

Chapter 4**.

Delicacy

Introduction

Delicacy concerns the amount of informational detail about discourse phenomena—the fineness of discriminations of categories of events—that is represented in a given transcription. (The term *granularity* is also used for a similar concept.) It is possible to define a hierarchy of transcription features according to the level of transcription in which they should be included. A *low delicacy* (or *low granularity*, or *broad*) transcription is one which represents relatively few details about a discourse, confining itself to the essentials (e.g. the words and who spoke them). In short, a low delicacy transcription marks fewer distinctions. Relative to this, a *high delicacy* (or *high granularity*, or *narrow*) transcription marks more distinctions. What are sometimes called “broad features” or “narrow features” in a transcription are not really broad or narrow in themselves, they are simply those features which typically are represented in a certain level of transcription.

The following example illustrates a low delicacy transcription, with relatively little transcriptional information. This delicacy of transcription, which can be called *Level 1* or *Foundation*, displays just a few very basic aspects of what happened:

1. (*Hey Cutie-Pie* SBC028: 66.550-73.225)

JEFF; it's been a long time
JILL; it's been so long
I know
you missed like all the drama here
JEFF; no drama

Perhaps the most obvious point is that almost any transcription will give a representation of the *words* that were spoken. This transcription also indicates who the *speaker* of each utterance is, via a speaker label at the beginning of the line. Implicitly this notation also indicates the change of speakers, since the speaker label is written only where the speaker is different from that of the previous line. One key piece of information about how the speakers produced their words that is often overlooked, but probably should not be, concerns the basic unit of speech production. The *intonation unit*—defined as a spurt of speech uttered under a single intonation contour—is indicated by the start of a new line for each unit. Finally, this transcription incorporates information about the *sequence* of events: the temporal order in which words were spoken, intonation units produced, turns taken. The sequence of events if written according to the usual conventions, with the progression of time implicitly represented from left to right and top to bottom. While temporal sequence might seem like an obvious thing to include, almost inevitable, it is still useful to recognize that it is present in, and indeed forms an essential part of, even the most basic transcriptions.

In the next example, the same recorded stretch of interaction is represented again, but this time reflecting a slightly more delicate (narrower) transcription. This can be called *Level 2* or *Basic* transcription:

2. (*Hey Cutie-Pie* SBC028: 66.550-73.225)

1 JEFF; It's been a long time.
2 JILL; It's been so long.

3 ...
 4 I know.
 5 ...
 6 You missed like all the drama here.
 7 JEFF; No drama.

This should be considered an alternative way of representing the same recorded interaction, which is appropriate for somewhat different purposes (e.g. allowing slightly more sophisticated analysis of the interaction—though much is still missing). It incorporates all of the transcription features of the previous, lower delicacy version, and adds several more. For example, it marks the location of *pauses* (at least for silences which are more than a minimum duration), and indicates intonational *closure* at the end of the line (here the period marks each line as ending with final intonation).

The next version of the same exchange is still more delicate:

3. Delicacy A (*Hey Cutie-Pie* SBC028: 66.550-73.225)
 1 JEFF; It's been a [long time].
 2 JILL; [(H) It's been so: long.
 3 ...
 4 I know: .
 5 You missed like all the drama here.
 6 .. (H)[::
 7 JEFF; [No drama.

As always, this level of delicacy incorporates all of the transcription features of the previous two versions, while introducing several additional features. These include a distinction between short pauses (less than two tenths of a second, marked by two dots) vs. medium to long pauses (marked by three dots). It also adds indications of in-breath (lines 2 and 6). This now makes salient the marking of prosodic lengthening on the second in-breath (line 6). Moreover, once the marking of in-breath has been introduced, it becomes meaningful to show its sequential relationship to the words spoken. Since the breath in line 2 overlaps with some words in line 1, the narrower transcription must introduce some overlap markings that were not relevant in the broad transcription. The same holds for line lines 6 and 7. Note that at this level of delicacy, we have only indicated where the overlap begins, omitting to say where it ends.

The next version of this recorded segment shows a transcription delicacy which adds information about the duration of pauses, measured in seconds. It also adds an indication of where overlapping speech ends, signaled by a right-hand square bracket.

4. Delicacy A (*Hey Cutie-Pie* SBC028: 66.550-73.225)
 1 JEFF; It's been a [long time].
 2 JILL; [(H) It's been so: long.
 3 (0.2)
 4 I know: .
 5 You missed like all the drama here.
 6 .. (H)[:]
 7 JEFF; [No dr]ama.

The following transcription incorporates in addition time stamps, indicating the start time and end time for each intonation unit. The time is measured in seconds from the beginning of the recording. The two numbers are written at the beginning of each line, separated by a tab. Another tab is inserted before the speaker label.

