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A case of transcriptional stereotyping

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Abstract

In preparation for a workshop I was to lead at the Odense conference, I was sent a tape and transcripts of conversations between a Dane and a German speaking to each other in English. The Odense transcripts were produced mainly in standard orthography. One exception was frequent use of the token 'off' for the word 'of'.

My hearings often disagreed with the Odense renderings of the word 'of'. An exercise in comparison yielded results which suggest that the Odense 'off', rather than accurately depicting a pronunciation detail, was used in some independence of pronunciation details and might best be characterized as a stereotype; in the case of the Dane, a benign stereotype in that it does capture something the Dane tends to do, but in the case of the German, a malignant stereotype in that it altogether misrepresents what the German does.

1. Introduction

In preparation for a workshop I was to lead on lingua franca talk at the Odense University Institute of Language and Communication's June 1994 Research Symposium, I was sent a taperecording of several business conversations between a Dane and a German speaking to each other in English. The tape was accompanied by transcripts (which I have been advised were rough drafts, not intended for use as research instruments). I then produced my own transcripts, using the Odense transcripts as guides, companions, sometimes challenges.

In general I avoid getting into transcriptional details at conference workshops, as there are too many people and inadequate equipment, these problems compounded at European conferences by a melange of mother-tongues. But in this case the materials themselves, consisting as they did of two people with two different mother-tongues speaking to each other in a third language, added a particularly problematic element. I decided that at the Odense workshop I would not merely *avoid* getting into transcriptional details, I would make it a definite announced policy: No discussion of transcriptional details. A transcript would be used as the basis for discussion of the interaction going on between these two people, but would not itself be subjected to analysis.

However, working on the transcripts I came across a transcriptional detail too interesting to let pass. I wrote it up and dropped a couple of copies on the ‘things of possible interest’ table at the conference. That freed me to stay well away from talk about transcribing during the workshop itself.

Since the sort of romps I instigate when called upon to do a ‘workshop’ are not fit for publication, as my contribution to this volume I offer instead my write-up of the interesting transcriptional detail.

2. Comparing transcripts: The word ‘of’

The Odense transcripts were for the most part in standard orthography while mine inclined toward ‘comic book’ orthography (a tendentious but not inapt term for transcription that attempts to capture pronunciation details with a conventional alphabet). The difference in approach can be glimpsed in the following Odense-vs.-Jefferson versions of two bits of talk; first of the Dane (AB):

Odense: 5: 121

AB: here in Denmark we have a very stormy weather

Jeff: 5: 13: 17

AB: here in Tenmug we have a weddy stormy weather

and then of the German (UW):

Odense: 5: 176

UW: I hope it will not happen

Jeff: 5: 20: 20

UW: I ↑hope it, vill noht hepp’n?

There were, however several exceptions to the standard orthography of the Odense transcripts, one of which was that recurrently the word ‘of’ was rendered as ‘off’. For example:

Odense: 5: 124

UW: it will have calmed down (.) e: end off january
↑

And on that item, my own hearings often disagreed with those of the Odense transcripts. For example, where ‘off’ appears above, I got:

Jeff: 5: 14: 27

UW: it will have calm’ dow:n? eh: end ohv Janooer↑y?
↑

Given that the Odense transcribers found this pronunciation detail interesting enough to depart from the standard orthography in order to capture it, and that on many of those occasions their results differed from mine, I decided to track the matching or mis-matching between the two sets of transcripts in their renderings of the word ‘of’.

As it happens, of the calls I transcribed (C2, C3, C4 and C5), only in C5 did both speakers produce the word ‘of’. In C2 only the Dane produces it, and in C3 and C4 (very brief interactions) neither produces it. In C5 there were some 39 occurrences of ‘of’; enough to do a bit of comparison.

