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Transcription as Methodology: Using Transcription Tasks to Assess Language Attitudes

Transcription as Methodology: Using Transcription Tasks to Assess Language Attitudes*

Jennifer Nguyen

1 Introduction

The way in which researchers portray speakers in writing has long been a subject of discussion among linguists and anthropologists. Preston (1982, 1985), Ochs (1979) and others have commented on the ideologies involved in the way researchers write down what speakers say. While these comments are intended to guide transcribers, the connection they illuminate between language ideologies and transcriptions suggests a method for the study of language attitudes. In this project, I use experimental methods to examine the meanings conveyed by modes of spellings in transcriptions.

2 Background

2.1 Ideologies of Transcription

When researchers write down what speakers say, they face questions about the kinds of spellings to use. The patterns they decide on may represent transcribers' conscious or subconscious ideologies about the speakers, or they may be an attempt to accurately portray the linguistic variety used by the speaker, with no evaluative stance. Preston (1982, 1985) has suggested that non-standard spellings introduce biases against speakers. Preston (1985) tests this assumption by presenting subjects with a transcript of a constructed conversation. In the transcript, some "speakers" are transcribed with non-standard spellings, while other speakers are transcribed entirely with standard spelling. In comparing speakers who were represented with non-standard spellings with those who were not, Preston found that the inclusion of any non-standard spellings lowered subjects' evaluations of the speakers' social class.

Not all researchers, however, agree with Preston about the danger of non-standard spellings in transcriptions. For example, West (1996) defends the use of these spellings in order to introduce characteristics of speech pro-

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duction into a transcription for linguistic research purposes. Also, Ochs (1979) cautions transcribers against standardizing spellings, arguing that this masks features of the interactions, such as word play. While Ochs' specific concerns are with transcriptions of children used to examine language development, her remarks apply more generally; a researcher committed to standard spellings is indicating that the important details of the transcribed speech are the content. Non-standard spellings indicate, for better or worse, that the transcriber finds information other than the ideas conveyed in the utterance to be important in evaluating the data.

At the heart of the disagreement on spelling patterns in transcriptions is the paradox that while transcripts take a written form, they are intended to represent spoken language. As Milroy & Milroy (1991:141) point out, people untrained in linguistics tend to refer to spoken language in terms of written language (e.g. speakers of English refer to forms such as 'teachin' for 'teaching' as missing the 'g'). When respellings occur in transcripts, the (ideal, unbiased) linguist would evaluate these spellings in terms of the spoken variety the transcriber is attempting to portray, without the inference that the respellings reflect the transcriber's value judgment of the speaker's variety. When non-linguists read such transcripts, however, they may assume that "bad" spellings are the transcriber's means of conveying "bad" speech. Thus, one wonders how non-linguists' assumptions might carry over to a transcription task. We would expect to see systematic spelling variation among novice transcribers who hold evaluative ideologies about the speakers they transcribe. In the current study, participants are presented with four speakers who represent a continuum of stigmatized varieties of English; we would expect participants to use non-standard spellings more frequently for speakers of more stigmatized varieties.

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants

The listeners who participated in the study were freshmen at the University of Michigan, were native speakers of English, and had no background in linguistics. They participated voluntarily, not as a part of any class, and were paid for their participation. The participants consisted of ten non-African American females, ten non-African American males, seven African American females, and one African American male.

3.2 Instrument

The speakers recorded for this project, all women, represent four speech varieties: Southern Appalachian English, African American English, Non-stigmatized U.S. English, and British English. Among the speakers are one senior undergraduate, two doctoral students, and one lecturer who had recently received her doctoral degree at the time of recording.

Each speaker provided two speech samples, one discussing the kind of wedding dress the speaker would buy if she were getting married, and the other describing the kind of teacher the speaker would like to be if she were to become a teacher. These speech samples ranged from 30 seconds to just over one minute in length. After the recordings were made, they were arranged on four audio cassettes, such that each cassette had one of the samples from each speaker and two of the four samples on each cassette were of the wedding dress topic, and two were of the teaching topic. Each cassette began with a different speaker to avoid an order effect. Further, since the Southern Appalachian and African American varieties were hypothesized to be the more stigmatized varieties in the sample, the samples for these two speakers consisted of different topics on each cassette, avoiding the possibility of participants hearing both stigmatized varieties in the wedding dress topic, which is hypothesized to be rated lower than the teaching topic. Thus, while six possible combinations of the speakers and topics were available, only four were used.