5. Delicacy A (*Hey Cutie-Pie* SBC028: 66.550-73.225)
 66.550 67.730 JEFF; It's been a [long time].
 67.320 69.020 JILL; [(H)] It's been so: long.
 69.020 69.235 (0.2)
 69.235 70.075 I know: .
 70.075 72.155 You missed like all the drama here.
 72.155 72.940 .. (H)[:]
 72.465 73.225 JEFF; [No dr]ama.

Although this is a significantly higher delicacy than where we began, one can go much farther than this. This will become evident in the chapters to follow.

Relativity

Since the scale of delicacy is relative, and effectively continuous, the number of delicacy levels which could be distinguished in principle is limited only by the number of kinds of information that can be represented in the narrowest of transcriptions. However, the concept of delicacy is more useful—and easier to apprehend—if a relatively small set of levels is defined. The number of delicacy levels in this approach is defined, somewhat arbitrarily, as seven.

What is considered important to be included in a transcription at a given delicacy level is a theoretical issue. For some features there will be widespread agreement about the delicacy classification, while for other features the classification will be more sensitive to the specific theoretical orientation of the transcriber, or even to the particular topic under investigation at the moment. Other transcribers would no doubt define different levels of delicacy.¹ The levels defined below represent one perspective on the natural development of a transcription, from beginning stages to later more elaborated stages.

Delicacy Hierarchy and Transcription Features

The *delicacy hierarchy* presented in Table 1 (and Appendix 1) defines seven levels of delicacy. Each level of the hierarchy lists the major transcription features comprising it. The descriptive labels given to the seven delicacy levels serve as rather arbitrary mnemonics for the key categories at that level. For the first two levels, the name describes the stage of transcription (*foundation, basic*). For the remaining five levels, the name reflects the most numerous or distinctive type of transcription feature characteristic of that level (*boundary, interaction, intonation, prosody, multimodal*).

In each column of the delicacy table, the transcription features are organized in two groups. The first group consists of the “core” features, representing a more or less cohesive group of transcription features, which are reflected in the name for that delicacy level. The second group is the “meta” features, representing* a set of transcription features which are somewhat independent of the main focus of that delicacy level. The meta features listed under a particular delicacy level are often only loosely related the name for that name. In principle the meta features can enter into the transcription process at any time,

and they can be shifted between levels if necessary.

In fact, the entire hierarchy should be seen as simply one way of organizing the conceptualization of transcription information. It is hoped that it will prompt further consideration of alternative ways to organize the content, process, and learning of transcription and its categories.

Table 1. *Transcription Delicacy Hierarchy (Intermediate)* [Version 2.3]

		1	2	3	3+
		Foundation	Basic	Intermediate	Intermediate+
1	Core	words speakers intonation units sequence	closure/finality appeal/question pause laughter marginal words	overlap truncation/cut-off breath pause duration lag/lengthening hold/micropause utterance start latching vocalism	manner/quality vox accent non-vocal event co-action gaze gesture body
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					
9					
11	Meta		comments unintelligible uncertain pseudograph header	index recording alignment timestamp	
12					
13					
14					
15					

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

["Table 1. Delicacy Hierarchy for Discourse Transcription"; cf. Appendix 1.]

Appendix 1a

Transcription Delicacy Hierarchy

[Version 2.3]

Table 1. *Transcription Delicacy Hierarchy for Discourse Transcription*

	Level	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
	Type	Foundation	Basic	Boundary	Interaction	Intonation	Prosody	Multimodal	
1	Core	words	closure/finality	overlap	vocalism	accent	declination unit	audio waveform	1
2		speakers	appeal/question	truncation/cut-off	manner/quality	appeal onset	prosodic sentence	timeline/score	2
3		intonation units	pause	breath	vox	onset/head/tail	paratone	pitch curve	3
4		sequence	laughter	pause duration	affect	tone	isotony/tone concord	amplitude curve	4
5			marginal words	lag/lengthening	non-vocal event	tune/contour	boundary attenuation	spectrogram	5
6				hold/micropause	co-action	chant/stylization	rush/anacrusis	energy curve	6
7				utterance start	gaze	terminal pitch	stress	duration curve	7
8				latching	gesture	key/baseline	accent unit	intonation stylization	8
9				linking	body	pitch reset	isochrony	indexed semiosis	9
10				discontinuous IU	event duration	booster	register/range	indexed context	10
11	Meta		comments	index	non-interactive source	code-switch	phonetic variation	transcription tool link	11
12			unintelligible	recording alignment	participation frame	disfluency/repair	phonetic segments	annotation graph	12
13			uncertain	timestamp	recipient/addressee	pause attribution	segment release	coding links	13
14			pseudograph		participant gloss	turn/backchannel	pre-phonation	participant database	14
15			header		alternative hearing			event database	15

[revised 26 September 2010]