



Tilburg papers in language and literature

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Issues in the Transcription
of Naturally-Occurring Talk:
Caricature versus Capturing
Pronunciational Particulars

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With an appended glossary of transcript symbols

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On occasion one comes across interactional bits which require the marking of pronunciational particulars. So, for example, in the following two fragments, alternative pronunciations of a word ('kiln', the oven in which ceramics are baked, the alternatives "kil" and "kiln", and 'leis', the Hawaiian flower garlands, the alternatives "lays" and "lees") become 'topicalized'.

(1) [G:DP:32-33:Standard Orthography With Exceptions:Simplified]

Janet: I guess they paid two- twenty thousand for the house and
→ two thousand for the ki:l.
Beth: Mm::,
Janet: Technically,
Ron: → (It's a) kil:n.
Jan: → Kil:n, I don't know how to say it,
Ron: → You always say kil.

(2) [Parker:AE:Standard Orthography With Exceptions:Recast]

Tom: Okay so you got that all lined up.
Leila: → Lays. Yah lays. Or lees however you say it.
Tom: [Alright? Now uh,

Or, for example, in the following two fragments, the fact that the affirmation/negation tokens ['Yes' or 'Yeah] and ['No'], which in their 'strict' form are quite acoustically distinct, one from the other, are produced with lax or slurred pronunciation, might be relevant to their mis-hearing by a coparticipant. (These two fragments are taken from

Jefferson, G., "What's in a 'nyem'?", Sociology, Volume 12, Number 1, January 1978, pages 135-139).

(3) [FN:Standard Orthography With Exceptions]

Pete: Have you seen the new building yet?
 Dora: → Nyem,
 Pete: What is it like.
 Dora: ((laughs)) I said no.
 Pete: ((laughing)) Oh I thought you said yes.

(4) [FN:Standard Orthography With Exceptions]

Jason: You want coffee?
 Mike: → Mnuh.
 Jason: Yes?
 Mike: No.
 Jason: Ō(h)h okay.

Likewise, in the following fragments the fact that certain words are slurred ("what I couldn'n couldn'do", "that I wouldn'prosecute", "that we shouldn'meet", "which isn'a norm") might well account for subsequent activities.

(5) [GTS:III:28:Standard Orthography With Exceptions]

Ken: → I just didn't feel like being told what I couldn'couldn'do.
 → So I- Could (.) or could not do. So I told him to cram it up his ass and left.

(6) [Lamb:Standard Orthography With Exceptions]

Mrs. B.: → So I had to sign a paper that I wouldn'prosecute. And I never heard [from them.
 Dr. L.: → That you would.
 Mrs. B.: → That I wouldn't.
 Dr. L.: u:Oh::.

((The dot under the 't' in Mrs. B.'s "wouldn't" indicates that it is strongly dentalized))

(7) [GTS:I:2:61:Standard Orthography With Exceptions]

Dan: → I was going to mention that uh, that we shouldn'meet uh Easter va- Easter wuh-weekend.
 (0.2)
 Roger: → We shouldn't?
 (0.3)
 Dan: Should not.

(8) [FN:Standard Orthography With Exceptions]

Alan: → ...which isn't a norm.
 Bev: → Is the norm?
 Alan: Is not.

And while it might be esthetically jarring and/or analytically misleading to produce transcripts which only capture pronunciation particulars when they are obviously relevant, there are strong objections to transcripts which capture these details throughout. Phonetic transcripts are not accessible to most readers. And the sort of 'comic book' orthography I use (e.g., for 'What are you doing?', "Wutche doin'?") is considered objectionable in that it makes the speakers look "stupid"; it seems to caricature them rather than illuminate features of their talk.

Secondly and relatedly, experts on phonetics such as William Labov, propose that someone who, for example, says "dat" instead of "that", is not producing defective English, but is speaking correctly in his dialect, and thus should not be transcript-displayed as producing an object which is commonly treated as defective.

I will briefly address each of these issues in turn.

There is a powerful basis for the 'caricature problem'. At least in American and British culture and literature, pronunciation particulars are systematically used as indices of personality type, categorial membership, etcetera.

