

Was that infinity or affinity?: qualitative research transcription as translation

Jen Ross, School of Education, University of Edinburgh
jen.ross@ed.ac.uk
January 2009

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, 14)

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

it was a first ever class I had taught, he was one of the first students I knew, its 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)

“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, but there is still relatively little discussion in most mainstream qualitative research literature or training of the importance of transcription, or its problematic nature. In this paper I argue that all researchers who use transcribed materials in their research should be paying attention to issues of transcription, and to the implications of the choices they make about how and by whom recordings should be transcribed, and what type of truth claims should be attached to the texts which are produced. 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 of the concerns that I believe qualitative researchers must take more seriously. The richness of the debates and ideas which have shaped translation in recent decades, and what these might have to offer to qualitative researchers in our thinking around transcription, are the focus of this paper.

Research transcription in context

By neglecting issues of transcription, the interview researcher’s road to hell becomes paved with transcripts. (Kvale 1996, 166)

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 transcriber.

In 2000, Judith Lapadat wrote that:

despite its wide use as a fundamental process in both qualitative analysis and in professional practice, there has been relatively little attention given to theoretical issues and methodological implications of the place and processes of transcription. (204)

Indeed, approaches to transcription in qualitative research literature are varied – from near-silence, as in Denzin and Lincoln (2005), one of the most widely cited of mainstream qualitative research texts, where transcription is barely mentioned, and only once (peripherally) discussed as a potential site of interest (665); to matter-of-factness, as in Silverman, who emphasises its unproblematic nature:

Audio and video recordings are an increasingly important part of qualitative research. Transcripts of such recordings, based on standardized conventions, provide an excellent record of ‘naturally occurring’ interaction. ...recordings and transcripts can offer a highly reliable record... (2001, 13).

while much literature tends to focus on the practicalities of cost and time (Lapadat and Lindsay 1999, 77).

Kvale (1996) on the other hand devotes a whole chapter in his popular book on interviewing to transforming speech to text, and he encourages readers to think seriously about issues of representation, ‘truth’ and context:

Transcripts are not copies or representations of some original reality, they are interpretative constructions that are useful tools for given purposes. ... 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?”. (165-66)

Two methodological areas have more consistently attended to transcription: conversation analysis (CA) (and to a lesser extent discourse analysis), and narrative analysis. CA, which studies talk and interaction in detail, employs standardised conventions, symbols and notation to attempt to capture, in text, features of breath, pause, changes in pitch and volume, and emphasis. CA transcripts are extremely detailed and require specialist knowledge to interpret. 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°=
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, online)

Narrative analysts, who look at stories as important units of meaning, 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, 304). Mishler gives several examples of the same stretches 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, 310). In addition, Riessman, in her discussion of levels of representation of experience (1993, 10), notes of transcription that “Transforming spoken language into a written text is now taken quite seriously because thoughtful investigators no longer assume the transparency of language” (12).

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, though it may require a special system of notation. Nowhere is this better seen than in the routine practice of sending recordings to be transcribed by external transcribers, 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).

Importantly, though, a ‘post-structuralist turn’ (Davies and Davies 2007) in the social sciences has opened up questions about the relationship of language and meaning, and several researchers have asked these questions of transcription:

[qualitative] research methodology has arisen, in large part, through the discovery that language itself is not transparent and hence constitutes a rich source of examinable data (Mishler, 1991; Silverman, 1993). It would seem ironic for those of us who collect and analyze the language of human interactions as our primary data to repeat this assumption of transparency with respect to our analysis procedures for handling and manipulating language data. (Lapadat and Lindsay 1999, 65)

Eco (2001) makes a distinction between translation and transcription:

Many dictionaries give, among the several meanings of ‘to translate,’ also the action of transforming data or instructions from one form or from one given alphabet into another form or alphabet, without loss of information. Such information will certainly include references to systems of *transcription* like the Morse code, to signalling systems using small naval flags, and even to the so-called genetic code. But it is clear that, on a linguistic level the model of transcription could at most be applied to phrase books from tourists that establish, in a rather perfunctory way, that *dog* = *chien* and that *coffee* = *café*... . It is clear that in the processes of translation proper there are margins of decision according to the context. These are, however, absent in transcription processes, in which there is no freedom of choice. (74-5)

However, far from being a process with ‘no freedom of choice’, as Eco claims, transcription represents a key moment of choice in the research process. Tilley and Powick 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 (Kvale, 1996; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Poland, 1995; Tilley, 2003a). We argue with Lapadat and Lindsay and others that transcription is an interpretive act from which arises ‘analytic and theoretical issues that are inherent in any form of representation’ (Mishler, 1991, p. 277). (2002, 292)

Translation offers us more than just a metaphor, though. The field of translation studies also offers a very rich body of theoretical work which we can draw on to better understand 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.

