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# Australia and the Pacific Islands

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### **TRANSCRIPTION**

Transcribing linguistic utterances is a complex endeavor that raises many questions of analytic import. A small but significant body of works in discourse analysis and linguistic anthropology (including Edwards 1993; Ochs 1979; Tedlock 1983) addresses some of these questions, but little has been written about the special problems that the transcription of sung language raises, and most scholars of Oceanic music continue to treat the process of linguistic transcription unproblematically. The following overview presents problems of transcribing spoken language and identifies possible avenues of inquiry in the analysis of sung language. This discussion takes as its object of inquiry the performance of singing in a social context, rather than decontextualized music.

### Basic principles of transcription

The transcription of language in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology has traditionally been a contingent, project-specific process, for which no standardized procedures exist: researchers have devised their own systems, inspired in part by previous research, in part by their own analytic requirements.

Everything in language can potentially have semantic or pragmatic significance. Meaning, be it referential (literal), affective (emotive), or social, can potentially be conveyed by every aspect of linguistic behavior, including subtle shifts in pronunciation (particularly if they give rise to nonstandard pronunciations), intonation, vocal quality, loudness, and tempo, plus nonphonological features including choice of words, syntactic variation, false starts, hedges, and other “noise” in delivery. This observation leads to the first basic principle of linguistic transcription: everything in linguistic performance must be encoded in a transcript, including material that the researcher might initially consider extraneous.

Competing with this principle are several concerns. One, first discussed in print by Elinor Ochs (1979), is that a transcript too rich in detail is unanalyzable. Transcribers must therefore find a compromise between the inclusion of detail sufficient for a careful analysis of the transcript and enough clarity to enable analysis. How this compromise is achieved depends on the ultimate goals of the research, the nature of the linguistic material, and the method utilized in the analysis of the transcript. However, transcribers must take seriously Ochs’ insistence that each transcriptive decision has theoretical import. The compromise itself will give subsequent analysis a particular theoretical slant, which would differ if an alternate compromise were made.

Ochs provides an example regarding the transcription of child-language data. Conversational turns between adults are commonly transcribed in a vertical arrangement: when one speaker yields the conversational floor to another, the transcriber, following the age-old practices of dramaturgical writing, usually begins transcribing the next turn on a fresh line. This arrangement provides a visual impression of equality between the conversationalists. Though it may be adequate for most conversations between adults, it is poorly suited to the transcription of asymmetrical interactions, as between children and adults.

Elaborating on Ochs’ insights, Jane A. Edwards (1993) identifies several components in transcript design. First, transcribers must decide which categories to include, and once they have made this decision, the transcription of each category must be systematic; a transcriber who decides that pause length is of potential importance to the transcript and its analysis must indicate pause length for every instance of a pause. Second, the transcript must be readable: the notational system must be sufficiently transparent and conventional to be readily interpreted by other users. Third, related events, like turns of the same conversation, must be transcribed in close proximity to one another, while unrelated events must be separated visually. Fourth, the spacial arrangement of the transcript must be iconic of the temporal arrangement of events.

### Transcribing musical material

Discussions of the problems that transcription raises have mostly concerned conversational data, but most of the issues raised in this literature are directly relevant to the transcription of musical material. Sung performances in Oceania are often punctuated by audience responses, including applause, laughter, weeping, or verbal evaluation. In Tongan song-and-dance performances, observers express approval by shouting *mālie* ‘well done’. In Sāmoan song-and-narrative performances, listeners show appreciation by saying ‘*ae*, or any of several other terms. Thus, sung performances

are as potentially dialogic as informal conversation, and a performance-centered analysis of singing must treat this dialogism as an object of inquiry. As John M. Atkinson (1984) has demonstrated, skillful politicians carefully control the timing of their audience's applause in response to speeches, and use the applause in designing the course of their subsequent delivery. Formal spoken discourse can be as sensitive to nonverbal response cues from the audience as informal conversation, and while it remains an empirical question, the same could probably be said of many musical performances worldwide (witness the timing of applause in performances of jazz). The transcription of singing must thus provide information about the inception, completion, and quality of applause.

In short, the transcription of any verbal and nonverbal data is a theoretically fraught activity, and researchers must approach the task of transcribing as an integral part of the analytic process.

—NIKO BESNIER