



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Was that Infinity or Affinity? Applying Insights from Translation Studies to Qualitative Research Transcription

Citation for published version:

Ross, J 2010, 'Was that Infinity or Affinity? Applying Insights from Translation Studies to Qualitative Research Transcription', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2, pp. 1-16.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Forum: Qualitative Social Research

Publisher Rights Statement:

Reprints of contributions already published elsewhere are only accepted if (a) it appeals to the interests of the FQS readers and it has not already reached a wide audience and if (b) it is assured that the copyright owner allows the reprint (in the case the submitting person is not the copyright owner). If these conditions are fulfilled, FQS may accept reprints, which will be published with reference to the place of the first publication.

FQS has the right to publish any contribution e.g. on CD-ROM or for selected print editions at any time in the future. In that case, the respective authors will be informed. Authors will also be notified, if other publishers ask for reprints of contributions, originally published in FQS.

For further questions, feel free to contact us via e-mail.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Was That Infinity or Affinity? Applying Insights From Translation Studies to Qualitative Research Transcription¹

Jen Ross

Key words:
qualitative
research;
transcription;
translation studies;
visibility; power;
foreignisation;
domestication

Abstract: Despite a small but compelling body of literature arguing that transcription represents a key moment of choice and the exercise of power in the research process, many qualitative researchers appear to believe (or at least proceed as if they believe) that transcription is relatively unproblematic. Translation studies and its engagement with visibility, power, authenticity and fidelity has a lot to offer to qualitative researchers working critically with transcription theory and practice. This paper explores the translation studies theories of equivalence, overt and covert translation, foreignisation and domestication, and the remainder, and demonstrates some fertile connections between transcription and translation. These connections help us to think about some broader political and cultural issues in relation to transcription and academic discourse, the complexity of equivalence and the central role of the situated transcriber.

Table of Contents

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. Research Transcription in Context](#)
- [3. Some Background to Translation Studies](#)
- [4. Equivalence](#)
- [5. \(In\)visibility 1: Domestication and Foreignisation](#)
- [6. \(In\)visibility 2: Assumptions, Accidents and Remainders](#)
 - [6.1 Assumptions and accidents](#)
 - [6.2 Remainders](#)
- [7. Conclusion: Moving Forward with Transcription](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[References](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

1. Introduction

"Do I believe 'in fidelity to the original,' you ask. Yes, yes, not because it's possible, but because one must try." (SPIVAK, 2001, p.14)

Many qualitative researchers will recognise the sentiment SPIVAK, though talking about translation, expresses above: the notion of "fidelity to the original" is one that troubles and challenges those of us working critically with an understanding of language as non-transparent, meaning as situated, and the power of interpretation as fundamental to meaning making. [1]

1 This paper emerged from a seminar presented by the author at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh, 10 February 2009, as part of their Translations, Adaptations and Modalities research theme.

The following extract came from an interview I first encountered in transcript form (i.e.: I did not have access to the recordings, and was not present at the interview itself):

"it was a first ever class I had taught, he was one of the first students I knew, it's something that you know he was at the university as long as I was, so when he left he had been there four years, I had been there four years, so I sort of have had an infinity with him." (Extract from an interview transcript) [2]

"Infinity with" as opposed to "affinity with" was *probably* an error in the transcription of this interview, but I chose in my analysis not to correct it, as it served as a reminder of how full of meaning-making the transcription function is, and that there are many other places where "errors" and decisions on the transcriber's part will not be visible. This insight is not a new one, as we will see. Nevertheless, many qualitative researchers appear to believe (or at least proceed as if they believe) that transcription is relatively unproblematic in the sense that *either* meaning is totally separate from form and therefore transcription choices are merely a matter of preference (or budget), *or* that meaning is intrinsically bound to form but that an accurate *transformation* can be produced. [3]

I believe that transcription represents a key moment of choice and the exercise of power in the research process. TILLEY and POWICK (2002, p.292) make this point, using a metaphor of translation:

"In our research on transcription, we critique the naive realism that leaves unquestioned the possibility of an objective transcriber, and ignores the complexities of transcription, which resemble more the work of translation than that of transference ... We argue with Lapadat and Lindsay and others that transcription is an interpretive act." [4]

Translation offers us more than just a metaphor, though. The field of translation studies has been engaging with the complexities of translation for more than 30 years, and scholars in that field share many concerns with qualitative researchers (TEMPLE, 2002, p.846). It offers a very rich body of theoretical work which we can draw on to get new perspectives on what is at stake in our transcription practices. This paper is an attempt to apply some of the insights and debates in translation studies to the theory and practice of transcription, paying special attention to the idea of visibility—of translator, translation, and process. [5]

