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COMMENT

Transcription and Recognition in the Oral History Interview

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Abstract

Transcription is a key part of oral history practice. Transcribed text is often the main way in which a wider audience engages with an oral history interview, and even as the possibilities for digital and multimedia presentation become wider, text remains an important component of how interviews are received and understood. Drawing on examples from our research on memories of the Troubles in Ireland, we argue that oral historians need to think creatively and conceptually about the effects of transcription, particularly in terms of how complex narratives are received and understood. We offer some examples of how creative forms of transcription can shape engagement with these narratives and with ideas of composure, coherence and memory.

Keywords: oral history; composure; transcription; collective memory; recognition

Transcription is too often the unseen or unspoken part of our work as oral historians. Yet it is structurally fundamental, not only to the writing and analysis of oral history, but also to the sharing, publication and archiving (and potential reception) of the memories and life stories we collect through our research. In most oral history projects, the transcribed extracts of an interview may well be the primary means through which a wider audience engages with its content, meaning and emotional texture. This gives the act of transcription considerable power. It is the mode of translation through which we may share potentially unheard or under-recognised forms of historical experience or, alternatively, through which we may fail to do so.

One of the issues with the phrase 'oral narrative', of course, is that in terms of written conventions it brings with it certain expectations of ordering, grammar and style. While we may claim to be open to any form of spoken recollection in the interview, we are all too aware that different modalities of narration (the linear, the episodic, the polyvocal) can look very different when set down on paper. The easier an oral performance is to capture using conventional prose, one might argue, the more recognisable

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it may appear as written composition. Forms of ordered storytelling may be read as more cogent, authoritative or composed by an audience, whilst those which are fragmentary or 'messier' in style may be interpreted as lacking in confidence or as expressive of what is sometimes termed 'subjective discomposure'.[1] As we discuss below, we think that critically engaging with transcription as a practice opens up a useful space for complicating the composure/discomposure frame, and for considering the creative narrative strategies of interviewees in a different light.

We do not wish to suggest that discomposure does not occur in the interview, nor do we wish to refuse the critical relationship between orality and emotion. However, it is our position that there are clear dangers in reading certain styles of narration too readily as evidence of difficulty or discomfort in communicating one's memories. Oral historian Lynn Abrams, for instance, describes discomposure as a dynamic 'manifested in a disjointed narrative'.[2] Whilst a disjointed or non-linear mode of narration may well be an indication of discomfort, it may equally occur for many other reasons, such as through an effort to convey nuanced emotion, to disrupt the expectations of the listener,[3] or to explore the complex temporality of a life story.[4] For us, it is crucial to practice transcription in a way that also affords recognition to different modes of narration.

As practitioners, however, most of us are aware of the difficulties arising from our efforts to capture the orality of different narrative styles. It is for this reason that we tend to prepare interviewees before showing them our transcripts: 'Don't let the "ums" and "ahs" put you off/Everyone's speech looks different/Yes, we did both repeat ourselves/No one likes seeing these.' But the prevalence of such discomforting encounters raises important questions. What motivations underpin our approach to transcription? In whose interests are we acting? To what extent should we understand the act of transcription as caught up with the conditions (and politics) of reception and recognition or the context in which historical narratives are interpreted, made sense of, understood or misunderstood?

This article explores the act of transcription as central to a politics of recognition in oral history. We begin by exploring the existing literature, tracing key debates and how certain conventions have come to be regarded as best practice with regard to the written form of the transcript. We then explore how we might usefully approach these techniques with new critical attention. We make the case for creative openness in our approach to transcription, exploring creative forms that might help us to capture emotional texture, orality and performance. To develop our argument, we make use of extracts from two interviews emerging from our own oral history projects on under-recognised dimensions of Northern Irish history. In the case of both narratives,

[1]Penny Summerfield describes the concept of discomposure in her article, 'Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews', *Cultural and Social History*, 1 (2004), 69–70.

[2]L. Abrams, 'Memory as both Source and Subject of Study: The Transformations of Oral History', in *Writing the History of Memory*, ed. S. Berger and B. Niven (London, 2014), 89–109.

[3]C. Peniston-Bird, '"All in It Together' and "Backs to the Wall": Relating Patriotism and the People's War in the 21st Century', *Oral History*, 40 (2012), 69–80.

[4]V. Goldman, 'Beyond Composure and Discomposure in a Shifting Queer Identity Narrative', in *New Directions in Queer Oral History: Archives of Disruption*, ed. C. Summerskill, A. T. Murphy and E. Vickers (2022), 83–91.

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we wished to make their content visible to a wider audience, but found that the mode of the speaker's performance presented significant challenges for transcription in terms of capturing the deeper meanings and emotional resonance of the words spoken. In drawing on these interviews, we explore the creative interventions in the form we found productive, or even necessary, to render these visible. We do not seek to prescribe a new type of best practice in this article, nor simply to criticise received conventions of transcription in favour of new ones, but to advocate openness to a wider array of different techniques and approaches to form, style and textuality.

