transcribe phonetic details on the basis of their relevance to the analysis at hand limits the utility of the resultant transcript for later researchers. Any linguist who has tried to work from another scholar's transcripts without access to a recording will appreciate the problem Fine raises. Her response to Preston indicates that discipline-specific practices will always play a role in academic transcription choices. It is easy for linguists to find fault with folklorists' representations of nonstandard speech; it may be less easy for us to find merit in them, but a responsible transcription practice must be open to this possibility. It is unlikely, after all, that linguists alone have special insight into how discourse should be represented, and it is very probable that other disciplines may remind us of factors – such as aesthetics and accessibility, to name two concerns that are low on most linguists' list of priorities – equally worthy of consideration as we undertake transcription.

There may be disciplinary reasons for preferring one type of transcription over another, and phonetic transcription is not always clearly superior. Many conversation analysts share with folklorists a reluctance to strip off the details of pronunciation in their transcripts but do not want to alienate their readers with phonetic transcription. Goodwin (1981: 47, n. 58) rightly notes that for most conversation-analytic purposes, phonetic transcription is unnecessarily burdensome, since the field's primary concern is the sequential organization of conversation. When conversation analysts examine details of pronunciation, however, the International Phonetic Alphabet is often a better analytic tool than the "'comic book' orthography" (Jefferson, 1996: 160) such scholars normally use. As illustration, I consider two discussions of pronunciation within conversation analysis.

Many conversation analysts take the position that nonstandard spellings are preferable to standard spellings because the latter obscure phonological variation.

West, for example, notes: "I have encountered speakers who alternate between 'sez' (which rhymes with 'fez'), 'siz' (which rhymes with 'fizz'), and 'say' (which rhymes with 'fey')" (1996: 337). This appeal to linguistics, however, suggests a linguistic solution: if these pronunciations are indeed relevant to the analysis and therefore necessary to the transcript, rather than provide rhymes to explicate the value of these nonce spellings, transcribers might well draw on the International Phonetic Alphabet or one of its simplified variants. After all, researchers who are already committed to a complex, technical notational system, as West is, should not balk at integrating an abbreviated version of the IPA into their transcription conventions. Moreover, by using standard spellings for some pronunciations of *say/says* and not others West imposes an implicit interpretation on the discourse, and one that may run counter to the actual standardness of these forms in context. That is, the standard spelling *say* may represent a nonstandard form of *says* (as in *She say we can go*) while the nonstandard spelling *sez* may index a grammatically standard form (as in *She says* [sɛz] *we can go*); the converse is also possible.

Another example in which phonetic transcription would clarify the analysis is found in Jefferson's (1996) discussion of 'transcriptional stereotyping'. Jefferson examines the pronunciation of the word *of*, which is variously transcribed in a research transcript as *of* and *off*. On the audiotapes from which the transcript was made, however, she found seven different pronunciations of the word, which she represents as *of, uff, ohv, awv, off, awf,* and *aff* (1996: 161). The phonetic values of these spellings are not given, and when Jefferson does use phonetic symbols they are not standard and their values are unexplained. Thus, what she writes as [ô] seems to represent [ɔ], [u] is apparently equivalent to [ʌ], and [ʋ] appears to mean 'not [ʌ]'. It is also clear in working through Jefferson's transcription system that using one standard spelling and several variants privileges the transcriber's variety, since the spellings *off* and *awf* both seem to be used to represent [ɔf], a possibility that might not occur to many Midwestern and Western speakers of American English, who would pronounce both forms as [ɑf].

There are analytic reasons, then, to favor phonetic over nonstandard spelling in certain contexts, but there are political reasons as well. Jaffe and Walton (forthcoming) have demonstrated that readers of unconventionally spelled texts view orthography as an index of social categories and judge speakers accordingly (usually negatively), even when the spellings are entirely 'eye dialect' (on this, see the next section) and the readers are aware that the text is a transcript. This 'orthographic metonymy', as Jaffe and Walton term the phenomenon, means that readers may make unwarranted assumptions about speakers whose speech is represented in nonstandard ways (see also Preston, 1985).

