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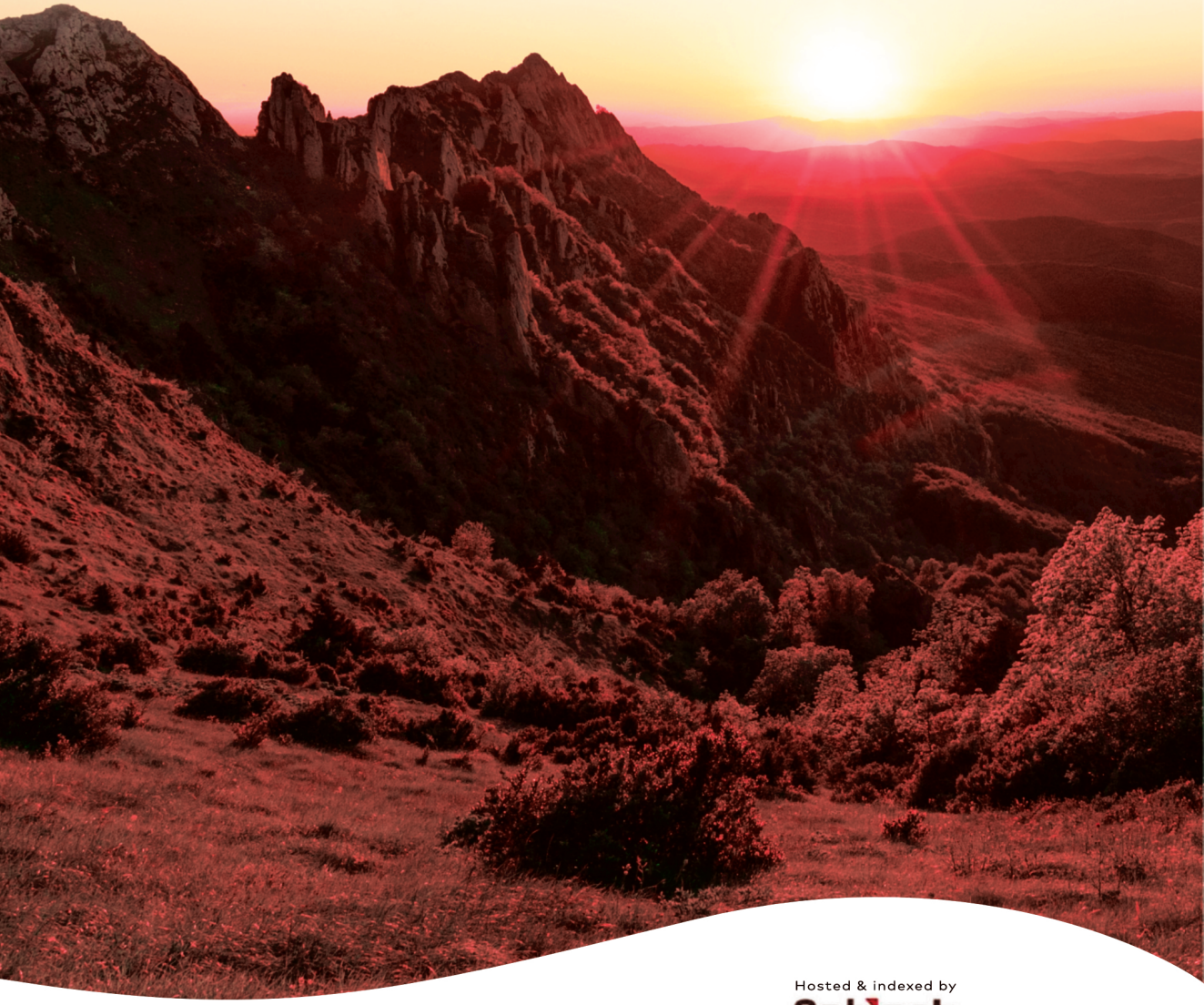

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Navigating hurdles in transcription of interview data in indigenous languages: A grounded experience

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Abstract

Drawing on experiences encountered during a doctoral research journey, this paper explores the challenges of interview transcription in a study where unstructured interviews were conducted in local indigenous vernacular languages. The participants' language limitations rendered digital transcription software ineffective, necessitating the use of manual transcription methods. To mitigate the time-consuming and laborious nature of full transcription, the authors advocate for partial transcription as a practical approach in their grounded theory study on the dynamics, experiences, and aspirations of flea market traders.

Keywords: Transcription, Computer aided data analysis, NVivo vernacular interview, vernacular data, grounded theory.

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Introduction

This paper emerges from a doctoral research study examining flea market trading activities in the Central Business District of Gweru, the capital of Zimbabwe's Midlands province, a city with a projected population of approximately 198,200 in 2024 (Worldometer, 2024). The study focused exclusively on licensed flea market traders, deliberately excluding unlicensed traders and hawkers, who likely outnumber their licensed counterparts. The participants operated from small stalls located in various sites owned either by the city council or private individuals.

