

GROUNDING SURVEY – WRITEUP AND REFLECTION

PART 1: WRITEUP

This survey was administered to R, the storyteller in my 2nd interview, based on the initial observations and assertions made in my midterm work. In this writeup, I will focus on 2 things: (1) my earlier assertion that live-transcription of interviews is nondisruptive because “people trump text” and (2) a discussion on the role and perception of the transcriber by interview subjects.

“People trump text”

In my midterm, I asserted (based on observations and an interview) that having your conversation captioned does not reduce your ability to attend to and develop rapport with other people physically present in that conversation. Pursuing that assertion further was one of the goals of this survey's design, and findings corroborated the assertion. As R so bluntly put it, “quite honestly [the transcriptionist] faded to the background pretty quickly.”

When asked to indicate a breakdown of their attention during the conversation, R indicated that the majority (65%) of her attention had been to either her storytelling or her own memories and thoughts, with 20% of the remaining attention going to me (the interviewer) or my questions, and 15% going to the transcript or the transcriptionist. For an interview designed to capture a story of R's memories as told by R, this breakdown seems quite appropriate.

R's comment, added after listing these numbers, bears further analysis:

R's comment	My interpretation
At the beginning and end I was noticing the transcriber and interviewer more	For those new to realtime transcription, there may be an initial adjustment period, but transcription soon fades into the background. This is corroborated in later comments on the survey; when asked how important it would be to her to have the same transcriber for future interviews, R wrote: “my sense is that after the first time it probably wouldn't [sic] be that important (a 2?) because it would be a familiar process.”
but for the most part I was focusing on the story and my memories in relation to the questions being asked.	This shows no signs of the transcription interfering with R's focus on her story.

At times I noticed the transcription text - but my eyes didn't stay there.	The transcription isn't “sticky” -- it's something that can be glanced at and then looked away from quickly. This was seen in earlier observations of different interviews; participants would flick their eyes to the monitor and then look back to the other person in the conversation.
Sometimes watching the text made me think more.	This starts going into a second theme of my analysis (not explored fully in this writeup), that of <i>grounded indigenous coding</i> . Having one's thoughts externalized as a concrete artifact that's shareable by others can help participants reflect. This is corroborated by a comment R writes later in the survey, when she talks about “reading the transcript as a way to follow my own story” and how it was “a benefit” and “a memory device.”

What is a transcriptionist seen as?

I warrant that the transcriptionist is seen as a service provided by a professional person, but that only the transcriptionist's skill and professionalism are relevant. This skill is quickly assessed in the beginning, and thereafter the transcriptionist is hardly thought of.

This is most poignantly captured in one survey comment by R: “I like that *it* was a human.” R continues: “That *the human* had a name meant she was human.” (Emphasis mine.) Names are part of an initial verification of the transcriptionist's categorical humanity, just as the first few minutes of watching the typed output are initial verifications of the transcriptionist's skill, a key part of building up the perception that you could trust the transcriptionist enough to ignore them. As R put it, “I didn't feel I needed to monitor what she typed to see whether she was capturing what I was saying.”

Skill did not mean error-free; errors by a transcriptionist perceived to be “skilled” did not diminish the perception of skill, at least not if R could see the mistake being a reasonable one – for instance, not knowing how to spell long names of Russian or East Indian origin. Allowances for differences in transcriptionist skill were also expressed: “if [the transcriptionist] wasn't keeping up, [I] would have slowed down or something .”

PART 2: REFLECTION

Doing this survey was a lot of fun – and blurred the line, for me, between survey and interview. I'd originally written the survey as a single page to be administered to R in person, but R's busy schedule combined with mine ended up with a meeting postponement and a decision to just send it by email (which is how the final version ended up being longer; I needed to write out some text I'd originally been meaning to speak to R).

R finally emailed back the results (shown in the survey-results file), but had misinterpreted one of the questions: where I asked about the transcriptionist, R had answered the questions as if they were about me (the interviewer). Curious about this, I asked R about it during our next meeting, which was not about the survey (or this research project) at all; she immediately started not just answering the question I'd pointed out, but also commenting even more on the survey questions, which I tried to capture (shown in the survey-followup file). This turned into a longer conversation on our research work in general, and my dissertation, and... at some point early in that process, when it became clear that our conversation was no longer about survey answers, I just stopped taking notes and started enjoying the talk (a decision that cost me “data,” I realize – but made me far happier at that particular moment, and you know what? I've lived just fine without whatever that “data” was.)

The lessons here, I think, were: (1) Interviews, surveys, and observations aren't distinct things – they blend into each other. (I knew that before, though.) (2) Surveys (and other small data artifacts) can be excellent conversation starters. Artifacts, in general, are good for getting participants to talk and toss around ideas with you; it gives you a common thing to focus on both mentally and physically. I could go into a long discussion of affordances, artifacts, the physical quality of human interaction, focus points, etc. here, but let's just leave it at that. (3) It's easy to “see” patterns that confirm or extend assertions you've already made. I didn't do a very thorough job of looking for contradictions – I'm definitely weaving a unified narrative here – and that's something I'd do in a longer project (possibly with a bit more data).