I do this by first giving some brief background to the literature on research transcription and on translation studies, then discussing how important translation studies theories of equivalence, foreignisation and domestication, assumptions and the remainder have implications for research transcription. Finally, I offer some comments about how the work I have done around transcription and translation is impacting on my research practice, and how I think this productive critical connection might be taken forward. [6]

2. Research Transcription in Context

"The problems of selective observation are not eliminated with the use of recording equipment. They are simply *delayed* until the moment at which the researcher sits down to transcribe the material from the audio- or videotape." (OCHS, 1979, p.44)

"By neglecting issues of transcription, the interview researcher's road to hell becomes paved with transcripts." (KVALE, 1996, p.166)

In 2000, Judith LAPADAT criticised the lack of attention given to the issues and complications inherent in transcription (p.204). The transformation of speech to text is a component of many qualitative methods in social science research. Interviews and focus groups are routinely used as techniques of data generation, and these events are typically recorded with an audio recorder and later *transcribed*, either by the interviewer or another researcher or, as commonly, by someone outside the immediate research project or setting—an external transcriber². [7]

Despite its widespread use and importance in qualitative research, approaches to transcription in qualitative research literature were, and remain, varied. Many general texts are more or less silent on the matter. For example, DENZIN and LINCOLN (2005), one of the most widely cited of mainstream qualitative research texts, barely mentions transcription, and only one chapter (peripherally) discusses it as a potential site of interest (CHASE, 2005, p.665). Other literature tends to focus on practicalities such as cost and time, as LAPADAT and LINDSAY point out (1999, p.77), but not the epistemological or methodological implications of transcription. [8]

Others take transcription seriously as a research challenge, but maintain that it *can* be done accurately. SILVERMAN claims that transcripts can "offer a highly reliable record" (2001, p.13), and calls on researchers to adopt some of the practices of conversation analysis (CA). CA, which studies talk and interaction, employs standardised conventions, symbols and notation to attempt to capture, in text, features of breath, pause, changes in pitch and volume, and emphasis from recordings of conversations. CA transcripts are extremely detailed, in response to analysts' need to meticulously examine these different aspects of talk. For example:

21	Zoe	w'(h) are you ta(h)lking to it while you
22		wORK?
23	Lyn	no:,
24		(.5)
25	Lyn	[heh heh °heh heh°=

2 This is a practice which is fraught with many complications around the low status of the work, lack of guidance and context given to transcribers, and the effects of transcriber distance from the research, which are well documented by TILLEY and POWICK (2002).

26	Zoe	[hh what ye' DOINg then
27	Lyn	=hahh hahh hahh
28		(1.0)
29	Zoe	wh't's the ↑point:h
30		(1.5)
31	Zoe	↑oh ↑go:d (.) look what ↑I'm wearing (ANTAKI, 2009, n.p.) [9]

These transcription practices produce texts which bear little resemblance to typical academic prose, but the record of pause lengths and specialised notation, for example, imply that these texts are scientific, technical and precise. [10]

Authors working in other traditions tend to dismiss the idea of a "reliable" transcription. A "post-structuralist turn" (DAVIES & DAVIES, 2007) in the social sciences has opened up questions about the relationship of language and meaning. LAPADAT and LINDSAY (1999) point out the irony of replicating discredited assumptions of transparency in transcription practices (1990, p.65), while RIESSMAN notes that "transforming spoken language into a written text is now taken quite seriously because thoughtful investigators no longer assume the transparency of language" (1993, p.12). KVALE (1996) devotes a whole chapter in his popular book on interviewing to transforming speech to text, and he encourages readers to think of transcriptions as "interpretive constructions": "the question 'What is the correct transcription?' cannot be answered—there is no true, objective transformation from the oral to the written mode. A more constructive question is: 'What is a useful transcription for my research purposes?'" (pp.165-66). [11]

Narrative analysts such as RIESSMAN and MISHLER look at stories as important units of meaning, and are often interested in the effect of the way that researchers choose to represent oral narratives in written form on the page, since "textual display, a re-presentation of speech, is in itself a rhetorical device" (MISHLER, 2003, p.304). MISHLER gives several examples of the same stretch of talk, transcribed in different ways, to illustrate that "transcriptions of speech, like other forms of representation in science, reflexively document and affirm theoretical positions" (2003, p.310). In other words, transcripts are highly individual, saying as much about the transcriber as the transcribed. Attempting "fidelity to the original", in this case, is an interpretive and perhaps even creative process on the part of the transcriber—whomever he or she may be, and whatever his or her relationship to the research. [12]

Even if we accept the non-transparency of transcription as a positive—or at least unavoidable—part of the research process, though, this does not mean that we understand all the implications and limitations of our choices. Theories of translation offer some new ways of seeing these choices and constraints, and I believe they can help move the theoretical discussion and debate about transcription forward in fruitful new directions. [13]

