

## ARTICLE

# Teaching Transcription for Social Justice in Linguistic Anthropology

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### Abstract

*The careful transcription of socially-occurring speech can be usefully incorporated into undergraduate classes in linguistic anthropology through in-class practice, discussion, and, especially, as a formal assignment. Teaching transcription—a key method for professional linguistic anthropologists—is particularly effective for engaging students in active learning of key disciplinary principles, as well as promoting critical (self-)awareness of, and reflection on, sociolinguistic practice. As students' written reflections on transcription assignments show, teaching close transcription contributes to deepened understandings of the fundamental characteristics and complexities of human speech, the key roles language plays in social interaction and inequality, and how they might apply these lessons toward greater social justice beyond the class.*

**Keywords:** *Linguistic anthropology; Transcription; Pedagogy; Social justice*

### Introduction

Throughout the field of anthropology, there are increasingly calls for and trends toward greater outward engagement and participation in political discourse and activism, spurred by a desire to see contemporary anthropological research and insights contribute to the public good (Borofsky 2000; Goldstein and Perry 2017; Hale 2008; Vine 2011). This public-facing work is vitally important, and we wholeheartedly support it. As a part of this, we continue to look for ways to promote engagement among the audience that we are able to reach most often and most effectively through our core professional work as teachers: our students. Given trends toward heavier teaching loads and fewer tenure-track positions that support significant research, writing, and outreach activity (Ginsberg 2016), it is perhaps truer today than ever that students are our biggest audience. For the sizable majority of anthropologists working outside of R1 universities and in non-tenure-track faculty roles, *undergraduate* students, in particular, are those with whom we have the greatest opportunity to share our unique disciplinary perspective and critical understanding of the workings of culture, diversity, and power.

Within our primary anthropological subfield of linguistic anthropology, we and many of our colleagues have embraced such an opportunity by teaching units or whole courses addressing the varied ways in which language plays a central role in social differentiation, bias, and inequality. Along with many other teacher-scholars concerned with social justice in linguistic anthropology, we work to thoughtfully incorporate a variety of pedagogical strategies that bring diverse experiences, voices, and perspectives around language into meaningful dialogue (Arnold 2019; Arnold and Corwin 2022; Babcock 2021; Language and Social Justice Committee 2020). Additionally, and in line with contemporary trends in post-secondary education, we strive to promote active or experiential learning in our classes, encouraging students to learn by doing rather than being passive receivers of knowledge (Bonwell and Eison 1991; Brame 2016; Lang 2016).

Taking these shifts in disciplinary perspectives, faculty positions and responsibilities, and pedagogical strategies as a starting point, this paper explores the value of one particular kind of active-learning assignment, namely the careful transcription of socially-occurring speech, which we have included in introductory and advanced undergraduate classes in linguistic anthropology, cultural anthropology, and ethnographic methods at a mid-size private urban university and a large public state university in recent years. In these classes, we find that teaching transcription—a key method in the professional practice of linguistic anthropologists—is a particularly effective strategy for engaging students in active learning about the nature of human speech, as well as for promoting critical (self-) awareness of sociolinguistic interaction and inequality. Evidence from students' written reflections on transcription assignments shows that teaching close transcription contributes to deepened understandings of 1) the fundamental characteristics and complexities of spoken human language and interaction; 2) the key roles language plays in social practice, differentiation, and stratification; and 3) how they might practically apply these lessons in their own diverse worlds and experiences beyond the class. We argue that achieving these learning outcomes with our undergraduate students, who often number in the hundreds each academic year, is an important way for linguistic anthropologists to contribute to work for social justice and the public good through our primary professional roles as teachers.

### **Active Learning, Critical Reflection, and Social Justice Pedagogies**

The turn toward active learning, now several decades old, has convincingly demonstrated that when students are actively engaged in the learning process through discussions, in-class activities, and hands-on assignments, their learning is usually deeper and much longer-lasting than with passive knowledge transmission (Bonwell and Eison 1991; Brame 2016). Active learning promotes critical thinking and problem solving, and it can be a pedagogical approach that is more inclusive of students' varied preparation, academic strengths, and social identities, allowing them to work toward the application of abstract concepts to real problems, experiences, and data (Wright 2015). In this way, active learning pedagogies can contribute to social justice both by fostering a more equitable and inclusive learning environment, where space is made for diverse perspectives and

backgrounds (Theobald et al. 2020; Wright 2015), and by encouraging students to think critically about relevant social and political issues as they apply key lessons, rather than simply learn *about* them, better equipping them to work toward social change. There is ample evidence that this is true for active learning pedagogies that involve participatory action research and other community-engaged components, but these approaches are not always logistically possible, especially in higher-enrollment classes and for faculty with heavy teaching loads. When large-scale active-learning projects are not feasible or well-suited to the size or structure of a class, we believe that even “small” active-learning experiences (Lang 2016) can be leveraged for enhanced learning outcomes and social justice beyond the classroom. In students’ work with the careful transcription of their own socially-occurring speech, we see much deeper learning about language, interaction, and social inequality than with more traditional reading-lecture-exam approaches.