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, 1098) in the humanities and an increasing resistance to the conception of translation as a “secondary, second class activity” (Bassnett 1996, 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 characterises a shift in emphasis from history in the 1970s, to power in the 1980s and visibility in the 1990s (1996, 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 and are also coming to the fore in translation studies today (Cronin 2003).

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, 7)

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 – can not be adequately addressed in such a comparison.

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:

determined by the socio-historical conditions in which the translation act is embedded, and by the range of often irreconcilable linguistic and contextual factors at play, among them at least the following: source and target languages with their specific structural constraints; the extra-linguistic world and the way this world is perceived by the two language communities; the linguistic conventions of the translator and of the target language and culture; structural, connotative and aesthetic features of the original; the translator's comprehension and interpretation of the original and her creativity; the translator's explicit and/or implicit theory of translation; translation traditions in the target culture; interpretation of the original by its author; audience design as well as generic norms, and possibly many more. (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” (347). 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). 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” (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.

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.

(In)visibility 1: Domestication and foreignisation

I have found Venuti's concepts of domestication and foreignisation extremely useful in theorising my own 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.

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:

Translating can never simply be communication between equals because it is fundamentally ethnocentric. Most literary projects are initiated in the domestic culture, where a foreign text is selected to satisfy different tastes from those that motivated its composition and reception in its native culture. The very function of translating is assimilation, the inscription of a foreign text with domestic intelligibilities and interests. (Venuti 1998, 11)

Later he expands on the problems of ethnocentrism and the desirability of preserving 'foreignness':

Bad translation shapes toward the foreign culture a domestic attitude that is ethnocentric: "generally under the guise of transmissibility, [it] carries out a systematic negation of the strangeness of the foreign work" (Berman 1992: 5). Good translation aims to limit this ethnocentric negation: it stages "an opening, a dialogue, a cross-breeding, a decentering" and thereby forces the domestic language and culture to register the foreignness of the foreign text (ibid.:4)." (Venuti 1998, 81)

Considering the politics of transcription in these terms 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 (2006) argues:

Printed and written text, as stable materialisations of the workings of the reasoning mind, continue to function as dominant markers of ability in higher education... Throughout the university writing, captured in its print form, 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. (1)

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, 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 including 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'.

The referee goes further, however, and suggests that our form of transcription: “undermines the authority of the interviewee in contrast to the authority of the academic text”. This raises an extremely interesting issue which is explored in some detail by Nespov and Barber (1995), as they explain why they had invited interviewees to edit and rewrite portions of the transcripts made from their interviews:

by ...freezing the parents' narratives in written analogs of spoken forms while writing *our* comments in standard written discourse - we unwittingly recreated the very divisions between ourselves and the parents we had been trying to overcome through collaboration. It is not that we wrote less "academically" in the second version,⁹ it is that the parents revised and shaped *their* analyses as *written* texts that flowed more smoothly for the reader and made their analytic points more explicitly. We researcher-writers say of "faithful" transcriptions that "that's the way people really speak" (cf. DeVault, 1990), but that is never completely true. People do not speak on paper. Transcripts are written forms, and when we freeze interview speech into print, we construct those we have talked to as subordinate writers: We make them look ignorant. (Nespov and Barber 1995, 57)

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? Perhaps so, but this does not necessarily suggest that we ought to protect *their* ignorance. And, while the argument that Nespov 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 faithfulness. Indeed, as Bayne argues of non-linear digital texts, transcriptions may usefully problematise and destabilise domestic norms of writing:

The printed page has been naturalised over centuries to the point where it is no longer seen as a technology. It has become invisible in the sense that its material aesthetics are generally subordinated to its ability to function as ‘a transparent window into conceptual thought’ (Lanham 1993: 4). As Hayles has revealed (Hayles 1999), print is naturalised to the extent that we see the information it ‘contains’ as being separable from its material form. (1)

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, 374)

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 visible, and perhaps dismissable, as such? 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, 84).

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, 92). 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, 44).

However, sometimes the component parts of the process of translation - the text, or the translator – make a choice for us and reveal themselves whether or not we ‘choose’ them. This brings us on to assumptions, accidents and Lecercle’s notion of the ‘remainder’.

