

TRANSCRIBING AND ANALYSING SPOKEN DATA: LOOKING BEYOND THE  
IMPLICIT IN TV INTERVIEWS

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**Abstract:** This paper presents the transcription and analysis of an interview with Julian Assange, founder and editor-in-chief of WikiLeaks. Assange is an enigmatic man with sympathisers and opponents all over the world. To his sympathisers he is the hero of a free transparent press; to his opponents, he is a dangerous man for openly revealing sensitive information. These two views merge as the interview develops and as spectators try to understand this social event. The transcription and analysis of this interview are presented with the aim of exemplifying three research techniques for social sciences: collecting, transcribing and analysing spoken data. I also highlight the importance of having social scientists develop these research techniques, which are usually taken for granted.

**KEY WORDS:** ASSANGE, DISCOURSE ANALYSIS, INTERVIEW, TRANSCRIPTION, RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

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## TRANSCRIPCIÓN Y ANÁLISIS DEL LENGUAJE HABLADO: MÁS ALLÁ DE LO IMPLÍCITO EN LAS ENTREVISTAS DE TELEVISIÓN

**Resumen:** *Este trabajo muestra la transcripción y el análisis de una entrevista con Julian Assange, fundador y editor en jefe de WikiLeaks. Assange es un hombre enigmático, con simpatizantes y opositores en todo el mundo. Para los primeros es el héroe de la prensa libre y transparente, en tanto que para los segundos, es un individuo peligroso por revelar de forma pública información confidencial. Ambas perspectivas convergen a lo largo de la entrevista a medida que se intenta comprender el evento social. La transcripción y el análisis de la entrevista se presentan con el fin de ejemplificar tres técnicas de investigación en las ciencias sociales: recolección, transcripción y análisis del lenguaje hablado. Asimismo, se destaca la importancia de que los profesionales en el campo de las ciencias sociales desarrollen estas técnicas de investigación, muchas veces dadas por hecho.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** ASSANGE, ANÁLISIS DEL DISCURSO, ENTREVISTA, TRANSCRIPCIÓN, TÉCNICAS DE INVESTIGACIÓN

### INTRODUCTION

This paper presents an interview with Julian Assange, founder and editor-in-chief of WikiLeaks, an international organization that publishes classified information from anonymous sources. To his sympathisers he is the hero of a free transparent press. To his opponents, says the BBC News World (2012, para. 1), he is a “publicity-seeker who has endangered lives by putting a mass of sensitive information into the public domain.” These two views merge as the interview develops and as the spectators try to understand this social event.

A transcription and analysis of this interview are presented in this paper with the aim of drawing attention to two research techniques in applied linguistics and social sciences in general, which are usually taken for granted in the profile of researchers: transcribing and analysing spoken data. First, I will describe the transcribing process, its challenges and limitations, and introduce

some characteristics of TV news interview settings; secondly, I will contextualise the collected material, and present an analysis of the interview from a conversational analysis perspective; last but not least, I will present insights and a conclusion. The interview transcription is to be found in Appendix 1.

#### THE TRANSCRIBING PROCESS

Transcribing is a never-ending meticulous undertaking in which the transcriber perceives new data in each new work session. Together with its interminable nature, Liddicoat (2007) identifies subjectivity as an additional challenge to the transcriber. Transcripts, she says, “are in every case subjective representations of the talk in which the transcriber has made decisions about what features of talk to include or exclude from the transcription” (p. 13). In order to minimise these limitations, a great effort was made to transcribe this extract as accurately as possible and to choose neutral words to introduce any background information without taking a stance on the spoken data. Additionally, multiple drafts of the transcription were made at different moments, supported by research about the context and the interview topic. The context-shaped nature of talk made this context investigation necessary. People’s names mentioned in the extract and other journalists’ opinions were investigated. This search in parallel to *unmotivated looking*—repetitive listening to the same data to determine what is going on—allowed me to better understand the roles, the views of the participants, and the machinery of the interaction. Seedhouse (2004) emphasises that *unmotivated looking* also implies “being open to discover new phenomena rather than searching the data with preconceptions or hypotheses” (p. 38). A balance between the accurate representation of speech and its readability was also sought in the transcription (Appendix 1).

Concerning the spoken data, the characteristics of this interview made it an interesting choice for analysis. It is a relatively short extract, spoken in Standard English, in the public domain, with easy access, rich in content, of international interest and unique, considering it is exceptional for an interviewee to abandon an interview being broadcast live by a world-recognised news TV programme like CNN (*Provoked by CNN...*, 2010).