In addition to active-learning exercises and assignments, we employ critical reflection as a strategy for driving home the lessons learned by doing transcription. The university at which one of us (Strand) teaches happens to be a Catholic institution with faculty development programming that endorses a distinctly Ignatian or Jesuit pedagogical approach. We (Strand and Wroblewski) are not ourselves Catholic, but we do find it useful that Ignatian pedagogy insists on 1) taking context into account, particularly students’ diverse backgrounds and social worlds; 2) emphasizing educational strategies that tap into students’ experiences as relevant sites for the application of general principles and theories; 3) reflecting critically on learning experiences and how these shape students’ self-knowledge and understanding of their place in the world; and 4) using reflection to effect action beyond the learning experience (Korth 2008; Nowacek and Mountin 2012). While working from reflection on learning to action in the world may take on spiritual significance for some instructors and students, it need not to be at once pedagogically productive and contribute to the greater social good. Considering the value of this kind of pedagogy, which privileges context and experience, insists on deliberate reflection toward action, and is inclusive of students from diverse backgrounds, Hollenbach (2010, 21) argues that “the university is a major venue where ideas about the meanings of [social] justice and their relevance to our life together must be explored.”

As seasoned instructors of linguistic anthropology, we believe that the combination of active learning and critical reflection is a way to work toward social justice together with our students in the university setting. This approach is certainly relevant beyond our sub-discipline, as well, but we highlight here some strategies that we have developed and found effective for teaching transcription in undergraduate linguistic anthropology classes. We begin with a discussion of ways to introduce transcription in classroom lessons, through lecture content, discussion, and hands-on group activities. We then describe the kinds of transcription assignments we find most valuable for active learning about language, interaction, and inequality outside of class-time. We end by considering how critical reflection is an important component of students’ learning that enables them to apply key

lessons toward greater justice and equality in their own interactions and their lives beyond college.

## Teaching Transcription in the Classroom

For linguistic anthropologists who work with speech as primary data, both audio recording and careful transcription are critical components of the methodological toolkit. But once the speech data has been rendered into text, as it is in the articles and chapters we write, read, and assign to students, it is easy enough to take for granted that it was effectively recorded and accurately transcribed by the researcher and focus instead on what was said and how. Authors devote the largest share of most publications to analysis of the content and form of informants' talk, and it is both logical and useful for most classroom lectures and discussions to reflect the main themes and arguments of whatever readings have been assigned. Brief reflections on the ethnographic process and positionality of the researcher are also often included in contemporary anthropological texts; these issues are explicitly addressed by most anthropology instructors, as well, and this is particularly important when studying language in stigmatized and marginalized speech communities. Relatedly, we believe it is well worth taking the time in class to consider the critical and power-inflected role of the researcher-author in the entextualization process, or the rendering of spoken discourse into a circulatable text (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Sung-Yul Park and Bucholtz 2009). Linguistic anthropologists and our colleagues in related fields of study use many different kinds of transcripts and transcription styles (Bucholtz 2007; Duranti 2006; Ochs 1979; Shohet and Loyd 2022), and calling students' attention to this in teaching can be a useful exercise. In the material we assign to students in our classes, there is typically a mix of transcribed speech that is limited to the words uttered; some that includes indications of features like volume, word or syllable stress, or laughter; and some that goes even further to capture the finer details of conversational speech, including pauses, speaker overlap, false starts, lengthened sounds, and the like. Talking about the differences in varied transcription styles helps us in teaching how "language" and "communication" are multi-layered phenomena that can be approached from many angles. Mary Bucholtz's "Variation in Transcription" (2007) is a particularly informative article on these points and can be taught on its own or as a supplement to other readings that prominently feature detailed transcriptions of socially-occurring talk.

Beyond classroom discussions of transcription as a method and the variability of transcription styles, attending to the power dynamics inherent in transcription is also valuable for teaching foundational lessons around socio-linguistic diversity and inequality. As Bucholtz (2000, 1461) has argued, "transcription is an inevitably creative, authorial act that has political effects." Every act of transcription requires researchers to make decisions about what to transcribe and how. As noted above, what is included may range from just ordinary words, which makes for easily readable transcripts, or it may include a wide range of other information about the characteristics of the speech and the interaction itself,

making for transcripts that may be more informative and “complete” but also more challenging to read. Bucholtz 2007 provides an effective demonstration of this range and the potential effects through a comparison of two very different transcripts of the same speech excerpt from her own research: one version is much shorter, reads smoothly, and suggests that the informant’s statements were monologic and authoritative; the other includes Bucholtz’s prompts, interruptions, laughter, and other interactional contributions, showing how the content of the informant’s claims was thoroughly co-constructed and structurally messy, not at all the uninterrupted monologue suggested by the shorter version. Bucholtz concludes that the shorter version was “not merely woefully inadequate but dangerously inaccurate” (2007, 788), and we find it to be a very compact and useful example for teaching about both transcription and the co-constructed nature of interactional speech.