As a qualitative study, data collection was conducted through unstructured interviews, recorded using a digital audio recorder. The interview data were subsequently analysed using NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software. The study employed a grounded theory methodology, which, as defined by its founders, seeks "the discovery of theory from data—systematically obtained and analysed" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1). Grounded theory analysis is detailed, progressing word by word and sentence by sentence, ensuring fidelity to the themes and concerns emerging directly from the data. The analytical process begins with preliminary (or initial) coding, advances through selective coding, and concludes with theoretical coding (Chen et al., 2024).

A key challenge in qualitative research is the transcription process, particularly when working with unstructured interviews and indigenous languages that digital transcription software may not support. Researchers frequently encounter issues related to accuracy, time consumption, and the potential for bias in manual transcription (Irshad et al., 2024; Ko et al., 2024). The use of transcription in grounded theory research, which requires an in-depth, iterative analysis, further amplifies these challenges. Recent studies have highlighted the need for methodological adaptations, such as partial transcription, to enhance efficiency without compromising the depth of analysis (O'Brien et al., 2025).

Moreover, qualitative researchers must navigate ethical concerns related to data accuracy and participant confidentiality. Advances in AI-based transcription tools have shown promise in overcoming some of these challenges, yet their effectiveness remains limited for lesser-known languages (Blonda et al., 2024). Despite these technological advancements, many studies continue to rely on traditional manual transcription methods, adapting them to fit specific research contexts (Leal et al., 2024). In this study, the researchers opted for a combination

of manual and partial transcription, a strategy supported by previous research advocating its efficiency in qualitative data analysis (Aubry et al., 2024).

This study's findings contribute to ongoing discussions on improving qualitative research methodologies, particularly within contexts where language barriers and transcription challenges are significant obstacles. By examining the experiences of flea market traders, this research aligns with broader grounded theory studies that explore socio-economic dynamics through qualitative data collection and analysis (Schaefer, 2024).

Background

The data collected for this study was predominantly oral rather than numerical, reflecting the interpretive philosophical orientation and its corresponding data collection methods. The primary method employed was unstructured interviews, complemented by concurrent observations. It is a common practice in qualitative research to transcribe interview data into text form to enable the level of analysis required by the systematic procedures of grounded theory, which are a precursor to coding and thematic analysis (Saunders et al., 2012; Lyons & Coyle, 2007). However, Kvale (2007) cautioned against viewing transcription as a straightforward clerical task, arguing instead that it is an interpretive process in which the researcher must make deliberate choices. This perspective is supported by recent research that explores the intricacies of transcription in multilingual and vernacular contexts (Daly & Barbour, 2021; Bird, 2020).

In this context, the researchers encountered several unique challenges related to practical and conceptual aspects of transcription. Although these issues are not entirely unprecedented in qualitative research, they held particular significance for this study. This paper outlines the research experiences and insights gained, which may be of value to others facing similar challenges. The literature discusses many of these issues and suggests a range of potential solutions. One of the primary challenges faced in this study was the translation and transcription of interviews, given that the majority of the recorded data were in *ChiShona* (the dominant local vernacular in Gweru, where the study was conducted) and, to a lesser extent, Ndebele (another local vernacular). Many interviews also included varying degrees of speech in English. Existing transcription software is not yet capable of processing audio data in these vernacular languages, a challenge echoed in similar research contexts where vernacular or indigenous languages are involved (Douedari et al., 2021; Mansfield & Stanford, 2023).

As noted in the literature, manually transcribing qualitative data, particularly from unstructured interviews, is a highly time-consuming and demanding process for researchers (King & Horrocks, 2012). Expert estimates suggested that an hour of interview recording can require up to eight hours of transcription work. In this study, transcription was further complicated by the need to translate audio data from the vernacular languages into English, significantly increasing the time and cost required. Similar complexities in translation and transcription in multilingual research have been documented by Flores (2024) and Al-Amer et al. (2023), who underscore the additional burden imposed on researchers working with local languages.

Given the time-intensive nature of this task, transcription is often outsourced to individuals with the necessary skills. However, this approach carries its own drawbacks. In qualitative research, the transcription process offers researchers an invaluable opportunity to develop an early and intimate familiarity with their data. Outsourcing this task, therefore, risks forfeiting this critical stage of data immersion and may impact the depth of subsequent analysis. Recent studies highlight that outsourcing transcription in vernacular contexts can further complicate the process, especially when cultural and linguistic nuances are critical to the study's objectives (Sexton et al., 2015; Bird, 2020).

