# Taping, Typing and Trusting: Confessions of a Transcriber

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When I embark on an oral history project I do everything myself - I tape the interviews, transcribe them, organise to have them checked and approved for publication by the repondents, then try to find an effective way to present those interviews to the reader - to ensconce the transcriptions in a readable and coherent written presentation. I've been interviewing people for various reasons since 1970, and from the experience of conducting hundreds of interviews - and transcribing the resulting tapes - I've come to a few conclusions that don't gibe too well with accepted professional and academic data-gathering orthodoxy.

**Words alone are not enough**

In the course of taping and transcribing all these conversations over the years, I am repeatedly impressed by how different interviews seem when I am transcribing them compared to what I felt about them driving away with the warm tape in my bag. It's happened too many times not to warrant attention - I drive away from an interview feeling that there was much of value in what had been said, only to find that after transcription it turns out not to be quite the mother-lode of usefulness that I felt it was when I was in the midst of taping it. Not that it's useless, just that it turns out to be not nearly as good as I thought it was. And, perhaps more significantly, the opposite happens too. Many's the time I've been surprised at how much good stuff there is, after I'd typed it up, in an interview that I'd felt was a tad lucklustre while it was being taped.

I'm sure that I'm not the first researcher to have experiences like this, but nonetheless I'd like to reflect for a moment on the implications that this aspect of the interviewing/ transcription process holds for orthodox oral history methodology, and to do this I want

to look closer at the act of transcription itself.

Many of the people that I have interviewed are from rural areas, and quite a number of them, especially the men, have turned out to be not particularly articulate - which is not to say that they don't have something to contribute - it's just that saying exactly what they mean doesn't necessarily come easily to many of them. It is not part of their culture to be fluently articulate.To many, even to be interviewed is more than a little daunting - it's something outside their everyday experience. For example, it is a very common conversational practice to leave sentences unfinished, just hanging there. It seems to me that this happens most when the speaker feels that s/he doesn't need to actually complete the sentence because what is left unfinished will be understood from either the construction of the sentence or from what has gone before in the conversation. So I often find that, when transcribing a tape, if I type out only the actual words that are said I finish up with words printed on the paper that are either misleading or whose precise meaning is unclear.

So, what to do? The hallowed tenets of Objectivity tell me that I should only traffick in what is *actually* said, and rigorously exclude anything that could be called "subjective" on my part. Objectivity, as I conceive it, is something we strive for, rather than ever arrive at - a sort of methodological compass. But subjectivity plays a positive role in the whole process too, and it is a role that I feel is too often overlooked. There is a considerable element of subjectivity involved in the interview process, and subjectivity doesn't have to be a no-no. Understood and harnessed properly it can enrich and give added meaning to otherwise arid literal transcriptions.

I think it is very important to remember that the interview is a *social transaction*. There is a whole lot more happening as the tape is rolling than just recording the sound of words being uttered. There's a lot to be processed in the interviewer's head while in the midst of the interview, a lot to keep track of. And there is eye-contact, there is body-language, there is the constantly renegotiated feeling-tone of the social context and the sense of rapport or otherwise of the people doing the conversing. There is no shortage of literature about communication skills that stresses the importance of these factors - the slight nod, a raised eyebrow, a grimace. A sentence delivered with a wry smile playing around the speaker's lips can change the meaning radically from what is conveyed by only the words themselves - for instance, when the speaker is being ironic, or sarcastic. These non-verbal aspects are an integral part of any conversation, and are crucial to an understanding of the meaning that is intended, yet they are lost in a strictly literal transcription.

Time after time I find myself transcribing a passage, only to realise that the actual words on the tape don't convey the meaning that I know the speaker intended. I was there at the recording, and I know what the speaker was on about, because I was subjectively involved in the conversation - in the transmission of meaning - and the meaning was clear to me because all those things that make up the social context enhanced my understanding of what was being said in a way that the words on their own could not convey. That is to say, my subjective involvement in the social act of conversing and recording is actually an *advantage* methodologically - something to be acknowledged and used, rather than seen as a hindrance to objectivity.