Transcription and established oral history practice

Discussions around the challenges of transcription are not new within the field of oral history. A well-established set of theoretical and methodological debates has long surrounded what Raphael Samuel referred to early in the discipline's history as 'the perils of the transcript'.[5] In his 1972 article on the topic, published in one of the first issues of the *Oral History Journal*, Samuel emphasised the 'serious distortion [that] arises when the spoken word is boxed into the categories of written prose'.[6] Noting that 'people do not usually speak in paragraphs', he questioned transcribers' attachment to the 'conventions and constrictions' of formal writing and suggested it would be useful if historians could be dissuaded from relying upon them too strictly, proposing instead that they focus on trying to convey as far as possible the cadences and tone of the speaker.[7]

A few years later, Alessandro Portelli began exploring more creative techniques for reflecting the 'orality' of narrative within the transcript.[8] Like Samuel, he argued that determining how to notate and transcribe spoken speech can never be merely a matter of 'philological purity'.[9] Rather, 'tone, volume, and intonation' all function to 'reveal the narrators' emotions, their participation in the story, and the way the story affected them', and as such should be included in the transcript.[10] In this sense, Portelli suggested, the act of capturing orality must always also be an effort to render *meaning* visible. It is inextricable from oral historians' attempts to navigate, and intervene in, a potential politics of reception and from the hierarchies and politics of memory that are always at play in the production of oral history narratives.

In terms of form and creativity, Portelli's early interventions remain among the most radical in the field. His openness to using forms such as epic poetry to capture the performance of certain speakers from his 1991 project with factory workers in Terni, Italy, for instance, has only been taken up by practitioners in a few cases.[11] Lorina Baker, for instance, makes a strong case for this mode of transcription in her

[5] R. Samuel, 'Perils of the Transcript', *Oral History*, 1 (1972), 19–22.

[6] *Ibid.*, 19.

[7] *Ibid.*, 21.

[8] A. Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different', in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. R. Perks and A. Thomson (London & New York, 2016), 48–58. This article was first published in Italian in 1979 and in translation in 1981.

[9] *Ibid.*, 51.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] A. Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral history* (New York, 1992).

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work on Aboriginal histories, as does Krista Woodley, whose argument that 'the self-conscious literary form can be used to acknowledge questions around history-telling's imposition of form, order and sense upon events' is closely connected to our own approach here.[12]

Yet, while some historians have been willing to experiment with form and poetics to capture the meanings embedded within oral speech, this approach has also met with consternation or dissent, diverging as it does from the notion that transcription's purpose is solely to offer a precise record of the interview, whether in terms of facticity or aurality. Dennis Tedlock's efforts, for instance, to develop a system of notation that prioritised 'the poetical qualities of oral history'[13] raised concerns that specialised orthographic techniques might 'turn the transcription to a rarified realm accessible only to a very small number of specially trained researchers'.[14] Frances Good makes the point that no form of transcription, however creative or attentive to orality, can convey the full depth of information present in a sound (or video) recording, and argues that the most important thing a transcriber can do is explain and describe their interventions to a prospective reader.[15]

While most oral historians now readily acknowledge the limits of the transcript, the discipline's collective willingness to adopt more creative transcription techniques has thus perhaps not advanced as far as Samuel and Portelli had hoped. As a result, there remains an attachment to the conventions of prose for clarity and readability, which has over the years found its way into many leading guides to oral history 'best practice'.[16] Columbia University's Center for Oral History, for instance, advises transcribers to prioritise verbatim fidelity over orality: 'The characteristics of *how* individual speakers communicate – in terms of syntax, grammar, and word usage – are welcome in the transcript so long as they do not interfere with the written clarity of *what* speakers meant to communicate.'[17] This is a striking example of the implicit epistemological politics of transcription in that it distinguishes between how people communicate and what they meant to communicate in the interests of clarity – precisely the difficulty identified by Samuel and Portelli in the work cited above.

In the last few years, conversations about transcription have mostly revolved around the practicalities and ethics of technological aids, particularly aids that use

[12]L. Baker, 'Using Poetry to Capture the Aboriginal Voice in Oral History Transcripts', in *Passionate Histories: Myth, Memory and Indigenous Australia*, ed. F. Peters-Little, A. Curthoys and J. Docker (Canberra, 2010), 185–202; K. Woodley, 'Let the Data Sing: Representing Discourse in Poetic Form', *Oral History Journal*, 32 (2004), 49–58.

[13]D. Tedlock, 'Learning to Listen: Oral History as Poetry', *Boundary 2*, 3 (1975), 707–28.

[14]E. A Mazé, 'The Uneasy Page: Transcribing and Editing Oral History', in *History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology*, ed. T. Charlton, L. Myers and R. Sharpless (Lanham, MD, 2007), 227–63.

[15]F. Good, 'Voice, Ear and Text: Words, Meaning and Transcription', in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. R. Perks and A. Thompson (London, 3rd ed., 2015), 673–90.

[16]See for instance Oral History Association, 'Archiving Oral History', https://oralhistory.org/archives-principles-and-best-practices-overview/ (accessed 20 Feb. 2026); National Lottery Heritage Fund, 'Oral History Good Practice Guidelines', https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/funding/good-practice-guidance/oral-history#heading-6 (accessed 20 Feb. 2026), both of which stress the role of verbatim transcription.

[17]Columbia Oral History Transcription Style Guide, https://incite.columbia.edu/works/oral-history-transcription-style-guide (accessed 30 Jan. 2026).

