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Verbal interactions and their transcription

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How to transcribe verbal interactions

The following guidelines is based on “Tool 17 Spoken materials and their transcription” (by Johannes Schwitalla from *The SPICES Guidelines 2007*: pp.116–121¹) and is adapted to the purpose of RADAR.

To get a knowledge about normally occurring verbal (words), paraverbal (voice) and nonverbal (body) communication processes between interlocutors, it is important to fix them in written form. This is even more important for the aim of detecting sources of miscommunication and misunderstanding. For practical reasons within the framework of the RADAR-project, we propose the following system of transcription.

In all cases one needs a tape or video recording of the interaction. Stretches of talk must be heard several times in order to note all details which one wants to be fixed. For non experts this becomes an exercise which needs a certain amount of practice before one feels comfortable in transcribing.

Before beginning with the transcript itself it is important to note information about the transcribed interaction. The cover (1st page of the transcript) should contain the following information:

- Place (institution) of the interaction
- Date (and time)
- Interactants: list of real names (not to be disseminated!) coordinated to their fictional names or list of functions/roles; abbreviations of names or functions/roles with possible explanations
- Persons who recorded and transcribed the text
- Perhaps: A name for the transcript, e.g.: “Immigration Office, No. 1” and a short description.

For reasons of discretion, the real names of persons, places, cities, institutions etc. occurring in the speech are not given to the reader, but must be substituted by fictional ones. We suggest using pseudo-names with the same number of syllables and culturally coherent.

There is a ten-steps guide on how to transcribe a conversation, taking into account also some paraverbal and nonverbal aspects.

Layout

Before introducing the ten steps, one must organise a layout that will make the transcription process easier, using a simple word programme for tables. Before commencing the transcription of the words attributing them to the relative speakers, it is necessary to create a table with 3 columns and a few rows (Initially the number of rows is not important; during the course of the transcription more rows can be added):

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

One must now insert the maximum width of each column (if necessary, even this can be changed during the transcription) with right alignment for columns 1 and 2, and left alignment for column 3, with single spacing:

| Col 1 | Col 2 | Col 3 |
|-------|-------|-------|
| 1,25 | 1,5 | 12 cm |
| | | |

- The row numbers are inserted in the first column from the left (this can be done automatically but only on completion of the document)
- The codes for the speakers/participants of the interaction are placed in the second column;

- The third column is used to insert the utterances of each speaker, eventual comments about the circumstances and the body language of a participant in the interactive communication, even if he/she does not speak. For each speaker/turn (or even comment) a new row is inserted.

The ten steps, which are presented below, are the following:

Step 1: Transcribing the words

Step 2: The speakers and turn taking

Step 3: Pauses between words and turns

Step 4: Stress of vowels

Step 5: Stretching of sounds

Step 6: Intonation of words

Step 7: Speed of words or whole sequences

Step 8: Volume of words or whole sequences

Step 9: Action comments

Step 10: Numbering of the lines

Step 1: Transcribing the words

Transcribe the words as faithfully as possible, always attributing them to the relative speaker. Identify the speakers and the relative turns.

It is important to transcribe the exact articulation of a word as the transcriber actually hears it, not as the transcriber thinks it should be articulated. Speakers, speaking to an addressee with the same language, often shorten the full phonetic form of a word and/or reduce the quality of vowels.

In transcripts of conversations between two or more interlocutors, we should use just one cell for one turn. This makes transcribing and reading much easier. We write only in small letters in order to use capital letters for special purposes (namely stress and COMMENTS) and we write only sounds (vowels, consonants) we really hear: If a word is not fully spoken we write exactly as we hear the sounds. We use a non-proportional font, such as Courier New 10; this makes the annotation of overlapping speech stretches easier and distinguishes it in a publication from the main text.

Transcription of verbal phenomena

| | |
|--|--|
| i will not arrive in paris before nine (...) | use of the normal orthographic conventions, with the only exception being the use of small letters throughout, thereby reserving the use of capital letters for special purposes |
| (arrive) | incomprehensible words; more points mean a longer stretch of blurred utterances word presumably uttered; when the transcriber cannot be completely sure of the exact wording |

examples for English:

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| univ' amn' t | interrupted for <i>university</i> instead of <i>I am not</i> (formed by analogy with other contractions such as <i>don't</i> or <i>won't</i>) |
| I ha' to go | incomplete words motivated by sound of the following word, often in quick speech: <i>I have/had to go</i> |

examples for Italian:

| | |
|--------------|---|
| indi' 'na | interrupted for <i>indiretto</i> instead of the complete Italian article 'una' used in some dialects and/or as |
|--------------|---|

il tren' è
veloce

typical form of the spoken variety in certain regions and/or within a certain social network
incomplete words motivated by sound of the following word, often in quick speech: *il tren' è veloce*

After writing down the wording of the utterances, the transcriber concentrates on specific phenomena of speech. We suggest to mark the following features: beginnings of overlaps, pauses, stress, intonation, speed, volume. Each of these characteristics must be listened to separately. That means that the transcriber must hear the same utterance unit several times.

