



The Benefits of a Jeffersonian Transcript

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Over the past 6 decades, researchers in conversation analysis have repeatedly shown that everyday social activities such as inviting a friend over, interviewing a police suspect, teaching a class, or cross-questioning in a courtroom—are achieved in orderly and reproducible ways. Jeffersonian transcription has been refined to both capture and crystallize the interactionally relevant specifics of how such tasks get done. Conversation analytic work has shown that by leaving out features like the timing of turns, and changes in prosody, volume and other vocal and embodied specifics of delivery, a standard orthographic transcript bleaches out crucial components of how humans perform discursive actions, and how they continuously analyze one another across sequences of talk. This short paper will overview some of the benefits of investing time in the Jeffersonian system. Rather than simply describing the system, we will illustrate the analytic usefulness of its systematic and detailed transcription practices; we show how transcription facilitates a clearer picture of how things get done in interaction.

OPEN ACCESS

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Specialty section:

This article was submitted to
Language Sciences,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Communication

Received: 18 September 2021

Accepted: 10 January 2022

Published: 08 March 2022

Citation:

Park SH and Hepburn A (2022) The
Benefits of a Jeffersonian Transcript.
Front. Commun. 7:779434.
doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2022.779434

Keywords: transcription, conversation analysis (CA), jeffersonian transcription, social interaction, transcription conventions

1 INTRODUCTION

This article overviews the benefits of working with a Jeffersonian transcript for researchers whose data comprises any kind of talk-in-interaction. Our argument will be that standard orthographic transcripts wipe out core elements that speakers themselves incorporate in order to construct activities of various kinds. Details of delivery such as timing, speed, emphasis, pitch, and volume, as well as embodied elements such as gaze direction, frowning etc., all affect how the action being built in the moment will be heard and responded to—this is what conversation analysis aims to tap into. Hepburn and Bolden (2017) wrote the definitive book on how to do Jeffersonian transcription, but here we rehearse some of the arguments for why one should invest the effort into representing these details of talk.

Conversation Analysis (CA) is a multi-disciplinary field first developed by Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson. It is dedicated to exploring the fundamental communication processes that underpin human interaction. Many of the transcription conventions originally developed by Gail Jefferson in the 1960's are still in use today and comprise largely intuitive conventions, such as up and down arrows representing pitch changes, underlining for emphasis, and capital letters for increased volume. Since it was first developed, Jeffersonian transcription has evolved to represent various embodied features of actions such as gaze, facial expressions, and body positions (e.g. Goodwin 1981;

Mondada 2007) as well as non-speech sounds such as laughter and crying (e.g. Hepburn 2004). Transcripts are designed specifically to represent interactionally relevant changes in delivery that we all use to ground our understandings about one another, for example that someone is having trouble responding or conveying difficult news, or that they are upset, disappointed, or angry about something.

2 CONVERSATION ANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE

Potter and Hepburn (2012) showed how the process of transforming spoken words into a verbatim, or orthographic, transcript skates over the activities being performed by speakers when dealing with a challenging question. Similarly, Hepburn and Bolden (2017) provided a simple illustration showing how a speaker's acknowledgement of having heard the question was misunderstood in journalistic outputs. Here we offer a similar illustration, taking a clip from a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing. This clip shows Rachel Mitchell, head of the Special Victims Division in Maricopa County, Arizona, and Brett Kavanaugh, Supreme Court nominee, who was providing testimony regarding allegations that he assaulted Christine Blasey Ford while the two were teenagers. Mitchell was hired by the Republicans to question Kavanaugh. First, we show the basic transcript as it appeared on various journalistic sites. Then we illustrate what more can be made of this piece of interaction by deploying a Jeffersonian transcript designed to facilitate a conversation analysis. The Jeffersonian transcript was created using original video footage from the Committee hearing recording.

1. C-SPAN Kavanaugh-Blasey Ford 59.05–1.00.17 Orthogonal transcript

MITCHELL: Have you ever passed out from drinking?

KAVANAUGH: Passed out would be no but I've gone to sleep. I've never blacked out. That's the allegation and that's wrong.

MITCHELL: So let's talk about your time in high school. In high school, after drinking, did you ever wake up in a different location than you remembered passing out or going to sleep?

KAVANAUGH: No, no.

MITCHELL: Did you ever wake up with your clothes in a different condition, or fewer clothes on than you remembered when you went to sleep or passed out?

KAVANAUGH: No, no.

MITCHELL: Did you ever tell—did anyone ever tell you about something that happened in your presence that you didn't remember during a time that you had been drinking?

KAVANAUGH: No, the we drank beer, and you know, so did I think the vast majority of people our age at the time. But in any event, we drank beer, and still do. So whatever, yeah.