3.3 Procedure

The participants in this study completed two tasks, transcribing the speakers and evaluating them. In all cases, these tasks were completed in one session. Participants completed the tasks in the researcher's office or in another room in a college campus building. At most, two participants were assigned to the same room. They listened to the samples on standard audio cassette players with headphones, and were told that they could stop the cassette tape and rewind it as frequently as they needed to.

Before beginning the task, participants were told what topics to expect, and cautioned that although the topics were about wedding dresses or teaching, these were hypothetical examples and did not indicate that the speakers were getting married or wanted to be teachers. The participants were instructed not only to transcribe the speakers on the cassettes "word-for-word," but also to transcribe the samples such that anyone reading their transcriptions would "get the same impression of the speaker that the participants got listening to the samples." Most students asked for clarification on these in-

structions, and were told that they could represent speakers in any way they wanted, that dictionary spellings were not required. Examples 1 and 2 below show typed versions of two of the transcriptions produced by participants. The first is a transcription of the British English speaker's teaching sample and the second, of the Southern Appalachian speaker's teaching sample.

- (1) "The teacher I wunt to be is moore like uh facilitater I...I wunt the clawss to be a kind uf learning community in which I help people to lurn. Umm, but when they leave the clawss they will be able to continue lurhning on their own – so I don't wunt to be kind of standing up there preaching, but I, I wunt to be moore like uh manager. And one of the most important things I think for me in a classroom is cra-ating a kind uv community where the students cahn also help each other so thot they're not working as individuals oll the time, but working together end learning frome wone another ahs well ahs learning frome me. Um, so I think uf my clossroom ahs a community of learning."
- (2) "Ah railyly want to bae more uv uh dIErect-or then teacher. Ah wunt to dIErect research. Ah'm very happy to have discussion in cl ss about anything that they directed to doen' they're research, but what I wunt to do is DIErect the research. So, I wunt to introduce students to the fiewld if they have no introduction, end I wunt to show them the work that's been dunne, and then help them to fashion they're OWN research pr jects. I wunt them to collect d ta, do data analysis, write uh proposal, write uh conference paper en actully present the conference paper end Ah wunht them to have eh handout with that, so that is mhy ahproach to teachin'."

After transcribing each speech sample, students were asked to answer two pages of questions that were intended to elicit their impressions of the speakers. Among these questions were three five-point Likert-scales that asked participants to rate how educated, how similar to their own speech, and how friendly the speakers were, and to justify each evaluation. Students were instructed to justify their impressions only when they could pinpoint the reasons for evaluating speakers the way they did; they were told that when they could not identify exactly what made them rate a speaker in a certain way, they were to leave that section blank, but were not supposed to change their ratings. In nearly all cases, students chose to justify their evaluations. Students were also asked to select speakers' ethnic group and place of origin, provide reasons for those selections, and guess the speakers' occupation. Finally, students were asked to provide some personal informa-

tion, such as their age, gender, and dialect background. The participants were told that the study would last approximately an hour and a half. While some required only 40 minutes to complete the tasks, others spent as long as two and a half hours. Students received \$15 for their participation in the study.

Figures 1 and 2 are scanned copies of the evaluation sheets that one participant completed in response to the Southern Appalachian speaker:

Speaker 4

(1a) What level of education do you think this speaker has attained? Less than high school High school Trade school / Community College College Graduate School

(1b) Please explain which characteristics about the speaker or sample led you to your answer. Give example, if possible. *She uses the same words numerous times in the same sentence and often repeats the same idea.*

(2a) How friendly is this speaker: Unfriendly 1 2 3 4 5 Very Friendly

(2b) Please explain which characteristics about the speaker or sample led you to your answer. Give example, if possible. *While it sounds conversational, I think she might have been speaking to someone who asked her about the dress, so she just got off on a tangent.*

(3a) How similar is this speaker's speech to yours? Not similar at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very similar

(3b) In what ways is the speaker's speech similar to yours? *I will occasionally repeat words in a sentence.*

(3c) In what way is it different from yours? *I usually don't repeat them as much as she did.*

Figure 1: Likert-scale evaluation sheet

(4) How old do you think this speaker is? Why do you think so?

