

*Article*

## **Negotiating Transcription as a Relative Insider: Implications for Rigor**

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### **Abstract**

Despite the prevalence of the transcription of language data in qualitative research, few published studies provide insight into how the transcription process is negotiated. The purpose of this article is to describe unique challenges to quality transcription faced by a “relative insider” by reflexively exploring the research process (in particular the researcher’s position) and to explicate the implications for transcription quality and research rigor/trustworthiness. Inaccuracies within transcripts created by discrepancies between participants’ intended meaning and the researcher’s/transcriptionist’s interpretation can compromise the rigor of one’s findings. Therefore, when conducting research among speakers of regional dialects, researchers/transcriptionists should plan how issues related to interviewing and particularly to transcription will be negotiated.

**Keywords:** rigor, trustworthiness, transcription, insider, dialect, translation, rural

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## **Introduction**

The transcription of language data is commonplace in qualitative research and should therefore be considered an important issue for qualitative researchers (Lapadat, 2000). Although transcripts often serve as the basis for analysis, few published qualitative studies provide insight into how the transcription process is negotiated (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). Over the past 10 to 15 years, several authors have emphasized the importance of quality transcription and called for a more thoughtful consideration of issues related to data transcription among qualitative researchers. In the following section I present a brief review of this literature.<sup>1</sup>

### **The transcription process**

To emphasize the problematic nature of transcription, Lapadat (2000) discussed various approaches to transcription based upon underlying epistemological assumptions. Consistent with positivism, one such approach views the verbatim transcript as an exact reproduction of a speech event. In contrast, an interpretivist approach to transcription views transcripts as contextual; theoretical constructions rather than objective representations of reality (Lapadat, 2000). Each approach has implications for data analysis and the subsequent knowledge claims generated throughout this process.

Adopting an interpretivist perspective, Lapadat (2000) problematized transcription this way:

Qualitative researchers are faced with the dilemma of how to enact transcription in research. If we do not accept the notion of one true reality that can be uniquely recorded and fully represented in written text, how do we do and evaluate transcription? The challenge is to move from formulaic application of a transcription process with origins in positivistic assumptions about language, reality, and the researcher's role, to a process that is sensitive to context, reflexive, and constructivist. (pp. 209–210)

Providing further emphasis, Lapadat and Lindsay (1999) reminded researchers that the transcription process, in addition to the actual transcribed text, was valuable.

Consistent with the process outlined by Lapadat (2000) and Lapadat and Lindsay (1999) are calls to approach transcription in a more open and transparent manner which acknowledges the complexity of the process. For instance, in an article that relates the experiences of a hired transcriptionist, Tilley (2003) emphasized the importance of explaining how the transcription process was negotiated within research publications. Based upon the transcription of interviews with HIV-positive men, Oliver, Serovich, and Mason (2005) demonstrated how a period of reflection was useful in highlighting issues related to data interpretation and the representation of participants' viewpoints.

From an interpretivist perspective, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of representation inherent in transcription and to disclose how the transcription process unfolds throughout the research process. Ultimately, such an approach contributes to the quality of data collection and analysis, which in turn affects the overall rigor, or trustworthiness, of a study's overall findings.

## **Transcription quality and trustworthiness**

Poland (1995, 2001) argued that transcription is an important part of the data verification process and a key contributor to data quality (and consequently to rigor). In particular, Poland emphasized the need to produce written transcripts that are representative of the spoken word. Without carefully checking transcripts, errors (such as incorrect sentence structure or mistaking words/phrases for others) might go undetected, and the trustworthiness of transcripts becomes questionable, ultimately affecting the validity of one's findings.

Consistent with Poland (1995, 2001), Easton, McComish, and Greenberg (2000) identified transcription errors including missing words, misinterpreting words, and mishearing words. Similarly, MacLean, Meyer, and Estable (2004) emphasized the importance of transcription accuracy and highlighted common challenges including participants'/interviewers' use of unfamiliar terminology, unfamiliar accents and colloquialisms. The transcription of unfamiliar accents or colloquialisms can create difficulties with respect to representation and lead to the misinterpretation of words and other transcription inaccuracies (MacLean et al., 2004; Oliver et al., 2005).