The Odense transcript of C5 shows a preponderance of ‘off’s as compared to ‘of’s:

‘off’	32	82%
‘of’	7	18%
	<hr/>	
	39	100%

My transcript shows something messier:

‘of’	12	31%
‘uff’	10	26%
‘ohv’	4	10%
‘awv’	4	10%
‘off’	4	10%
‘awf’	4	10%
‘aff’	1	3%
	<hr/>	
	39	100%

Looking over the two sets of ‘of’s, I realized that I didn’t know what the Odense transcripts ‘off’ intended. I’d been reading it as written, i.e., as ‘off’ [ɔf], but I began to wonder if that was right, since only 8 of the items in my transcript showed more or less that sound (the 4 ‘off’s and the 4 ‘awf’s) while the Odense transcript showed 32 ‘off’s.

On the other hand, 19 of the items in my transcript, whatever the vowel (the 10 ‘uff’s, 4 ‘off’s, 4 ‘awf’s and 1 ‘aff’) ended in the [f] which I’d assumed was intended by the Odense transcripts ‘off’.

Perhaps, then, the Odense transcripts ‘of’–‘off’ alternation was aimed at capturing a [v]–[f] alternation, regardless of vowel formation. So I ran a comparison of the two transcripts, treating the Odense ‘of’–‘off’ alternation as a [v]–[f] alternation.

3. The [v]–[f] alternation

If the Odense distinction was between [v] and [f], I could reasonably consolidate my ragbag of noises, bringing them into two categories which could then be compared with the Odense ‘of’ and ‘off’.

So, ‘off’ ‘ohv’ and ‘awv’ went into the [v] collection, and ‘uff’, ‘off’, ‘awf’ and ‘aff’ went into [f].

Here is the Odense transcripts showing again, now in terms of [v]–[f]:

‘off’	[f]	32	82%
‘of’	[v]	7	18%
		<hr/>	
		39	100%

And here are my transcripts results, in those terms:

‘uff’	}	18	46%
‘off’			
‘awf’			
‘aff’			
‘of’	}	21	54%
‘ohv’			
‘awv’			
		<hr/>	
		39	100%

An interesting difference between the two transcripts emerges. The Odense transcript shows roughly a split of 80%–20% [f]–[v], while my transcript shows roughly a 50%–50% split.

If the [f]–[v] alternation is actually occurring on the 50–50 basis shown in my transcript, then the Odense showing of 80% [f] might best be characterized as the result of principled rather than instance-by-instance transcribing.

That is, somehow a decision had been made that these speakers produce [f] in place of [v] when they say ‘of’. So when the word ‘of’ occurred, regardless of how it might actually be pronounced, the token ‘off’ was deployed. And the seven cases in which the token ‘of’ appears might be accounted for as occasional lapses of attention; automatic production of a correctly spelled word. (Such lapses are so characteristic of the transcription process that I’ve taken to putting dots under the correctly spelled word to show that, yes, that is what was said, the word was produced in standard form, this was not a transcriptional lapse. Coming across a correctly spelled word with a dot under it, I don’t have to wonder if this ‘of’ is the result of a hearing or a lapse of attention.)

3.1. *The [v]–[f] alternation by speaker*

Having begun to think in terms of what ‘these speakers produce’, it occurred to me to wonder if anything of possible interest could result from looking at the [v]–[f] alternation by speaker. Here is what turned up.

Odense Transcript				Jefferson Transcript			
Speaker AB	[f]	17	100%	Speaker AB	[f]	13	76%
	[v]	0	0%		[v]	4	24%
<hr/>				<hr/>			
		17	100%			17	100%
Speaker UW	[f]	15	68%	Speaker UW	[f]	5	23%
	[v]	7	32%		[v]	17	77%
<hr/>				<hr/>			
		22	100%			22	100%

It turns out that the Odense transcript attributes no [v]s at all to speaker AB. And while UW is shown as producing 7 [v]s, the preponderance, over two-thirds of UW's productions, are shown as [f]s. That is, *both speakers are shown in the Odense transcript to be heavily producers of [f]*.