So, for example, a right-wing California newspaper provides us with a 'detailed' quote of a Welfare Rights organizer. In the midst of some standard journalistic English, we suddenly find: "there ain't gonna be no shopping downtown".

(9) [From the Santa Ana Register, Januray 27, 1970]

Welfare demonstrators, whose sieges of two downtown department stores after they were refused winter clothing money by the county resulted in 37 arrests, have vowed to continue their

- protests all this week. "This weekend, there ain't gonna be no shopping downtown", Bernard Thomas, an organizer for the National Welfare Rights Organization, told a rally Monday night.

And in fiction/literature there is a strong tendency to unmarked, standard language by its neutral or high-status characters, with every now and then a particular character's talk shown in its 'deviant' particulars.

For example, the novelist Stephen Crane, praised for his remarkable capturing of the talk of the 'lower classes', with whom he had no contact (praised by reviewers with equal lack of contact), has speakers from different categories speaking very differently. In his short story The Monster, he has a white judge speaking standard, indeed elegant, English.

(10) [From The Monster by Stephen Crane]

He said thoughtfully, "No one wants to advance such ideas, but somehow I think that that poor fellow ought to die."

In this same story, Crane has an enormously sympathetic character, a black handyman, speaking rich dialect.

(11) [From The Monster by Stephen Crane]

"I ain't gwi' have you round yere spilin' yer pants an' have Mis' Trescott light on me presen'ly. Deed I ain't."

And certainly such differences exist. For example, in two utterances from a British small claims court, in particular, via distinctive pronunciations of the word 'new', we hear a class distinction: Upper-class English by the Adjudicator, Phipps, and lower-class English (cockney) by the Plaintiff, Sokol.

(12) [SCC:DCD:1]

Phipps: 'hmh hh An:d, you state, thet- the dress::: (.) w'z nyoo:.
Sokol: Ih w'z bra:n' noo::.

But it should be pointed out that membership in some category does not automatically bring with it 'textbook' pronunciation. So, for example in Fragment (12) above, both speakers slur the word 'was', pronouncing it "w'z".

And in the following fragment, taken from a California traffic court, a white judge produces massive slurring.

(13) [Pollner:TC]

Judge: An' if you are en innegent, en you feel thetchu need a lawyer, the court will appoint counsel tuh representchu... You have the right tuh speeny witnesses of yer own

((For the sake of clarity: "innegent" in standard orthography is 'indigent' and "speeny" is 'subpoena'))

Now, one writer makes a device of this literary tendency to have some characters speaking perfect textbook English, while others wreak grammatical and pronounciational havoc. In his book about Jewish immigrants in New York City, Call It Sleep, Henry Roth has them speaking abysmal English and elegant Yiddish. He makes the distinction in part by rendering their English in 'comic book' orthography, their Yiddish in standard orthography.

(14) [From Call It Sleep by Henry Roth]

((David's mother claims him at the police station))

"Er-" his mother began timidly. "Herr- Mister. Ve- er- ve go?"

.

Hand in hand they walked as rapidly as his pace permitted. "We're not very far," she informed him. "though far enough for a weary child. Now tell me, how did you ever stray into that place?"

There is, then, a strong and problematic orientation to how people talk, deeply engrained in our literature. Some people are shown as talking 'defectively', others as talking perfectly. And many reserachers propose as a solution to this problem, that everything be produced in standard orthography.

Then there is the second, and related objection; that a speaker who is shown in a transcript to be producing defective language, is speaking correctly in his dialect, and that correctness should be represented by

mentioned that actors are taught to keep their dialect 'consistent', and are faulted for such 'slippage'.

And, for example, in his book Call It Sleep, Henry Roth keeps his people's talk consistent. In a segment in which a little boy shifts from English to Yiddish, his 'bad English' includes a series of "den"s for 'then'. When he shifts into Yiddish, the pronunciation is shown as the standard "then".

(18) [From Call It Sleep by Henry Roth]

((David is trying to rush his friend out of the apartment))

→ "You go op Yussie! G'wan! Horry op! I'll waid f'yuh in mine house. Den you come down and den I'll go! Horry op!