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machine learning and large-language models, often referred to as artificial intelligence (AI). The Oral History Society (OHS) has published a helpful discussion paper summarising the benefits and risks of using AI in oral history work, suggesting that some software can now generate 'remarkably accurate' transcripts but also warning that accuracy can be compromised, especially when speakers use dialect or audio is muffled.[18] The paper also points out that the 'deep listening' entailed in manually producing a transcript is often a key part of research and analysis, and that using software to facilitate this process might mean missing elements of the narrative or losing some of your focus on the interviewee's account. Mary Larson, drawing on a discussion about AI held at the annual Oral History Association conference, makes a related point: automated transcription may be accurate but it is unable to engage with the material contextually or critically, producing 'flattened voices that lose nuance through standardisation; flattened interviews reduced to words without context or any broader understanding of the interview process'.[19]

We are not particularly concerned with this debate here, although in passing it is perhaps worth noting that the flattening effect Larson describes effectively here might also be produced through the fairly common practice of outsourcing transcription to a human third party not involved in the research process. For our purposes it is sufficient to say that the analysis of Larson and the OHS shows that AI-driven transcription is based on an approach that wants to produce 'accurate' versions of audio recordings as quickly, cheaply and smoothly as possible. While this drive is understandable given the financial or temporal constraints shaping much historical research, we suggest that it implicitly thinks of transcription as a technical problem (mostly concerned with accuracy or fidelity) and potentially reinforces the loss of the creative approaches that emerged in the early years of the discipline especially if (as seems plausible) the vast majority of transcription will soon be carried out through the use of AI-based software.[20]

Our particular focus here is on how the conventions and constructions of prose might work precisely to misconstrue or obfuscate the content or meanings contained within a narrative. As such, we advocate for a return to some of the early will to creative intervention as a means of affording recognition.

[18]R. Perks, 'How Intelligent is Artificial Intelligence? Oral History and AI', https://ohs.org.uk/general-interest/how-intelligent-is-artificial-intelligence-oral-history-and-ai/ (accessed 20 Feb. 2026).

[19]M. Larson, 'Oral History Encounters AI: An Exploration of Core Principles and Best Practices, Context and Consent', *Oral History Review*, 53 (2026), 93–110.

[20]A reviewer of the first draft of this article pointed out that it would be possible to use AI tools to produce creative transcripts along the lines we are suggesting here; this is true, of course, and it does seem to be the case that the technology as it stands is quite good at producing various kinds of formal pastiche and imitation (so turning prose into a 'typical-sounding' podcast or film script or whatever). Our intuition though is that for the kind of thing we are proposing, the process of doing it is as important as the product, and so this kind of AI-led approach would distance the researcher or the transcriber from thinking about the interview and the interviewee.

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Northern Ireland and the Politics of Memory

In this article, we turn to these debates on the theory and practice of transcription and apply them to a particular context: the collective memory of the Troubles in post-Belfast/Good Friday Agreement Northern Ireland. As the literature discussed in the previous section makes clear, transcription is not simply about reproducing an audio recording in a different format. It is an intervention in the politics of reception and recognition produced by a particular memory politics; it can shape and delimit meaning or, alternatively, open up possible readings and interpretations, depending on the choices made by the person who carries out the transcription. In the context of the North and the Troubles, the war that took place in Ireland and Britain between roughly 1969 and 1998, oral history interviewees are composing and expressing their narratives within a complex, contested and often fairly fraught frame of debates around how the history and memory of the war should be represented and understood in the present. The effect of these debates on an interview are positional and fluid, partly dependent on the specific community of memory an interviewee feels like they are addressing in the interview, partly dependent on their own political or social position, partly dependent on intersubjective dynamics between interviewer and interviewee, and so on; we have both discussed the memory politics of Northern Ireland in detail elsewhere and do not intend to do so in this article.[21] What we are interested in drawing out here is how the process of transcription is implicated in the politics of memory, composure, recognition and reception in this specific context, and how working through some of those questions within that context might offer some wider insights into the complexities of transcription in oral history.

With that in mind, the two interviews we draw on below are both with individuals who grew up in the North before and during the Troubles. The interview with Ben was conducted in 2016, as part of a project on youth experience and everyday life growing up in Belfast during the Northern Ireland conflict.[22] The interview with Julie was conducted in 2022 as part of a project on migration from Northern Ireland to Britain. They have distinctive narratives and life trajectories, and the context in which they are remembering is not the same, but both interviewees are conscious of the complex politics of memory in the North and of the dynamics of the 'speakable and the hearable' it engenders; they express their experiences of the past in relation to dominant ideas about the war.[23] For different reasons, they both feel that their particular life stories sit uncomfortably within this dominant imaginary of the past. How is the act of transcription connected to these dynamics of memory, and to the politics of reception and recognition undergirded by them? Can thinking creatively about transcription create a space for dissonant or uncomfortable narratives to emerge? How should we undertake transcription in the context of unsettled or contested pasts? As we select the written form of the (re)telling, we may move the reader towards a particular interpretation, emphasising articulacy or incoherence, composure or 'discomposure'. In the examples offered below, we make some initial attempts at using non-conventional transcription

[21]See L. Newby, 'Troubled Generations? (De)Constructing Narratives of Youth Experience in the Northern Ireland Conflict', *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 14 (2021), 6–24; F. Roulston, *Belfast Punk and the Troubles: An Oral History* (Manchester, 2022).

[22]A pseudonym is used for Ben's oral history account, at his own request.

[23]Newby, 'Troubled Generations?'.

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to open up some of these questions and to show how the form of the transcript always plays a part in our analysis.

By doing so, we want to argue for a renewed and critical engagement with practices of transcription as a means of intervening in the conditions of reception in oral history, particularly thinking about how we might make use of creative techniques to support public engagement with the shape and content of people's stories in terms of memory, subjectivity, composure and meaning. The fact of the matter is that, in the context of our work, transcription itself is never simply an act of translation. It constitutes a dynamics of power, positioning the researcher as co-author of meaning and interpretation but also, arguably as importantly, as the individual tasked with intervening in a potential politics of reception and recognition. In the task of transcription, the oral historian already begins to shape and delimit meaning.