My transcript shows the two speakers as virtual mirror images of each other. AB is shown as consistently producing [f] (13 of the 17 cases, 76%). UW is shown as consistently producing [v] (17 of the 22 cases, 77%).

If my transcript is accurate, then it could be proposed that while the Odense transcript's 'off', as a matter of principle rather than the result of case-by-case listening is more a *stereotype* than a description, at least with regard to speaker AB it constitutes a *benign stereotype*. But with regard to UW, it's a thoroughly *malignant stereotype*. It tells us his consonant is faulty, when in fact it's perfectly reasonable.

In a recent exercise considering a possible phenomenon in male–female laughter, I proposed that such stereotypic remarks as 'Xs do Y' (in that particular case, that women join in on men's laughter and that men do not join in on women's laughter) might best be considered, not as descriptions but as 'glosses'. And as glosses, they need not be 100% accurate to be valid; to be in a sense 'true'.

The same might be said to hold for the Odense showing of AB's consonants as 100% [f]. Okay, so it's not utterly accurate but it is representative. It captures and conveys something about AB's talk. That is to say, although AB does not invariably produce an [f] in place of a [v], he does so consistently.

Parenthetically just let me note that in C2, another of the conversations between AB and UW, only AB produces the word 'of'. He does so 13 times. As in C5 the Odense transcript of C2 shows [f] in all cases of 'of'; i.e., displays it as 'off'. My transcript shows 3 cases of [v] and 10 cases of [f]; 23% and 77% respectively. This is virtually identical to the 24%–76% proportions of AB's [v]–[f] alternation in C5.

It appears that AB's production is doubly consistent, i.e., within a single conversation he can be described as consistently producing [f] for [v] in the word 'of'. And secondly, across conversations he consistently produces the same proportion of [f] to [v] in the word 'of'.

Again, then: The Odense transcript's showing of AB as producing 'of' with [f] in 100% of the cases does point to an occurrence which, although not invariable as the Odense transcript proposes, is consistent. In that sense, the Odense 'off' may be characterized as a benign stereotype of AB's talk.

With regard to UW, however, the Odense transcript gives a malignant stereotype. It shows UW as, if not invariably producing [f] for [v], then certainly consistently doing so; i.e. in 15 of 22 cases, 68%. My transcript shows UW as consistently producing [v]; in 17 of 22 cases, 77%. If my transcript is accurate, then the Odense transcript is proposing something about UW's talk that is just about antipodal to the truth.

3.2. A reconsideration

Earlier I remarked that the 7 instances (out of a total of 39 cases) in which the Odense transcript shows the token 'of' for the word 'of', might be accounted for as occasional lapses of attention, a common transcriptional occurrence. But I had come up with that possibility before it occurred to me to consider the [v]–[f] alternation by speaker.

Consideration of the [v]–[f] alternation by speaker revealed that all 7 of the Odense 'of's occur among UW's 22 cases. This absolute partitioning of the tokens raises the possibility that those seven are not occasional lapses from a principled deployment of the token 'off', but are hearings after all; sensitive to UW's consistent production of [v].

Now, my transcript shows 17 [v]s; 17 cases that would take the token 'of' in the Odense transcript system. If my transcript is correct, then the 7 Odense 'of's comprise less than half of the actual set of cases.

Further, if my transcript is correct, then 2 of the 7 Odense 'of's are incorrect. My transcript shows 5 [f]s in UW's talk, two of which show up as alternative hearings to Odense [v]s:

Odense: 5: 5

UW: h the e::m delivery of (.) monday [v]
 ↑

Jeff: 5: 1: 24

UW: 'K_ay eh:::m: del_iver_iy awf M_onda_y? [f]
 ↑

and

Odense: 5: 78

UW: ...I told you out of the situation ... [v]
 ↑

Jeff: 5: 10: 7

UW: ... I t_old you awd uff the s_ituation ... [f]
 ↑

Again, if my transcript is correct, then we're left with 5 correct cases out of the 17. I would guess that those 5 'of's are lapses after all. But I also wonder if those lapses,

while not in any single case a hearing of UW's 'of's, don't somehow reflect some sort of underlying sensitivity to UW's consistent production of [v].