3. Some Background to Translation Studies

Translation theory and practice has been written about for centuries but, according to BASSNETT (1996), the field of translation studies emerged in the 1970s, in parallel with "polysystems theory" (systems within systems, of which the literary system is one, and the social system thought to be another—CLASSE, 2000, p.1098) in the humanities and an increasing resistance to the conception of translation as a "secondary, second class activity" (BASSNETT, 1996, p.12). In the decades since, theorists in the field have drawn extensively from post-colonial, post-structuralist and feminist theory, literary studies, linguistics, anthropology and translation's own long history. BASSNETT traces a shift in emphasis from history in the 1970s, to power in the 1980s and visibility in the 1990s (1996, p.22). These themes continue to be important today, along with what VENUTI calls an "ethics of difference" (1998)—an emphasis on diversity, difference and the politics of otherness. Theories of globalisation and networks are also coming to the fore in translation studies today (CRONIN, 2003). [14]

VENUTI, in the introduction to his "Translation Studies Reader", describes the collection's scope and organisation as follows:

"Selections can be grouped to explore basic concepts of language (instrumental vs hermeneutic), key theoretical concepts (translatability and relative autonomy, equivalence and shifts, reception and function), recurrent translation strategies (free vs literal, dynamic vs formal, domesticating vs foreignising), and various cultural and political issues (identity and ideology, power and minority situation)" (2005, p.7). [15]

The ideas I am touching on in this paper: equivalence, overt and covert translation, foreignisation and domestication, and the remainder, take up and cut across themes of power, visibility and otherness. Although I will push what I see as the parallels between translation and transcription in the social sciences as far as I can in what follows, it seems important to say that some of the most compelling ideas and themes in translation studies—the marginalisation and othering of cultural difference, globalisation and the politics of language and the canon—cannot be adequately addressed in such a comparison. I recommend VENUTI's work (1998), as well as that of BASSNETT (1980, 1996), BAKER (2005) and HERMANS (1996, 2002) for those wishing to learn more about translation studies beyond what is discussed in this paper. [16]

4. Equivalence

One of the key theoretical contributions of translation studies is in the evolving and contested understanding of what makes a good translation—fidelity and equivalence are complex and shifting concepts which are deeply engaged with by translation scholars. Indeed, equivalence would seem to be a shared central issue in both transcription and translation: how to create a target-text which bears the closest possible relationship to the source-text (or data). What this actually means, or what a "good translation" might be, is the subject of much debate in translation studies. For example, HOUSE (2006) argues that equivalence is

extremely complex, as it is socially and historically determined, and affected by the constraints of specific languages, linguistic and social conventions, as well as the translator's comprehension, creativity, and implicit theories (2006, p.344). She makes the distinction between overt and covert translation—a covert translation

"is a translation which enjoys the status of an original source text in the target culture. The translation is covert because it is not marked pragmatically as a translation of a source text but may, conceivably, have been created in its own right" (p.347). [17]

An overt translation, on the other hand, "is not as it were a 'second original'" (ibid.) and not directed at the target audience. A translator producing a covert translation is therefore concerned with equivalence at a contextual (social, cultural) level, while someone producing an overt translation might be more concerned with equivalence at a textual level (creating a word-for-word match, for example). [18]

The difference between contextual and textual equivalence is illustrated simply by BASSNETT (1980), who gives as an example a description of the English word "butter" and the Italian word "burro". Both refer to the same substance, but the cultural significance and practical uses of butter in Britain are quite different from *burro* in Italy, so "the problem of equivalence here involves the utilization and perception of the object in a given context. The *butter-burro* translation, whilst perfectly adequate on one level, also serves as a reminder ... that each language represents a separate reality" (p.19). [19]

In transcription, we might consider a covert transcription as one which blends in seamlessly to material which was "born" textual, while an overt transcription might look more like what is often called "verbatim" transcription—marked by its origins in speech: repetition, hesitation, stumbles and interruptions, for example. The former would achieve equivalence in the sense that it provided readers with a comfortable reading experience, that it gave the appearance of transparency of meaning, and that it did not break the flow of prose or stand out in an academic text. The latter might achieve equivalence by recording (or attempting to record) each verbal utterance as text, even if it drew attention to itself by being manifestly un-text-like. [20]

HOUSE maintains that different types of translation are appropriate for different purposes, and this may be the case with transcription as well. However, the decision about which to attempt is complicated by the significant practical and political implications of visibility (of the translator and the translation). The rest of this paper is devoted to these implications. [21]

5. (In)visibility 1: Domestication and Foreignisation

VENUTI's concepts of domestication and foreignisation are extremely useful in theorising transcription practices. These concepts are essentially a reworking of HOUSE's overt and covert translation model, where domestication implies assimilation to dominant "home" values of the target culture, while foreignisation is a deliberate othering or making strange of the target text to highlight its source in another place and/or time. [22]