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2. C-SPAN Kavanaugh-Blasey Ford 59.05–1.00.17 Jeffersonian transcript
01 MIT: Have you e:ve:r passed out from drinking.
02 (.)
03 KAV: Tch .hhh I- w- thwu- (0.2) >Passed out wou'bec (.) ↓neo:
04 but I've gone to slee:p,=<uh but (0.2) I've never blacked
05 ↓out,=That's the- (0.2) that's the- (0.2) the- (0.2)
06 allegation; (0.2) .hhh (.) uh:: (0.3) a:n:d (0.8)
07 uh: (0.3) thut- (0.2) that- (.) that's wrong,
08 (0.5)
09 MIT: Tk .Hhh So let's talk about your time in high school. (0.5)
10 In high school after drinking, did you ever wake up in
11 a different location than you remembered
12 (0.5)/((hand gesture))[passing out or going to sleep.]
13 Kav: [ (( head shake )) ]
14 KAV: No.
15 (0.5)
16 KAV: No.
17 (0.7)
18 MIT: Did you ever wake up with (0.7)/((circular hand gesture))
19 your clo:thes in a different condition, or fewer
20 clothes o:n: .hhh than you remembered
21 [when you went to sleep, or passed #out.]
22 Kav: [ (( head shake )) ]
23 (1.5)/((Kav frowns, open hand gesture))
24 KAV: ((frowning, gaze to MIT)) ↑No.=Ye- (0.4) No.
25 (0.6)/((Kav gaze down))
26 KAV: ((Kav gaze to Mit, smile/grimace)) Hh-hh-hh-((breathy laugh))
27 (0.2)
28 MIT: Did you e:|ver tell: (0.2) #uh (0.2) s:=uh: (0.3) Did (.)
29 >anyone ever< tell you about something that happened in
30 your p:resence, .hh [that you di:dn't re]#member. =#°in=
31 Kav: [ ((disgust face)) ]
32 MIT: =u-j- during a time that you had been drinking.
33 KAV: Tch N- (0.4) No.
34 (.)
35 KAV: The- (0.4) the- (0.5) We drank bee:r, a:n:d (2.7)
36 s- #°y'know (0.3) so- >so did I think< (0.3)
37 the vast majority of- (0.3) of people our age at
38 the ti:me=But in any event we drank bee:r, and (0.2)
39 .Hhh/((disgust face)) (0.5) and uh: (0.7) still ↑do.
40 So whatever: (0.4) .Hhhh y- yeah.

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We can straight away see that the second transcript is both three times longer, and harder to read for non-conversation analysts. It has numbered lines, includes specifics of timing and delivery, some interactionally relevant visual details such as gestures, gaze direction, and facial expressions, and is given a non-proportional font (e.g., Courier). Why add in all this detail? While space does not permit a full answer to this question (see Hepburn and Bolden 2017, for more detail), below we show some of the more obvious elements that an orthographic transcript misses.

Examining Kavanaugh's answers using only the orthographic transcript makes him sound like he has no trouble with the questions put to him. However, this skates over the halting way that Kavanaugh delivers his responses. For example, in the Jeffersonian transcript, line three contains a tut particle "Tch," an inbreath ".hhh," several false starts "I-w-thwu-" and a timed pause (0.2). On lines 5-7, rather than "that's the allegation and that's wrong" we can see something that looks much less definitive: "That's the- (0.2) that's the- (0.2) the- (0.2) allegation; (0.2).hhh (.) uh:: (0.3) a:n:d (0.8) uh: (0.3) thut- (0.2) that- (.) that's wrong," Again there are many false starts, with a great deal of pausing between them, which are common occurrences in the doing of "hesitation" or "delicacy" (see Lerner 2013).

Closer attention to the detail of the question design and response also raises some important issues. Heritage and Raymond (2021), have argued that polar (or yes/no) questions like these unavoidably incorporate within their main proposition

the un/likelihood of some state of affairs, thereby creating the conditions for (or setting up a “preference” for in conversation analytic terms) a positive or negative response. For example, “have you ever x” questions encode that there is little likelihood of “x” happening (note Mitchell was chosen by Republicans). It is interesting to note that there is emphasis (shown by underlining) and stretched delivery (shown by the colons) on “ever”—the ‘negative polarity’ item itself (Heritage 2002; see also; Raymond and Heritage, 2021)—perhaps adding further to the improbability of such an event.

