Chapter 10

Software-Assisted Transcribering for Qualitative Interviews: Practical Guidelines

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces a guide to transcribing qualitative research interviews assisted by digital transcription software. It also provides practical advice on transcribing methods, conventions, and options. It is useful in its exploration of the challenges involved with transcribing, while it offers detailed solutions and advice for the novice researcher. The chapter also addresses key concerns, like the time it takes to transcribe, transcription tools, and digital versus analogue recordings. As a method chapter based on experiences from a case, it takes on a practical approach by demonstrating the benefits of data analysis software packages with examples and screenshots on how to specifically use the software package Express Scribe. The pros and cons of using a transcriptionist are also discussed. A real transcript is presented in the chapter, and the steps involved with developing and formatting it are offered in detail. The guidelines suggested in this chapter are concentrated on the pragmatic hands-on experience of a researcher with examples from a real life large-scale qualitative study based on in-depth interviews. The significance of transcribing within the analytical process and the methodological insights of using Express Scribe eventually emerge as a developing concept from this work.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TRANSCRIBING

The use of audio recordings in interview studies is a popular practice that usually leads to formulating a transcript (Bowling, 2009). It is the second stage that follows the data collection (Sarangi, 2010). Transcribing the recording is therefore a significant step in qualitative research analysis, and without a transcript it would be difficult to manage the data. However, once the data collection is complete and all interviews are recorded, novice researchers might find themselves perplexed. They arrive at a stage where they have to transcribe hours and hours of recordings, usually without clear guides on how to get started. As

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DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) explain, “Transcribing tape-recorded interviews into text is a process that remains relatively unexplored” (318). Additionally, some of these recordings might be inaudible, or have other problems that would make them difficult to transcribe, like poor sentence structure (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), weak semantics or repeated interruptions. Having experienced these concerns first hand, I have a deep sympathy for researchers at this phase of the research process. Most of the literature on the practicalities of transcribing concentrates on transcribing for discourse and conversation analysis (Ruch et al., 2007; Sarangi, 2010). These works mostly focus on language or conversation, while generally sharing a single set of detailed conventions for transcribing (Parry, 2010). The type of detailed transcription described in these studies is intimidating for someone new to research. They demonstrate techniques for phonetic verbatim transcription to methodically capture every nuance and utter. I felt undue pressure to produce similar transcripts. I then turned my focus towards examples of interview transcripts, and sought guidance on various options and approaches from similar studies and simpler guidelines (Bailey, 2008; Bird, 2005; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Silverman, 2001, 2005, 2006; Tilley, 2003; Webb, 1999). I then realized that I did not need to conform to the particulars of discourse analysis techniques, allowing me to focus on how and what to transcribe. This chapter aims to provide some guidance in this area from the perspective of a qualitative researcher with hands on experience.

TRANSCRIPTING QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

What to Transcribe

When transcribing most qualitative research interviews, it is not always be necessary to capture every utterance, pause and enunciation with the level of detail specifically required for conversation analysis research. Still, it might be useful to look at these standards as a ‘rough’ guide, and to apply your own techniques as needed. Decide how much detail is actually needed for the purpose of your study. Parry (2010) explains that there are different ways of structuring transcripts to meet the needs of a particular investigation. Therefore, you should not worry about having to conform to specific conventions so long as you are consistent. The resulting transcript should also be legible and formatted for analysis. As a qualitative researcher you are an interpreter and the research instrument in your study (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Silverman, 2005, 2006), so your involved decisions are part of the process. It is not always necessary to record every hand gesture or vocalization, but you may feel the need to note an overly animated action. For example, you can emphasize laughter, chuckles, sighs, raised voices as well as outwardly non-verbal occurrences like hand gestures, nodding, fidgeting or other exaggerated movements. You should also think about how you want to deal with interruptions, pauses, stutters, overlapping speech, silence, muffled phrases, ‘ums’ and recording problems. The resulting type of transcript will also rely on decisions made during the interview. If these are not made early on, it might be too late to get the required results after the fact. Those decisions are left to the researcher depending on what type of study they are conducting and what the resulting transcript should include. As Miles and Huberman (1994) explain, “the transcription of tapes can be done in many ways that will produce rather different texts” (p. 9).

There are no concrete rules on exactly what to transcribe. Sarangi (2010) explains that “transcription has to be fit for purpose rather than just an application of a standard set of conventions” (p. 400). For example, in most ethnographic studies recording may not even be an option and researchers fully rely on field notes. Some might question the need to record the interview, or transcribe it at all. It is possible and acceptable to only take