The Problem

A researcher seeking to analyse interview data is confronted by the sheer volume of data in the audio form. Standard procedures have required reducing the interview data to a written form. By its nature, this transcription process is time consuming. However, a detailed verbatim transcription is not always necessary in certain research situations. Where the interview is conducted in English or one of the major languages, technology has eased the burden of transcription considerably. Thus NVivo, one common qualitative data analysis software, integrates transcription with analysis through an enabling software called TranscribeMe. This paper is, however, concerned about the challenges faced by researchers using interviews in a local vernacular language. In all cases requiring transcription, a number of considerations determine the appropriate level of detail in the given situation. The key issue in this paper is to explore some of the pertinent issues as they arose from a qualitative study of the dynamics, experiences and aspirations of flea market traders in the central business district of Gweru - a city in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe.

The Hurdles in Grounded Theory

Interviews for this study were conducted predominantly in ChiShona or to a lesser extent in isiNdebele, with some responses in English. Often, participants switched between these languages in the same interview. This multilingual complexity, frequently encountered in similar Zimbabwean contexts (Chikweche & Fletcher, 2012), presented significant challenges in transcription. Finding reliable individuals capable of translating and transcribing across these languages while maintaining the nuanced meanings was an arduous task. In some cases, multiple transcribers would have been required for a single interview, which could compromise the integrity of the transcribed data and raise ethical concerns, such as breaches of confidentiality. This approach would have also delayed engagement with the data, making it less feasible. Consequently, we chose to limit full-text transcription to only essential segments, opting instead for other techniques such as detailed field notes and audio replay.

One researcher who conducted the interviews and recorded them on tape gained a valuable early familiarity with the data. This was bolstered by field notes made during the interviews and refined immediately after. By replaying the audio multiple times, the team sought to overcome the limitations of partial transcription while maintaining a deep engagement with the data. Although transcription to text enhances analysis convenience, particularly when using qualitative data analysis software like NVivo, it was deemed unlikely to yield significantly greater insights given the team's direct engagement with the recordings and field notes.

Transcription is widely regarded as an essential step in qualitative research, converting data into a tangible form for analysis (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). However, when interviews are conducted in vernacular languages, as in this study, transcription poses unique challenges. The language of reporting was English, requiring vernacular conversations to be translated into English. This dilemma is frequently encountered when conducting research in multilingual communities or rural areas. Researchers must consider the implications of the interview language on transcription, as participants often express themselves best in their native tongues (Solomon, 2024).

Balancing approaches to transcription

Among the research team, opinions diverged regarding the extent of transcription required. One researcher, drawing on prior experience with Shona texts, argued against full transcription, while another advocated for

complete and detailed transcription to ensure rigorous analysis. Literature on transcription approaches (Kvale, 2007; McLellan et al., 2003) helped resolve these differences. Kvale warned researchers of the limitations of transcripts, noting that they represent a transformation of spoken narrative into written discourse. Transcripts, therefore, are imperfect representations and require flexibility. The key transcription decisions included:

- **What to transcribe***: Full versus selective transcription was debated, with recognition of the potential value of paralinguistic features (Lyons & Coyle, 2007).*
- **How much to transcribe***: Decisions were informed by balancing time and effort against the need for detailed data.*
- **Who should transcribe***: Outsourcing transcription was considered but deemed unsuitable due to concerns over accuracy, cost, and the need for researchers' direct engagement with the data.*

Technology and its limitations

While NVivo and other tools like TranscribeMe offer integrated transcription and analysis, their utility is limited to widely spoken languages. Unfortunately, ChiShona and isiNdebele are not supported. Speech recognition software, such as that in Microsoft Office, was dismissed because much of the data was in "Shonglish," a local mix of Shona, Ndebele, and English, which these tools cannot process accurately.

The idea of engaging professional transcriptionists was also explored but dismissed due to concerns over translation integrity, confidentiality, and additional costs. Ultimately, the team opted for in-house transcription, which allowed greater control over accuracy and consistency. Recent studies emphasise that while technology can assist, transcription of vernacular or multilingual data often requires manual intervention to maintain data fidelity (Solomon, 2024). As Kvale (2007) noted, transcription and qualitative analysis require flexible approaches. In this case, Grounded theory, with its iterative nature, supports methods such as working directly from audio to capture prosodic and paralinguistic features (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). Such an approach enables researchers to access deeper layers of meaning, particularly when analysing interviews conducted in conversational vernaculars.

Methodological implications

This study's transcription challenges justifies the importance of considering language and transcription strategies during research design. Allowing participants to express themselves freely in their natural speech forms enhances the authenticity of the data but complicates subsequent transcription. The research experience aligns with the flexible methods advocated in the literature, acknowledging that transcription is not a one-size-fits-all process but rather a decision-laden practice shaped by context, language, and research goals.

