

Transcription as Methodology: Using Transcription Tasks to Assess Language Attitudes

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When speech is represented in text, transcribers construct, through spelling and other means, identities of the speakers that are consistent with their own perceptions. Many researchers, including Preston, Kerswill & Williams, and Ochs, have warned linguists against the biases they may create in their transcripts, since spelling and other decisions are not created in a social vacuum and convey to readers strong assumptions about the general “standardness” of the transcribed speakers. In the current study, I assess this relationship between speech and transcription by asking novice transcribers to evaluate and transcribe several speech samples, and I find that novice transcriptions provide a powerful indirect method for studying language attitudes and ideologies.

In this study, I asked twenty-eight freshmen at the University of Michigan to listen to recordings of four different speech varieties (Southern Appalachian English, African American English, non-stigmatized American English, and British English) on two separate topics (teaching styles and wedding dresses) and transcribe these samples. The listeners were then asked to evaluate the speakers on a five-point Likert Scale for educational background, friendliness, and linguistic similarity to the listeners, and to justify these ranking in an open-ended response section.

I analyzed these data with multivariate statistical techniques that assess the relative effects of topic, speaker, and listener information on evaluations of the speakers and rates of non-standard spellings in the transcriptions. Results indicate that listeners represent with a greater number of respellings the samples from the speakers of stigmatized linguistic varieties (Southern Appalachian English being the most frequently respelled) and those in which speakers talked about an education-neutral topic (wedding dresses as opposed to teaching). The frequency of respellings also correlated significantly with listeners’ evaluations of speakers’ education and linguistic similarity to the listener.

The link found here between the transcription and evaluative tasks suggests the usefulness of transcription as an empirical means of examining language ideologies and attitudes. Not only do listeners see standard spelling as representing their own linguistic varieties, they see it as best suited to “educated” varieties. For instance, while Southern Appalachian English and British English both differ phonologically from the varieties spoken by the listeners, the Southern Appalachian sample is respelled significantly more frequently than the British English sample, corresponding to the much higher ratings for education received by the British English speaker. Further, the respelling differences between the two topics discussed by the same speakers suggest that the frequency of respelling is not simply an outcome of speech variety, but a function of the educational level participants attribute to the speakers. Finally, in open-ended questions, participants’ justifications of their evaluations demonstrate an awareness of speech varieties and the ideologies associated with those varieties. These results help to show how attitudes toward speakers are formed, what assumptions people make about linguistic varieties and standard spelling, and how the task of transcription is processed and performed. Thus, novice transcriptions may be employed as a powerful research tool.