How to choose transcription software for conversation analysis
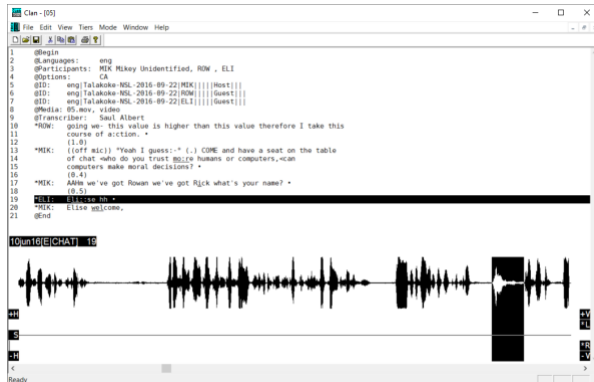
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1: The CLAN 'list-of-turns' interface

Transcription software lets analysts synchronize media recordings with textual transcripts. This can be extremely useful for systematic transcription and analysis, but there are some important practical and methodological implications to bear in mind when choosing between and using these systems for CA. One key choice is between two common approaches to representing transcripts for editing and viewing: either as 'tiers-of-timelines' (ELAN, EXMARaLDA, and ANVIL) or as 'lists-of-turns' (e.g. CLAN, Transana, and TranscriberAG). ELAN and CLAN are both good, free examples for a simple comparison of these approaches because both have very good documentation for further reference[1].
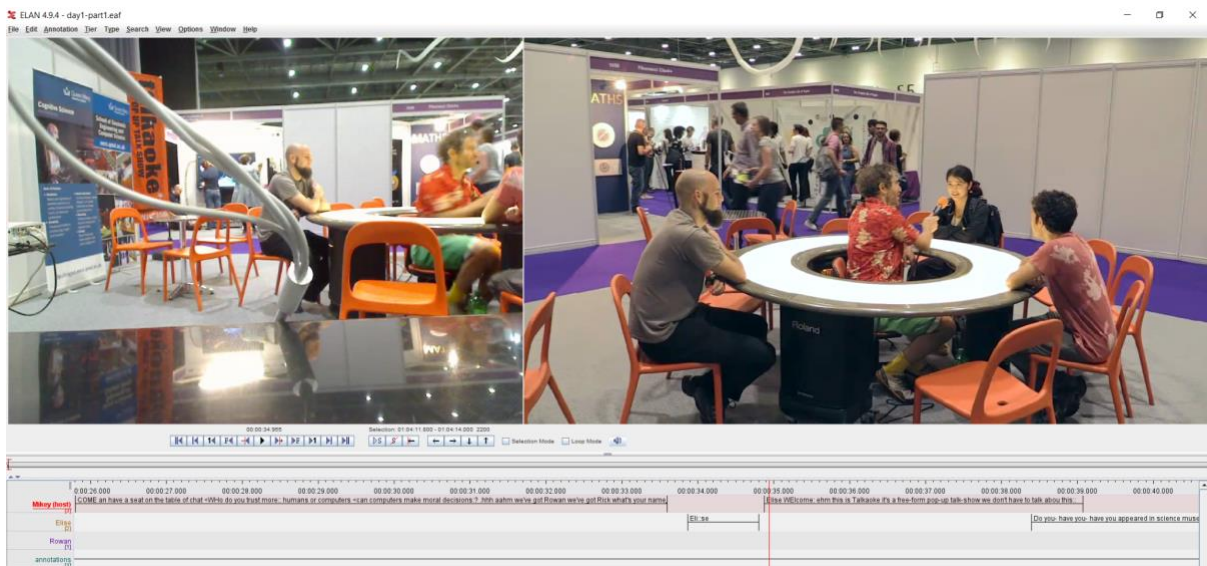
2: ELAN's 'tiers-of-timelines' or 'partitions' interface

The advantages of tier-and-timeline software such as ELAN is that you can add as many tiers as necessary for any number of participants and phenomena along a horizontal timeline. This is particularly useful for bodily movements, facial expressions and other durational events that can be represented alongside talk as either independent or hierarchically structured tiers. ELAN's embedded media player is very sophisticated and enables analysts to align, review and transcribe multiple media files—shot from two or more

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[1] There are also some excellent how-to videos for both CLAN, ELAN and other useful tools for CA transcription produced by the DIGIHUMLAB, available at https://dighumlab.org/.

angles, for example. The disadvantage of using ELAN for CA is that it can be hard to visually scan multiple tiers for precise moments of overlap and specific positions within units of talk. Also ELAN's ability to export files as a list-of-turns is basic and requires formatting to produce presentable transcripts. List-of-turns style transcription editors like CLAN, however, create transcripts that are easy to paste directly into a CA publication or presentation. CLAN may seem more intuitive for CA because the transcripts look Jeffersonian and the interface is more like a standard word processor. However CLAN has a more basic media viewer, and relatively complex ways to create multiple tiers for bodily movements, images or for adding phonetic, grammatical and other annotation layers.

More generally, there are significant benefits and caveats for using either of these systems for CA. Synchronizing transcripts with recordings allows analysts to measure and review the precise timings of interaction, and analysts can also import and export transcripts in standardized machine-readable data formats. This can facilitate collaboration both within CA and in research groups that use various analytical approaches that combine, for example, video, sensor and motion capture data. Using these software tools and data formats also creates transcripts that are compatible with corpus databases and tools for searching, browsing and computational analysis. However, when researchers use software to combine primary data (recordings) and secondary data (transcripts), they should be careful to maintain these distinctions during analysis. For example, there is an important distinction between machine-measured clock-time and Jefferson's counting of 'beats' of interactional time, which typically include around 200ms of latency in turn-transitions. If this distinction is not accounted for, computational analysis might treat gaps as attributable silences. The CA transcript is a descriptive representation of the course of social actions, whereas sensor readings or coded data show physiological or functional changes over time. Especially with corpus tools, researchers should be aware that it is impossible to 'search' for social actions which people may implement in various ways, and that key variations, 'deviant cases', and crucial conversation analytic points of interest may be effaced in this process.