Additionally, and even more importantly, the transcription process forces authors to make choices about how to represent highly variable spoken language—including non-normative pronunciations, grammar, and words—in writing, which is ordinarily less variable and more standardized (Lippi-Green 2012), especially in academic and professional contexts. While most researchers certainly want to create transcripts that are faithful to the spoken language captured in their audio recordings, how and how much non-normative language is presented in writing has significant effects on both readability and readers’ impressions of the speakers (Jaffe and Walton 2000; Preston 1982, 1985, 2000). At times, as Preston (2000) has shown, spellings that attempt to represent non-normative speech may deviate so far from conventional spellings that transcripts become virtually unreadable. Decades ago, Preston (1982, 1985) also alerted sociolinguists and folklorists to researcher-transcribers’ tendency to use more non-standard spellings in transcripts of the speech of people from marginalized and stigmatized social groups. In this way, in the laudable quest for accurate transcription of variable speech, researchers may contribute to the reproduction of socio-linguistic hierarchies, using more-standard writing to represent higher-status, “standard”-sounding speakers and less-standard, less-“correct” spellings to represent socially less-well-regarded speakers.

The effects of this well-documented pattern were demonstrated in a reading experiment conducted by linguistic anthropologists Jaffe and Walton (2000), who asked people to respond to texts written with non-standard orthographic (spelling) features. Not unexpectedly, they found that “orthography cues voice, but it does so by using stereotyped forms whose meanings are inescapably linked to their use in texts whose aim is to denigrate the speakers being represented” (Jaffe and Walton 2000, 583). Consequently, they argued, “it is almost impossible to avoid stigma in the non-standard orthographic representation of others’ low-status speech” (Jaffe and Walton 2000, 582).

Beyond teaching *about* transcription, teaching students to transcribe effectively and conscientiously requires integrating theory, i.e., readings and lectures on topics like those discussed above, and practice, i.e., assessing and doing transcription work. Like all other

essential methods in the anthropologist's toolkit, we believe that transcription should be approached critically. Students, and even many scholars, tend to view transcription as a relatively straightforward, objective, and inconsequential chore in research, a kind of perfunctory first step toward eventual, and more important, analytical writing. In fact, transcription is a complicated, highly subjective, and politically-loaded practice. Transcription is itself a form of analysis, and a transcript is a subjective representation of speech and speakers. A critically-minded approach to teaching transcription, therefore, involves exposing its inherent paradox: achieving an "objective" representation of speech depends on necessarily subjective interpretation. In other words, effectively teaching transcription as a method involves modeling how to accurately and consistently capture speech, while at the same time teaching mindfulness about the problematic nature of the transcription process—that it is an ever-imperfect attempt to entextualize social interactions, identities, and cultures (Bucholtz 2007). Entextualization, which might seem to be an innocuous method for creating a record of human speech, must be approached critically as representation, a political project with real consequences for real speakers.

In teaching about these complexities in the written representation of varied speech, we find that hands-on classroom exercises that involve working with existing transcripts, listening to audio-recorded speech, and practicing transcription together are essential for students to become confident in transcribing efficiently and conscientiously. Through these exercises, we have been able to facilitate productive discussions around 1) variation in transcription; 2) researcher-transcriber bias toward and sympathy for informants; 3) the effects of non-standard written representation; and 4) when and how to best represent varied and non-normative speech in transcripts. While these exercises have been designed primarily with linguistic anthropology students in mind, Wroblewski has found that the methodological lessons also transfer quite effectively into cultural anthropology and ethnographic methods classrooms, where critical and thoughtful approaches to transcription are just as vital.

A good introductory classroom activity for discussing variation in transcription is to provide students with sample transcripts, whether published or unpublished, and compare and contrast them together. This can include differing transcription approaches used by 1) a single author for different analytical purposes (an instructor's own published works could be especially useful here); 2) different authors; or 3) different publication venues and types. The focus of the discussion should be on learning to understand the sources and (strategic) effects of transcription variation, rather than, as Bucholtz (2007) warns, "pointlessly" looking for ways to eradicate it.