Our interviews

Ben, the first interviewee whose account we consider, centres his narrative on growing up in a conflicted area of west Belfast during the 1970s and 1980s. Born into a predominantly loyalist neighbourhood with a strong paramilitary presence, he encountered the stark pressures of conflict from his earliest childhood. Yet, in recalling his experiences, Ben resisted a straightforward representation of the conflict's emotional impacts. His narrative was not linear, nor did he impose a single interpretation to 'stabilise' his experiences or their meaning in memory. Instead, he vividly performed scenes from his childhood with little exposition or contextualisation. At points, Ben moved rapidly from describing harassment and violence by adult combatants to recalling his enthusiasm for rioting, before moving on to exploring his rebellious joy in forming and maintaining cross-community friendships. This complex mode of narration, however, posed challenges for transcription, producing quick shifts in emotional frequency that were difficult to translate and for the reader to follow. While in the interview Ben clearly advocated for a multi-dimensional understanding of the conflict's impact on young people (and one often absent from public memory culture), on the page the richness of his account was easy to misread as discomposure.

Julie, the second interviewee whose narrative we draw on here, also talks about her experiences of the Troubles, although from a different perspective than Ben. She grew up just outside Belfast and lived there when the war started, then migrated to England in the late 1960s to work as a teacher. Her interview is marked both by her sense of the Troubles as a traumatic and incomprehensible rupture and by her frustration that her identity as a middle-class Protestant is consistently misread or misunderstood in Britain, particularly in the context of the war. Describing the 'mixed', non-sectarian, liberal milieu that characterised her childhood and adolescence, Julie perceives it as being doubly erased: once by the Troubles, which she narrates as an eruption of sectarian violence that interrupted the liberalisation of Northern Irish society, and then again by her move to England where the specificities of her background and outlook were misrecognised and she was understood as simply Irish, with the various racist connotations this identification entailed in 1970s and 1980s Britain. Her mode of narration was voluble and sometimes elliptical, studded with examples of anti-Irish discrimination and with her ongoing and persistent anger and frustration at the social and political effects of the Troubles.

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What Julie's and Ben's interviews have in common, in terms of both form and content, is that each entails an attempt to narrate a set of experiences that the interviewee feels are difficult to express under the hegemonic discursive conditions of the present. Creative modes of transcription are useful in this instance, we argue, as a way to meet the interviewees halfway – to recognise and respect their efforts at speaking through the noisy static of dominant imaginaries and to translate that effort onto the page. In the remainder of this article, we experiment with a number of different styles of transcription to represent passages from these interviews. We critically discuss each style, reflecting on how different modes of transcription intersect with questions of emotion, rhythm, performance and recognition.

The poetic

One potential context in which experimenting with the form of transcription may prove effective is in capturing complex emotional performance. As Alistair Thomson has noted, 'whilst sometimes the emotional resonance of an event might leap off the page, the emotional depths of a passage are often expressed beneath or between the lines of text', making the more subtle affective dimensions of a narrative difficult to represent in transcription.[24] For example, if an interviewee tries to convey amusement or mirth without ever laughing, how might the researcher best translate the emotional dimension or tone of their speech for a reading audience? If they shift from one affective frequency to another without explaining this in their narrative, how can we represent these shifts in the subsequent transcript?

These challenges can arise even when working with a very short interview extract. Take the following example from Ben's interview, in which he speaks of his complex and shifting feelings about his life growing up amidst conflict in Northern Ireland:

> BEN: Um, see, it's difficult now. If you'd have asked me a few years, I'd have said yeah, I enjoyed growing up, I *really*, really – okay, we might've been out rioting, we might've been out doing different things, we might've been getting away with things I shouldn't have been getting away with, you know what I mean, I'd have said yeah, I'd have enjoyed that, but there's other things...

To be sure, elements of Ben's emotional performance do come to the fore in this narrative, even transcribed as it is in quite a traditional form and using few interventions beyond the use of italics and punctuation to highlight changes in rhythm or moments of emphasis. As he begins, Ben's tone is clearly pensive, marked by pauses as he takes the time to formulate a response to the interviewer's question of whether he enjoyed his early life in the city: 'Um, see, it's difficult now.' He names certain emotions explicitly, underlining his sense of youthful excitement at things like 'rioting' with a certain emphasis: 'I'd have said yeah, I enjoyed growing up, I *really*, really [...]'. However, as he turns to reflect on the more difficult dimensions of the period, he shifts in emotional frequency quite suddenly, saying in a different and more suggestive tone 'but there's other things...', thereby complicating his earlier depiction of youthful enjoyment.

[24]A. Thomson, 'Indexing and Interpreting Emotion: Joy and Shame in Oral History', *Studies in Oral History*, 41 (2019), 1–11.

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In the space of the interview, Ben's intonation, the subtle rhythms of his speech, his eye contact, and his physical gestures all made the rapidly shifting emotional dynamics of his memories easy to follow. The dynamic and embodied nature of the encounter afforded Ben the opportunity to communicate these subtle emotional cues, quite intentionally, in body as much as spoken language. Indeed, Ben's form of speech in this extract is characteristic of a mode of telling he relied upon throughout the interview to centre and explore the complex and conflicting emotional dynamics of his childhood memories. However, these subtle dimensions of his performance are difficult to represent within the confines of such a short paragraph. Presented as prose, his narration may appear as stilted, unsure or hesitant.