Inevitably, any discussion of the "accuracy" of transcripts will be viewed as problematic for some as no transcript can completely represent an exchange between two or more individuals. A transcript, after all, is merely one representation/re-presentation of this event, and no matter how "accurate" the transcript, we cannot expect to reproduce all aspects of a speech event or objectively reproduce the exchange between interviewer and interviewee (Poland, 1995, 2001). For instance, nonverbal cues and the emotional context of interviews are difficult to depict within written transcripts (Poland, 1995). "[Crying]" is limited in its ability to express someone's sorrow when dealing with the loss of a life partner. A person's tone when speaking can also be quite difficult to represent in text.

Despite the shortcomings of transcription, and consistent with Poland (2001), I argue that the trustworthiness of transcripts can be understood and evaluated in terms of how well the transcript reproduces the actual aural record. This position "presupposes . . . that despite the inherent limitations of written and aural records, an attempt should be made to ensure that transcripts capture the utterances as closely as possible as they were audiotaped" (Poland, 1995, p. 295). It is important to minimize the occurrence of written text within transcripts that does not reflect what was clearly spoken and recorded (Poland, 1995, 2001).

## **Purpose of this paper**

Given the importance of data transcription in qualitative research, its implications for rigor and recent calls to place increased emphasis on the transcription process, the purpose of this article is to describe unique challenges to quality transcription faced by a "relative insider." Drawing upon experiences associated with conducting interviews with speakers of a distinct regional dialect, this article reflexively explores the researcher's position, how being a "relative insider" contributes to transcription quality and the implications for research rigor/trustworthiness. This article makes a unique contribution to the transcription literature based upon the relative "insider" knowledge possessed by the researcher/transcriptionist and the distinctiveness of the research setting (speakers of a regional dialect from a rural, somewhat isolated area). The information presented in this article should be of particular interest to those who conduct (or are planning to conduct) research within rural/remote settings, and/or among participants with unique characteristics (e.g., language spoken includes nonstandard elements) and, more generally, to those who produce or work with transcripts.

## **The research context**

### **Background**

The research referenced in this article was conducted during the summer of 2004. A total of 15 semistructured interviews with adults aged 65 years and older in a rural region of Newfoundland and Labrador (NL), Canada, were conducted to explore participants' perceptions of leisure-time physical activity (PA) and to examine these perceptions from a historical perspective (Witcher, Holt, Spence, & O'Brien Cousins, 2007). Research ethics board approval was obtained prior to data collection, and all study participants provided written informed consent.

The rationale for this project was based upon national data which indicated that participation in leisure-time physical activity was particularly low among older adults (Craig, Russell, Cameron, & Bauman, 2004; National Center for Health Statistics, 2005), which is associated with increased chronic disease risk (Warburton, Nicol, & Bredin, 2006). In addition, few studies had explored how contextual influences might affect PA participation in rural or remote areas; interpretive approaches were particularly rare. Finally, the information obtained would serve to inform future PA promotion interventions or campaigns toward improving the likelihood of increased PA participation among rural older adults.

### **Setting**

The province of Newfoundland and Labrador consists of the island of Newfoundland (the most easterly part of North America) and Labrador (which borders the province of Québec) with a combined land area of nearly 406,000 km<sup>2</sup> and population of approximately 505,000 (Statistics Canada, 2007). The first permanent European (British) settlement was established on the island of Newfoundland in 1610; permanent settlers to follow were primarily of English and Irish descent. The province was recognized as a British colony in 1824 and in 1949 entered confederation as the 10th province of Canada (Cadigan, 2009; Rowe, 1980). The relative early settlement of Newfoundland and Labrador by the English and Irish, combined with its isolated geography, has given rise to distinctive English language features (Story, 1959). These features include nonstandard aspects of lexicon, semantics, and phonetics exhibited by indigenous speakers. In fact, Paddock (1982) identified several distinct dialect areas within the province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

The specific site of the research was Fogo Island, NL, a small island off the northeast coast of the island of Newfoundland, a 90 minute trip away from the author's hometown (45-minute drive and 45-minute ferry ride). The author had members of his extended family who lived in several Fogo Island communities but had not visited them for a couple years prior to this study. Fogo Island is 24 kilometers in length and 14.5 kilometers wide. There are nine settlements on Fogo Island that have a combined population of approximately 3,500 (Mellin, 2003). Permanently settled by the English approximately 260 years ago (Irish immigration followed), residents have traditionally been involved in fishery-related activities. Since the moratorium on cod fishing in 1992, increasing numbers of people have left their community to seek employment elsewhere (generally outside the province).