What sets VENUTI's concepts apart, however, is his attention to the political and ideological implications of translation and the way he links these strategies explicitly to concerns of power, subordination and cultural marginalisation. He argues that translation is "fundamentally ethnocentric", and that "the very function of translating is assimilation, the inscription of a foreign text with domestic intelligibilities and interests" (VENUTI, 1998, p.11). Later he draws on BERMAN, who writes of the problems of ethnocentrism and the desirability of preserving "foreignness": "A bad translation I call the translation which, generally under the guise of transmissibility, carries out a systematic negation of the strangeness of the foreign work" (BERMAN, 1992, p.5). [23]

BUCHOLTZ (2000), in her work on the politics of transcription, identifies many important ways in which transcription can demonstrate attitudes towards race, otherness and power, for example. To this I would add that considering the politics of transcription in terms of foreignisation and domestication invites a look at academic discourse in the social sciences and the privileged status of what is generally thought of as "academic" prose over alternative forms of knowing and expression. As BAYNE argues, the scholarly written text "is still the primary marker of academic legitimacy. The linear, logically-developing scholarly text, with its hierarchical structure and build toward conclusion, is still the primary expression of the academic mind" (2006, p.1). [24]

If we consider academic writing as the dominant mode of discourse in the social sciences, then it becomes possible to explore transcription as an act of either domestication to or foreignisation from that discursive centre. The question: "Can a translator maintain a critical distance from domestic norms without dooming a translation to be dismissed as unreadable?" (VENUTI, 1998, p.84) becomes highly relevant to transcription, and indeed helps us to understand some of the discomfort and resistance to more verbatim forms of transcription in academic writing and publishing. For example, a recent referee's report for a paper I co-authored included the following comment: "my view is that the reproduction of the interviewee's verbal tics (such as 'um') may be the convention but it is irrelevant and obtrusive". This reader manifestly did not wish to be reminded that the interview data we were presenting was not born textual. [25]

The referee went further, however, and suggested that our form of transcription "undermines the authority of the interviewee in contrast to the authority of the academic text". The issue of authority explored in some detail by NESPOR and BARBER (1995), as they explain that they invited interviewees to edit and rewrite

portions of the transcripts made from their interviews in order to protect them from looking "ignorant", or like "subordinate writers" in contrast to the academic prose of the researchers. They further argue that: "researcher-writers say of 'faithful' transcriptions that 'that's the way people really speak' ... but that is never completely true. People do not speak on paper" (NESPOR & BARBER, 1995, p.57). [26]

Is it the case that most people are so unfamiliar with the difference between speech and writing that they would consider a verbatim transcription to imply ignorance? It would seem so, but this does not necessarily suggest that we ought to protect *their* ignorance. And, while the argument that NESPOR and BARBER make—that attempting to capture the flow of conversation in transcription is misguided, as "people do not speak on paper"—may on the face of it seem sensible, foreignising strategies are not necessarily bound to notions of accuracy. Indeed, as BAYNE argues of non-linear digital texts (2006, p.1), transcriptions may usefully problematise and destabilise domestic norms of academic writing, and allow us to recognise them as constructed, not transparent, forms. [27]

WATSON gets at the same idea in a different way—talking of the relocation of the researcher in relation to the data that transcription makes necessary:

"Metaphors of transcription tend to emphasize a process by which a fluid and dynamic interaction is made static and thus necessarily reduced. ... The transcript needs to be reconstituted through analysis and bears much the same relationship to the original data as a prune, when rehydrated, does to a plum. But prunes are not necessarily inferior to plums; rather, they do 'being fruit' in different ways. Whereas the interview is the immediate immersed research context, the transcription serves to relocate the researcher enabling a different relationship to the data to be developed" (2006, p.374). [28]

However, while appearing to celebrate this relocation, she immediately goes on to point out that "an ironic feature of transcription is that the greater the attempt to convey nuance through transcription conventions the less natural the transcription appears" (ibid.). If we attempt to include foreignised transcripts in our analyses and publications, there will inevitably be a strangeness to the texts we produce. The question is, do we do more harm or more good in making our translations and transcriptions visible, and perhaps able to be dismissed as impossibly other? As VENUTI asks, "to what extent does such an ethics [of difference] risk unintelligibility, by decentering domestic ideologies, and cultural marginality, by destabilizing the workings of domestic institutions?" (1998, p.84) [29]

Indeed, foreignisation can render strange and essentially "other" not only the text but also the source culture, thereby inviting a domestic audience to observe at a distance, and to marginalise a foreign culture as hopelessly different and unreachable, and possibly, in the presence of a colonial impulse, needing intervention. CARBONELL argues that "the processes of cultural difference allow desired knowledges that satisfies the needs of the West, rather than the

knowledge genuinely deployed by the Other (either the East, the Third World, the Primitive or even the Ancient)" (1996, p.92). [30]

