

What do we do when we transcribe speech? Typologies in lexical substitutions.

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Transcription of spoken language is becoming a widely common practice in corpus linguistics, computational linguistics, besides being a regular activity in administrative, parliamentary and judiciary acts. But transcription is not just a metalinguistic practice serving linguistic analysis, it is, at the same time, a linguistic act itself, governed by its own strategies and tightly linked to other speech acts, and linguistic practices (such as note-taking, listening to spoken language for different purposes, writing following dictation, etc.). Recent literature has often been centered on transcription system design (e.g. Du Bois, 1991; Edwards, 1992; Du Bois et alii, 1993; Gumpertz & Berenz, 1993; Cook, 1995; Leech et alii, 1995), on reviewing and comparing different transcription systems (e.g. Psathas, & Anderson, 1990; Edwards, 1995; Cook, 1995; Johansson, 1995; Chafe, 1995; O'Connell & Kowal, 1995a, 1995b), and on errors and inconsistencies in linguistic annotation (e.g. Oppermann, Burger and Weilhammer, 2000). However, a consistent amount of errors and repairs occur even at the basic level of transcription, when the mere sequence of spoken words are heard and transcribed (e.g. Chiari 2006). Some of these errors are corrected in further stages of annotation (especially when phonetic and phonological labelling is required), but some others remain undetected in the revision process. The present work illustrates the main results of an experiment on errors and repairs in spoken Italian language transcription, with significant relevance for the evaluation of validity, reliability and correctness of transcriptions of speech belonging to several different typologies, set for the annotation of spoken corpora. In particular, we dealt with errors and repair strategies that appear on the first drafts of the transcription process, that are not easily detectable with automatic post-editing procedures. 35 participants were asked to give an accurate transcription of 22 short utterances, repeated from one to four times, belonging two non-spontaneous controlled speech (10) and spontaneous speech (10). Sample spoken material consisted of 100 different utterances (50 in controlled speech and 50 in spontaneous speech), plus two control utterances added at the beginning of the test. Nearly 1.000 errors were detected and analyzed.

In this paper we mean to discuss typologies in lexical substitutions, covering about 45.1% of total error types (among deletion – 43.7%, addition – 8.8%, substitution and movement – 2.4%). Examples are utterances where *un profondo cambiamento* is transcribed as *un grande cambiamento*. Among substitutions 52.7% of occurrences involve lexical elements, 19% function words and 16.6% verb conjugation errors. Target grammatical categories involved in word level substitutions are mainly verbs 21.5%, prepositions 13.2%, pronouns 11.% and nouns 9.8%). Substitutions in the great majority of cases involve elements belonging to the same grammatical category. Regarding content preservation in word level substitutions, in 38.7% of cases meaning is preserved completely, in 22.6% is partially preserved, while in 38.7% a complete misunderstanding occurs. Error analysis suggest a general preference for meaning preservation even after the alteration of the original form, and for the preference for certain error patterns and repair strategies. A detailed quantification, exemplification and analysis of lexical substitution will be provided as to suggest different “motivations” in change due to the specific pragmatic properties of transcriptional acts, such as a coherent re-creation of the spoken text, textual reproduction of written conventions to the spoken material (deletion of repetition, especially those representing hesitation), error correction (as in the redundant expression *a me mi dispiace* becoming for the transcriber *a me dispiace*), and ordinary consequences of the “volatility” of the form of the utterance.

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