A proposal then might be that the persistence of [v] in UW's talk generated an underlying sensitivity which, in a few cases, resulted in a lapse from the principled use of the token 'off', and which, in even fewer cases, had, as a *byproduct*, a piece of correct transcription.

4. What about the vowels?

Given the results of exploring variation in consonants by speaker, an obvious enough next step is to look at the vowels. But in this case the exploration will not be a comparison between the two transcripts. As I said earlier, when I first started working with the Odense transcript with its two tokens for the word 'of' ('of' and 'off'), I assumed that the token 'off' was to be read literally; as something like 'awf' [ôf]. That initial assumption left a trail. As I made my own transcripts, I marked on the Odense transcripts my own hearings of their 'of's and 'off's. And when I thought my hearings agreed with theirs I'd mark it 'OK'. It turns out that where they had the token 'off' and I heard 'awf' [ôf], the sound for which the standard-orthographic token is 'off' I'd mark it 'OK'. Here is a sampling of cases.

Odense: 2: 5

UFF

AB: forty procent off them

Odense: 2: 13

OK

AB: four off them was taken out

Odense: 2: 14

OF

AB: four off them was was taking out

Odense: 5: 29

OK OF

UW: tremEndous increase here off e:: off (.) orders

Odense: 5: 94

OK

AB: you can take (.) take care off it

Odense: 5: 138

UFF

AB: off course yes

Odense: 5: 142

AFF UFF

AB: but it's a lot off off people

Again, then, I assumed as I was transcribing that the Odense token ‘off’ was to be read literally; as something like ‘awf’ [ôf]. And that would mean that both the Odense transcript and my transcript were catching vowel alternations and thus could be compared.

But I eventually decided that the Odense ‘off’ is not to be read as ‘awf’ [ôf], but as ‘uff’ [uf]. My guess is that it was created by using the standard orthography for ‘of’ as its base, and simply doubling the consonant to indicate that not [v] but [f] is being produced. (Which is to say that where I wrote in the alternate hearing ‘UFF’, I should have marked the ‘off’ ‘OK’, and where I marked ‘OK’, I should have written in the alternate hearing ‘AWF’. The fact that ‘off’ is readable as ‘awf’ [ôf] is one of the headaches that nonphonetic orthography gives rise to.)

So, my best guess at this point is that the Odense transcript’s tokens for ‘of’, ‘of’ and ‘off’, were focussed exclusively on the [v]–[f] consonant alternation and were not intended to be read as *also* showing a – perhaps altogether too perfectly – corresponding [u]–[ô] alternation.

Given what seems to me a strong likelihood, that the Odense transcripts did not mark variations in the vowel and are thus to be read as [uv] and [uf], I’ll be working here with only my own transcript as the basis for vowel comparison. And while my transcript shows a range of tokens (‘of’, ‘uff’, ‘ohv’, ‘awv’, ‘off’, ‘awf’ and ‘aff’), I’m going to drastically simplify them, working with an ‘uh’–not ‘uh’ [u]–[∅] alternation in the case of AB, and an ‘uh’–‘aw’ [u]–[ô] alternation in the case of UW, as follows.

<i>Speaker AB</i>					
(17 cases)					
‘of’ [uv]	4	} 13 [u]	77%	{	24%
‘uff’ [uf]	9				53%
‘off’/‘awf’ [ôf]	3	} 4 [∅]	23%	{	18%
‘aff’ [af]	1				5%
17				100%	13 100%

One striking feature is that AB tends to produce the vowel which is standard for the word ‘of’; ‘uh’ [u]. He does so in 13 of his 17 cases, 77%. And in 69% of the variant pronunciations (9 of the variant 13), the variant consists of a standard vowel [u] and a variant consonant [f].