(In)visibility 2: assumptions, accidents and remainders

Assumptions and accidents

As Bayne (2004) writes: “the primary locus for the wielding of power by the researcher is in the transcription, interpretation and writing up of interview data where, traditionally, the messy, open oral text is ‘tamed’ and closed off by the researcher”. Mishler (1986) says that “each representation is also a transformation” (48), and this transformation is largely in the hands of the transcriber. However, the effects of the translator/transcriber emerge not only from their conscious strategies, but also on the unconscious assumptions (and errors) they make. Sometimes in translation these assumptions are brought starkly to light by the passage of time and alternative translations; in qualitative research this will rarely if ever be the case¹.

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, though there is usually a sense on the part of an advocate of a particular version that although “we do not need to attribute a deliberate intention to the translator”, it is still possible to “perceive the skewed representation in the translation” (Mason, in Venuti 1998, 3). Baker identifies one of the key discourses of translation: the depiction of translators as:

honest and detached brokers who operate largely in the ‘spaces between’ cultures. The spatial metaphor of the ‘in-between’ is particularly pervasive in more recent writing on translation... the idea of interculture is used to create a neutral space for translators to act as honest brokers who are not embedded in either culture, who can transcend any cultural or political affiliation, at least while they’re engaged in the highly romanticised task of translating. (2006, 11)

¹ 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.

She problematises this discourse in the context of cultural meta-narratives, and argues that “no one, translators included, can stand outside or between narratives” (12). Similarly, Oliver et al explain that “a transcriber hears the interview through his/her own cultural-linguistic filters” (Oliver et al 2005, 10).

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

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]

The description of 'online things' as either 'funky' or 'clunky' makes quite a difference to the point the interviewee is making. There are many other discrepancies between the two extracts. But the biggest difference between them – 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. It is also, in my reading (not having heard the recording or been present at the interview), much harder to understand. For example:

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

doesn't make much sense, whereas I can read the Extract 2 version as a messy conversation, stopping and starting, and feel I can more easily follow the interviewer's line of thinking. In other words, *because* the transcription in Extract 2 is so foreign and un-prose-like, it becomes comprehensible on its own terms.

Reminders

Sometimes the nature of the text itself makes the translator more visible. Some theorists have argued that, in fact, that there will always be inadvertent gain associated with translation, because words always have meanings and associations which differ between languages. Lecercle calls this gain 'the remainder', and Venuti notes that it "violates the [Gricean] maxim of truth, or the 'virtual reality' created in

the translation (Neubert and Shreve 1992: 79), because the variables it contains can introduce a competing truth or break the realist illusion” (1998, 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...” (14)

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 – where a character’s initials stand for a proverb in the source language and cannot (for reasons of overall meaning of the book) be changed to the corresponding English initials – and argues that:

the text pulls the reader up sharp: in manifestly declining to be translated and thus opening up a yawning chasm in the English discourse, the passage reminds the reader that behind the words as they appear on the page there is another discourse in a different language. (15)

Such rem(a)inders can appear noticeably in transcripts as well, as with this extract from a recent interview between a 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...

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 recorder and its purpose (to be a proxy 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.

Conclusion: moving forward with transcription

Transcription, like translation, gives us a way to see and think differently:

Things become fixed that would otherwise be lost. What is apparently inconsequential becomes visible. The transcript thus serves to draw attention to an aspect of the data that was not apparent in the immersed situation of

the interview. However, these 'slips' perhaps provide analytical handles for thinking about meaning. (Watson 2006, 379)

In her beautiful book about language and identity, Eva Hoffman writes in *Lost in Translation* 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, 273). To understand that the translation and the translator are inseparable, and that the source and target texts are fundamentally irreconcilable, is not to throw up our hands in dismay and conclude that all translation is doomed to inadequacy. It is to acknowledge that translation, like transcription, like research, is an act of negotiation, not a search for perfection.

Having said that, I think I have made it clear in this paper that I believe transcription is a significant part of the meaning-making process in qualitative research, and is bound up in all sorts of power issues that come with choices about how, who and what to transcribe. Translation studies concepts and approaches, and the seriousness with which scholars in that field take issues of mutual concern to researchers and translators, offer support that could help us to make more time and space for transcription: not only to take it seriously and approach it with care and attention, but also to allow it to touch and trouble our research as a strange and bothersome task and representation of interviews as complex social interactions.

Without looking for perfection, we can still accept that we have a duty as researchers to 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 and Lindsay 1999, 66).

What I am calling for, then, is a more consistently reflexive approach to research transcription: not to add complexity, but to better explore it.

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