

TRANSCRIBING FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH



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ONE

Introduction

CHAPTER CONTENTS

- Reanimating talk through transcription... 4
- Representing words... 6
- Transcribing interview talk: Do we still need the interactional specifics?... 6
- Our approach to transcription... 9
- Preview of the book... 10
- Concluding comments... 11

Social scientists are increasingly recognizing the value of examining the social world as it unfolds. A key challenge is to find ways of representing the words, gestures and conduct of the people being studied. This book explores the issues involved in this representational process. How should social scientists transcribe what happens in social interaction in analytically useful ways? What might be the payoffs of systematic and detailed transcription practices? This book is both a practical guide to the process of transcribing as a research tool and an introduction to the social science behind it.

At first glance, it might appear that capturing what is said on paper is a straightforward task: isn't it easy to just write down what people say? Far from it! A simple illustration shows that transcripts, even fairly 'accurate' ones, can be misleading.

In 2010, *The New York Times* reported on a satellite interview conducted by Rachel Maddow, an MSNBC journalist, with Rand Paul, who was running for a Senate seat:

(1)

Asked by Ms. Maddow if a private business had the right to refuse to serve black people, Mr. Paul replied, "Yes." (*The New York Times*, 20 May 2010)

The following day (21 May 2010), Chris Hayes, another MSNBC journalist, claimed that *The New York Times* relied on the following transcript of the interview and, as a result, misinterpreted what Paul said:

(2)

MADDOW: Do you think that a private business has
the right to say we don't serve black people?
PAUL: Yes. I'm not in favor of any discrimination of any form.

Chris Hayes argues that when we watch the recording of the interview, it is clear that Paul's 'yes' was not a response to Maddow's question – in other words, that the transcript, while technically accurate, is misleading. Is it possible to capture what actually happened in the interview in a way that does not misrepresent the interaction that took place? Here is a detailed transcript of this interaction that uses some of the transcription conventions we will discuss in the book:

(3)

The Rachel Maddow Show 19 May 2010 8:05
1 MADDOW: Do you think that a private
2 bu[siness has a right [to say we don't=
3 PAUL: [I-I'm not in- [I'm not in:
4 MADDOW: =serve [Black people.]
5 PAUL: [I'm not in]:
6 (1.8)
7 PAUL: >↓Yheh<=I'm not in favor: of any
8 discrimina:tion of any fo:rm,

There are several obvious differences between the detailed transcript (Extract 3) and the journalistic one (Extract 2). First, Extract 3, lines 1–5 show that Paul and Maddow speak at the same time (the overlap is marked by square brackets, see Chapter 3), as Paul is attempting to formulate a response to Maddow's question (which she had asked prior). Second, in line 6, there is a 1.8 second silence before Paul begins his response (Chapter 3), which appears to be due to the transmission delay as Paul waits Maddow out before attempting to respond again. Third, what was transcribed as 'yes' in the simple transcript is actually 'yeah'. While we might think of 'yeah' as a non-standard or colloquial production of 'yes', it is a rather different kind of 'response token' – in other words, a different way to deal with the question. Fourth, the transcript provides some details on how 'yeah' was articulated: very quickly (marked via minimal spelling 'yeh' and > <; see Chapter 3), with slight breathiness (marked by addition of 'h' in 'yehh'; Chapter 5) and at a lower pitch than his usual delivery (marked by the down arrow; Chapter 4). Finally, we see that Paul immediately extends his turn with 'I'm not in favor': the quick start of this expansion is marked by the equal sign (=; Chapter 3). We can also observe that this is a repeat of the response he was attempting to produce in lines 3 and 5. What difference do these details make in our understanding of this interaction? They provide the specific evidence that allows us to see that Paul's 'yeah' is his acknowledgement of having heard the question rather than an affirmative response to it.