News TV interviews, on the other hand, have become important settings for journalists and public people. Clayman and Heritage (2002: 2-3) point

out that being able to respond to interviewers' unanticipated delicate questions has become a requirement for public figures wishing to succeed in political communication. Similarly, journalists' and interviewers' questioning skills give them professional recognition.

Different authors (Clayman, 1992; Clayman and Heritage, 2002; Greatbatch, 1992) have identified some characteristics of news TV interviews and their settings:

- (1) With a pre-allocated turn-taking structure, with the interviewee's answers following the interviewer's questions or probing assertions
- (2) Where participants display expressive caution
- (3) Showing the interviewer's objectivity
- (4) Embedded within institutional, cultural and socio-historical environments

The turn-taking structure allows for “the maintenance of the discourse identities [...] for the maintenance of the audience as the primary recipients of the talk, and for the maintenance of a neutralistic stance by [interviewers]” (Greatbatch, 1992: 271). Journalists and interviewers, Clayman and Heritage (2002) add, are constantly struggling to balance two different conceptions of objectivity: *objectivity as impartiality*, which obliges them to keep their questions neutral and unbiased; and *objectivity as adversarialness*, which implies they should confront their interviewees rather than becoming their spokesperson. The context-embedded nature of interviews is in fact a characteristic of spoken data in general, and constitutes the second principle of conversation analysis. Seedhouse (2004) states that “contributions to interaction are *context-shaped* in that they cannot be [...] understood except by [...] the [...] environment in which they occur [...] they are] *context-renewing* in that they inevitably form part of the sequential environment in which a next contribution will occur” (p. 14). I will now move on to analysing how real these features are in the selected spoken data.

#### THE INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

In October, 2010, WikiLeaks released classified US military documents about the Iraq War. Soon after this, Julian Assange was interviewed by a female

journalist, Atika Shubert, from CNN. It is not clear how the interview was initiated since no greetings or introductions were made. However, I will assume there was a previous introduction and I will start the analysis where this extract begins.

*Pre-allocated turn-taking* —the first characteristic mentioned above— is present in this extract with the interviewee's answers following the interviewer's questions or assertions, and it predominates throughout the interview. Nevertheless, an initial underlying topic disagreement between interviewer and interviewee is perceived. Assange expects to be asked about the release of classified documents, whereas the interviewer's questions focus on what seem to be annoying topics for Assange. The speakers' communication goals are confronted throughout the short interview resulting in little information exchange.

Atika Shubert starts the interview with a provocative statement about some employees' suspension at WikiLeaks. The use of the passive voice in her statement allows her to be impersonal and to emphasise the facts rather than the sources of information. The constant *pauses, hesitations, broken incomplete sentences* and *interruptions* to her own speech (lines 1 and 2) allow us to see she is aware of the fact that she is approaching delicate issues which might not be part of the official agenda. It takes her two *self-initiated self-repairs* to finally utter the statement about internal disputes and volunteers quitting their jobs at WikiLeaks.

Much more confident, as shown in his immediate direct question (line 3), Assange enquires about Shubert's sources. Her slow pausing speech shows she is again in a delicate situation. By using *dispreferred seconds* (pauses and a *delayed generic word* like 'staffers') she succeeds in answering the question without revealing names (line 4).

Assange's *aligned question* (line 5) reflects his scepticism about the authorship of the sources. However, after Shubert's affirmative answer, Assange enquires about specific names (line 7). Again, the use of *dispreferred seconds* (*displacements*, pauses and a collective noun like 'people') allow her to maintain secrecy.

In lines 3-8, question-answer *adjacency pairs* and the interviewer's *expressive caution* (second characteristic of news TV interviews) build the interaction.

In line 9, Assange's desire to get specific names leads him to talk about apparently only one employee who has been suspended. The context-renewing characteristic of talk is clearly perceived here, Assange's talking about his employee is a result of Shubert's previous statement. In this way, a kind of

negotiation between interviewer and interviewee starts. Assange acknowledges that one employee was suspended, which is what the journalist wants to hear; as compensation, she reveals Domscheit-Berg's name (line 10). Nonetheless, a *dispreferred action* is also implicit in line 10 when Shubert indirectly rejects Assange's previous statement that his employee has not talked to anyone; she confirms Domscheit-Berg has done many interviews with CNN. *Dispreferred seconds* like *pauses*, *preface* (uhm) and *unstructured incomplete sentences* come back to her speech in lines 11 and 12, while trying to introduce the subject of how Assange's personality has affected WikiLeaks. Smartly, Shubert manages to present this issue as deriving from Domscheit-Berg's words, not from hers. Clayman (1992) calls this a *footing device*, a journalistic technique which allows them to preserve their neutrality by attributing statements to a third person.