As oral historians, then, we might perhaps ask: if one form curtails or delimits our effort to represent these subtleties of emotion, might a more creative form open up greater possibilities for doing so? Are the multivalent and rapidly unfolding affective rhythms of Ben's recollections better represented as *intentioned* or *impactful* using an alternative form of transcription? Transcribed as a poem, for instance, Ben's short reflections do take on a rather different and perhaps more deliberate quality:

See
It's difficult now.

If you'd have asked me a few years,
I'd have said
Yeah, I enjoyed growing up!
I *really*, really
Okay
We might've been out rioting
We might've been out doing different things
We might've been getting away with things
I shouldn't have been getting away with
You know what I mean?
I'd have said, yeah, I'd have enjoyed that!

But there's other things...

Here, Ben's tendency to switch between different emotional rhythms is afforded greater space by the form of the poem. In the poetic transcription, line breaks are used to denote or accentuate subtle shifts in his cadence and rhythm as Ben sought to capture the different, and sometimes contrasting, feelings that are attached to his early experiences. Something of his original performance is restored in this transcription: there is a greater sense of the unfolding and thoughtful yet also ambivalent way in which Ben approached his answer to the question. Neither version is perfect, of course, but some of the orality of the original performance is perhaps retained in a poetic rendering of his speech, as is his deliberate refusal to give a definitive or singular answer to the question. The poetic form may take some getting used to (especially for those of us attached to certain forms of transcription) but in this case it does foreground the defiant form of composure represented by Ben's unfolding and ambivalent reflections.

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A further example of the possibilities of this form of transcription comes from a section of Julie's interview where she describes her memory of the start of the Troubles in Belfast in 1969. She is probably talking about the August riots, often considered to be one of the critical moments in the beginning of the war, although she was not explicit about this temporal or historical anchoring in her narrative, instead simply noting the year and moving on to this impressionistic description.

> Well, they didn't, two nights later I was trying to get a bus into Belfast
> And the bus driver took us so far
> And then he stopped and threw everybody off the bus
> And said I'm not going any further because they're burning buses
> And you
> It's kind of surreal, so I'm, I'm like, walking down the street with, wearing a mini-skirt I'd borrowed from my flatmate, which was too short, thinking God, I didn't want to have to walk in a mini-skirt
> You know, it's all sort of, sort of into
> Inter, interplaying
> And then guns, guns, guns, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang
> Over the fields
> And what do you call those ones
> Da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da
> Just, just walked into, just woken up basically in a war zone
> And lived through it that year.

Transcribed in the standard way as a block of prose, this account might be read as a little muddled. It starts with a fairly direct piece of narrative about buses not being able to enter parts of the city because of street violence and Julie having to get off the bus and walk to her destination in a short skirt, a detail that emphasises her remembered vulnerability but also her sense of the incongruity between the 'swinging Sixties' and the outbreak of the war in the North. Then it transitions sharply into something more like a sonic performance, which on the tape is striking for the vehemence with which it was conducted – she says 'guns' three times, 'bang' eight times, then performs the sound of another gun. The finishing clause – 'just woken up basically in a war zone and lived through it that year' – underscores the sense, also evoked by the short skirt, that Julie primarily experienced the start of the war as incongruous with her previous experiences of Northern Irish life, a theme she returned to repeatedly throughout the interview.

Using a more poetic style of transcription, essentially by reordering the material with line breaks, means the impressionistic or jumpy mode of speech Julie is using here figures as expressive rather than as confused or unclear. It draws attention to the sonically performative element of her narrative, which feels like a particularly important dimension of what she wants to say in this part of the interview. The urge here may be to stress how shocking the start of the conflict was to her younger self by foregrounding the somatic, embodied experience of hearing shooting in the near distance during the August riots (in which eight people were killed and around 750 injured); it may also be driven by an intersubjective effort to express this historical experience through performing an aspect of the urban soundscape that Julie remembers of the

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'war zone' that in her recollection Belfast turned into over the course of the summer of 1969.[25] Transcribing in a way that is more sympathetic to a staccato or impressionistic mode of narration can encourage readers to engage with the performative dimensions of speech in an oral history interview, rather than focusing on the ways in which it might deviate from standard written syntax and structure. However, as we stress throughout, this is an interpretative intervention on the part of the transcriber and should be understood as that; we are not restoring the 'real' meaning of the narrative by finding the correct frame in which to put it or by polishing the glass to make the image contained within it more visible, but making a deliberate creative choice to stress one of its elements through the way in which we present a written record of the oral source.

The novel

A second element of spoken conversation that can be hard to translate into the written word is polyvocality, or the tendency of speakers to perform the voices of imagined interlocutors as part of their own narrative. These performances vary widely in tone and style – they can be quotidian accounts of remembered conversations recounted using fairly conventional 'she said/I said' constructions, or more deliberately dramatic or comic recitations intended to produce an effect on the interviewer or the audience. Conversely, they can also be disjointed or partially realised, momentary interludes where it is clear an interviewee is ventriloquising the remembered voice of another person but perhaps not totally clear who that person is or why they are entering into the story. This mode is often used as part of an anecdote, a narrative form that, as Daniel James has shown, has a particularly important place in the oral history interview, often used by a speaker to dramatise their sense of their place in the social order they want to describe in the interview.[26] Luisa Passerini finds a similar tendency in her work on the memory of Italian fascism in Turin, identifying her narrators' tendency to present themselves as (for instance) innately rebellious by offering a series of vignettes from their life that synecdochally try to make that tendency evident to the interviewer.[27]

An anecdote does not need to be polyvocal, of course, but when it entails some kind of confrontation with the social order or the social landscape being described, it often also entails the representation of someone else's voice. And while, following James, it is helpful to think about the anecdote as a form, it is an especially labile and polymorphous one. Some speakers offer fully formed anecdotes that have obviously been told many times before, with a recognisable structure and a punchline. Others tell more fragmentary stories or scatter parts of stories across their account, in a way that can be harder to show on the page, and often with a similarly elliptic performance of polyvocality. That is the case for our example, again taken from Julie's interview, who is describing her experience of moving to England during the Troubles to work as a schoolteacher.