She's probably in her mid-twenties
She has a very mature voice.

(5) Where do you think this speaker is from? What makes you think so?

A southern state. She speaks with
a southern accent.

(6) What ethnic group do you think this speaker belongs to? (circle one of the following)

White African American Latino Southeast Asian Indian Native American
Other (please specify)

(6b) Why do you think so?

She just sounds white. (there are subtle differences
between the vocal chords of different ethnic groups)

(7) If you had to guess what this person does for a living, what would you guess? Why?

She doesn't sound like she has
much of an education, so she is
probably a house wife or works some
low-end job.

Figure 2: Open-ended question sheet

4 Data Analysis

4.1 Scoring and Modeling

In this study, data were collected for two independent variables (topic and speech variety) and four dependent variables (non-standard spellings in the transcriptions and evaluation data for education level, linguistic similarity of speaker to respondent, and friendliness).

After the data were collected, I calculated the percentage of words represented with non-standard spellings for each speech sample (these are referred to here as respellings). Obvious spelling mistakes were not counted; for example, if *computer* were spelled '*computor*,' this would not count as a respelling, whereas a spelling of '*kompyuder*' would be considered a respelling.

Since some transcribers used respellings much more frequently than others, a method was needed for comparing the resulting percentages. Thus, a mean was calculated for each transcriber, and this mean was subtracted from the percentage of respelling for each transcript the transcriber made, normalizing the mean at zero. The resulting score is the respelling mean used in the calculations below. The remaining dependent variables, the results of the Likert-scales, did not need to be normalized; raw scores for the Likert-scales are reported.

4.2 Effects of Independent Variables on Outcome Variables

The first step in demonstrating a relationship between the two types of outcome variables measured here, respellings and subjective evaluations, is to establish that the outcomes are meaningful in being significantly related to the stimulus variables. In this section, I present the effects that the stimulus variables, language variety, and topic have on the outcomes.

Table 1 shows the mean scores of the outcomes per each independent variable; the F-values and significance levels provided in Table 1 were derived using General Linear Modeling, which controls for each of the remaining independent variables when testing for the effect of each individual variable.

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables			
	Respelling	Education Level	Similarity	Friendliness
Speech Varieties	$F=28.41^{**}$	$F=12.88^{**}$	$F=12.18^{**}$	$F=5.26^*$
South. Appalachian	+5.93	2.89	1.86	3.54
African Amer.	-1.68	3.71	3.04	4.07
Non-stig. Amer.	-2.97	3.18	3.36	3.82
British	-1.29	4.21	2.43	3.25
Topic	$F=8.53^*$	$F=31.26^{**}$	$F=8.44^*$	$F=12.96^{**}$
Wedding	+1.31	3.04	2.38	3.95
Teaching	-1.31	3.96	2.96	3.39

Table 1: Mean Scores and F-values of Independent Predictors on Dependent Outcomes

* $p < .01$ ** $p < .001$

In Table 1, since the respelling rates are centered at zero for each participant, the positive numbers indicate high levels of respellings and negative

numbers, lower levels. The remaining three dependent variables, speakers' estimated levels of education, friendliness, and similarity to the speech of participants have means of one through five, with the higher means indicating higher levels of rated education, friendliness, and similarity.

As Table 1 shows, both independent variables, speaker and topic, have significant effects on each of the four outcome variables. Figures 3 through 6 illustrate the mean scores of each combination of speaker and topic on respelling rates and evaluations of education, linguistic similarity, and friendliness.