If the Odense transcript’s token ‘off’ is indeed to be read as ‘uff’ [uf], then not only does it constitute a benign stereotype of AB’s consistent production of the variant consonant [f], but as well, a benign stereotype of AB’s consistent production of the standard vowel [u].

What about UW’s vowels? I’ve already characterized the Odense transcripts’ token ‘off’ as a malignant stereotype of UW’s consonants. If ‘off’ is to be read as

‘uff’ [uf], what sort of stereotype is it for UW’s vowels as shown in my own transcript?

		Speaker UW (22 cases)			
‘of’ [uv]	9	10 [u] 46%	{	41%	
‘uff’ [uf]	1			5%	1 [uf] 7%
		17 [v] 77%			
‘awv’/‘ohv’ [ôv]	8	12 [ô] 54%	{	36%	8 [ôf] 62%
‘awf’/‘off’ [ôf]	4			18%	4 [ôf] 31%
22		100%	13	100%	

A striking feature here is that, in contrast to his consistent production of the standard consonant [v] for the word ‘of’ (17 of his 22 cases, 77%), UW vacillates in his production of the vowel. Of those 17 cases with a standard consonant [v], 9 are produced with the standard vowel [u] and 8 with the variant [ô].

Putting aside the 9 cases in which UW is shown as producing the word ‘of’ in a more or less standard manner, i.e., the 9 cases of ‘of’ [uv] and focussing on the 13 variant cases, it turns out that 12 of those 13 cases are produced with the variant vowel [ô] (8 with the standard consonant [v] and 4 with the variant consonant [f]).

Indeed, only a single case of UW’s productions as rendered in my transcript coincides with my reading of the Odense transcripts’ token ‘off’ as ‘uff’ [uf]. In this light, the Odense transcript of C5 with its showing of 68% of UW’s productions as consisting of a standard vowel and variant consonant, borders on libel! That’s not at all what UW is doing.

5. Discussion

The Odense transcripts’ token, ‘off’, can certainly be characterized as representative of the Danish speaker AB’s tendency to produce the variant consonant [f] in place of the standard [v] when producing the word ‘of’. And read as ‘uff’, it can also be characterized as representative of AB’s tendency to produce the standard vowel [u]. Although, read as ‘uff’, it is accurate in only 53%, 9 of the 17 cases, it at least depicts salient features of AB’s productions. A benign stereotype.

When it comes to the German speaker UW’s talk, however, the Odense transcript’s ‘off’ is simply wrong, in that UW tends to produce the standard consonant [v], not the variant [f] which is shown. And read as ‘uff’, it misses the 45%–55% oscillation between the standard [u] and variant [ô] that UW is producing. Further, read as ‘uff’, the Odense token turns out to be accurate in only 1 of the 22 cases. An office secretary using straight standard orthography would have done more justice to UW’s talk, the standard token ‘of’ [uv] catching 8 of the 22 cases. The Odense token

is then not only wildly inaccurate but altogether misleading in its depiction of salient features of UW's productions. A malignant stereotype.

What we have then is a token which, say, reasonably represents one participant's talk but utterly misrepresents the other's. One possibility raised by this partitioning is that the token 'off' was generated out of the talk of the one speaker and simply (mis)applied to the talk of the other.

In the series of calls involving AB and UW, C2 is the first in which English is being spoken. As I noted earlier, in C2 only AB produces the word 'of'. The first occurrence of an 'of' by AB is early in the call, and if the Odense token 'off' is read as 'uff', then, on this first occurrence of an 'of', both transcripts give the same rendering; 'off' in the Odense transcript, 'uff' in mine.

Odense: 2: 5

UFF

AB: there eh is forty procent off them

↑

Jeff: 2: 1: 25

AB: dahr- (0.2) uh: is: forty prrocent uff zhem

↑

(At that point, thinking the Odense 'off' was to be read as written, 'awf' [ôf], I marked a mismatch between the Odense 'off' and my 'uff', where I now think both transcripts are marking the same sound, [uf], and the marking should be 'OK' instead of a proposed alternative, 'UFF'.)