The use of nonstandard orthography in transcription should not be rejected out of hand, however, because it may be a necessary substitute for phonetic spelling in texts aimed at general audiences. In presenting our research to nonspecialist audiences and to scholars in other fields, we may find that we sometimes need to rely on nonstandard spellings as a way to bridge the gap. Rather than dismiss a potential resource, we must be willing to explore its possibilities, all the while mindful of the representational issues it raises.

Finally, we must address the problems associated with the phonetic alphabet itself. Linguists whose work is interdisciplinary often lament that the inclusion of phonetic symbols in a text dooms it to obscurity among readers who lack linguistic training (see, e.g. Hymes, 1981: 5). But we need to take seriously such readers' averseness to unfamiliar symbols. Their reaction may not simply indicate intellectual torpor or timidity, but a very reasonable disinclination to delve into a highly technical text. This is not to say that we should not include phonetic detail, but that we need to account for our decision to do so (as Hymes in fact goes on to do). Moreover, the fact that the IPA is based on the Roman alphabet and assigns phonetic values based on European orthographic conventions raises important questions about its tacitly assumed status among many linguists as a neutral notational system (cf. Becker, 1995: 234).[6] As with any other system, then, the choice to represent speech in this way must be explained and its limitations and dangers noted. We must be aware that in using the IPA we are potentially representing the discourse of speakers as 'technical', just as in using nonstandard spellings we are potentially representing the discourse of speakers as 'ignorant'. Yet in some instances, as Sherzer (1994) shows, only a highly technical linguistic transcription (in the case he discusses, one that includes morpheme-by-morpheme glosses) can effectively display the aesthetic aspects of the discourse under analysis. In short, depending on our transcription choices, the reader may end up feeling either superior to the transcript or inferior to it. Alternatively, the transcript may fail to call attention to itself at all: for example, if we use standard spelling in transcription. Standardization, however, creates its own problems, as already shown, because it involves the erasure of linguistic variation. To standardize (and to decide precisely where one draws the line between standard and nonstandard, an impossible task) may be understood as "verbal hygiene" (Cameron, 1995). The morphological-level transcription that Preston favors, for example, does not tell us whether to use markers of casual speech like contraction (*I'd, I've*), which are standard, or grammatical forms like *ain't*, which are not.

3.2.2. 'Eye dialect' and colloquial spelling

Unlike Preston, I believe that nonstandard spelling has a legitimate place in the discourse analyst's toolbox, along with phonetic transcription and standard spelling. But I share with Preston a belief that transcription practices should be motivated by analytic concerns and by sensitivity to the sociopolitical context of transcription. When nonstandard orthography does not reflect a difference in pronunciation (*eye dialect*) or when it reflects regular phonological processes of connected speech (*colloquial spelling*), it fails on both criteria.

The motivation for using eye dialect deserves greater discussion than it has received thus far. Critics often view it as an analytic lapse, but in fact the use of eye dialect is often a result of a principled concern with the aesthetics of transcription, with a desire to produce a vivid text. In the method of conversation analysis,

---

[6]   Phoneticians themselves are well ahead of discourse analysts in openly discussing problems of transcription (see, e.g. Lane et al., 1996). Phoneticians' own awareness of the limitations of transcription reminds discourse analysts to be as cautious of phonetic transcription as of any other kind.

unconventional orthography is recommended in order to capture the flavor of the original speech. The goal is to create a transcript "that will look to the eye how it sounds to the ear" (Schenkein, 1978: xi). The problem arises not with the goal itself, which indicates an awareness of the reader's experience that is too often missing in discourse-analytic practice, but with the assumption that spoken discourse can be directly reflected in written form.