His mother sniffed sharply. "Are you driving him out, child? You mustn't do that!"

→ "No! No!" David reverted desperately to Yiddish. "He's going by himself! I'm not pushing him! . . . He's coming down to call me. And then we're both going into the street."

That is, there is agreement among researchers, professional imitators (i.e., actors) and fiction writers, that pronunciation within a dialect is consistent. But when one listens carefully to people talking, one finds a bit of variation. Sometimes the differences are mild, sometimes quite strong. Here are a series of excerpts from taperecorded conversations by speakers of 'sub-standard' English or various 'dialects'.

In the following fragment, a member of a California motorcycle gang, the Hell's Angels, produces "them" followed by "dere" ('their').

(19) [KPFK:GJ]

Joe: I tell them right t'dere face . . .

In the following, a Bronx janitor produces several versions of 'there': "the:uh", "de:uh," and "dere", and consistently uses "th" for 'the'.

In the following, a Welsh woman living in the North of England pronounces her son's name, Kerry, without, then with, and again without the trilled 'r'.

(24) [Rah:II:14-16:R]

- Ida: → Well] 'ee] ↓ 'ee-]
 Jessie: → Well] thz e] only] Ke:rrɪy en they fight like th' ↓ °dev' l°
 .
 Jessie: → <And e-ehm (.) Ke'trɪy w's: eh:m, in the chess mahtch
 .
 Jessie: → So it's a:l]l hahnging on Kerry's:<uh tga:me

In another conversation, referring to the same matter, the name is produced with the trilled 'r'.

(25) [Rah:I:4:1]

- Jessie: → in fa:ct uh Kerrɪ wɪz playing in th'chess toornam'nt,

From that same corpus can be extracted other examples of variation in the trilled or non-trilled 'r', by other speakers. In the following fragment a Northern Englishwoman pronounces 'rang' in both versions.

(26) [Rah:I:1-3:R]

- Vera: → Oh Mahthew rɹang t'see'f you were there,
 .
 Vera: → En I rang Joy:ce up lahs'night thinkin'she wɪz havin'uhr
teeth aout

And in the following fragment, a Northern Englishwoman pronounces 'alright' as "awright" and "alrɹight", and 'Vera' with non-trilled and trilled 'r'.

(27) [Rah:II:1-2:R]

- Ida: → How uz ↓thi:ngs ↑awri: [↑:ght?
 Jessie: [Ye:s fi:ne yes I'm ringin up about
 tomorruh actually: en:d I'm d- I'll do coffee t'morrow
 mohr:ning.
 (.)
 Ida: → It chee- Not Vera's.
 Jessie: eh- Insteada Vera's.h
 Ida: → A: [:lr ri:gh t,] Ye: s,
 Jessie: [Yes] :: [Ye] s. [C'z uh: [thz no ba:gmeet] en,
 Ida: → [I : s Vera s]

.
 Jessie: It'll be en oppuhtunity f'me: tih do it.
 Ida: Oh hhoh h^hogh:h eYes,=
 Jessie: eYe:s,
 Ida: → → =^ou-Veerra's awright is she:?

One can also find some rather intreguing 'consistent inconsistencies'. In a corpus of conversations recorded in Southern California, there is massive pronunciation of the days of the week as ending with 'dee', not 'day'. For example:

(28) [NB:I:6:R:1]

Lottie: → let's see: (.) Thurs:dee night I wen'in town I came back
 → Fri^udee it wz la:te,
 (0.5)
 Emma: → Oh you went in †Thursdee ni:ght?

But one of the speakers, Lottie, who produces six days of the week as ending with "dee", consistently uses the ending "day" for "Saturday". In the following fragment we see her producing "Fridee", "Saturday", and "Sundee".

(29) [NB:IV:10:R:2-3]

Lottie: → theⁿ Fr iⁱ,dee morning ther gunnuh leave fer La:s Vegas=
 Emma: [°Mm hm, °]
 Lottie: = 'n spen' [°t'hhh
 Emma: [°Ooohh Khot. °
 (0.3)
 Lottie: → *→ Fri:dee: uh ni:ght'n then come ba:ck Sa:tur↓day en then:
 .
 Lottie: → †We swam in the n:ude °hh Sundee night . . .