The translator's dilemma is clearly ours as well, as "the differences between the oral and the written language contexts become critical through the transcription from an oral to a written modality (MISHLER, 1991)" (KVALE, 1996, p.44). BUCHOLTZ distinguishes between naturalised and denaturalised transcriptions, and, following OCHS, calls for proponents of each style of transcription to "unsettle" and experiment with the other to see what difference it makes, and what they can learn (2000, pp.1461-2). [31]

However, sometimes the component parts of the process of translation—the text, or the translator—reveal themselves whether or not we choose them. This brings us on to assumptions, accidents and LECERCLE's (1990) notion of the "remainder". [32]

6. (In)visibility 2: Assumptions, Accidents and Reminders

6.1 Assumptions and accidents

The effects of the translator and transcriber emerge not only from their conscious strategies, but also from the unconscious assumptions (and errors) they make. Sometimes in *translation* these assumptions are brought starkly to light by the passage of time or alternative translations; in qualitative research transcription this will rarely if ever be the case³. [33]

This may be one reason why translation studies has addressed this issue in such depth: it has become clear that reasonable people can disagree about the best way to translate any given passage. The entire debate about equivalence rests on this premise. BAKER identifies as a key discourse of translation the depiction of translators as "honest and detached brokers who operate largely in the 'spaces between' cultures ... who can transcend any cultural or political affiliation, at least while they're engaged in the highly romanticised task of translating" (2006, p.11). She problematises this discourse in the context of cultural meta-narratives, and argues that "no one, translators included, can stand outside or between narratives" (p.12). This echoes the arguments of many qualitative researchers; OLIVER, SEROVICH and MASON, for example, explain that "a transcriber hears the interview through his/her own cultural-linguistic filters" (2005, p.1282). [34]

A recent accident provides a fortunate opportunity for an example. A set of interview recordings was sent out to a transcription company, who had several transcribers working on them. One recording was accidentally transcribed twice, by two different transcribers. Each had access to the same audio file, style sheet and list of words and phrases which were likely to appear, and the instruction to

3 In large part this is due to the almost ubiquitous commitment to anonymity that researchers make to their interviewees, which make audio or video recordings off limits to anyone outside the research team. In an important sense, therefore, the transcript, not the recording, *becomes* the original in a way a translation may not seem to.

transcribe verbatim, noting pauses, laughter and other non-linguistic happenings where possible. [35]

It would be possible to choose literally any part of these two transcripts to illustrate the point that no two people hear or represent in the same way—from the very first line, the transcripts differ. In fact, one transcript is 25 pages long, and the other is 82! However, the extract below illustrates, I think, that the line between an error and an assumption may be very fine indeed.

Extract 1 (transcriber A):

IE: you know, this is—there was a huge long phase right at the beginning of all of this when all of us together collectively struggled, because nobody knew what this thing was, you know, we were trying to create something and what did it do and what could it do, and, um, particularly because we had to make these things and then the technology, if you like, came afterwards, um, what's going to be very different now is that the technology is there upfront, and you're populating something that exists, um, I think one of the things that—I'm sure it's not just me, everybody has struggled with all the way through, is how much you might want to say to your user in terms of words, this—online things are quite clunky. Well, here's a bit of background information that you need to know, for you to—I mean, giving up, also what we've been doing on history [resources], you know, launch cold into—to make sensible judgments in history you actually have to know something about what you're dealing with and how you deal with all of that issue, how you deal with just plunging into the middle of something and not being—I mean I set these couple of maths ones for my things, I must have been mad, I was a primary school teacher, I have taught lots of primary maths in my time, it was rather a long time ago.

Extract 2 (transcriber B):

IE: So, you know, there's a huge, great, long phase right at the beginning of all of it...

IV: Uhuh ...

IE: When all of us, together, collectively struggled because nobody knew what this thing was, you know

IV: Mmhm

IE: We were trying to create something and what did it do and what could it do?

IV: Ahuh...

IE: And, um ... particularly because we had to make these things and then... the technology, if you like, came afterwards

IV: yeah

IE: Um ... What's going to be very different now, is that the technology is there up front and you're populating something that exists

IV: Mmhm ...

IE: um ... I think one of the things that—I'm sure it's not just me—everybody has struggled with, all the way through ... is, how much you might want to say to your user

IV: Mmhm

IE: In terms of words ... because ...