From line 13 Assange's irritation starts to grow, there is an *overlap* to interrupt Shubert's statement about his personality. His self-confidence also seems to go down, as observed by the three *pauses* and five *prefaces* in lines 13-15. Within this delicate situation, and in spite of her four *pauses* in line 16, the journalist keeps leading the interview to question him about personal issues. Her discourse skilfully moves from 'your personality' (line 11) to 'the story around you' (line 16), which reflects her interest in the accusations against Assange.

A *turn shift* takes place via the question-answer *adjacency pair* in lines 17-18. The answer to Shubert's question 'Would you consider stepping aside?' becomes his longest turn, and the closest to the journalist's goal of talking about her interviewee's personal issues. The question is well managed by Assange, he not only justifies the criticisms against WikiLeaks and 'his role' (emphasis and louder voice in the transcription) as the lightning rod explaining the kind of organization they are, but also presents himself as a victim of the tabloid press. By saying 'anyone' involved in that kind of activity could expect attacks by the press (lines 21-22) he also rejects Shubert's previous accusation about his personality affecting WikiLeaks. Frequent *pauses* and *prefaces* characterise this long turn, a probable sign of Assange's uneasiness and exasperation.

In lines 25-26 Shubert finally introduces the issue she has been waiting to talk about: the rape and molestation accusations against him. This is achieved through her clever link to Assange's previous self-description as a lightning rod. The words rape and molestation are so strong that the journalist *delays* using them. She is about to utter them (line 26) when he interrupts her with his refusal to talk about that subject.

Lines 25-26 end the information exchange and start the interaction collapse. The taboo subject is implicitly introduced by Shubert, but Assange refuses to deal with it. So far we could say the interviewer has almost reached her objective, she made him talk about a WikiLeaks employee's suspension; she made him talk about his role as a lightning rod, and she implicitly 'introduced' the rape topic. It seems that she successfully balanced objectivity as impartiality and objectivity as adversarialness. The latter could explain Shubert's determination not to allow Assange to talk about the release of the classified documents. She hindered his making use of the interview as a stage to talk about his own preferred topic.

On the other hand, the journalist's success can also be interpreted from Assange's perspective since he found out which of his employees had talked to CNN; moreover, he had the opportunity to present himself as a victim of the poisonous tabloid press, and he did not talk about topics he did not want to.

Clayman and Heritage's (2002) metaphor of the news interview as a game becomes meaningful at this point "it [the interview] is organized by well-established rules [...] it is played through a series of moves and counter-moves. Its participants are locked in competition, and with varying levels of skill they deploy their moves [...] in pursuit of divergent [...] objectives" (p. 25).

Lakoff's (1973, in Johnstone, 2008) *politeness* rules are broken in the rest of the interview. In lines 27-40 the interviewer and interviewee impose on each other (*distance*); the addressee is not given the option of not answering the questions (*deference*); and the addresser makes the addressee feel bad (*camaraderie*). Lines 27-40 are also characterised by question-answer *adjacency pairs* full of *dispreferred seconds*: interruptions, displacements, uneasy silences, prefaces, overlaps, deliberate loud coughing, and even threats; thus, there is no conversation alignment and a clear *escalation to conflict*.

Shubert and Assange's disagreement hinders a collaboratively negotiated close. Assange's abrupt departure was the result of his previous threats and Shubert's unresponsiveness to them. In the absence of politeness, and cooperation conversation rules this was probably an expected consequence. Their disagreement went beyond the limits of the normative interview pattern, and probably harmed the public image of both.

## INSIGHTS AND CONCLUSION

Collecting, transcribing and analysing spoken data was a revealing and enriching experience. Searching for the spoken data, doing numerous transcriptions, and learning about the structure of news TV interviews were imperative to my comprehension of this piece of reality. Transcribing helped me refine my analysis and become aware of the fact that “transcription is not simply a representation of talk, but an analytic tool which helps the researcher to notice features [...] and to attend to [...] aspects of talk which may not be apparent outside the act of transcription” (Heath and Luff, 1993, in Liddicoat, 2007: 14). Doing conversation analysis and learning about features of news TV interviews was also theoretically rewarding and made me aware of my initial partially biased perception of this interaction.