For initiating more hands-on learning about the value and challenges of transcription, along with the importance of accuracy and consistency, an exercise we find particularly useful is to ask students to listen carefully to an excerpt of audio-recorded speech while following along with an existing transcript. Ideally, the recorded and transcribed speech is all or mostly in a language that is familiar to all students; in our cases, this means American

English. As a first step in working with these examples, we often ask students to simply read a transcript and talk about their impressions of the speakers and what they notice in the transcript itself. We then have them re-read it while listening to the accompanying audio, and then sometimes with audio and video, if available. At each step, students are prompted to reflect on and discuss how their perception of the interaction and interactants changes with increasing amounts of sociolinguistic context. For example, students can be asked to describe the kinds of speaker personae that emerge in their minds through transcribed text. They can be prompted to look for differential representations of individual speakers' contributions and to consider their own socio-linguistic biases as readers and as listeners. Subsequently re-reading transcripts with the added layers of accompanying audio and video can be an especially eye-opening experience for students, as it forces them to confront possible inconsistencies between their own assumptions and sociolinguistic reality, thereby personalizing the problem of accurate and consistent representation. This lesson is especially important for studying stigmatized and marginalized speakers and their language, which are the focus of a very large amount of cultural and linguistic anthropological research.

After introducing students to both the benefits and potential pitfalls of the transcription process, a useful, scaffolded next step is to have them attempt the process themselves in an ungraded, informal setting. One way we have done this in our classrooms is to have all students listen to the same sample of recorded speech, then work on transcribing small, workable segments of it individually or in small groups and compare their results. Having students practice transcribing together in the classroom gets them thinking about how they will deal with linguistic variation in their own transcripts, particularly non-standard speech forms, and why this concern matters for academic representation more generally. For this activity, it is important to use audio that showcases socially-occurring speech, including features such as false starts, discourse markers or so-called "filler" words, non-word sounds, variations in intonation, volume, and pitch, etc. that are essential to conversation but often dismissed as irrelevant in transcription by non-linguists. By comparing their results, students learn to recognize that, even in very short strings of speech, lots of decisions must be made about what to include and how to represent it. Inevitably, in comparing their work to that of their classmates, they also gain first-hand experience with how different transcribers make different decisions, even when it comes to capturing the same few seconds of seemingly objective audio data. We find that Jefferson's (1983) and Preston's (1985, 2000) guidelines for representing non-normative speech are quite helpful here, as they allow students to weigh alternative strategies presented by experts in the field and, through collaborative discussion of their practice transcripts, reach their own conclusions about how to present their data systematically and equally across speakers and speech types. These hands-on, in-class exercises can then serve as illustrative starting points for deepened discussions about the politics of representation, bias, and the potential reproduction of inequality.

## **Transcription Assignments for Active Learning**

After teaching some of the fundamental principles and problems of transcription in the classroom, we ask students to apply this knowledge through individual, graded transcription assignments. As discussed above, there are many styles of transcription used in linguistic anthropology and related fields, depending largely on researchers' analytical focus. A wide range of transcription assignments may be useful for giving students hands-on experience with linguistic-anthropological methods and concepts: topic-level transcripts or "activity logging" to create a basic record of audio or video data content (Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik 2013; Shohet and Lloyd 2022); careful transcription of words plus as many interactional features as possible; or even phonetic transcription using the International Phonetic Alphabet in classes where the IPA is taught. But we find so-called "close" transcription, developed and used primarily in the sub-subfield of conversation analysis (CA) is especially productive as a teaching tool. Because it requires the transcriber to listen carefully and repeatedly in order to accurately indicate false starts, the duration of pauses, and exactly when multiple speakers' talk overlaps, conversation-analytic transcription is particularly useful for disrupting popular, deep-seated beliefs about the equivalence of spoken and written language.

For many students, detailed, CA-style transcription is the most challenging, technical, and time-consuming assignment of the semester but also one that ultimately changes their understanding of human language and interaction. Close transcription demands attention to the complexities of speech and the co-construction of meaning in socially-occurring talk. When students are tasked with creating their own written representation of even a minute or two of interactional speech, they must reckon with the dysfluencies, overlaps, and paralinguistic features that make spoken communication fundamentally different from words on a page or a screen.

We believe this kind of transcription exercise is most productive when it is integrated with other course assignments, such as ethnographic interviews or analyses of students' own recorded, socially-occurring speech events, which may be part of a larger research project. This way, the exercise of transcription serves multiple pedagogical purposes: students develop a critical (and marketable) skill while connecting theoretical lessons and sociopolitical discussions from the classroom to speech data that they are personally invested in. When students expect to be evaluated on the organization, accuracy, and consistency of their transcripts, they are compelled to become deliberate and systematic in their entextualization choices. Having them work with their own data further drives home the need for thoughtful representation as mediators for their informants and interlocutors. Recorded interview and conversational data that include the students as participants offer an added opportunity for them to reflect on their own language practices, their contributions to sociolinguistic diversity, the complicated role of the participant-observer, and the power dynamics involved in academic research and representation.