- IV: Right, okay, in what way?
- IE: online things are quite funky ...
- IV: Right
- IE: Well ... here's a bit of background information that you need to know before you...
- IV: Okay
- IE: You know ... and we've given up also what we've been doing on history [resources] ...
- IV: Mmhm
- IE: You know, launch cold into ... [pause] to make sensible judgements in history, you had to actually know something about ...
- IV: Right
- IE: Something you're dealing with and how you deal with all of that issue
- IV: Uhuh ...
- IE: How you deal with just plunging into the middle of something
- IV: Okay
- IE: Um ... and not being ... I mean I've [unclear 14.23] there's a couple of maths ones for my sins—I must be mad! [Laughter] You know, I was a primary schoolteacher, I have taught lots of binary maths in my time; it was just a rather long time ago ...
- IV: [chuckle] [36]

The description of "online things" as either "funky" or "clunky" made quite a difference to the point the interviewee is making—she is either celebrating or bemoaning the current state of technology, and the need for interventions by teachers in online learning contexts, and which is which hinges on that word. In transcription as in other contexts, "what people hear depends on what they expect to hear" (HUTCHINS & KLAUSEN, 2000, p.5), and these assumptions at the transcribing stage can greatly affect the resulting analysis of research data. [37]

There are many other discrepancies between the two extracts. My aim here is not to "lament variability" (BUCHOLTZ, 2002, p.785), but to ask (as BUCHOLTZ does) what it might imply. For the biggest difference between the extracts—both ostensibly "verbatim"—is what the transcriber has chosen to do with the interviewer's interjections. In Extract 1, these are excised completely. The transcriber believed or decided in this case that the interviewer's turns in this stretch of talk were not relevant. Indeed, in themselves they might not carry much meaning. Arguably the same information is conveyed in both extracts. However, Extract 2 gives a much different impression of what was *happening* than Extract 1: it shows the interviewer encouraging, laughing, and asking for clarification and expansion, it implies a level of rapport and sympathy between the people in the conversation. Extract 1 is far more prose-like, and more expository. It makes it sound as if the interviewee is volunteering information without prompting. It erases its own context. This could be a result of the transcriber being tired, pressed for time, or bored, but it could just as easily reflect his or her implicit assumptions about the nature of interviews, conversation or research. [38]

6.2 Reminders

Sometimes the nature of the text itself makes the translator more visible. Some theorists have argued, in fact, that there will always be inadvertent gain associated with translation, because words always have meanings and associations which differ between languages. LECERCLE (1990) calls this gain "the remainder", and VENUTI notes that it "violates ... the 'virtual reality' created in the translation ... because the variables it contains can introduce a competing truth or break the realist illusion" (1998, p.22). The realist illusion is broken by some texts in especially apparent ways—DERRIDA's work is a frequently cited example. HERMANS (2002) recounts a story of a passage in which DERRIDA:

"having used the term 'fake-out', carries on for a few sentences and then suddenly retraces his steps, wondering 'I cannot imagine how Sam Weber is going to translate "fake-out"' (1997b: 213); it is a peculiar statement to make, for in the translation we are reading the term has already been translated by Sam Weber, a few sentences earlier, without a hitch. ... In anticipating what subsequently turned out to be a non-problem for the translator, Derrida not only implicated the translator in the translation, but allowed us to register Weber's discursive presence in the curious situation where, having adequately dealt with 'contre-pied' as 'fake-out', the translator is taken back to the corresponding French term which he is now obligated to leave untranslated ..." (p.14). [39]

Calling this a "convoluted case", HERMANS goes on to cite a more straightforward example of a translator being forced to draw attention to a translation, and argues that: "in manifestly declining to be translated ... the passage reminds the reader that behind the words as they appear on the page there is another discourse in a different language" (p.15). [40]

Such rem(a)inders can appear noticeably in transcripts as well, as with this extract from a recent interview between my colleague and a school pupil, talking about technology in schools:

Pupil: "But the annoying thing is, the really annoying thing about the restrictions on these computers that gets me so angry, I'm actually putting my hand up and down really quickly, you can't obviously see that because it's on a tape recorder ..." [41]

This breaking of the illusion that the transcript can capture everything—a reminder of what is lost—is only part of what makes this interesting. In signalling his awareness of the digital recorder and its purpose (to provide a recording which stands in for the interview itself), the interviewee draws attention to the constructedness of both the situation and his account. The "you" he speaks to is not the interviewer he is conversing with, but the reader, through the transcriber. This playfulness and troubling of the process matters because, even when not made explicit in this way, transcriptions and translations *are* suspect, problematic, and utterly imperfect. They are laden with interpretation, mistakes, leftovers and strategies, whatever the extent to which the transcriber or researcher chooses to domesticate what remains. [42]

7. Conclusion: Moving Forward with Transcription

This paper has demonstrated some fertile connections between transcription and translation, connections which help us to think about some broader political and cultural issues in relation to transcription and academic discourse, the complexity of equivalence and the central role of the situated transcriber. I have certainly found these to be important ideas in my own development as a researcher. [43]