It may be that the token 'off' was born on this first occurrence, in the manner I proposed earlier; using the standard-orthographic 'of' as its base and doubling the 'f' to represent the presence of [f] in place of [v]. And I'm guessing that the token 'off' was thereafter deployed on a principled rather than case by case basis. So, for example, just a bit later in C2 the Odense transcript shows two consecutive occurrences of 'off' while my transcript shows variation.

Odense: 2: 17-18

AB: I can live with that five off them you don't

↑

livering then I can take care off them

↑

Jeff: 2: 4: 5-9

AB: I can live (.) wih- é-that fi[↑]ve of sem:. You don't

↑

eh livering. Them: I take care uff sem

↑

Having created 'off' as the token for AB's 'of', it appears that although in C5 there were now two speakers (not to mention two different mother-tongues) producing the

word, the in-principle use of a token designed for the one speaker simply persisted. The result being that the German speaker UW is shown to be making the same noises as the Danish speaker AB, although he most definitely is not. A case, in fine detail, of ‘all these foreigners sound alike’.

Appendix: Comparison: Odense–Jefferson: C5: ‘Of’

Odense				Jefferson			
Page	Line	Version	Speaker	Page	Line	Version	
1	1	‘off’	UW	1	9	‘awv’	
1	5	‘of’	UW	1	24	‘awf’	
2	18	‘off’	AB	3	9	‘of’	
2	26	‘off’	UW	4	11	‘of’	
2	27	‘off’	UW	4	14	‘of’	
2	29a	‘off’	UW	4	18a	‘off’	
2	29b	‘off’	UW	4	18b	‘of’	
2	34	‘off’ 2x	AB	5	6	‘uff’ 2x	
2	35a	‘off’	AB	5	9a	‘of’	
2	35b	‘off’ [+Ø]	AB	5	9b	‘uff’ [+‘of’]	
3	49	‘of’	UW	7	1a	‘of’	
3	50	‘off’ 2x	UW	7	1b	‘awf’ 2x	

Odense				Jefferson			
Page	Line	Version	Speaker	Page	Line	Version	
4	55	‘of’	UW	7	19	‘awv’	
4	60	‘off’	UW	8	10	‘awv’	
4	64	‘off’	UW	8	22	‘of’	
4	66a	‘off’	AB	9	1a	‘aw:f’	
4	66b	‘off’ 4x	AB	9	1b	‘uff’ 4x	
5	78	‘of’	UW	10	8a	‘uff’	
5	79	‘of’	UW	10	8b	‘of’	
5	89	‘off’	AB	11	6a	‘uff’	
5	go	‘off’	AB	11	6b	‘uff’	
6	93	‘off’	AB	11	14	‘uff’	
6	94	‘off’	AB	11	20	‘off’	
7	110a	‘off’	UW	13	9a	‘of’	
7	110b	‘off’	UW	13	9b	‘awv’	
7	125	‘off’	UW	15	1	‘ohv’	
8	126	‘off’	UW	15	3	‘ohv’	
8	131	‘off’	UW	15	18	‘of’	

Odense				Jefferson			
Page	Line	Version	Speaker	Page	Line	Version	
8	132	‘of’	UW	15	21	‘ohv’	
8	138a	‘of’	UW	16	20	‘of’	

8	138b	'off'	AB	16	22	'uff'
8	142a	'off'	AB	17	6a	'aff'
8	142b	'off'	AB	17	6b	'uff'
9	155	'off'	AB	18	16	'uff'
9	156	'off'	AB	18	ig	'awf'
9	157	'off'	UW	18	24	'ohv'
10	179	'off'	AB	21	4	'of'
11	185	'off'	AB	21	20	'of'
11	192–3	'off' 2x	UW	22	20	'off' 2x