There is a widespread assumption across the social sciences that simple transcripts using standard orthography can stand in for the interaction itself. A casual leaf through any major qualitative methods handbook reveals that many qualitative social scientists often see data transcription as a straightforward job of reproducing what was said in a standard orthography. However, in the last 50 years, new ways of understanding the relationship between people, practices and institutions have been established. One outcome has been the development of a sophisticated and theoretically nuanced empiricism that focuses on talk as the central medium for action and understanding. This has begun to facilitate an understanding of human conduct in complex situations that is distinct from conceptions offered by methods such as experiments and surveys. As researchers in conversation analysis, discursive psychology and ethnomethodology have shown in increasingly sophisticated ways, talk is a medium of action; everyday social phenomena – ordering a pizza, sentencing someone in a court of law, answering interviewers' questions or breaking bad news in a medical interaction – are all realized through talk in interaction in orderly and reproducible ways.

The discipline that has done most to lay the groundwork for the systematic recording and analysis of human conduct has been conversation analysis (see Box 1.1). Rather than collecting data through experiments or surveys in order to test hypotheses generated by the social scientist's own pre-existing theories and assumptions, the aim has been to create corpora of naturalistic data and transcripts that can be used for analysis and for generating data-driven theory and understanding of the social world. Crucially, this allows researchers to base their analyses on close observations of the world as it happens, and to do so in a way that allows fellow researchers insights into the original data that produced the

analysis. This development has been massively facilitated by technology – word processors, audio and video editing software, combined with increasingly high-quality recording equipment that is non-intrusive, portable and easy to operate, producing data that is simple to edit, anonymize and share. Alongside these technological developments there needs to be a paper system of representation that makes all of this portable, editable, shareable and therefore conventional; a standard system of transcription that captures the specifics of social action will allow researchers to share data and collaborate in analysis. This book provides the basic framework for that shared system of conventions.

..... **BOX 1.1**

What is conversation analysis?

Conversation analysis (CA) is an interdisciplinary field of study that investigates the fundamental communication processes that make human interaction possible. Founded by Harvey Sacks in collaboration with Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson, CA is rooted in two key developments in sociology: Erving Goffman's micro-sociology of 'the interaction order' and Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology. CA aims to explicate how people accomplish and understand social actions when interacting with others. A distinctive feature of this empirical approach to the study of communication is its reliance on video- and audio-recordings of naturally occurring talk-in-interaction. In spite of its name, conversation analysis is not limited to the study of 'conversation' per se. CA research examines diverse forms of talk and visible conduct in numerous social settings: casual conversations between friends and family members, interactions in courtrooms, classrooms, medical offices, news interviews, workplace meetings, calls to emergency services and helplines, and many others. CA takes human interaction to be at the center of social life and offers social science researchers a unique set of tools for uncovering its workings.

In this chapter, we will set out the assumptions that underlie our approach to transcription, and argue for when and why we might need a transcript that captures not simply the words, but interaction in all its animated detail, as it is analyzed and responded to by participants themselves. We also outline the basics of how to get started with this form of transcription. We suggest some useful ways for laying out a transcript, and cover a number of basic (largely conversation analytic) findings about interaction that have shaped some of the central elements of transcription. This sets the scene for demonstrating *how* to transcribe in the remainder of the book.

REANIMATING TALK THROUGH TRANSCRIPTION

We're dealing with something real and powerful ... little tiny things that God might have overlooked, perhaps. (Sacks, 1992: I: 238; cited in Jefferson, 2004a: 22)

In our everyday social interactions, we might notice delays, changes of emphasis, tiny laughter particles, words that are cut off and restarted. This is what grounds our very strong intuitions, for example that a speaker is conveying something complex or challenging, that they are unhappy or angry about something, or simply being ironic or flippant. Such attention to specifics allows us to animate our responses accordingly. Tuning in to the infinite variety of actions that are performed by adjusting the rhythm and musicality of interaction is the ambition that the transcription system we discuss in this book is designed to support.

The transcription system explored here was originally developed by Gail Jefferson (see Expert Box 1) as part of the nascent conversation analytic research enterprise and is now widely known as Jeffersonian transcription. A Jeffersonian transcript can initially appear complex and hard to read, mainly due to its unfamiliarity – it is a technical and rigorous practice for which training is needed. However, the system is intended to build intuitively on familiar ideas (underlining for emphasis, capital letters for elevated volume, etc.). The apparent increase in complexity reflects the fact that there just *are* more things that we need to attend to in interaction than are registered in orthographic or play-script transcript.