I started out in my own doctoral research project wanting each of my transcripts to be as faithful a representation of the interview as possible. For me this has always meant attempting to transcribe everything that is said, including repetition, stumbles and the rest, despite the messiness and troublesomeness of producing and then citing or working with these transcripts. For one thing, I thought, how would I decide what to leave out if I were to deliberately selectively transcribe? I told myself that I knew this was still my interpretation, and that I would be highly selective when I came to writing up my research, and I told myself I was acknowledging that. But I do not think I was. I really wanted my data to *sound authentic*, and I had not deeply examined what I meant by that. [44]

In her beautiful book about language and identity, "Lost in Translation", Eva HOFFMAN writes that " ... in my translation therapy, I keep going back and forth over the rifts, not to heal them but to see that I—one person, first-person singular—have been on both sides" (1998, p.273). I think doing this work around translation and transcription has freed me up to live with the contradictions in my practice. I still find myself trying to honour the voices in my interviews on their own terms, even while I am more aware now that what I make of them must, necessarily, be in my own voice. I have not given up on fidelity—"not because it's possible, but because one must try". [45]

However, I have a new goal now, too—to use my transcription practice to trouble and challenge the dominant discourse of academic writing in ways that leave more room for different modes and voices. I want the remainders, the foreignness and the accidents to be front and centre, because I believe that there is value in mess and uncertainty, and in problematising our reliance on certain forms of academic writing as "stable materialisations of the workings of the reasoning mind" (BAYNE, 2006, p.1), to the exclusion of all others. [46]

Reasonable people can and will disagree about this, and many research projects will not have representing interviewee voices or deconstructing the academy as goals. However, in this case a cigar is never just a cigar—all researchers should be alert to the negotiations and assumptions transcription involves. Not attending, not actively choosing, does not mean that no choice is being made, because "researchers make choices about transcription that enact the theories that they hold. If these theories and their relationships to research processes are left implicit, it is difficult to examine them or to interpret the findings that follow from them" (LAPADAT & LINDSAY, 1999, p.66). [47]

One unavoidable issue here is that transcribing in any but the most cursory of ways is extremely time consuming, and one thing researchers usually lack is time. We do not generally cost time for transcription in to our research bids, or if we do it is to pay external transcribers. It would be good to see more work that follows up on TILLEY and POWICK (2002) and McLELLAN, MacQUEEN and NEIDIG (2003), but which draws on translation studies literature and on the experiences of translators, and suggests strategies for working with external transcribers in ways which take account of the conceptual and theoretical issues in the transcription process. There is also every reason to believe that voice recognition software may someday soon be used for some forms of transcription (MATHESON, 2007), which will bring us a whole new set of questions about the meanings of accuracy and interpretation, and for which, again, we may be able to turn to translation studies for some insights. [48]

Going forward, I would also like qualitative researchers to do more work on foreignisation and domestication, understanding better how we shape our transcripts to meet or resist certain kinds of expectations and desires within the academy. [49]

Translation studies and its engagement with visibility, power, authenticity and fidelity has a lot to offer to qualitative researchers working critically with transcription theory and practice. We must continue to look for new perspectives and strategies which put transcription in its rightful place, as a crucial stage of meaning making in research, and an important subject for theoretical discussion and debate. [50]

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the following colleagues at the University of Edinburgh: Dr Kate ORTON-JOHNSON, Dr Charles ANDERSON, Dr Maria FILIPPAKOPOULOU, Dr Richard FREEMAN, Zoe WILLIAMSON, and my supervisors Dr Siân BAYNE and Dr Hamish MACLEOD.

References

- Antaki, Charles (2009). *An introduction to conversation analysis*. Loughborough University, <http://www-staff.lboro.ac.uk/~ssca1/trans4.htm> [Date of access: 1/9/2009].
- Baker, Mona (2006). Narratives in and of translation. *SKASE Journal of Translation and Interpretation*, 1(1), 4-13.
- Bassnett, Susan (1980). Central issues. In Susan Bassnett (Ed.), *Translation studies* (pp.13-38). London: Methuen.
- Bassnett, Susan (1996). The meek or the mighty: Reappraising the role of the translator. In Roman Alvarez & M. Carmen-Africa Vidal (Eds.), *Translation, power, subversion* (pp.10-24). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Bayne, Siân (2006). Networked learning with digital texts. *Networked Learning Conference 2006*, Lancaster. <http://www.networkedlearningconference.org.uk/past/nlc2006/abstracts/pdfs/P13%20Bayne.pdf> [Date of access: 21/1/2010].
- Berman, Antoine (1992). *The experience of the foreign: Culture and translation in romantic Germany*. Albany: SUNY Press.