Scaling over the hurdles: Theory and practice interface

The decision to make full verbatim transcriptions, that is capturing every word and nonverbal elements, such as laughter, sighs, or background sounds, of all interview data was always going to be challenging. However, not all qualitative research necessitates the same level of detailed transcription. For methodologies relying on discourse or conversation analysis, full transcription might be warranted, with standardised schemes developed to ensure consistency. In other cases, Richards (2015) suggested partial transcription, which can later be expanded upon as analysis progresses. In this submission, the original audiotapes were stored digitally, providing flexibility to revisit and expand transcripts when necessary. Each tape was track-marked, and partial transcripts included time codes to facilitate reference to the original recordings.

Recent studies have reaffirmed the complexity of transcription, particularly in multilingual and multicultural contexts. Solomon (2024) emphasises the importance of adapting transcription processes to the nature of the research methodology, noting that multilingual data often requires innovative approaches to avoid losing meaning during translation or transcription. Similarly, King and Horrocks (2010) estimated that even the simplest transcription of a one-hour interview could take up to eight hours. They suggest selectively transcribing areas of interest or key informants' interviews while summarising the rest. Tang et al. (2010) presented a different approach by conducting a grounded theory study on consumer decision-making without recording interviews. Instead, they analysed data in real-time, arguing that simultaneous collection and analysis allowed them to identify emerging patterns more effectively. This approach aligns with the argument that qualitative research requires flexibility and adaptation to the study's specific context (Hammersley, 2011).

Leveraging technology for efficiency

With the integration of NVivo software, our team could listen to audio recordings while viewing abbreviated transcripts. Advances in NVivo, from versions 7 to 12, enabled direct coding from audio, reducing the reliance on written transcripts. This technological development, as noted by Solomon (2024), underscores the diminishing value of full transcription in light of modern software capabilities. Holton (2011) argued that qualitative research should prioritise capturing the 'discovered truth' rather than obsessing over verbatim transcription.

Multilingual challenges

The multilingual nature of this study, featuring ChiShona, English, and, to a lesser extent, isiNdebele, introduced additional complexities. Participants often switched between languages within the same interview. Coding in the original language, as recommended by Urquhart (2013), preserves the nuance of meaning. However, coding in multiple languages would have introduced conceptual difficulties and risks of inaccuracy. Similar challenges were highlighted by Binder and Edwards (2010), who used expert translation and back-translation for their grounded theory research in German and English. Lyons and Coyle (2007) also described the difficulties of transcription in multilingual research, where problematic translations often arise when moving between languages. Recent research by Solomon (2024) suggests that combining transcription and translation within the research team can mitigate these issues, as it ensures better control over data accuracy and context. This approach was adopted in our study to avoid the inefficiencies of a two-stage process.

Flexibility in research practices

The decision to rely on partial transcription was supported by the growing consensus that qualitative research must remain flexible. Stern (2011) cautioned against overemphasis on verbatim accuracy, urging researchers to focus on identifying the 'cream' of the data, the essential insights that rise to the top. This perspective aligns with Holton's (2011) argument for using field notes to capture participants' main concerns without becoming overwhelmed by excessive descriptive detail.

Timing of analysis

Birks and Mills (2012) advocate for starting analysis from the first data collection event, reducing the need for extensive transcription. They argue

that preliminary analysis of recordings and field notes diminishes the value of subsequent transcription, particularly when theoretical sampling is in use. Glaser (1967) even questioned the necessity of tape recordings, viewing them as a distraction from the immediacy of the researcher's insights.

Interviews are a cornerstone of qualitative research, and the flexibility of unstructured interviews is mirrored in the diversity of transcription and analysis methods. Decisions in this study reflect the adaptive spirit of qualitative research, as described by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), who emphasised the interpretive nature of qualitative practices by noting that:

> *Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (p. 3).*

By balancing practical constraints with methodological rigour, our approach sought to honour the complexity of the data while remaining true to the evolving analysis.

Conclusion

Transcription will undoubtedly remain a cornerstone of qualitative research, serving as a vital precursor to the analysis of interviews recorded in audio form. However, as this paper has highlighted, each research context presents its own unique challenges, particularly when multilingual interviews are involved. An open and flexible approach to transcription offers researchers a spectrum of choices, ranging from full verbatim to partial transcription.

The experiences recounted in this study underscore the practicality and benefits of partial transcription in scenarios where interviews are conducted in two or more languages, with reporting taking place in a third. This approach becomes especially valuable when combined with the use of computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). Modern CAQDAS tools, such as NVivo, facilitate seamless integration of audio data, allowing researchers to directly engage with recordings while using partial transcripts as navigational aids. Ultimately, transcription strategies should be adapted to the methodological and contextual needs of each study, balancing rigour with pragmatism. By doing so, researchers can achieve meaningful insights while optimising their time and resources.

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