Concerning the interview, I have tried to analyse it by presenting the two participants’ perspectives. The interaction was, in my view, delicate for both the interviewee and interviewer. Although Assange seems to be the one in a predicament, the journalist also faces the pressure of remaining neutral, challenging him and being responsible for a topic the press and the audience want to know about. Whether Shubert or Assange succeeded in the interview, and who was more impolite to each other is a question of perspective. Shubert’s persistence on changing the focus of the interview, ignoring Assange’s unwillingness to approach the subject, and asking about irritating possibly false claims about him can be considered extremely disrespectful. Her persistence could be justified by her need to meet the “journalistic requirement of being interactionally adversarial while remaining officially neutral” (Clayman, 1992: 196). However, *adversarialness* and *impartiality* (Clayman and Heritage, 2002) are just ideals and “there are no standards for the evaluation of either [...] questions inevitably encode [...] decisions about relevance, they can never be [...] neutral nor is there adversarialness that does not involve judgements about what is, and what is not appropriate” (pp. 29-30).

On the other hand, Assange’s position of talking only about his preferred topics, his resistance to talk about issues important to the audience and the press, his objection to present the other side of accusations against him, as well as his threats and sudden exit can also be considered exceedingly rude. His behaviour can actually be judged as his inability to deal with the interviewer’s

questions. After all, as journalist Larry King (2010) said, ‘rape’ and ‘the release of classified documents’ are both equally serious topics. If the accusations against Assange were just rumours, he only had to say so.

I will finish this paper with British interviewer Robin Day’s words: “A TV interview does not exist to glorify the person interviewed. Nor does it exist to glorify the interviewer. It is for the information of the public” (Clayman and Heritage, 2002: 29).

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## APPENDIX: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION

- 1 Interviewer <There ha:ve been> (.) <a lot of reports of internal> (.) >There ha:ve been internal disputes within WikiLeaks<
- 2 Uhm (.) Several people have (.)- Volunteers have quit.
- 3 J. Assange Where do you get your sources from? °Atika°
- 4 Interviewer <From (.) former sta:ffers> (.) from (.) =
- 5 J. Assange = A:nd (.) a:nd (.) Do you speak to them?
- 6 Interviewer (.) <Yes, I do:↓>
- 7 J. Assange Which ones?↑
- 8 Interviewer <We:ll,> >I'm not going to say whi:ch o:nes↓ < but (.) people have said that (.) they quit.↓ =
- 9 J. Assange = Because there's there's only o:ne (.) former staffer that he was suspe:nded (.) and who:: as far as I know: ↓ hasn't spoken to anyone.
- 10 Interviewer <We:ll (.) that former staffer Daniel Do:mscheit-Berg, uhm has> (.) done many interviews here in CNN and sai:d he was suspended
- 11 and then quit (.) >and he sai:d among other things< (.) <a per:sonality (1.2) issue> (.) that

- 12 you::r personality seems to be ecli::psing  
uhm WikiLeaks and the work with WikiLeaks I [wonder ( ) -
- 13 J. Assange [This is ( ) I mean this is just not a very  
i:nteresting i:ssue uhm where an  
14 organization an organization has employees uhm and when employees misbehave they get  
suspended a:nd ( ) that was the case of uhm  
15 Domscheit ( ) uhm Schmitt and uhm some employee:s when they get suspended they're not  
happy about this suspension.
- 16 Interviewer <But this criticism that: ( ) you know that ( ) the story around you:: > ( ) is eclipsing the work  
with WikiLeaks ( ) Does that concern  
17 you - >Would you consi:der stepping asi:de?↑<
- 18 J. Assange Well, this organization does not let a:nyone hang out:t to dry. We we a:lways expect  
treme::ndous uhm ( ) criticism. Uhm It is MY::  
19 RO::LE ( ) to be the li:ghtning rod uhm to attra:ct ( ) uhm to attra:ct the the atta:cks against  
the organization where I work ( ) uhm ( ) and  
20 that is a uhm a di:fficult role↑ ( ) uhm ( ) On the other hand, I also get under credited uhm  
So: ( ), I mean uhm that's my fu:nction ( )  
21 uhm ( ) in this organization. And and A:NYONE involved in that sort of sort of activity can  
be expected to uhm be attacked across the  
22 full spectrum uhm ( ) whether it's a ( ) sort of ( ) direct fabrications or: ( ) or: ( ) uhm ( )  
poisonous rumors by the tabloid press uhm.