This negative polarity design is continued in Mitchell’s further question on lines 9–12: “did you ever wake up in a different location than you remembered (0.5)/((hand gesture))passing out or going to sleep.” Again there is emphasis on “ever,” shown by the underlining. It is interesting to note that although Kavanaugh has denied passing out, Mitchell has included it in the question, after some silence, accompanied by a kind of circling hand gesture. In response, Kavanaugh is unusually definitive. He is primed with a negative response, shown by his head shake in overlap with the end of Mitchell’s turn (indicated by the lining up of square brackets across lines 12 and 13—one reason why a non-proportional font is important). Note that following the first “No.” on line 14 (the turn final period showing falling intonation, one common way of indicating turn completion), there is a gap on line 15—such silences are shown on their own line to indicate that a new speaker could have taken a turn at this point. Kavanaugh repeats the “No.” indicating that he has nothing more to add here. The presupposition in the question—that Kavanaugh might have passed out—goes unchallenged.

We can contrast these definitive responses with Kavanaugh’s response following Mitchell’s third question on lines 18–21: “Did you ever wake up with (0.7)/((circular hand gesture)) your clothes in a different condition, =or fewer clothes o:n:.hhh than you remembered when you went to sleep, or passed #out.” Although once again the design of the question primes Kavanaugh to say ‘no’ (again he is shaking his head in overlap towards the end of Mitchell’s turn), he nevertheless spends some time frowning and gazing to and from Mitchell before responding “↑No.=Ye- (0.4) No.,” followed by gazing downwards, and gazing back to Mitchell doing breathy and tense clenched jaw laughter ‘Hh-hh-hh-’ (see Hepburn and Varney 2013 on different types of laughter). Jefferson’s transcription conventions have given rise to some important research on the interactional role of laughter. Jefferson (1979) noted laughter’s role in inviting recipient laughter, and as Shaw et al. (2013) noted, when laughter is in turn final position, as Kavanaugh’s is, it can also have a proactive role in managing recipient responses, e.g., to encourage the overhearing audience to affiliate with and not take seriously his evident trouble with the question.

Rather than pursuing Kavanaugh’s equivocal response to the question, Mitchell continues with her final question on lines 28–32, which gets a further element of negative polarity: “did anyone ever tell you.” Leaving aside the oddness of a

question about whether Kavanaugh remembers about “something that happened in your presence, .hh [that you didn’t re]#member.” we can note that Kavanaugh’s response is again less definitive than it might appear on an orthographic transcript. After a delayed “No,” he proceeds to account for his answer on lines 35–40—CA findings would predict that this is an unusual thing to do unless one’s response is counter to the preference encoded in the question.

3 DISCUSSION

In sum, we have shown some of the interactional relevance of adding in elements of speech delivery and timing, as well as some basic visual information. The detailed elements of interaction included in the Jeffersonian transcript allow a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of what participants actually say and do. In the example above, we saw how the emphatic delivery of particular words (e.g., negative polarity items) may prime the respondent in specific ways to answer. Furthermore, the disfluencies (e.g. pauses, false starts) displayed in the talk indicate that the speaker is having difficulty in conveying a clear position. These interactional features are something that can only be captured in the Jeffersonian transcript, being crucial resources for understanding what actually happened during the hearing. Our argument is that, in order to understand what is accomplished interactionally, we should transcribe not just what people say but how and when they say it.

Jeffersonian transcription not only helps conversation analysts examine the social world “as it is” but also allows a wide range of readers to see things that happened. The aim of Jeffersonian transcription has always been to make the transcripts “accessible to linguistically unsophisticated readers” (Sacks et al., 1974, p. 734), with the details added in for an accurate representation of the interactional process. While it is true that readers may find it difficult to follow complex and detailed transcripts (Hammersley 2010), adding in the relevant details is imperative because, as CA studies have convincingly demonstrated, they are what participants find consequential. The details captured in the Jeffersonian transcripts are those that are oriented to by participants themselves and are relevant to the ongoing interaction. The Jeffersonian system, therefore, can be found useful by social scientists, practitioners, clients, policy makers, professionals, and laypersons as it enables a close examination of how things are done in everyday social interaction.

Social institutions may benefit from consulting conversation analysts to determine important features of interactions. Training may be needed to focus on participants’ orientations in the ongoing interaction. Especially when the subtle specifics of interactional display can change the meaning of what is being done in significant ways, as in our example above, producing detailed accurate transcripts is critical. Some

exercises accompany Hepburn and Bolden's book on how to do Jeffersonian transcription, available via this link: <https://rucal.rutgers.edu/transcription/>.

Journalists should be careful in representing what was said and done in the interactional event they describe so as not to omit features that are fundamental to understanding what happened. Furthermore, a careful transcription can help institutions (e.g., helpline services) identify and promote good practice (e.g. Hepburn 2006; Hepburn et al., 2014). As practitioners engage with recordings and transcripts on their own, and attend to various features of talk, they can better understand the practices they use every day and what makes them "good" and "bad" practices.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

AH and SP contributed to conception and design of the study. AH organized the data and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. SP wrote the discussion section of the manuscript. All authors contributed to manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

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