And in the following fragment, she produces "Thursdee" and "Saturday", her coparticipant producing "Saturdee".

(30) [NB:II:1:R:7-8]

Emma: → well people'r com'n in nex (.) Sa:turdee en I hope tuh:
 goodness it's good we^uather.
 .
 Lottie: → I went t'the one: uh (0.2) Thursdee on uh (.) 't'hhh up there
 by Knoxberry Fa:rm they seem tih have a better uh: :
 Emma: [Ya:h.
 (0.2)
 Lottie: yihknow s'lection.
 Emma: °Ya:h, °
 Lottie: *→ 't'hh But I wz up he:re las' Saturday I hadtuh go get some...

Whatever relationship holds between these variations, and notions of 'defective' speech versus speaking correctly in one's 'dialect', remains to be seen. But it seems to me that theories and proposals about how people talk should be based upon close attention to their in-situ, spontaneously-produced utterances. And while the production of transcripts in standard orthography removes the problem of 'caricaturing' speakers, it also obscures the very data upon which a range of theories should be based.

Further: Not only do people produce words in one way or another, but they produce them in the course of interaction. And when people interact, they do so at a range of levels, including that of pronunciation. So, for example, in Fragment (1), we see a little discussion emerging about the alternative pronunciations of 'kiln'.

But there are other materials in which the relevance of pronunciation particulars is not obvious; the talk is perfectly coherent with no marking of such details. For example, in the following fragment, there is no explicit discussion, but a speaker shifts his pronunciation of the word 'kiln' from "kiln" to "kil" (this fragment is considered in Jefferson, G., "On exposed and embedded correction in conversation", Studium Linguistik, Heft 14, 1983, pages 58-68).

(31) [TC:II(a):14:21]

- Griff: Well I- uh I didn't know anyone: thet knew anything about
 → kilns except you:.
 (0.2)
- J.R.: Whhhhuhhhuh 'hh Actually most'v my experience's been in gas
 → kilns though real [ly en]
- Griff: Why the hell dihyou [I know] it. Thet's what I kip telling myself.
- J.R.: [Yea:h.]
 (0.5)
- Griff: *→ fool with en electric ki(h)l w'n y'g'n gitta ga:s [kil.]
 J.R.: [u-u-] Ay
 → electric kilns er a lot m- cost more to operate fer one thing,

While the transcript would be perfectly coherent without notating the pronunciation differences, it might also be obscuring a layer of interaction. Specifically, it may not be incidental that someone asking advice of another, adopts the pronunciation of the advisor.

On the other hand, someone seeking another's advice may in various ways exhibit his own competence and non-subordinate status. For example, in the following fragment, one woman is asking another how to make tacos. One way that she preserves her non-subordinate status is by herself naming candidate ingredients. In this case it may not be incidental, but may be part and parcel of her preserving non-subordinate status, that she maintains her pronunciation of the word 'sauce' ("sawss"), in the face of her advisor's pronunciation ("sahss").

(32) [NB:II:2:R:1-2]

Gladys: → you need uh hamburger don't↓chu.
 Emma: `hh Yē:u::s? ē_[En] n y uh need_{[some: u]h :}
 Gladys: → s- `hh sh:redded lettuce?
 Emma: Shredded lettuce en CHEE::SE?
 Gladys: → *→ Dih you need a hot sawss:?
 Emma: → `t`hhh A TA↑:CO ↓sah*:ss.
 Gladys: *→ A ta:co ↓s*aw:ss.

And once we begin to find possible phenomena in pronunciation details which are not in the first place obviously relevant; i.e., details which are not in the first place required to make sense of an utterance or an interactional bit, as in Fragments (1) and (2), or to at least partially account for a range of repairs and understanding-checks as in Fragments (3)-(9), then we are either committed to transcribing all the talk in its pronunciation particulars, or to accepting the obliteration of a potentially fruitful data base.