### **Reflexivity and researcher positionality**

Reflexivity was important throughout the research process; from the writing of the research proposal through to fieldwork, data analysis and interpretation. In particular, researcher positionality had to be negotiated throughout the project. As the primary researcher I therefore

had to reflexively examine my background and the impact it might have on the research, including experiences with participants, data transcription, and data interpretation. The following section describes some reflexive thoughts as I negotiated the position of researcher in the project.

### **Researcher's position: insider/outsider**

Reflecting on the study, I wondered: Did my background (being from the same geographic area in which I was proposing to conduct my research) make me an insider? Was I also an outsider in some respects? (After all, I was no longer living in NL). Was one position more advantageous than the other? Furthermore, I wondered what the possible implications of my position in the research might be. To gain further insight into some of these questions, I began reading empirical articles that had been written on insider/outsider status. It became apparent this distinction was not clear cut.

Pike (1954) offered two standpoints with respect to how a “human observer” (p. 10) can describe human behavior, the emic and etic perspectives. Traditionally, the emic, insider, or internal perspective refers to, “the intrinsic cultural distinctions meaningful to the members of a cultural group” (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2004, p. 305). An insider “conducts studies with populations, communities, and identity groups of which they are also members” (Kanuha, 2000, p. 439). This “insider knowledge” is considered advantageous to the understanding and interpretation of human behavior. The etic, outsider, or external (Pike, 1954) perspective, in contrast, refers to, “the extrinsic ideas and categories meaningful for researchers” (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004, p. 305). As opposed to an insider, the outsider is unfamiliar with the group under investigation and, according to the traditional perspective, evaluates human behavior from an objective, value-neutral position.

### **Was I an “insider”?**

Since the inception of the concepts of emic and etic research within anthropology, the use of these terms and discussion pertaining to the insider/outsider researcher has spread across a variety of social science disciplines (Headland, Pike, & Harris, 1990). Bearing the distinction between these two sets of perspectives in mind, it appeared to me that I would be conducting research from an emic perspective; that is, as an “insider.” After all, I was proposing to collect data in an area in which I was very familiar, located near my hometown, in a province I called home for the first 24 years of my life.

### **Was I an “outsider”?**

Although it seemed plausible that I was an “insider” in certain respects, I felt like I was an “outsider” in others as I did not fit either category completely. For example, I could argue that I was an outsider by virtue of not growing up in the actual site of my data collection. In addition, my several years of living outside the province of NL might have caused me to become an “outsider.” There was also the issue of my academic background. The mere fact that I was a master's candidate who was conducting interviews likely cast me in a light different from that of your average community member. Finally, there was the issue of age. Given I was in my 20s, interviewing long-time residents in their 70s, 80s, and 90s, could I ever claim to be an insider when it came to their experiences?

## The relative perspective

From as early as the 1960s, the merits and shortcomings of the insider/outsider distinction have been discussed; this debate is not new (see Aguilar, 1981; Headland et al., 1990). Over the years, however, many researchers have moved away from arguing for or against one particular perspective, acknowledging that inside and outside statuses both have advantages and disadvantages (Mercer, 2007). For the most part, researchers now recognize that it is unrealistic to categorize oneself as a true or absolute insider or outsider (Hayano, 1979). Guarding against this dichotomous oversimplification and consistent with Aguilar (1981), I applied a more reasonable position to my own research, viewing myself as a relative insider; a position that acknowledges the heterogeneous nature of populations. As I have alluded to above, in many respects I could be considered an “insider.” I was familiar with the area in which I was conducting my research and had visited the area many times. I had several extended family members who still lived there and grew up in the same local dialect region, but despite these characteristics, I could not claim to be an absolute insider.

I believe my relative insider status gave me a distinct advantage over relative outsiders in terms of transcription. My familiarity with the dialect spoken by participants and knowledge of unique terms and phrases enabled my transcripts to remain faithful to the words spoken by participants. As a result, the quality of transcripts and integrity of interpretations were enhanced. The section that follows presents potential challenges to transcription accuracy by highlighting some of my experiences with data transcription, analysis and interpretation. This is an important issue for reflection as my experiences related to the use of a regional dialect demonstrate important considerations that directly affect the rigor of one’s study.