[25] S. Prince and G. Warner, *Belfast and Derry in Revolt: A New History of the Start of the Troubles* (Dublin, 2019).

[26] D. James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory and Political Identity* (Durham, NC, 2001).

[27] L. Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge, 2009).

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> Throughother, what do you mean throughother, oh yeah, that was the first thing, the first challenge in England, oh no, the first challenge was the interview [laughs]. I went over to the interview, again, Alice in Wonderland hairstyle [pauses], big eyes, my Sunday best coat, which was actually a mini-coat in mint green I think, with a scarf and matching gloves, white scarf, matching white gloves, I must've looked like Alice in Wonderland, and I was interviewed by the dance tutor, and he said to me [pauses] do you think you'll manage in an English college coming from Northern Ireland, why, well, your accent, we had a guy last year and he had to have elocution lessons, and he said also we're a much more liberal society, do you think you'll be able to manage living in a liberal atmosphere, and I thought of walking through Belfast at night with guns, you know, sitting up all night playing your guitar, I said no, no, I think I'll be alright [...] and then, yeah, then it was [pauses], it was [pauses], did you, did you row the boat over, English accent, did you row, row the boat over, no, do you have pigs in the kitchen, do you really have pigs in the kitchen, nooo. On the gentler side, oh, I don't know what you're saying, but I like the sound of it, and then mm-hmm, ah-ha, mm-hmm, ah-ha, and, and probably the biggest insult amongst a fair few was oh you must be really clever to get into an English college, are you going to go back and, and teach the Irish what you've learned here, phew.

This passage (condensed in places here) was a striking moment in the interview, where Julie clearly wanted to express something important to her about her experience of moving from the North to England. In general, she presented this experience as one of dislocation, discomfort, misunderstanding, with voice and accent a key site where this misunderstanding adhered. Her attempt at translating this experience to the interviewer is impressionistic and iterative. She starts by comparing herself to Alice in Wonderland, emphasising her remembered sense of vulnerability and strangeness in moving to a new place, then describes an unpleasant interview experience where her capacity to teach in an English school as someone from Northern Ireland is questioned. Then she moves into a series of mini-anecdotes, all concerning the ways in which she felt unpleasantly interpellated as someone from Northern Ireland living in England and all drawing on stock tropes from the anti-Irish racist imaginary.

In terms of transcription and form, one way of presenting this material that foregrounds its thick, textured description of Julie's alienation as a migrant in England is to scaffold and frame it in a way that draws out the different voices being narrated here. For instance:

> 'Throughother, what do you mean throughother?'
>
> Oh yeah, that was the first thing, the first challenge in England. Oh no, the first challenge was the interview. I went over to the interview, again, Alice in Wonderland hairstyle ... big eyes, my Sunday best coat, which was actually a mini-coat in mint green I think, with a scarf and matching gloves, white scarf, matching white gloves, I must've looked like Alice in Wonderland, and I was interviewed by the dance tutor, and he said to me:
>
> 'Do you think you'll manage in an English college coming from Northern Ireland?'
>
> 'Why?'

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'Well, your accent, we had a guy last year and he had to have elocution lessons.' He said: 'Also, we're a much more liberal society, do you think you'll be able to manage living in a liberal atmosphere?'

And I thought of walking through Belfast at night with guns, you know, sitting up all night playing your guitar. I said, 'No, no, I think I'll be alright.'

And then, yeah, then it was, it was:

'Did you, did you row the boat over?' English accent. 'Did you row, row the boat over?'

'No.'

'Do you have pigs in the kitchen, do you really have pigs in the kitchen?'

'Nooo.'

On the gentler side, oh, 'I don't know what you're saying, but I like the sound of it,' and then, 'mm-hmm, ah-ha, mm-hmm, ah-ha.' And, and probably the biggest insult amongst a fair few was, 'Oh you must be really clever to get into an English college, are you going to go back and, and teach the Irish what you've learned here?'

Phew!

As with the examples of poetic transcription above, this is a fairly light-touch intervention mostly focused on line breaks, punctuation and staging as ways of scaffolding a reader's engagement with the narrative. Formally, however, the aim is a little different from the previous approach, and intends to produce something that looks more like a kind of novelistic prose. The line breaks in the previous section tried to make the expressive nature of non-linear or seemingly jumbled narration visible to a reader in a way that circumvented the tendency to read that kind of speaking, especially when transcribed, as incoherent or discomposed. Here the intention is instead to unscramble some of the polyvocality of the composite and multi-temporal anecdote Julie is offering us. Imposing a relatively conventional form on the text – something close to free indirect speech, basically – gives more space to the multiple voices the narrator is recalling and ventriloquising and highlights the rich and comic texture of the enfolded stories contained within this section of the interview. Particularly in the context of a story like this one, which is largely about the experience of alienation the narrator felt on moving from the north of Ireland to England during the Troubles, it is helpful to shape the transcript in such a way that attention is drawn to the proliferation of different voices she remembers and to the emotional dynamics of the experience she is remembering.