In addition to stimulating connections between theory, politics, and practice, the further combination of transcription with subsequent analytical writing assignments trains students to think proactively about how to present their speech data and how it might be interpreted by different audiences. While transcripts are ubiquitous in social science publications, authors' formatting and stylistic choices are largely implicit, despite their important functions in framing their analyses. Practicing close transcription gives students the ability to work with multiple scales of entextualization, from micro- to macro-level linguistic and interactional phenomena. They learn to see their own, finely detailed transcripts as important resources in research, which can be used repeatedly and adapted strategically to their analytical agendas. They learn to recognize "the transcript" as something separate and functionally distinct from the bits of transcribed speech that are incorporated into analytical writing, where the researcher controls what is and is not included and how it is presented to readers. Critical transcribing thus promotes critical reading of transcripts and, in turn, more responsible analytical writing.

When teaching students how to engage in close, CA-style transcription, we find it important to carefully structure assignments by providing them with established symbolic and stylistic conventions and step-by-step guidelines for how to make the process efficient and systematic. While transcription conventions vary across disciplines and individual researchers, Dubois (2006) provides a useful set of symbols for representing spoken discourse, as well as comparison lists of conventions across time periods and subdisciplines in linguistics and discourse analysis. McNeill (2005) and Shohet and Loyd (2022) provide additional suggestions for systematically transcribing non-linguistic features such as gestures, as well as helpful step-by-step guides for capturing multiple layers of audiovisual data, if video recordings are gathered. In addition to reference resources, it is essential to supply students with templates and transcript samples to set clear expectations for formatting and style, as well as offer examples of transcription conventions in context. We often rely on our own unpublished, English-language transcripts for this. Offering step-by-step directions for effectively entextualizing their recorded data—such as moving from topic transcription of an entire recording to word-level transcription of an analytically interesting segment and then finally to the close transcription of finer interactional details for perhaps two minutes of talk—helps students break down what can seem like a daunting and complicated task. By learning to see transcription as a series of steps, students also learn to distinguish between different types of transcripts and their functions in presenting data to different audiences of readers.

It is important to acknowledge that machine-generated transcripts are increasingly available, and some students will use these as an aid for word-level transcription. However, going through the steps outlined above to consider what is captured in audio recordings besides just words drives home vital lessons about the nature of human language and social interaction. In fact, the guided use of machine-generated transcripts in classroom exercises can help illustrate the importance of careful and critical transcription. For example, instructors might provide samples of machine-generated transcripts with

accompanying audio and video, objects of critical evaluation, so that students learn to recognize the capabilities and shortcomings of automated transcription when it comes to capturing important linguistic and extra-linguistic details, including non-word sounds, nonverbal communication forms, non-normative pronunciations, and voice quality, among other things. Some instructors may even wish to encourage students to use machine-generated transcripts as a first step, while making it abundantly clear that these word-level transcripts will need to be substantially edited, reformatted, and added to *while carefully listening to the audio* to meet the goals and requirements of the assignment. In this way, even though automated word-level transcription programs are now widely available, close transcription assignments are nevertheless relatively AI-resistant.

The assessment of students' transcripts can also serve significant pedagogical purpose, which is why we believe it is important to provide clear guidelines for evaluation and well-founded rationale for grading criteria. We focus on three main evaluation categories: organization, accuracy, and consistency. We use these as general categories in our grading rubrics and their inclusion and weight vary with the type of transcription assignment. For example, we might include rubric questions such as:

- Organization: Is the transcript clear and legible? Does it include appropriate frames, such as header information, transcription keys, time stamps, line numbers, and speaker attributions? Are tabs, line breaks, and instances of speaker overlap clearly and systematically formatted?
- Accuracy: Does the transcript include all audible speech, non-word sounds, and non-verbal communication forms? Is each utterance attributed to the correct speaker(s)? Is the timing of speaker overlap accurately indicated? Does the transcriber clearly distinguish between spoken discourse and authorial commentary? Is authorial commentary used effectively to capture relevant interaction dynamics and speech qualities?
- Consistency: Are transcription conventions used correctly and consistently? Does the transcriber introduce new conventions of their own? If so, are these explained and employed consistently? Are non-standard speech forms (such as phonetic features) "respelled"? If so, are the respelling choices clear and systematic across speakers and talk?

Promoting careful attention to each of these teaches students to critically reflect on their entextualization choices and their responsibilities in representing speakers and speech. It illustrates the broader importance of "positioned objectivity" (Hale 2008) in engaged, social justice-oriented research, where situated knowledge and subjective insights are not only inevitable but, in fact, essential to providing complete and accountable analyses.