..... EXPERT BOX 1

Gail Jefferson and the development of transcription

Paul Drew, Professor of Conversation Analysis, Loughborough University, UK

Gail Jefferson's extraordinary transcribing skills predate her career as a conversation analyst. Whilst an undergraduate at UCLA, majoring in dance, she had a part-time job transcribing recordings of race sensitivity training sessions held for prison guards. In her last publication, Jefferson gives an account of how, when she worked with Harvey Sacks at UC Irvine in the late 1960s, she was inspired by Sacks's first efforts to transcribe laughter. She began to go further in trying to capture and represent in her transcriptions some of the detail of the occurrence of laughter, such as precisely where laughter began, how it began and how the pulses of audible out-breath were configured and what other participants were doing (were they laughing, and if so, again precisely how?). All of which were relevant to an analytic understanding of what speakers were doing when they laughed. Jefferson persuaded Sacks of the importance of transcribing recordings in the kind of detail for which her system has become so renowned; she demonstrated to Sacks, then to others, that transcribing the details of talk was an essential part of the analytic process, of analyzing the moment-by-moment contingencies of interaction.

When she moved permanently to the Netherlands in the mid-1980s she learned Dutch, and with her exceptional ear for language, developed a facility for transcribing Dutch recordings and worked extensively with Dutch colleagues on Dutch data that she had transcribed.

It is sometimes supposed that Jefferson worked only on audio-recordings; this is not the case – she worked frequently with video data, especially in the earlier years of her career when of course video was

(Continued)

(Continued)

a much more clunky medium than now. She tried to adapt a system used to transcribe dance, the Laban system, to capture the details of non-vocal movement and conduct. But she acknowledged her experiments with the Laban system were not satisfactory; she was a great admirer of the approach that Chuck Goodwin was developing to transcribe the non-vocal details of embodied, face-to-face interactions.

REPRESENTING WORDS

One of the most striking features of a more precise Jeffersonian transcription is its representation of talk in non-standard orthography. This approach has been criticized from two sides: those who prefer using standard English language orthography (typically, social scientists) and those who prefer using a standard phonetic transcription system, such as the International Phonetic Alphabet (linguists). On the one hand, qualitative social scientists complain that Jeffersonian transcription is too difficult to read, transcriber-dependent, and presents speech in a caricature fashion of ‘comic book’ orthography which makes speakers look stupid (see Jefferson, 1983, for a response to these critics). On the other hand, linguists criticize Jeffersonian transcription for being too unsystematic in its representation of phonetic details and advocate the adoption of a standard phonetic transcription system, such as the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). We tackle some of these latter comparative issues and respond to various concerns and problems with Jeffersonian transcription in more detail in our final chapter.

In response to advocates of a standard orthographic or ‘play-script’ version of transcript, or even ‘Jefferson Lite’ (Potter, 2003), we would argue that such transcripts are not a more neutral or simple record; rather they are a highly consequential transformation of the original. For example, orthographic transcript imposes the conventions of written language, which are designed to be broadly independent of specific speakers and readers. Conversation analysts have repeatedly shown that such a transformation systematically wipes out evidence of the intricate coordination and recipient design that are so obviously oriented to features of talk.

TRANSCRIBING INTERVIEW TALK: DO WE STILL NEED THE INTERACTIONAL SPECIFICS?

The process of transforming spoken words into written form is taken as a prerequisite for conducting all kinds of qualitative research. But how do we decide when it will be necessary to transcribe the specific elements of how those words are delivered? For example, if one were interested in conducting interviews in order to identify discourses or repertoires, why would such detail be necessary? To help us address this question, let us consider an example of interview talk. The interviews were designed to explore the discursive construction of teacher–pupil conflict, and a major component of this was talk about teacher stress.

As Potter and Hepburn have noted (2012) the form of interaction favored by most researchers is interview talk, and overwhelmingly this involves standard ‘verbatim’ or orthographic transcription – transcribing word-for-word what is said. Sentences tend to appear as grammatical, false starts and ‘ums’ are typically omitted, and standard usage of punctuation is maintained. However, there are few discussions of the problems that this might lead to. Below is a typical example of how interview talk is reported – as a decontextualized quote providing evidence of this teacher’s ‘own views’ about teacher stress¹.