The examples in (6) illustrate the problems that can arise with the use of eye dialect and colloquial spelling. I collected examples (6) through (16) from ten widely read texts in discourse analysis. I did not focus solely on conversation analysis, which has received the brunt of criticism among transcription reformers (and has perhaps thereby deflected criticism of other approaches). Instead I included books in linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, and other subfields as well. Although readers may recognize some of the examples, for the most part I have not indicated their sources because my purpose is not to take to task particular scholars but to point out the problematic nature of transcription for all discourse analysts.

(6) *Examples of eye dialect and colloquial spelling in discourse analysis texts*

Linguistic phenomenon	Discourse analysts' transcription
Reduced vowels	Ascent 'v man
	There wuz uh big bang
Flaps	gotta new teacher
	We've hadda good relationship
	Hey waita se(h)cond
Voiced alveolar fricatives	iz
	b'cuz
	Jeeziz
Nonphonetic English orthography	elecshun
	enuf
	yu

The examples in (6) demonstrate that sometimes, flavor and color in transcripts are artificial additives. While some spellings do reflect possible alternations between careful and casual pronunciations, others (*uh* for *a* [ə], *iz* for is [ɪz]) do not provide any phonetic information that the standard orthography would not supply. Both regular phonological processes, like vowel reduction and intervocalic flapping, and obligatory pronunciations like [wəz] for *was* and [ənʌf] for *enough* are made strange by unconventional orthography. Such spellings imply that archaic pronunciations like [wæs] and [enox] are the unmarked forms. In fact, marked pronunciations of this kind would be rendered invisible to analysis under transcription practices that do not distinguish between predictable and unpredictable pronunciations. Preston's (1982) recommendations in this regard clearly have merit.

Eye-dialect and colloquial spellings often cluster together in transcripts, a tendency that reinforces the impression of colloquial speech, but not necessarily on the basis of the recording. Examples of this phenomenon are given in (7) through (9):

(7) Wanna cum down'n av a bighta lunch with me?
(8) You c'n ahl come up here
(9) Looks like uh coupluh cars ar'all tangled up out there

Again, in each case, the spelling suggests that a nonstandard pronunciation was pro-
duced, but nothing in the orthography indicates a spelling at odds with ordinary con-
nected speech, and in some cases the spellings (*cum, ar'*) simply eliminate idiosyn-
crasies of English spelling conventions, though not systematically. For example, we
find both *cum* in (7) and *come* in (8), presumably for the same pronunciation [kʌm],
as well as the deletion of 'silent *e*' in *ar'* but not in *there* in (9).

   As the foregoing examples suggest, no principle seems to govern when an uncon-
ventional spelling should be used. Thus, the same analyst may use a range of
spellings for what is very possibly the same phonetic form, as in *'n* versus *and*, *'v*
versus *have*, *ta* versus *to*, and the examples given in (10), where each set of forms
comes from a single transcriber:

(10) a. izn it dreary ~ isn' she a doll? ~ isn't he cute
     b. b'cuz ~ because
     c. bedder ~ better
     d. Switzerland ~ Switzerl'nd
     e. emergensee ~ emergency

Of course, in the absence of the original recordings it is impossible to be sure that a
speaker did not say 'Switzer[lænd]' in the first token of the pair in (d), but it seems
probable that the two spellings of *emergency* in (e) reflect no difference in pronun-
ciation. And in some cases, transcribers' spellings do not correspond to any likely
pronunciation of a word, such as *Than' you* or *right or wron'*. Here a velar nasal [ŋ]
is represented as replaced by an alveolar nasal [n]. The transcriber was probably
influenced by the common substitution of the alveolar for the velar nasal in the mor-
pheme -*ing* in colloquial speech. However, this phonological rule is morphologically
constrained and does not apply to monomorphemic forms such as *wrong* (let alone
thank, which has a final velar stop [k] that would block application of the rule).