The play

Of course, when thinking through different ways of capturing, in written form, the performance of a narrative, the option to intervene more extensively in form and style inevitably presents itself. Until now, we have explored methods that make minimal interventions in the verbatim record and that primarily rely on line breaks, working on the assumption that minimal alterations to the text of the interview best preserves its accuracy. As discussed above, this approach, which foregrounds fidelity to the speaker's original words, is often considered the foundation of best practice in oral

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history transcription. However, in some cases, such restraint may not do the narrative justice, especially where it results in a transcript that is difficult to follow, or which raises the (often false) impression of discomposure.

Consider the following extract from Ben's interview, in which he recounts a darkly comic memory of a teenage encounter with a policeman. During the interview, the anecdote, which sees Ben (a young Protestant) accused of harming his Catholic friend during their teenage years in 1980s Belfast, due to a disbelief on the part of adults that such a cross-community friendship could be genuine, was delivered with considerable exuberance and comedic timing. However, these dimensions of Ben's performance are quickly diminished in a traditional verbatim format, which serves to flatten Ben's delivery and fails to capture the anecdote's reliance on gesture, intonation and facial expression:

> I remember him staying in my house and, um, the police kicked the door down and they came in... 'Right, you've killed him!' 'What do you mean I've killed...?' 'You were last seen with him.' Here's me, 'yeah?' 'You've killed him,' and they pulled me outside and all, with a pair of trunks on, that was it, that's all I had on in bed, and they pulled me outside, 'You've killed him.' Here's me: 'I haven't killed anybody!' 'Where is he?' Here's me: 'He's in bed!' 'No, he's not in bed!' They went in and he was in bed right, and yet, cos we were out that night – but he was in bed, so, and then his mum was in the police van as well, so she says, 'Right okay come on home.' He says, 'No mum, I'm staying here!' So we had to go to work the next morning, and um, I remember the police leaving, and 'Youse are going to have to fix that door' and I remember this policeman actually turned round to me and says, 'Look, what's that Catholic doing in your house?'

Transcribed in paragraph prose, Ben's fluid manner of speaking and rapid rhythm, alongside the polyvocal nature of the performance, present certain difficulties for interpretation. While the content of his encounter with the policeman and his friend's mother are certainly still legible, the lack of context Ben gives for each speaker is noticeable and makes it harder for the reader to follow the precise narrative arc of the anecdote, much less access its deeper meaning. During the interview, Ben performed this anecdote more like a play or a dramatic monologue, with his narrative voice and that of his characters distinguished primarily by the style of the performance. The darkly comedic undertone of his performance clearly conveyed the message that he remembered this encounter as a farcical caper.

One option, of course, would simply be to adjust the form slightly and make use of a novelistic style in the manner discussed in the preceding section. This may help, as it did in the case of Julie's polyvocal style of telling, to draw out the different voices that feature in the anecdote, to highlight their distinctiveness, and to offer some clarity back to the narrator's performance. Another is to include indicators of a change of intonation in square brackets, such as [Ben raises his eyebrows and speaks in a haughty tone], which may help to convey important non-verbal cues and thus reimbue the narrative with some of its performative dimension.

But we might also consider a different technique, one more suited to the style of Ben's original narration. Transcribed as a play, for instance, the transcript offers

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another, perhaps more impactful, means of capturing the expressive performativity of this extract:

> *[An encounter between a self-righteous POLICE OFFICER and an incredulous teenage BEN]*
>
> BEN: 'I remember him staying in my house and, um, the police kicked the door down and they came in…'
>
> POLICE OFFICER: *[Fiercely]* 'Right, you've killed him!'
>
> BEN: *[Shocked]* 'What do you mean I've killed…?'
>
> *[POLICE OFFICER becoming aggressive and pointing a finger at BEN]*
>
> POLICE OFFICER: 'You were last seen with him!'
>
> BEN: *[To the audience]* Here's me *[To the POLICE OFFICER]* 'Yeah?'
>
> POLICE OFFICER: 'You've killed him!'
>
> BEN: *[To the audience]* And they pulled me outside and all, with a pair of trunks on. That was it! *[raises eyebrows]* That's all I had on in bed! And they pulled me outside…
>
> POLICE OFFICER: *[Doubling down, increasingly desperate]* 'You've killed him.'
>
> BEN: *[With emphasis]* 'I haven't killed anybody!'
>
> POLICE OFFICER: 'Where is he?'
>
> BEN: 'He's in bed!'
>
> POLICE OFFICER: 'No, he's not in bed!'
>
> BEN: *[To the audience]* They went in and he was in bed right, and yet, cos we were out that night – but he was in bed, so, and then his mum was in the police van as well, so she says…
>
> FRIEND'S MUM: 'Right, okay, come on home.'
>
> FRIEND: 'No mum, I'm staying here!'
>
> *[Curtains.]*

In this dramatic form, many of the more expressive elements of Ben's narrative are re-centred through the use of small but crucial textual impositions, primarily in the

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form of names and stage directions. The lack of verbal context Ben provides for the various speakers in his anecdote, for instance, is balanced out by providing names and using the form of the play to separate each verbal intervention, as are the moments in which he was using his narrative voice to address the listening audience. The gestural nature of Ben's performance is easily captured with stage directions, but here these interrupt the overarching flow of his narrative less than they might in the context of a paragraph. Stylistically, this formatting as a play is readily recognisable and, in our view, gives a clearer sense of the tone and texture, and particularly the comedic charge, of the original anecdote.