Grading students on what may seem to be nitpicky organizational choices, such as how they attribute speech to respective individual and collective speakers, how they format

turns in talk, or how overlaps and interruptions are visually lined up, gets them thinking about how to account for bigger sociolinguistic issues, such as the active construction of speaker identities and differential roles, relationships, and hierarchies in everyday talk. Requiring students to submit their audio files along with their transcripts and evaluating their accuracy in capturing relevant speech, sounds, and visual information, if available, reminds them of their responsibilities as spokespersons for their study participants. Grading with time-efficiency in mind, and often working with multiple classes of 35–45 students, we normally only listen to the one-to-three-minute segments students have themselves selected for close transcription. But listening once through and judging students' consistent use of transcription symbols, standard and non-standard orthographies, and analytic commentaries for those brief segments engages them in an ongoing pursuit of best practices for rendering spoken language into text. At the same time, it forces them to reconcile their own unconscious proclivities toward uneven representation across speakers and speech types. When students know they will be graded on how effectively they employ transcription symbols and how consistently they decide to “respell” unexpected pronunciations or non-normative dialect features, they also often find that existing conventions are inadequate and are compelled to invent some of their own. And we encourage this, as long as they provide transcription keys for their readers, of course, as it allows them to contribute directly to the continued refinement of transcription as a method.

Most importantly, structured evaluation of students' transcription practices drives home key lessons in linguistic anthropology and about social scientific research and social justice. As Jefferson (1983) observes, transcribers want to capture the orality, the spontaneity, and the art of social interaction, as well as the distinctiveness of voices, speech varieties, and social contexts. And yet, they must constantly keep their potential readers in mind. Too much linguistic detail can be distracting, inconsistent orthographic choices can be jarring and analytically misleading, and adding too many “condiments” to the utterances of certain speakers can further stigmatize and marginalize them. Holding students accountable for their transcripts reminds them that capturing the idiosyncratic nature of speech and providing “authentic” representations necessitates continuous, positioned choices. It requires reflective decision-making, which automated transcription software programs can never fully reproduce, so these kinds of transcription assignments are also relatively AI-resistant. Critically, accurate, thoughtful textual representations of human speech, diverse and varied as it is, require reckoning with one's own biases and subjectivity in ways that promote greater (self-)awareness and social justice.

## **Moving toward Critical Awareness and Action through Reflection**

Beyond direct experiences with transcription itself, we find that deliberate reflection on transcription assignments further deepens students' understanding of the complexities of spoken language and promotes greater critical awareness of linguistic variation, bias, and

inequality. Productive reflection on the transcription process can be encouraged both in classroom discussion and through writing assignments, whether formal or informal.

In the classroom, we incorporate a face-to-face debrief as soon as possible after the main transcription assignment is due to hear students' responses and encourage them to think and talk about the experience and what they learned from it. This might be a short activity at the beginning of class, including questions as simple as asking students, open-endedly, "How did it go?" and "What did you learn?" Or, if more time is available, we might direct discussion more specifically toward how students' expectations for the assignment were different from their experiences, how they felt about the process and the transcripts they produced, and what sorts of connections they saw between transcription and other lessons from the class. This gives them an opportunity to share their revelations but also their frustrations, and the latter is valuable both as validation for students who may have thought they struggled much more than others and for building a stronger sense of inclusivity and community in the class.

However, as we all know, there is rarely 100% voluntary participation in class discussion, and the 10–20 minutes we might ordinarily be able to incorporate is not much time for thorough reflection, especially for students who need or prefer more time to think before answering. One of us (Strand) has developed a one-page written reflection assignment, which is graded but low-stakes, to accompany the transcription assignment itself. This approach has proved successful in terms of encouraging students to reflect more deeply on how the transcription process transformed their understandings of spoken versus written language, conversation structure and social interaction, and socio-linguistic inequality.

For the reflection assignment, Strand gives students a set of prompts, asking them to provide thoughtful answers to one or more in about one page of writing. The prompts vary a bit depending on the exact transcription assignment students have been asked to complete (e.g., autoethnography vs. conversational interview), but these are generally representative:

- How did you connect the transcription assignment to key ideas and materials from class?
- How did the transcription assignment change your understanding of the nature of spoken language or of the relationship between spoken and written language?
- What was especially surprising to you as you transcribed your own speech and that of your interlocutor(s)? Why?
- What was most difficult about the process of close transcription, and why?
- Do you think doing the transcription assignment has had (or will have) an effect on you personally, beyond this class? If so, how? If not, why not?

Students' written responses provide strong evidence that transcription assignments are especially effective as a means for teaching fundamental linguistic and anthropological lessons. Wanting to share a sampling of these, Strand asked a semester's worth of undergraduate students in three different classes—one primarily for non-majors, two primarily for majors—for permission to use their written reflections for this purpose, and several dozen obliged. (To mitigate any potential coercion, the research consent process happened after the semester had ended and final grades were already officially posted.) Among the most prominent themes in this set of student reflections, now backed up by hundreds of others over several years, were newfound revelations around the ideas that 1) spoken language is incredibly complex, nuanced, and tied irrevocably to context; and 2) socially-occurring speech never sounds or looks like "standard" writing, which has implications for thinking about language, privilege, and social justice. Additionally, a great many students described transcription as an especially challenging assignment but also ultimately rewarding, with important applications in real-world settings.