   As Preston (1982) points out, transcribers often represent with marked spellings
those pronunciations that differ from their own; hence in (11) and (12) two phono-
logical features that are characteristic of my own dialect are rendered in nonstandard
spelling by transcribers who presumably do not share these pronunciations:

(11) stoopid, avenoo
(12) He just dudn't like people smokin' around him

Both the depalatalization of obstruents preceding [u] in (11) and the stopping of
alveolar fricatives in negative forms such as *isn't*, *wasn't*, and *doesn't* as in (12) are
typical of Midwestern American English and are not considered nonstandard region-
ally. The spellings, however, suggest otherwise. Most transcribers would probably
be unwilling to subject our own speech variety – let alone our own speech – to the
same treatment. (Heath (1983) is an exception.)

This situation raises the issue of inequitable transcription practices for different dialects of English. In discourse analysts' texts, representations of nonstandard varieties may be based as much on stereotype as on fact. Example (13), for instance, is from a secondhand report of an unrecorded utterance by an African American speaker:

(13) So y're gonna check out ma ol lady, huh?

The transcript reflects certain phonological forms associated with AAVE, specifically the monophthongization of the diphthong [aj] and the deletion of final [d] following [l]. It also includes features of colloquial speech that are not unique to AAVE (reduction of the vowel in *you're*, *gonna* for *going to*) as well as lexical items drawn from slang (*check out*, *old lady*), though again these are not exclusively African American. Perhaps the speaker did say exactly these words and in exactly this way, but given the influence of stereotype even when a transcriber works from a recording, it is not at all implausible that stereotyping crept into this remembered example as well.

Sometimes stereotyping causes different varieties to be treated differently even in the same text. The excerpts in (14) are taken from a study which contrasts the 'literate' style of Standard English speakers Kevin and Nina with the 'oral' style of the unnamed speaker of nonstandard English. (The variety he speaks appears to be AAVE.)

(14) a. Kevin: But that's thèn, that's not nòw, now
          Nina: But ultimately it- they- it so it's all spread out nòw. But it all càme
                 from somewhere, right?
(14) b. cool dûde, you know catch wômen, this and that.
          but he, must get his nò:se, wide open, behind
          some ôther girl, and this and that, ...

But part of what makes the speakers' styles literate or oral is their representation in the transcripts: the first transcript is much more like written discourse, with its paragraphlike organization of text and conventional use of capitalization and punctuation. By contrast, the second excerpt is an undivided chunk, and capitals are not used. The result is akin to that seen in the newspaper example earlier: the second speaker's language is found wanting, but the transcript itself creates the supposed deficiencies.[7]

Transcription choices therefore may lead to self-fulfilling analyses. As further illustration, in another study two speakers' styles are contrasted and the 'less effective' speaker's language is represented with phonological spellings (*workin'*, *me 'n' this girl*), whereas the transcription of the 'more effective' speaker's discourse uses

---

[7] The decision to assign names to the speakers in (17a) but not to the speaker in (17b) also has political effects. Where the speakers in (17a) are represented as individuals, the speaker in (17b) is identifiable only as a member of a group ('oral'-style speakers).

only standard spelling, even in similar contexts. Thus the excerpt of the 'more effective' speaker transcribed in (15) includes two places where the colloquial speech processes marked in the transcript of the 'less effective' speaker might be at work: the pronunciation of *solving*, in which an alveolar nasal could potentially substitute for the alveolar; and the reduction of *and*:

(15) I could ask them about it and how I would go about solving it

Although the first process may not have applied in this relatively formal discourse, the reduction of *and* occurs quite regularly even in careful speech. Such details, however, are included only in the representation of the 'less effective' speaker's speech.

These examples demonstrate the power of theoretical and analytic assumptions, of 'scholarly predisposition', in shaping the transcript. But in other instances the transcript may actually contradict the analyst's stated aims. The epigraph that appears at the beginning of this article reproduces a transcription that is all but incomprehensible and remains so even when read in context.[8] The analyst's purpose, however, was to demonstrate the interactional competence of Stan and other speakers in the data, all of whom are mentally retarded. The analyst's claim that this interaction should be understood as typical of all speakers and that Stan's mental abilities are irrelevant might have been more persuasive if a different transcription system had been employed.