- 23 Anyway ↓ (.) that is something we:: as an organization uhm cannot be distracted by. We  
 have to uhm (.) mo:ve o:n and do uhm the  
 24 work we are committed to do.
- 25 Interviewer <You mentioned ↓> (.) <you sort of described> yourself as a lightning ro:d (1.6) <one  
 aspect that (.) of that has been the le:gal situation  
 26 for yourself in Sweden> you're now facing [charges-
- 27 J. Assange [I am no:t going to talk about that (.) in  
 relation to this ↓-
- 28 Interviewer <But it does affe:ct WikiLeaks ↑>
- 29 J. Assange Yes, bu:t this i:nterview <is abo:ut (.) something else ↓> (1.9) <I; I: I'll have to walk if  
 you::>-
- 30 Interviewer Do you still- [Do ( )
- 31 J. Assange [If you're GOING TO:: conta::minate this extre:mely serious interview with  
 questions about my personal life-
- 32 Interviewer Well, I'm no:t ↑ but what I wa:nna a:sk is if this was at a certain point a dirty (.) chicks  
 campaign=
- 33 J. Assange =I'm gonna wa:lk if you're going to::-

- 34 Interviewer So: you don't want to address whether or not: (.) you feel this is an  
[attack-
- 35 J. Assange [It's completely disgust:ing Atika ↑
- 36 Interviewer I'm a::sking whether or not:- =
- 37 J. Assange = I'm going to wa:lk if you're going to: uhm conta::minate uhm (.) as revea::ling the  
38 deaths of a hundred and two thousand peo:ple with  
uhm attacks against my person.
- 39 Interviewer I'm not↑ [what I'm a:sking is °if you feel that the attacks on WikiLeaks°  
[(LOUD COUGH)]
- 40 J. Assange °Ok, sorry°  
(Julian stands up and takes off the microphone)
- 41 Interviewer (°°Julian ↑°°) ( ) (°°and what's tha:i? ↑°°) ( ) ( ) (°°I ha::d to ask that  
question°°)
- 42 J. Assange °°O:bviously, co::me on!°°
- 43 Interviewer (°°I ha::d to ask that question°°)  
(Julian leaves the room)

## TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS (GAIL JEFFERSON IN LIDDICOAT, 2007)

Symbol	Meaning
<u>word</u>	Underline word = Speaker's stress or emphasis
Yea:h	Colon(s) = Length is shown by inserting a colon after the lengthened sound or word
The:::	If it is very long additional colons are used
?	Question mark = Rising intonation
.	Full stop = Falling intonation
↑Lovely	Upward arrow = To show rise in pitch use an upward arrow just before the pitch shift
↓ euh	Downward arrow = To show fall in pitch use a downward arrow just before the pitch shift
WORD	Capital letters = To show talk that is markedly louder than the other talk
°Yeah° / °°Yeah°°	Degree signs = To show talk that is very soft use degree signs before and after the word(s). Use more signs if talk is very soft
>word<	Talk which is noticeable faster than surrounding talk

<word>	Talk which is noticeable slower than surrounding talk
That one about-	Dash = Incomplete speech where a sound is cut off abruptly
((word))	Double brackets = To show that what is inside is described, not transcribed: ((cough)), ((laughter)), ((applause)), ((car door slams))
=	One unit of talk follows another with no discernible interval between the two
[	Overlapped speech = Simultaneous talk, where one person starts to talk while another person is still talking
]	The start of the overlap is aligned in the transcript. E.g. Poor [Nick [no man I've got one too.
.]	The end of a stretch of overlapping. E.g. [some of] the movies were really heavy [ yeah ]
.	Very short pause
(0.5) (1.0) (1.2)	Length of silence measured in tenths of seconds
(word or words)	Transcriber's best hearing because of background noises, interference or low volume
( )	Blank space between brackets= Impossible to hear enough to transcribe anything

## VOCALIZATION SOUNDS

<b>Sound</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
mhm or mm	made by the listener to indicate that he is listening
uhm or uh	used for word searches
uh huh	yes like meaning
uh-uh	no-like meaning