- Bucholtz, Mary (2000). The politics of transcription. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 32, 1439-1465.
- Bucholtz, Mary (2002). Variation in transcription. *Discourse Studies*, 9(6), 784-808.
- Carbonell, Ovidio (1996). The exotic space of cultural translation. In Roman Alvarez & M. Carmen-Africa Vidal (Eds.), *Translation, power, subversion* (pp.79-98). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Chase, Susan (2005). Narrative inquiry: Multiple lenses, approaches, voices. In Norman Denzin & Yvonna Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed. pp.651-680). London: Sage.
- Classe, Olive (2000). *Encyclopedia of literary translation into English*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Cronin, Michael (2003). *Translation and globalisation*. London: Routledge.
- Davies, Bronwyn & Davies, Cristyn (2007). Having, and being had by, "experience" or, "experience" in the social sciences after the discursive/poststructuralist turn. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(8), 1139-1159.
- Denzin, Norman & Lincoln, Yvonna (Eds.) (2005). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). London: Sage.
- Hermans, Theo (1996). Norms and the determination of translation: A theoretical framework. In Roman Alvarez & M. Carmen-Africa Vidal (Eds.), *Translation, power, subversion* (pp.10-23). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Hermans, Theo (2002). Paradoxes and aporias in translation and translation studies. In Alessandra Riccardi (Ed.), *Translation studies: Perspectives on an emerging discipline* (pp.10-23). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hoffman, Eva (1998). *Lost in translation*. London: Vintage.
- House, Julianne (2006). Text and context in translation. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 38, 338-358.
- Hutchins, Edwin & Klausen, Tove (2000). *Distributed cognition in an airline cockpit*, http://hci.ucsd.edu/lab/hci_papers/EH1996-1.pdf [Date of access: 1/9/2009].
- Kvale, Steinar (1996). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. London: Sage.
- Lapadat, Judith (2000). Problematizing transcription: Purpose, paradigm and quality. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 3(3), 203-219.
- Lapadat, Judith & Lindsay, Anne (1999). Transcription in research and practice: From standardization of technique to interpretive positionings. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 5(1), 64-86.
- Lecerle, Jean-Jacques (1990). *The violence of language*. London: Routledge.
- Matheson, Jennifer (2007). The voice transcription technique: Use of voice recognition software to transcribe digital interview data in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 12(4)547-560.
- McLellan, Eleanor; MacQueen, Kathleen & Neidig, Judith (2003). Beyond the qualitative interview: Data preparation and transcription. *Field Methods*, 15(1), 63-84.
- Mishler, Elliott (2003). Representing discourse: The rhetoric of transcription. In Yvonna Lincoln & Norman Denzin (Eds.), *Turning points in qualitative research* (pp.297-326). Oxford: Altamira Press.
- Nespor, Jan & Barber, Liz (1995). Audience and the politics of narrative. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8(1), 49-62.
- Ochs, Elinor (1979). Transcription as theory. In Elinor Ochs & Bambi Schieffelin (Eds.), *Developmental pragmatics* (pp.43-72). New York: Academic Press.
- Oliver, Daniel; Serovich, Julianne & Mason, Tina (2005). Constraints and opportunities with interview transcription: Towards reflection in qualitative research. *Social Forces*, 84(2), 1273-1289.
- Riessman, Catherine Kohler (1993). *Narrative analysis*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Silverman, David (2001). *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analysing talk, text and interaction*. London: Sage.
- Spivak, Gayatri (2001). Questioned on translation: Adrift. *Public Culture*, 13(1), 13-22.
- Temple, Bogusia (2002). Crossed wires: Interpreters, translators, and bilingual workers in cross-language research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12(6), 844-854.
- Tilley, Susan & Powick, Kelly (2002). Distanced data: Transcribing other people's research tapes. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 27(2&3), 291-310.

Venuti, Lawrence (1998). *The scandals of translation: Towards an ethics of difference*. London: Routledge.

Venuti, Lawrence (2005). *The translation studies reader*. London: Routledge.

Watson, Cate (2006). Unreliable narrators? "Inconsistency" (and some inconstancy) in interviews. *Qualitative Research*, 6(3), 367-384.

Author

Jen ROSS is an Associate Lecturer and PhD student in the School of Education at the University of Edinburgh, and is part of the Digital Cultures and Education research group (<http://www.education.ed.ac.uk/dice/>). Her background is in English Literature, and she has worked over the past five years on a number of online learning projects and academic programmes at the University, most recently on projects looking at online learning in museums, and student writing online. Her doctoral research looks into online reflective practices in higher education. She is particularly interested in issues of identity, authenticity and performativity online and in reflective practices, as well as in post-structuralist theories of language, knowledge and experience.

Contact:

Jen Ross

Higher and Community Education
University of Edinburgh
1.36 Paterson's Land
Holyrood Road
Edinburgh
EH8 8AQ, UK

Tel.: +44 131 651 6133

E-mail: jen.ross@ed.ac.uk

URL: <http://www.jenrossity.net/>

Citation

Ross, Jen (2010). Was that Infinity or Affinity? Applying Insights from Translation Studies to Qualitative Research Transcription [50 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 11(2), Art. 2, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs100223>.