Is the solution then to erase all evidence of nonstandard, colloquial, dysfluent, or otherwise 'marked' forms in transcription? The excerpt in (16) is one example of such a transcript:

(16) No! There is no group, obviously I do not need group therapy, I need peace and quiet. See me. This place is disturbing me! Its harming me....I'm losing weight. Every, everything that's been happening to me is bad. And all I got, all I get is: "well, why don't you take medication?" Medication is disagreeable to me. There are people to whom you may not give medication. Obviously, and the medication that I got is hurting me, its harming me!

Here the speaker, who has been diagnosed as psychotic, is represented as articulate, even eloquent. The analyst's decision to background the 'transcribedness' of the discourse, however, normalizes the speech as given in the transcript. At the same time the formal, or perhaps foreign, style of this discourse undermines the normalization to some extent, and the spelling of *it's* as *its* and the lack of capitalization of *well*, though perhaps unintentional typographical errors, also undercut the straightforward impression of eloquence. The juxtaposition of misspellings and hyperliterate syntax has the same disquieting effect that articulate oral schizophrenic discourse can produce: that it is both normal and not normal.

---

[8]   Preston's (1985: 329) proposed interpretation of the first part of this transcript is: 'With, uh, one boat you hold on; don't let go'.

The decision to represent the speaker's utterance in a highly literacized transcription style is therefore as ideological as the decision to represent Stan's words as gibberish, and in fact both are used to make very similar points about communicative competence: that even speakers with mental disabilities are able to use language effectively. Although most discourse analysts would agree with this position, we must also recognize that any argument that draws on transcription for evidence participates in complex issues of representation.

4. Naturalized and denaturalized transcription practices

The choices made by these two researchers reflect two extremes in the range of transcriptional options: *naturalized transcription* and *denaturalized transcription*. A naturalized transcription is one in which the process of transcription is made less visible through *literacization*, the privileging of written over oral discourse features. Such transcripts run the risk of failing to call enough attention to linguistic form and its transformation from speech to writing.

However, denaturalized transcription, in its faithfulness to oral language, may make speech itself seem alien. This is the paradox of using written texts to represent spoken language. In most written discourse, speech is represented via conventions of naturalization (as in fictional dialogue, newspaper quotations, and so on). The result is that when a written representation reflects the discourse's oral origins, normal speech is defamiliarized (cf. West, 1996: 335). That is, the more a text reflects the oralness of speech, the less transparent it becomes for readers unaccustomed to encountering oral features in written discourse.

Given the complexity of the problem illustrated in the preceding examples, in which even well-intentioned and careful analysts produce transcripts that are open to conflicting interpretations, it seems clear that there can be no privileged, objective position from which to transcribe speech. Nor is it likely, as suggested by Luebs's (1996) research on transcription practices within different theoretical frameworks, that scholars will come to agreement about the best way to transcribe. Preston's recommendations, for example, are intended to provide a more accurate, unbiased transcription. However, I am not sanguine about the possibility of developing a foolproof transcription system that forecloses ideological positioning. Transcription is inevitably a creative, authorial act that has political effects, and many of these effects cannot be anticipated.

It is, moreover, undesirable to purge all traces of the transcriber from the transcript. We are not machines, but interpreters of texts and our transcripts must necessarily select out the details most important for our analysis. Our goal should not be neutrality but responsibility. Ultimately, what is needed is a reflexive discourse analysis in which the researcher strives not for an unattainable self-effacement but for vigilant self-awareness. Thus, in cases where the transcription of speech is naturalized – where transcripts are understood as relatively direct representations of the original discourse and the transcription process itself is backgrounded – it may be wise to consider the effects of denaturalization. What is the effect on the transcript if