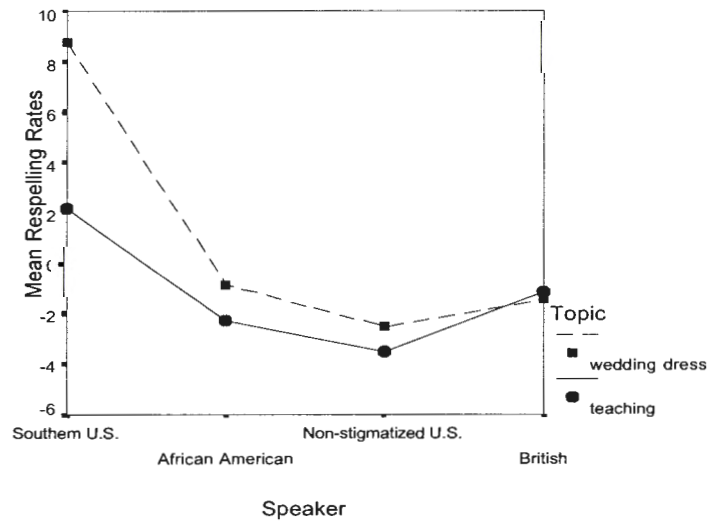


Figure 3: Mean Rates of Respelling per Speaker and Topic

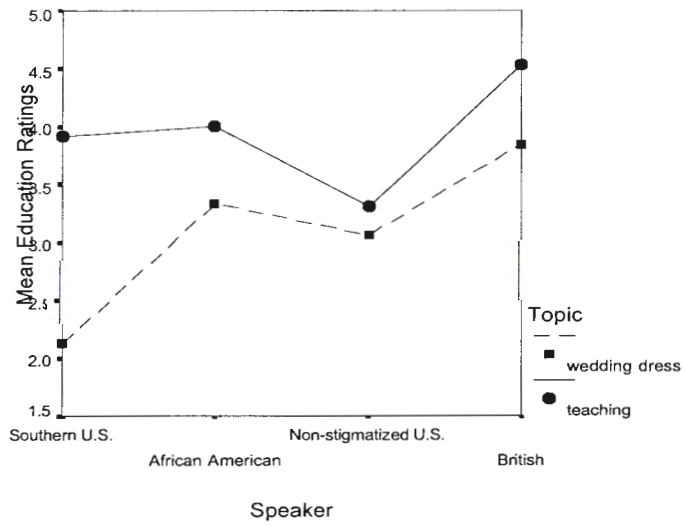


Figure 4: Mean Education Evaluations per Speaker and Topic

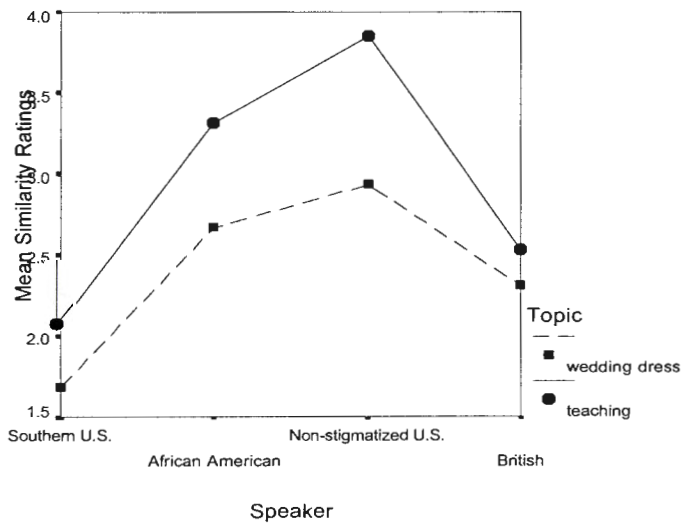


Figure 5: Mean Similarity Ratings per Speaker and Topic

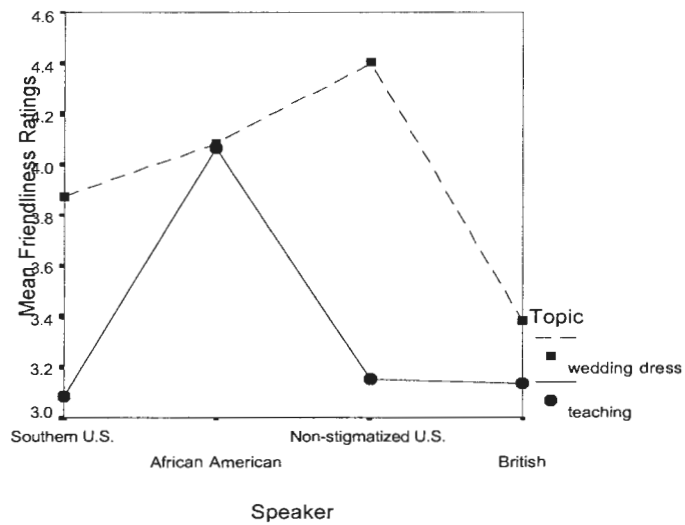


Figure 6: Mean Friendliness Ratings per Speaker and Topic

4.2 Relationships between Outcome Variables

We have determined that the stimulus variables of speaker and topic are significant predictors of all four outcome variables. We now must look at the relationships that exist among the outcome variables in order to explore the meanings of the respellings in the transcripts. To address this question, I use a General Linear Model with ratings of education, similarity, and friendliness as predictors and the respelling rate as the outcome. Table 2 provides these results:

Predictor	F-score of Effect on Respelling Rate
Education	4.533*
Similarity	3.656*
Friendliness	.376

Table 2: F-scores of evaluation ratings on rates of respelling

* $p < .01$

Pearson Correlation Coefficients are used to examine the relationships among the three Likert-scale evaluations. These tests show a significant positive correlation between ratings of education and similarity, at a level of

$p < .05$, meaning that as educational ratings increased, so did ratings for similarity. Likewise, a positive correlation exists between similarity and friendliness at a level of significance of $p < .05$. This shows that the more similar a speaker is rated as being, the friendlier she is considered. Among these Likert-scale variables, only education level and friendliness failed to show a significant correlation.

5 Analysis of Results

Section 4 described many statistically significant relationships among the variables in this study. Speech variety and topic determined both the types of spellings that were used in the transcriptions and the evaluations of speakers' education, friendliness, and linguistic similarity to the participants. The Southern Appalachian samples were rated the lowest for education and similarity and had the most respellings. The British English speaker, while rated the highest for education level, received the lowest scores for friendliness.

A great deal more could be said here about these effects of independent variables on evaluations, and parallels could be drawn between the conclusions of this study and the results of prior language attitude studies. The focus of this research, however, is to examine the correlations among the dependent variables and investigate the question laid out at the beginning of this project: what meanings do spellings in transcripts convey? The participants' decisions to use non-standard spellings is clearly ideologically motivated. For instance, the novice transcribers here systematically chose to use more respellings to represent speakers they rate as less educated and less similar to themselves than they use for speakers rated as highly educated and linguistically similar.

The close correlation between ratings of education and similarity demonstrates the linguistic security of the participants. Since most speakers in this study come from Michigan, these results corroborate language attitude studies such as Hartley and Preston (1999) that find Michigan speakers to be highly linguistically secure. Further, the significant effects of both education and similarity ratings, even when controlling for the other, on respellings suggest that for linguistically secure participants, evaluations of education and linguistic similarity, as well as modes of spelling, together indicate the level of prestige accorded by participants to each speech sample. Whether the correlation between respellings and linguistic similarity evaluations would exist among participants less linguistically secure than college students in Michigan is an interesting question for further study.

It might be possible to suggest that some of the varieties in this study are transcribed with more non-standard spellings than others because of popular-

ized conventions of transcribing some dialects. This possibility would mitigate the effect of ideologies about written language on the rates of respellings. In other words, participants may respell Southern Appalachian English more than British English simply because they are more frequently exposed to modes of writing Southern English, rather than because they find British English to be more prestigious. If this were the case, the rates of respelling should be a function only of the speech variety being transcribed. However, the results in the previous section indicate that this is not the case. Speakers are transcribed with significantly different respelling rates across the two topics. The samples about what sort of teacher the speaker would like to be evokes higher evaluations for education and similarity, and, importantly, lower rates of respelling than the same speakers' wedding dress samples. Clearly, the topic of the samples not only affects participants' perception of the speakers, but also, by extension, the degree to which participants see the speech varieties being represented by standard spellings.

6 Conclusions

The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, it is intended to follow up on the transcription research of Preston and others by providing an empirical investigation of the ideologies conveyed through transcripts. Preston found that non-standard spellings convey negative impressions of the speakers to transcript readers. Likewise, this study finds, at least for novice transcribers, that spelling decisions result from an evaluation of speakers' prestige.

The second motivation for this study follows from the first; if transcriptions represent transcribers' attitudes toward speakers, then novice transcription may provide researchers with an additional means of studying language attitudes. The modes of respellings used in these transcriptions follow the same general pattern as the evaluation; those samples rated high for prestige are usually low in respellings and vice versa. Thus, researchers interested in an indirect behavioral method of assessing the relative prestige of various speech varieties or topics may consider the possibility of a transcription task.

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