Among students' comments about the transcription assignment was the plainly correct observation that "transcription is a very tedious and hard task to complete because it requires so much just to write one line." Accurately accounting for what is said and how does take time and effort, and it also challenges students to confront their own (learned) linguistic habits and biases. "The most difficult part is that you think to yourself the best way to say a sentence and you automatically will type that, the struggle is no one speaks a perfect sentence," wrote another student who was an anthropology major but taking their first class in linguistic anthropology. These aspects of transcription can certainly be challenging and even initially discouraging for some students (and professionals!), so much so that another student ended their written reflection by stating: "I wouldn't be upset if I never got to do close transcription again. There is so much to account for." However, the thought and time spent do pay off for most novice transcribers once they settle into the work. As a non-major student in a general education class related, "although [re-listening multiple times] became tedious, I still found myself enjoying the process"—a sentiment that we both share when it comes to our own research-related transcription work.

Taking the time to listen, rewind, and listen again many times over is necessary to adequately capture the complexity of the recorded audio data in close transcription. "Every time I re-listened to the recording, I discovered something new from the conversation," wrote one student among many who shared the same experience. In part, the need to re-listen has to do with the sheer amount of talk that can happen in just a few seconds in casual social interaction. "Transcribing my conversation with my roommate was very difficult," another student wrote, "because, as it turns out, I talk fast. I was surprised by just how much was said in a matter of seconds." Capturing all of the content (i.e., words) is also just the beginning, because, as another student observed, "in spoken language, there are so many minute pauses, inhaled, and exhaled that are included. These elements that we do not think about when talking, actually provide emphasis and give meaning." Of course, we also teach these lessons in other ways in our linguistic anthropology classes,

but, perhaps unsurprisingly, they are learned much more deeply through the active process of transcription, which forces the more easily overlooked features of human speech to the surface.

The complex but largely subconscious coordination of social interaction also comes into relief for many students, especially those who record themselves talking with close friends or family members. One student captured this perfectly in their reflection, writing:

One of the most interesting parts of the conversation was when my best friend was able to predict what I was going to say before it even escaped my mouth. . . . It's fascinating that humans are so socialized into conversations that we do not even realize that most of the time, we are predicting the other person's reactions and pauses to know where we can fit in.

Developing this kind of experiential knowledge of not just language but speech and interaction in a much more holistic sense is both informative and rewarding, and many students report new fascination with and appreciation for talk in interaction. "It has made my everyday interactions more interesting," wrote one student, while another enthusiastically expressed that "there is something really beautiful about spoken language!"

Perhaps more than anything else, assignments involving careful transcription teach the fundamentally different natures of spoken and written language. Spoken language is a human universal, acquired automatically with little to no effort for neurotypical, hearing individuals, while mastering the skills of reading and writing takes years of formal training. Yet, given the emphasis on written language in schools and the naturalized ease most of our students have developed with reading and writing by the time they reach college, many come into our classes believing written and spoken language to be essentially equivalent. Some also believe, and have been taught, that written language is more complex and thus maybe even superior. Grappling with the complexity of speech thoroughly disrupts these misconceptions. "Before starting this assignment, I thought that written language is automatically more complex than spoken language because in writing we use more complex grammar and vocabulary, but that is not true to me any more," one student wrote. Through the task of transcription, as another student put it, "the disparity between spoken and written language became increasingly prevalent. Spoken dialogue is complicated and littered with vocal overlapping, conversation fillers, and phrases that may not fit prescriptive grammar." Through the process of critical reflection, observations like these can contribute to disrupting systems of linguistic privilege and subordination.

This lesson is particularly revelatory for those students who may hear themselves and be heard by others as speakers of "standard" or normative U.S. English. That belief, in tandem with the idea that spoken and written language are the same thing, leads many "standard"-speaking students to expect their transcribed speech to look like ordinary writing. As one student shared, "before transcribing the conversation my friend and I had, I was under the impression that the way I spoke was pretty much similar to the way I wrote.

After transcribing, I realized how broken up 'normal' conversation is with "uh"s, "like"s, and trailed off thoughts." Many students had similar experiences, including one who wrote:

Before this assignment, I thought that my spoken language was more or less similar to my written language. After this assignment, I realized how disjointed my sentences often are when I speak. After many years of schooling in a formal setting, I definitely adhere to "standard" American English when writing. My natural speech has far more incomplete sentences, blurred consonants, and interjections of "like" and "um."

Connecting this back to the transcription assignment—a process that attempts to represent recorded speech in a textual format—another student hit the proverbial nail on the head with the observation that "it's extremely hard to transcribe a spoken conversation into written language, because the two things are not the same."