discourse markers, repetitions, repairs, and other oral forms are introduced? How does it change the transcript to include phonological detail, and how do different orthographies (e.g., adaptations of standard spelling versus the phonetic alphabet) affect our view of the text – and of the speakers represented within it? In cases where transcription is denaturalized, through the inclusion of oral details of the discourse, through technical transcription systems, and so on, we might examine the results of a more naturalized transcription mode. How does the use of conventional spelling influence our reading? What is the representational difference between a poetry-like format, in which lines are broken at breath groups or other units, and a prose-like format in which the text is displayed as a block? Ochs (1979) raises similar challenges in her influential article on the theoretical effects of transcription. She recommends unsettling our analytic assumptions by transcribing talk in ways that run counter to our initial impulses, suggesting, for example, that transcribers of child-adult interaction place children's speech in the leftmost position on the page and adult speech on the right. Our tendency as users of left-to-right writing systems to assign primacy to the speaker whose speech is presented first (i.e., to the left) thereby undercuts our tendency as adults to assign primacy to the adult speaker.

A reflexive transcription practice, then, is one in which the researcher is conscious of her or his effect on the unfolding transcript, and the effect of the transcript on the representation of speakers whose discourse is transcribed. This self-awareness, at both the interpretive and representational levels, however, is not enough. Discourse analysts must also make these choices visible in our research reports, not once but repeatedly. As Hymes (1981: 12) remarks, 'The great linguist Leonard Bloomfield used to tell students that in published work one should not bring the reader into the kitchen. But it is in keeping with the canons of science to let the kitchen sometimes be seen. Always to conceal the turmoil behind the scenes is ultimately to be misleading'. We must be as accountable for the research process as for the research product.

Most crucially, a truly reflexive transcription practice will involve a discussion both of the choices we make and of their limitations. Because these are not always evident to us, we must work from tapes rather than transcripts as much as possible. And we must seek reactions from colleagues, from laypeople, and especially from the speakers whose voices we record – not to find validation for our own decisions but to discover other ways of hearing and transcribing.[9]

Tedlock suggests that an obstacle to more adequate transcription is the fear that too much explanatory annotation in the transcript will 'threaten the illusion of the integrity of the text' (1990: 137). Although Tedlock's own solution to the problem – to produce a text more like a script than a transcript, in which the researcher is as central as the other participants and the style is more literary than linguistic – will not be embraced by most discourse analysts, his challenge to those who aspire to 'realistic' representation must be acknowledged and met. Perhaps the clearest example of reflexive discourse analysis is provided by Mishler (1991) who explicitly

---

[9]   As one reviewer of this article rightly notes, the availability of digital audio and video technology has made it much easier to consult our recordings repeatedly and to share them with others.

acknowledges his ideological and theoretical assumptions without using them to defend his transcript, a model I have tried to follow in my discussion of Examples 1–3. Until we become more comfortable with this role, however, we may have to rely on others to point out the shortcomings of our own transcription decisions.

5. Conclusion

The transcription of a text always involves the inscription of a context. The conditions of the transcribing act are often visible in the text: the transcriber's goals; her or his theories and beliefs about the speakers; her or his level of attention to the task and familiarity with the language or register of the discourse; and so on. And this context is social and political in nature: the transcription practices of individual transcribers emerge in large part from the practices of the surrounding community, whether this is a transcribing service employed by a police department, a newsroom, or an academic discipline. Because transcription is an act of interpretation and representation, it is also an act of power. As Mishler (1991: 227) points out, 'there is no way not to make such decisions'.

We cannot trust to our transcripts or to our discipline's transcription practices to keep these issues at the forefront. A prescriptive or standardized transcription system runs counter to the goal of recognizing the contingency of transcription. We should not seek to standardize our methods, which at worst can be a way of avoiding accountability for our transcription decisions. Instead, we must take responsibility by acknowledging the problem. Ultimately, the only way to remind ourselves and one another of the inherent instability of our transcripts is to say so – that is, to practice a reflexive discourse analysis in which we as researchers state our relationship to our transcripts. Admittedly, this practice may result in the researcher's displacing the research as the center of discussion, as has sometimes happened when other disciplines have encouraged greater reflexivity. Or it may be used not to acknowledge responsibility for one's own scholarly practices, but to fend off potential criticism or to justify the adequacy of one's transcription. But even to ask that researchers think about ourselves in relation to our transcripts is a step toward making transcription practices visible, toward emphasizing that transcription is always partial, in every sense of that word, and toward exploring how our practices shape our knowledge.