(4)

BFH:5, 6:47

I think all teachers are stressed. Because they’re stressed they may react inappropriately in certain situations, because they are near the edge themselves.

Such responses would be collected and used as evidence for themes or discourses related to teacher stress, or subject to interpretative phenomenological analysis, where it might provide evidence for overwhelming feelings, or simply evidence of this teacher’s personal opinion about stress. So if your research questions involve a focus on these things, surely it’s fine to simply represent interview talk in this way?

From a conversation analytic perspective, where we start to understand the way talk performs actions, various features of this stretch of talk become crucial. Some of the most obvious are: the question design of the interviewer, how interviewee turns are responded to, whether participants’ final unit contours are closing or questioning, or whether the parties are speaking in overlap. While most researchers accept that the interview is an interactional occasion, they typically fail to provide this kind of information. For example in Extract 4 above, note the lack of interviewer question and uptake. Below is how the example would be more fully transcribed for a conversation analytic study:

(5)

BFH:5, 6:34

01 Int: So d’you feel then that the constrai:nts on teachers’
 02 ti::me and the resources that are available to you,
 03 actually .hh (0.2) c- er constrain your ability to
 04 do your job well.=To deal effectively with- (0.2)
 05 °with kids: an° (0.2) ()
 06 Tch: [U : : m :] (0.9)
 07 ((swallows)) Ye:s, (0.7) I think all teachers are
 08 stressed.
 09 (0.2)
 10 Int: Mm..

¹Taken from Hepburn and Brown (2001) and discussed in Potter and Hepburn (2012).

11 Tch: Er because they're stressed, (.) they may react (0.5)
 12 u::hm inappropriately.
 13 Int: Mhm.
 14 (0.2)
 15 Tch: In certain situatio[ns.]
 16 Int: [M]hm.
 17 (0.4)
 18 Tch: Because they (.) are near (.) the edge themse:[lves.]
 19 Int: [Yeah.]
 20 (0.4)
 21 Int: °Yeah.

In setting out an accurate transcript, it is important to begin at the points where you can see something being started, such as a question being asked, a compliment being given, some news being delivered, rather than starting with a response. Here the teacher has been asked a rather challenging question, which calls into question her ability to 'do your job well'. This is immediately latched with an equally challenging elaboration, invoking her inability to 'deal effectively with kids' (lines 4–5). It's notable that in the design of this second unit the interviewer gradually trails off, becoming less audible, rather than coming to a final stop. Taken as a whole, the interviewer's turn might sound decidedly disaffiliative.

We can then turn to the evident trouble that the teacher has in producing a response. The gaps and pauses preceding and throughout the seven lines of her turn (and her transformation of 'your ability to do your job' into 'all teachers are stressed', Hepburn and Brown, 2001) show her careful handling of the question, crafting a response that isn't personally incriminating.

There is obviously more that can be said about this small extract, but the point is that this is what conversation analysts are referring to when they say that these specific features of delivery – the trailing off, the pauses, the stretched, emphasized and cut-off sounds – are not simply insignificant distractions from the main business of talk, rather they are highly consequential to understanding the actions that talk is performing. So even if our focus is on generating interview data in order to identify discourses or narratives, we should still be sensitive to what our interviewees are doing with their talk – how they are vigilantly crafting responses that deal with the ongoing business being done by the interviewer. It is not enough to simply note that this teacher's response is organized by an overarching 'stress' discourse, or that her 'opinion' is that 'all teachers are stressed', as this bypasses the nuanced design and rhetorical function of her utterance in its specific sequential location. The same arguments hold for the type of simulated interactional data created experimentally, as researchers typically work with standard orthography in order to code it for different communication processes. The practice of transcribing in more detail gives us a way of slowing down the talk and capturing these relevant interactional features on the page. An accurate transcript is an investment of time that supports much more robust analytic claims, and as such provides other researchers with a useful resource to interrogate those claims.

EXPERT BOX 2

Representing interview talk
Jonathan Potter, Rutgers University, USA

Through much of the 1980s I had worked primarily on the analysis of interviews. Although I was very familiar with the Jeffersonian system overviewed and developed in this book it seemed too cumbersome and time consuming for working with large quantities of interview material. Margaret Wetherell and I (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) suggested a cut down system for use with interviews that I subsequently called Jefferson Lite – a transcription system with many of the significant features omitted (Potter, 1998). Round about 1990 I stopped working with interviews – they seemed like I was having a conversation with myself, and there was richer excitement to be had with ordinary phone calls, social workers talking to parents, and political disputes. Yet interviews were a central part of my scholarly world, as I would get asked to review interview studies – sometimes more than one a month.