## Transcription challenges

If we accept that the systematic checking of data is an important contributor to rigor and that this systematic checking is especially relevant to speech events that have been transcribed (textual data), highlighting particular challenges to transcription quality may help researchers improve upon the quality of their data and therefore improve the rigor of their studies. In Table 1 I present specific examples of the usage of a regional dialect by older adults on Fogo Island, transcribed from semistructured interviews.

**Nonstandard meaning.** Transcripts from this study contained nonstandard English features that could be misrepresented or misinterpreted. *Nonstandard meaning* refers to words used by participants that are part of the Standard English vocabulary but, as spoken in the regional dialect, have meanings other than those associated with Standard English.

In Table 1 I have presented three terms that illustrate participants’ use of Standard English words that were associated with nonstandard English meanings. An older man used the first term when remembering waiting as a boy to go fishing one day, “We couldn’t get out fishin, we were waitin see [pause] and I was out on the *bridge*, Monday morning it ’twas.” With respect to the second term, another older man talked about how men his age from his community kept busy, “Well some men, ah [pause] they go out in the *store*, and they [pause] you know, make little things.” Finally, an older man used the third term when talking about what people in his community might do for fun, “Some might go *cruisin* around a bit, there’s more [pause] just stay home.” In each of these examples, participants used a term that had meaning in Standard English. However, the meaning portrayed in each example is nonstandard. In other words, participants were using terms

that are familiar to English speakers but used them in ways which are unfamiliar; the meanings were also unfamiliar (see Table 1). It seems likely that someone unfamiliar with the dialect spoken would misinterpret the correct meaning.

Transcript inaccuracies are sometimes caused by translation, for example, when the transcriptionist must translate and transcribe from one language to another or as the above examples illustrate, when the transcriptionist and/or researcher must interpret aspects of an unfamiliar dialect. Not only is there a risk to misinterpret the meaning of words common to the transcriptionist's and/or researcher's dialect, but also the possible dilemma of being presented with words or phrases that make no sense in one's native language/dialect. More specifically, the transcriptionist's/researcher's lack of familiarity with slang or with words specific to a culture (e.g., use of accents and colloquialisms) can negatively affect the quality of transcription (Easton et al., 2000; MacLean et al., 2004; Oliver et al., 2005).

**Nonstandard terminology.** Table 1 also contains three terms from transcripts to illustrate words that were commonly used among participants but are not part of Standard English (nonstandard terminology). The first term was used by an older woman, "If Mom was in the *stage* at the fish [pause] we were expected to do some of the house work." In this quote, an older woman referred to her responsibilities when she was younger and spoke about her mother being "in the stage" assisting with fish processing. Although "stage" does exist in Standard English, the phrase, "in the stage" has no meaning. The following usage of the second term is similar, in which an older man talked about his responsibilities when younger: "There was *splits* to get, there was wood to get, there was coal to bring [pause] water barrel had to be filled up. That had to be done when you come out of school." Again, "split" or "splits" does exist in Standard English, but the phrase "splits to get" has no meaning. In contrast to the examples above, the following quotation demonstrates usage of the third term; one that does not exist in Standard English. One older woman in particular remembered being employed prior to marriage, "[doing] work on the wharf [pause] *yaffling* fish" before the age of 17.

The examples presented in Table 1 highlight two potential challenges to transcription quality. When a regional dialect is spoken and/or colloquialisms used, even words or phrases that are well known may be associated with alternative meanings for participants. Participants may also use unfamiliar words or phrases. In both instances, the researcher/transcriptionist is challenged to remain faithful to participants' unique usage of certain terms and may easily misinterpret or misrepresent what was spoken. The researcher's/transcriptionist's familiarity of these issues and the strategies used to address these challenges will affect the rigor of the overall research.

Table 1. Translation of terms as used by participants during interviews

<i>Nonstandard meaning</i>	<i>Translation*</i>
Bridge	A small uncovered platform at the door of a house to which the steps lead
Store	A building or room where supplies and gear are stored
Cruisin	Visiting friends or relatives
<i>Nonstandard terminology</i>	<i>Translation*</i>
Stage	An elevated platform on the shore with working tables, sheds, etc., where fish are landed and processed
Splits	Thin pieces of wood, about 30-36 cm long, used chiefly as kindling
Yaffling	The action of gathering and stowing armloads of dried and salted codfish

\*Translations obtained from Story, Kirwin, and Widdowson (1990).