Step 2: The speakers and turn taking

Identify the speakers and the relative turns, as well as the overlapping sequences and note the beginning and possibly also the end with square brackets:

```
1 STUDENT good morning mister [smith how are you      ]
2 TEACHER                [good morning misses klein]
```

Step 3: Pauses

Concentrating on pauses between words as well as between turns.

| | | |
|-----|-------------------|---|
| | | pauses: |
| * | do you * really | brief pause |
| ** | do you ** really | medium pause |
| *** | do you *** really | long pause |
| *8* | do you *8* really | very long pause with an indication of the number of seconds |

Step 4: Stress

Concentrate on syllables pronounced with particular emphasis and mark the vowel(s) with capital letters.

sO marked stress of the vowel "O"

Step 5: Stretching

Concentrate on sounds which are pronounced in a particular lengthening way.

no long vowel "o"

Step 6: Intonation

Concentrate on falling and rising intonation at the end of an utterance unit (sentence).

Falling intonation is marked with a backslash \, rising intonation with a slash /:

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|
| do you have your pAssport with you/ | rising intonation |
| you have your pAssport with you\ | falling intonation |

Step 7: Speed

Note only particularly evident changes of speed in the speech production, that is when a speaker speaks remarkably faster or slower. As for other observations of the transcriber, we put the quality of speech production in double angle brackets as below:

| | |
|--|------------------------------------|
| <<FAST: d' y' 've you' pAssport with you>> | a notably faster speed, compressed |
| <<SLOW: do you have your pAssport with you>> | a notably slower speed, stretched |

Step 8: Volume

Analogously, note only very loud or very soft speaking.

<<LOUD: i can oblige you>> a sequence transmitted notably louder
<<SOFT: ah i forgot it>> a sequence transmitted notably softer

Step 9: Action comments

Take note of nonverbal but relevant communicative phenomena – in other words, what we communicate through a particular way of speaking and body language;

<<LAUGHS>> occurs between two speech sequences
<<SMILING: okay>> *okay* is pronounced with a smiling lip position
<<LAUGHING: (...)>> occurs simultaneously to non understandable speech
<<COUGHS>> relevant only if intentional; occurs between two speech sequences
<<AFFIRMATIVE: hm hm>> affirmative listener signals

and any other information about the specific context and the situation may be put in angle brackets

<<BACKGROUND MUSIC>>
<<A WOMAN ENTERS THE ROOM>>
<<A DOOR CLOSES>>
<<LOOKING AT THE PATIENT'S HISTORY when you came for your last visit/
RAISING HIS EYES TO LOOK AT THE PATIENT>>

Action comments and other contextual and situational information are noted in CAPITAL LETTERS.

Step 10: Numbering of the lines

In order to make the transcription more precise it is worthwhile hearing the whole sequence once again. Then the automatic numbering of the lines can be inserted in the left hand column.

In order to insert the automatic numbering command, highlight the column from the top and each cell will be numbered. In order to number each line within a cell, position the cursor on the number on the cell's column, add a space with the spacer and press 'enter': A number will be inserted in the so far un-numbered line, and so on. The advantage of this is that any previous numbering will be changed accordingly. In this way you do not have to correct previous numbering manually, if further additions to the already transcribed text should be necessary.

Summary of the symbols

x stands for a letter

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| | <u>words not fully pronounced</u> |
| \x | at the beginning |
| x' | at the end |
| x'x | between syllables |
| | <u>intonation of syllables</u> |
| x/ | voice rising |
| x\ | voice falling |
| [xxxxxxx] [xxxxxxxxxxx] | <u>overlapping speech</u> |
| | <u>pauses</u> |
| * | short |
| ** | medium |
| *** | long |
| *sec* | very long with indication of the length of seconds taken |
| | <u>stress</u> |
| xxXxx | single capital letter indicates emphasis on vowel |
| | <u>stretch</u> |
| xxx <u>x</u> | single underlined letter indicates a long sound |
| | <u>speed (annotation in CAPITAL LETTERS)</u> |
| <<FAST>> | high speed |
| <<SLOW>> | slow speed |
| | <u>volume (annotation in CAPITAL LETTERS)</u> |
| <<LOUD>> | high volume |
| <<SOFT>> | low volume |
| | <u>comments (annotation in CAPITAL LETTERS)</u> |
| <<COMMENT>> | action comment |
| <<COMMENT>> | information about context of situation |

ⁱ From SPICES Guidelines 2007 with some modifications:

Klein Gabriella B. (ed.), SPICES Guidelines. A training method for intercultural communication in institutional settings (with contributions by Sandro Caruana, Koffi M. Dossou, Gabriella B. Klein, David Lasagabaster, Galya Mateva, Nataša Pirih Svetina, Johannes Schwitalla). Perugia: Key & Key Communications, 2007 (ISBN 978-88-95887-03-6).