To be sure, translating Ben's anecdote into dramatic form requires a willingness to move quite some distance beyond a rigid verbatim transcription. We have taken some liberties here, which themselves presuppose, rely upon, and represent an initial analysis of the narrative and its meanings, but also offer the provision of context and the interviewer's own impressions of the emotional frequencies that structure the narrative. Moreover, whilst this is a form of transcription that requires substantial intervention, the researcher's impositions remain readily distinguishable from Ben's original words.

We might still argue that for the purpose of academic analysis, less intervention is preferable to far-reaching impositions. After all, a verbatim rendering will be more familiar to most practitioners and academics. But does it change the situation if we are seeking to make a narrative available and accessible to a wider audience? When transcribing for a wider readership, especially where it is not possible to play the original recording,[28] adjustments to form and even to content may offer an important means of widening access or affording our interviewees recognition– recognition of intent, of emotional complexity, of the nuanced repertoires they drew on in their interviews to give their stories meaning. There is no 'correct' approach here, of course. But we ask: in some cases, and to some audiences, which form of translation is more enlivening, more authentic, more in keeping with the ambition to convey emotion as well as meaning?

Conclusion

The early debates about transcription we summarise above took place at a critical juncture in the development of oral history practice.[29] Oral history was not fully institutionalised, and the organisations that were beginning to emerge to shape and develop the method contained divergences of opinion on how best to transcribe, among other things. In the present, we can identify two tendencies: on the one hand, an increasingly calcified set of conventions around best practice in transcription, and on the other hand (and running alongside the increasing popularity of oral history as a method), a diverse but under-theorised set of practices that are actually being used when people undertake transcription and prepare transcripts for various kinds of

[28]Ben, for instance, did not wish for the audio recording of his interview to be made public. He did not object to extracts appearing in print.

[29]This juncture was summarised nicely by Alexander Freund a few years ago in his article 'From .Wav to .Txt: Why We Still Need Transcripts in the Digital Age', *Oral History*, 45 (2017), 33–42.

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public use, from articles and books to exhibitions, websites, and so on. A further development of the ideas we raise here could connect transcription to the long-standing debates around 'shared authority' by thinking about how interviewees might participate in the production of transcripts, including creative transcripts. We might also consider how some researchers have incorporated non-textual elements into their research through (for instance) crafting and material culture, as in the 'Fleece to Fashion' project about histories of knitting in modern Scotland, or through the production of graphic novels drawing on oral history material, as in the Survivor-Centred Visual Narratives project.[30]

What we have argued for here is a return to explicit reflection on and experimentation with the form of the transcript. This is not in pursuit of a fairer rendering or greater accuracy of transposition from sound to text, although attentiveness to the texture and rhythms of orality is one dimension of formal experimentation that can be useful. Instead, it is a reminder of the interpretative stakes of transcription, and its entanglement in the politics of recognition and visibility/invisibility that surround acts of interpretation in oral history. As Portelli's critique of the hegemony of written, 'grammatical' conventions in transcription practice shows us, expectations about narrative, form, style, and so on are intrinsic to what we do when we produce a transcript and to the way in which that transcript is read and understood by someone else. Thinking deliberately about how we might intervene in those expectations through the way we transcribe and present our interviewee's voices is a useful way to pull our attention back to the operation of some of these dynamics in what we are doing, changing the frequency of our engagement to what our interviewees are saying and how it is that they are saying it. This is not to prescribe creative forms of transcription as a panacea to the difficulties of representation, interpretation and reception – different situations require different approaches, and the sensibilities and approaches of individual historians will shape how they engage with these questions – but simply an encouragement for colleagues to consider how the form of the transcripts they produce affects the meaning of the narratives they contain.

Composure, one of the key concepts in post-positivist oral history, famously draws on two meanings of the word 'composure': a narrator tells (or composes) a story that evens out the jagged edges of the past and renders them smooth, meaning they can relate the story with calmness (or composure). This way of thinking about the relationship between what interviewees say and dominant discourses about the past continues to be profoundly useful for oral historians who are interested in this dynamic. It has been augmented by Penny Summerfield's analysis of composure in the narratives of interviewees who struggle to express their version of the past because it diverges from, or sits outside, popular memories of a period – her example is of women who participated in the Home Guard during the Second World War.[31] We remain indebted to both of these ideas for the analytical space they open up, and as a lens for thinking about how dominant representations of the past and their ideological weight can colour what happens in the oral history interview. But considering the formal dimensions of transcription and what happens when we experiment with that form helps to draw out

[30]Fleece to Fashion, accessible at https://fleecetofashion.gla.ac.uk/ (accessed 2 Jun. 2026); Survivor-Centred Visual Narratives, accessible at https://visualnarratives.org/ (accessed 2 Jun. 2026).

[31]Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure'.

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an implicit element of the composure/discomposure model that can perhaps otherwise be overlooked. Narratives that do not cohere to our expectations of how a story should be told because they are messy, disordered, fragmentary, elliptical, contradictory, halting, reluctant, or whatever, may indeed signify a difficulty in speaking against or outside dominant narratives about the past. But this mode of telling can be understood as an expressive, creative intervention on the part of our interviewees, rather than a failure or an inability, that is, as an *active intervention* that works against the current of a hegemonic discourse. Creative forms of transcription can redirect our attention to the expressive aspects of an unconventional narrative or way of speaking, and help to resist a one-dimensional application of discomposure to stories that subvert our expectations in terms of form, content or style.

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