In addition to deepened learning and critical awareness, moving from active learning and reflection to real-world action is a further goal and an important way in which we believe the transcription and reflection assignments can contribute to sociolinguistic justice. Students' written reflections suggest that this is achieved for many in part by seeing just how messy and non-standard their spoken utterances and interactions looked when put into writing. "The next time that I judge someone[']s speech] . . . I need to remember this assignment and how my own speech looked when I transcribed it," wrote a student who had previously self-identified as a speaker of "standard" English, and this sentiment occurred repeatedly.

Students also showed evidence of internalizing lessons about the political nature of transcription that had been presented in course materials like Bucholtz (2007) and in classroom lecture, discussion, and hands-on group exercises. One student described unexpected emotional responses to the task of transcribing an interlocutor's speech that failed to conform to prescriptions for "good" or "standard" English. The student wrote, "I was worried that the recurrence of the word [like] in my interviewee's speech would make her responses seem less intelligent or valuable. I was almost glad to see myself using 'like' just to balance it out." This kind of enhanced learning is especially likely to happen when students transcribe their own speech and that of others they care about, as was the case here in terms of their existing relationship to the interviewee. Making the problem of accurate and equitable textual representation personal brings students' own biases and those they can anticipate from readers to the surface, requiring them to confront the politics of transcription practically and also often emotionally.

Finally, a good number of written reflections showed that students were able to balance their own intentions to act on lessons learned to play a role in dismantling systems of social and linguistic oppression with an awareness of the obstacles to such action. "I think in the long run this assignment and this class will lead me to view grammatically correct language as less important," wrote a student in one of the majors-oriented classes. "While I will continue to try and produce grammatically correct papers for my professors," they

continued, “should the tables ever be switched I will not care very much as long as I can understand what the other person is saying.” This is ultimately our greatest hope in terms of how students move from active-learning transcription assignments that involve their own experiential data to critical reflection and finally action in the social world, or at least a plan for specific actions that can contribute to greater social justice.

## Conclusion

In the field of anthropology, the undergraduate classroom is a key site for engaging with political discourse, promoting activism, and imagining solutions to real-world problems. We have demonstrated how teaching transcription to linguistic anthropology students can serve as a relatively “small” but ultimately powerful active-learning experience that promotes critical awareness, real-world action, and social justice. Teaching students to transcribe thoughtfully and critically achieves multiple pedagogical purposes and learning outcomes. Students develop a core set of research and analytical skills while making connections between theory, politics, and practice. They become critical readers of analytical writing and academic representation and actively contribute to the refinement of disciplinary methods. Through guided reflection, they deepen their understanding of the complexities of spoken language and their awareness of linguistic variation and inequality. Most important, they are forced to reckon with their own subjectivities, the inherent biases of academic research, and systems of social inequality, potentially compelling them to action beyond the classroom. In her call for an “anthro-political linguistics” and an unmasking of the language-power connection, Zentella (2018, 191) reminds us that “whether we choose to discuss it or not, there is no language without politics.” Teaching students to look closely at spoken language by *doing* transcription exposes the central role language plays in sustaining systems of social differentiation and stratification. It unlocks pathways for them to contribute to meaningful change.

Of course, learning to transcribe may not be a transformative experience for all students, and not everyone will pursue these potential pathways to change. We know from experience that plenty will remember transcribing as, first and foremost, a tedious, mechanical, and frustrating chore. But, given sound, thoughtful instruction, no neophyte transcriber could deny that there is much more to spoken language than they had assumed or that we are collectively led to believe. We have tried to provide a step-by-step process for delivering such critically-minded and scaffolded instruction here, one that could be applied in any introductory or upper-level linguistic or cultural anthropology classroom and that is intended to be approachable to students of all skill levels and disciplinary and social backgrounds. The beauty of teaching transcription is in its relative simplicity. Transcription is a practical skill that all anthropology and linguistics students can benefit from having in their toolkit. Teaching to transcribe provides a ready-to-go, high-impact, active-learning experience that does not require the often complicated logistical planning or uncredited time and energy needed to develop deep community engagement; such engagement is not always possible with limited institutional resources or for classes that must be taught

with relatively high enrollment caps. Moreover, teaching to transcribe thoughtfully and critically, using original data, and following specific disciplinary conventions, allows for assignments that are relatively AI-resistant, particularly when they involve the kinds of close linguistic analysis and reflection that we suggest. Most importantly, as we hope to have demonstrated, teaching transcription inevitably forces students to become more conscious of language choices and their consequences, thereby contributing to anthropology's larger goals of raising critical awareness about culture, diversity, and power, and providing new avenues toward social justice.

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## Appendix A: Sample Close Transcription Template

### Speech Event Title

Start time HH:MM:SS

Line	Speaker	Utterance
1	Name A:	Utterance
2	Name B:	Utterance
3	Name A:	Utterance
4	Name B:	Utterance

End time HH:MM:SS