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this article was to describe unique challenges to quality transcription faced by a “relative insider” by reflexively exploring the research process (in particular the researcher’s position) and to explicate the implications for transcription quality and research rigor/trustworthiness. Two distinct but related sets of issues were examined: insider/outsider status and transcription/translation. These issues respond to Davidson’s (2009) recent call for researchers to clarify how the trustworthiness of transcripts and transcription is addressed. To this end, this paper may offer useful insights for researchers wishing to conduct research in dialectically distinct areas (e.g., rural northeast & southwest U.S, northern Canada) and/or settings with which they have complex personal connections (e.g., researching one’s own workplace, conducting research on an aboriginal reserve of which one is a member).

In terms of researcher position, my relative insider status placed me in a privileged position with respect to transcription and interpretation. Consistent with Glaser’s (1978) concept of theoretical sensitivity, I brought to my research background knowledge of the dialect spoken by participants. My theoretical sensitivity, or, “awareness of the subtleties of meaning of data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 41), enabled me to understand the words and phrases spoken by participants that were not part of Standard English. As a result, subsequent transcripts remained faithful to the aural record. My relative insider status, therefore, contributed to the rigor of the study and trustworthiness of findings. In contrast, relative outsiders would likely be unfamiliar with such dialectical nuances and would need to become more familiar in order to maintain a similar level of rigor.

Another issue brought to light by my experience as a relative insider relates to who is responsible for data collection. In light of the present discussion, however, a more important question may be, Who is responsible for data transcription? With respect to this issue, Lapadat (2000) wrote, “It is advantageous for the researcher to be close to the data, but there are multiple ways of achieving this. One is for the researcher to transcribe all the tapes. Or, the researcher could transcribe some tapes” (p. 215). Although having researchers collect and transcribe all their data does not in and of itself assure superior quality transcripts (Tilley, 2003), it is generally accepted that this offers a number of advantages with respect to data trustworthiness (Easton et al., 2000; Tilley, 2003). Similarly, by virtue of familiarity and knowledge with respect to the dialect spoken by participants, I was able to remain faithful to the aural record and offer interpretations that were reliable and trustworthy.

The examples presented in Table 1 help illustrate potential challenges to quality transcription faced by the “relative outsider” researcher/transcriptionist. For instance, when participants use standard words associated with nonstandard meanings, the researcher/transcriptionist may, albeit unknowingly, misinterpret the meaning of the word or phrase. Relative outsider researchers/transcriptionists may also be challenged to understand cultural-specific words, phrases, or colloquiums (MacLean et al., 2004; Oliver et al., 2005). In both cases, such misinterpretations/misunderstandings create a discrepancy between participants’ intended meaning and the researcher’s/transcriptionist’s interpretation, which can compromise the rigor of one’s findings (Poland, 1995, 2001).

Although my relative insider position offered a variety of advantages, I was also mindful of potential challenges. For instance, the relative insider may be viewed as a friend or buddy rather than a professional researcher. Participants may also be reluctant to reveal certain information in an interview to someone who has close ties to other community members. In these instances, the relative outsider may obtain certain information more readily than the relative outsider.

Therefore, the intent of this article is not to discourage relative outsiders from conducting similar research but to highlight the experiences that were salient for me; those experiences that I believe are important for researchers/transcriptionists to consider when planning or currently engaging in, similar research. For instance, researchers and transcriptionists alike should be clear on how transcription is to be approached (Oliver et al., 2005) and be clear on how unfamiliar terminology will be dealt with (MacLean et al., 2004). With respect to research being carried out among speakers of regional dialects, researchers/transcriptionists should plan how issues related to interviewing and particularly to transcription will be negotiated. This is especially important if the researcher or the transcriptionist is not well versed in the particular dialect spoken.

### Conclusion

Transcription is often a vital part of qualitative research and its importance should not be overlooked or ignored. Transcripts that remain faithful to the aural record contribute to data quality and subsequently to the rigor of data analysis. However, when working with unique or distinct populations, remaining faithful to the aural record can be difficult and may present the relative outsider with particular challenges to maintaining data quality. In this situation, a qualitative researcher must take steps to ensure the quality of his or her data so as to maintain rigor of analysis and interpretation.

### Notes

1. The reader is referred to Davidson (2009) for a more exhaustive review of the transcription literature published between 1979 and 2009.

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