References

Bailey, Guy, Natalie Maynor and Patricia Cukor-Avila, eds., 1991. The emergence of Black English: Text and commentary. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Bakhtin, Mikhail, 1984. Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Becker, A.L., 1995. Beyond translation. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Bell, Allan, 1991. The language of news media. Oxford: Blackwell.

Bucholtz, Mary, 1995. Language in evidence: The pragmatics of translation and the judicial process. In: Marshall Morris, ed., Translation and the law, 115–129. Philadelphia, PA: Benjamins.

Cameron, Deborah, 1995. Verbal hygiene. London: Routledge.

Clifford, James and George E. Marcus, eds., 1986. Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Cook, Guy, 1990. Transcribing infinity: Problems of context interpretation. Journal of Pragmatics 14(1): 1–24.

Coulthard, Malcolm, 1996. The official version: Audience manipulation in police records of interviews with suspects. In: Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard and Malcolm Coulthard, eds., Texts and practices: Readings in critical discourse analysis. 166–178. London: Routledge.

Cunningham, Clark D. and Bonnie S. McElhinny, 1995. Taking it to the streets: Putting discourse analysis to the service of a public defender's office. Clinical Law Review 2(1): 285–314.

DeVault, Marjorie L., 1990. Talking and listening from women's standpoint: Feminist strategies for interviewing and analysis. Social Problems 37(1): 96–116.

Edwards, Jane and Martin D. Lampert, eds., 1993. Talking data: Transcription and coding in discourse research. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Erickson, Frederick, 1984. Rhetoric, anecdote, rhapsody: Coherence strategies in a conversation among black American adolescents. In: Deborah Tannen, ed., Coherence in spoken and written discourse, 81–154. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Fairclough, Norman, 1988. Discourse representation in media discourse. Sociolinguistics 17(2): 125–139.

Fine, Elizabeth, 1983. In defense of literary dialect: A response to Dennis R. Preston. Journal of American Folklore 96(381): 323–330.

Goodwin, Charles, 1981. Conversational organization: Interaction between speakers and hearers. New York: Academic Press.

Green, Georgia M., 1990. Linguistic analysis of conversation as evidence regarding the interpretation of speech events. In: Judith N. Levi and Anne Graffam Walker, eds., Language in the judicial process, 247–277. New York: Plenum.

Green, Judith, Maria Franquiz and Carol Dixon, 1997. The myth of the objective transcript: Transcribing as a situated act. TESOL Quarterly 31(1): 172–176.

Gumperz, John J., Hannah Kaltman and Mary Catherine O'Connor, 1984. Cohesion in spoken and written discourse: Ethnic style and the transition to literacy. In: Deborah Tannen, ed., Coherence in spoken and written discourse, 3–19. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Heath, Shirley Brice, 1983. Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hymes, Dell, 1981. 'In vain I tried to tell you': Essays in Native American ethnopoetics. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Jaffe, Alexandra and Shana Walton, forthcoming. The voices people read: Orthography and the representation of nonstandard speech. Journal of Sociolinguistics.

Jefferson, Gail, 1996. A case of transcriptional stereotyping. Journal of Pragmatics 26: 159–170.

Jordan, June, 1985. Nobody mean more to me than you and the future life of Willie Jordan. In: On call: Political essays, 123–139. Boston: South End Press.

Lane, Lisa Ann, Robert Knippen, Jeannette Denton and Daniel Suslak, 1996. Reaching criterion in phonetic transcription: Validity and reliability of non-native speakers. In: Miriam Meyerhoff, ed., (N)WAVES and MEANS: A selection of papers from NWAVE 24. University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics 3(1): 87–110.