Looking back over those reports I can see my frustration with transcripts that failed to capture the actions of the interviewer – he or she was being written out of the narrative by the very form of representation being used. I wrote pleas to editors to ask authors to be more precise in capturing the actions of the interviewers as I didn't feel I could assess the claims without that. Often, I thought the claims were only sustainable by greying out the actions of the interviewer. Later on I felt something similar with visitors to Loughborough Discourse and Rhetoric Group meetings. We asked them to bring the recording and it was often clear that crucial features of the interaction had been missed and the understanding of what was going on was thereby fatally handicapped.

I found something particularly striking where critical psychologists were simultaneously calling for more attention to emotion and to unconscious processes, and resisting the richer Jeffersonian capturing of interview material. For participants it is clear that features of delivery – intonation, breathiness, stress, pace – are fundamental for displaying and orienting to actions as angry, upset, cold and so on. This book illustrates the best available system for capturing these things, and, in my view, psychologists interested in feelings would find this a powerful and productive system for representation. Projecting forward, I believe that psychologists and other social scientists who are not interested in conversation would nevertheless find the careful capturing of delivery a powerful investigative resource.

I do not underestimate the time and effort required for achieving a precise transcript. However, my view is that all interview researchers would benefit from the focus on the interactional production of their 'raw' data and working with a video and high-quality transcript for at least one full interview will be productive, surprising and maybe salutary.

OUR APPROACH TO TRANSCRIPTION

Our starting point with transcription is that standard orthographic transcripts miss basic features of timing, overlap, intonation, emphasis, volume and many other features that

interaction analysts now recognize as central to understanding ongoing activities in talk. Talk also emerges in real time such that it can be slowed down or speeded up, and speakers can closely coordinate changeovers, or speak over one another. These features of the delivery of talk are fundamental to the way speakers build and respond to specific actions. As this volume will repeatedly show, changes in these features can make a critical difference to the meaning and function of an utterance, and as such, the parties to the interaction treat them as relevant in one way or another.

If talk were a relatively transparent medium for the communication of one person's mind to another then more orthographic forms of representation would make sense; however, if talk is seen to be a live and enacted medium for action, then forms of representation that try to capture elements of action rather than 'just the words' are what is needed. In this volume we lay out the rationale for the latter perspective, and detail the specifics for how to transcribe. Where possible we aim to show the relevance of different transcription conventions with studies that have utilized them. Most of the studies that we will draw upon come from conversation analysis as the discipline that has done most to develop a science of human interaction.

To summarize, central motives for using the Jeffersonian transcription system include:

- It attempts to capture the talk as it is heard and responded to by speakers.
- It is necessary for performing an adequate analysis of what is happening in talk, both for analysts, and, more importantly, for the speakers themselves.
- It provides a window into the orderly practices that speakers are engaged in, in a way that 'slows down' the interaction to a level that is hard to discern just by listening.
- It allows other researchers to have direct access to the data that you are using to make your analytic claims.
- It avoids the limitations of researchers' and informants' memory about what happened, and minimizes the possible role of your preconceptions about what people are saying and doing in interactional data.

PREVIEW OF THE BOOK

In Chapter 2, we outline some of the basic features of transcripts. We suggest some useful ways for laying out a transcript and managing issues of ethics and anonymity.

In Chapter 3 we explore temporal and sequential relationships, which concern how different parts of talk are related in time. We also cover some of the basic conversation analytic findings about interaction that shape some of the relevant features of transcription.

Chapter 4 focuses on aspects of speech delivery, including changes in pitch, loudness, tempo, degrees of emphasis and voice quality. We also explore transcription issues and challenges related to proficiency and competence, including transcribing talk of young children, non-native speakers, and the talk of persons with speech disorders.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore ways of representing various other activities in interaction that don't necessarily involve speech. In Chapter 5 we focus on breathing and related

interactional activities, such as sighing and laughing. In Chapter 6 we explore transcribing expressions of upset and pain. We also focus on the representation of non-speech sounds such as tutting and throat clearing.