Consequently, it is not unusual for me to rearrange whole sentences while I am tran-

scribing, so that their meaning is not garbled by the hesitations and re-starts and mid-sentence revisions or digressions of everyday speech. And it is a very rare interview indeed that doesn't need whole paragraphs and slabs of subject-matter repositioned in the conversation so that topics are dealt with in an appropriately organised manner. To my mind, this amalgam of methodological and social awareness can be a sharp tool in the hands of a sensitive interviewer/transcriber. It has been pointed out to me that the danger of doing things this way is that I might be wrong in my understandings - I might end up attributing something to the respondent that they didn't mean, or unwittingly distorting what they meant. But there is a safeguard against this happening, because the transcript is returned to the respondent for them to check that I haven't got anything wrong. If I have, they soon tell me. So, I see the role of the interviewer/transcriber not as a mere mechanical recorder of the spoken word, but as something more akin to a kind of midwife who assists with the delivery of meaning. ( I should say at this point that none of this is to suggest that the colloquial feel and informality of oral testimony should be sacrificed in the process. Sometimes I transcribe material that is not strictly relevant to the topic simply because it conveys the richness of vernacular expression and warrants inclusion on its own account. In a recent conversation with some old-time timbergetters I was captivated by expressions such as: "Andy was so skinny he never shot a shadder" and "I dunno why she went into hospital - I think she had her valves taken out.")

But consider for a moment what is becoming increasingly common practice among 'professional' oral historians - the sort of people who get funding from a large institution to write an oral history of some aspect of their organisational past, for example. Oral historians with a grant of some sort may or may not do the interviews themselves. If the grant is generous enough to allow it they would likely hire interviewers to do the legwork for them, and most would contract out the transcription of the the tapes to avoid what is generally considered to be a tedious task that can be relegated to somebody with typing skills. But unless the person doing the transcribing is the same person who was conducting the interview, all of these other things we've just looked at are not taken into account - all those crucial modifiers of meaning that are going on in the complex social situation that is the interview. The baldness of typescript leaches much from the human richness of a conversation, and farming out the transcription seems to me to maximise the distance between the two.

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Another aspect of professional oral history practice that I'd like to question is the practice of having the interviewee sign a formal Release Form giving permission for their transcriptions to be published. I understand the reasoning behind this - it is a prudent thing to do. But it is something that I find difficult to do, again because of the essentially social nature of the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewed.

I'm always impressed with how much people are prepared to divulge to a stranger. Every time I go back to them with the final transcript so they can have a final check, I just can't bring myself to then ask them to sign a formal Release, even though I have been advised that not to do so is "unprofessional". But to me, what I'd be saying, in effect, is: "Here, sign this because I don't trust you not to sue me over something in the future" and suddenly assumptions of litigiousness and distrust are introduced into the social relationship between both parties, and I'm not comfortable with that.

But, I've been asked, what if someone changes their mind, or goes senile and *does* want to sue you over something you've published once it has appeared? Well, as a sort of commonsense hedge against this, I deliver or mail the final transcript with a covering letter asking the respondent to consider it carefully as it is the last chance they'll have to make changes before it is published. Then I make follow-up phone calls to get their OK, and make any alterations they specify. I'd rather maintain the rapport and trust of my respondents than risk alienating them by trying to cover myself against the unlikely event of legal action. (Mind you, one day I may come to rue this approach, but it's a risk I'm prepared to take.)

Respondents are more than just raw data repositories to be exploited by researchers for their own purposes. Without the respondent's testimony the oral history project would not exist, and for me the social relationship with the respondent is not finished as soon as the transcript is approved. Everyone that I interview gets a complimentary copy of the ensuing publication as a token of my appreciation of their co-operation and help. This can be costly sometimes, but I think that the money is better spent that way than paying someone to do the transcription, (which these days can set you back quite a bit).

These remarks are not applicable to all oral history projects. Obviously some projects are so large that it would be impossible for one person to do both interviewing and transcribing, and obviously some projects may be controversial and more prone to possible litigation. However, these days the separation of interviewer and transcriber in the research process, and the *de rigeur* garnering of signed Releases are coming to be regarded as signifiers of professionalism and orthodox 'best practice'. But at what cost?

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