Luebs, Margaret Ann, 1996. Frozen speech: The rhetoric of transcription. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan.

Michaels, Sarah and James Collins, 1984. Oral discourse styles: Classroom interaction and the acquisition of literacy. In: Deborah Tannen, ed., Coherence in spoken and written discourse, 219–244. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Mishler, Elliot G., 1991. Representing discourse: The rhetoric of transcription. Journal of Narrative and Life History 1(4): 255–280.

Moerman, Michael, 1996. The field of analyzing foreign language conversations. Journal of Pragmatics 26(2): 147–158.

Morgan, Marcyliena H., 1991. Indirectness and interpretation in African American women's discourse. Pragmatics 1(4): 421–451.

Ochs, Elinor, 1979. Transcription as theory. In: Elinor Ochs and Bambi B. Schieffelin, eds., Developmental pragmatics, 43–72. New York: Academic Press.

Preston, Dennis R., 1982. 'Ritin' fowklower daun 'rong: Folklorists' failures in phonology. Journal of American Folklore 95(377): 304–316.

Preston, Dennis R., 1983. Mowr bayud spellin': A reply to Fine. Journal of American Folklore 96(381): 330–339.

Preston, Dennis R., 1985. The Li'l Abner syndrome: Written representations of speech. American Speech 60(4): 328–336.

Prince, Ellen F., 1984. Language and the law: Reference, stress, and context. In: Deborah Schiffrin, ed., Meaning, form, and use in context: Linguistic applications, 240–252. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Prince, Ellen F., 1990. On the use of social conversation as evidence in a court of law. In: Judith N. Levi and Anne Graffam Walker, eds., Language in the judicial process, 279–289. New York: Plenum.

Psathas, George and Timothy Anderson, 1990. The 'practices' of transcription in conversation analysis. Semiotica 78(1/2): 75–99.

Roberts, Celia, 1997. Transcribing talk: Issues of representation. TESOL Quarterly 31(1): 167–172.

Ryave, Alan L., 1978. On the achievement of a series of stories. In: Jim Schenkein, ed., Studies in the organization of conversational interaction, 113–132. New York: Academic.

Schenkein, Jim, ed., 1978. Studies in the organization of conversational interaction. New York: Academic Press.

Sherzer, Joel, 1994. Transcription, representation, and translation: Repetition and performance in Kuna discourse. In: Barbara Johnstone, ed., Repetition in discourse: Interdisciplinary perspectives. Vol. 1, 37–52. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Shuy, Roger W., 1993. Language crimes: The use and abuse of language evidence in the courtroom. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Slembrouck, Stef, 1992. The parliamentary Hansard 'verbatim' report: The written construction of spoken discourse. Language and Literature 1(2): 101–119.

Tedlock, Dennis, 1983. The spoken word and the work of interpretation. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Tedlock, Dennis, 1990. From voice and ear to hand and eye. Journal of American Folklore 103(408): 133–156.

Van Maanen, John, 1988. Tales of the field: On writing ethnography. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Wald, Benji, 1995. The problem of scholarly predisposition (Review article). Language in Society 24(2): 245–257.

Walker, Anne Graffam, 1990. Language at work in the law: The customs, conventions, and appellate consequences of court reporting. In: Judith N. Levi and Anne Graffam Walker, eds., Language in the judicial process, 203–244. New York: Plenum.

West, Candace, 1996. Ethnography and orthography: A (modest) methodological proposal. Journal of Contemporary Ethnography 25(3): 327–352.

Mary Bucholtz is assistant professor of linguistics and discourse studies in the Department of English at Texas A&M University. Her research focuses on issues of representation and identity in discourse, with special emphasis on race and gender. She has previously published on transcription and translation in the law and linguistic identity work in the media. More recently she has been examining the linguistic production of white racial identity, an issue she is exploring in her current book project, *Signifying Nothing: Language, Youth, and Whiteness*. Her co-edited volume on language and gender, *Reinventing Identities*, was be published by Oxford University Press in 1999.