Chapter 7 then moves on from transcribing audible behaviors to exploring different methods for capturing aspects of participants' visible conduct – including eye gaze and gestures – and discusses ways of working with and representing video data.

Since the transcription system was originally developed for the English language, researchers working with other languages face particular challenges. In Chapter 8 we discuss approaches to transcribing talk in other languages and presenting data to audiences unfamiliar with the language.

Chapter 9 outlines software and data management tools that aid transcription and considers some of the pros and cons of their use.

In Chapter 10 we explore some of the more conceptual issues and concerns surrounding transcription. We outline a number of the more well-known alternatives to Jeffersonian transcription and address epistemological concerns around the nature of the transcription system. We conclude with a discussion of future opportunities and challenges for transcription in social science research.

Web resources. The book is designed to be used together with web resources. The web resources will allow readers to practice and check up on their developing transcription skills. A series of short web-based exercises accompany each chapter.

Expert boxes. Each chapter includes boxes where experts in the field share their experiences and expertise on aspects of transcription.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

A Jeffersonian transcript represents an attempt to capture actions in talk, and this separates it from disciplines such as linguistics or phonetics. Some fundamental features of an interactionally sensitive transcript are:

- Transcribing what we hear people say not what we think they *should* say. This may involve using non-standard orthography and capturing people's 'errors'.
- Capturing details of *how* people talk, not just what they say.
- Capturing precise timing of turns relative to each other.
- Representing relevant visible conduct.

Done sensitively, a Jeffersonian transcript represents a magical engagement with the lived moment-by-moment features of interaction. The richness and psychological complication, the irony and delicacy loaded into different features of delivery: an accurate transcript becomes something alive. The benefits of going the extra mile in producing our transcripts are much more than being able to say we've done it accurately; a detailed Jeffersonian transcript really starts to open up what's happening interactionally

for participants, and that, of course, improves analysis. An added benefit of all this wonderfully engrossing effort is that you produce transcript that is genuinely useful both to your own future research and to the wider community of interaction researchers. Transcript will exist as a live resource for future researchers in a way that experimental protocols and even interview records rarely are.

RECOMMENDED READING

For arguments that are cautious about adding the specifics of delivery to transcription (particularly in research interviews) see:

Parker, I. (2005) *Qualitative psychology: Introducing radical research*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Poland, B.D. (2001) Transcription quality. In Gubrium, J.F. and Holstein, J.A. (Eds) *Handbook of interview research: Context and method*. London: Sage.

For a debate in which Potter and Hepburn encourage interview researchers to use more rigorous forms of transcription see:

Potter, J. and Hepburn, A. (2005) Qualitative interviews in psychology: Problems and possibilities. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 2, 281–307.

Smith, J. (2005) Advocating pluralism. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 2, 309–11.

Hollway, W. (2005) Commentary on 'Qualitative interviews in psychology'. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 2, 312–14.

Mischler, E. (2005) Commentary on 'Qualitative interviews in psychology'. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 2, 315–18.

Potter, J. and Hepburn, A. (2005) Action, interaction and interviews – Some responses to Hollway, Mischler and Smith. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 2, 319–25.

For another debate where the issue of transcription and representation is key (partly as a response to Potter and Hepburn, 2005) see:

Griffin, C. (2007) Being dead and being there: Research interviews, sharing hand cream and the preference for analysing 'naturally occurring data'. *Discourse Studies*, 9, 246–69.

Potter, J. and Hepburn, A. (2007) Life is out there: A comment on Griffin. *Discourse Studies*, 9, 276–87.

Henwood, K. (2007) Beyond hypercriticality: Taking forward methodological inquiry and debate in discursive and qualitative social psychology. *Discourse Studies*, 9, 270–75.

Griffin, C. (2007) Different visions: A rejoinder to Henwood, Potter and Hepburn. *Discourse Studies*, 9, 283–87.

To find out more about the concepts discussed in this chapter, see examples of real transcriptions, and test your knowledge through exercises and quizzes, visit the supporting website at

<https://study.sagepub.com/hepburnandbolden>