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Duvall, Tracy, "Style Matters: Applying--EGADS!--Theory to Documentary Editing" (2001). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. 443.

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Style Matters: Applying—EGADS!—Theory to Documentary Editing

TRACY DUVALL

Historical editors rarely cite theory to justify particular editorial practices. Instead, they usually make appeals to common sense and personal experience. Of course, “eyeballing it” is legitimate, but documentary editors should inform themselves about linguistic and literary theory to create better-informed policies for transcription and translation. Increasing theoretical sophistication will lead editors to pay more attention to *re-producing* an author’s style. (The hyphenation of re-producing is meant to remind the reader that transcription and translation are creative acts [thus, *produce*] but that this creativity is constrained by the goal of fidelity to the source text [thus, *re-*].)

This article will introduce three theoretical concepts from linguistic anthropology as examples of the riches available to editors. I do not claim that these three particular concepts are especially key or that the policies that I recommend should be applied universally. Rather, the main point is that theoretical concepts such as these can help us to clarify the implications of our decisions in a way that common-sense reasoning does not. As a concrete example, I argue that paying attention to theory makes any effort to detach style from content meaningless. While this argument applies to any sort of editing, including transcription, the discussion mostly addresses translation in scholarly editions.

Historical editors profess an admirable commitment to textual accuracy. We should see accuracy in the broad sense, including stylistic fidelity. However, editors of translations succumb too often to the temptation to clarify or otherwise improve texts without marking these renovations as editorial. Perhaps the tendency to play Santa Claus is especially seductive to translators because they are already engaged in large-scale interpretive alterations of the text.

Many translators value “readability”—really fluidity—over stylistic accuracy. This focus depends on a false

distinction between form and content—they render the “content” more readable by changing its form. But this step actually renders the original text, considered holistically, less readable through the translation, since meaningful aspects of the text have been altered. Linguistic and literary theory makes this distinction between form and content untenable.

Now I will introduce a selection of linguistic concepts that have proven useful in my historical editing: indexicality, iconicity, and dysfluency.¹

Indexicality is an aspect of all discourse. It is the way that discourse inherently indicates aspects of its context. For example, one index of any bit of discourse is the writer’s choice of language and style in that situation. Another is the writer’s attitude toward the relationship between writing and speaking. Indexes can be conscious or unconscious, explicit or implicit. The indexes of any statement differ by reader and between the reader and the writer. And they can change with time. So we cannot define a timeless, universal meaning for a chunk of discourse: our perception of its meaning now or at the time of its writing differs among contemporaries and changes historically.

One of the nice aspects of indexicality for an editor is that it focuses attention on how different people interpret the text, rather than on the text per se. For example, from my perspective this text indicates that I believe English to be the proper language for this essay and that academic discourse is the proper style. You might feel that this text indicates things about my personality, education, purpose, and so on. Indeed, a reader might find that it indicates attributes of broader categories such as the English language, Anglo-Americans, documentary editors, and ethnic relations, among other possibilities.

Indexicality, unlike the idea of connotation, is inseparable from denotation. Moreover, in many cases the indexes are what is most interesting and important about a bit of discourse. For example, the Marqués de Rubí (see below) was told to submit his reports to the viceroy of New Spain rather than to someone closer to the king. The fact that he did or did not address his ultra-brief reports of movement to the viceroy is, for me, more important than what the notes explicitly say.

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Thus, moving from theory to practice: Editors should attempt to re-produce or otherwise note as many indices as possible. These include, for example, the author's fluency as a writer, personality, and choice of register. However, re-producing the indexes that would occur to the *author's* contemporaries is different from re-producing indexes that would occur to the *editor's* contemporaries. For instance, a text that seems archaic and stilted today might have seemed cutting-edge and informal at the time of its creation. Which is the proper goal for a scholarly edition—to re-produce the historical moment in readers or to signal and explain it from a distance? How we answer this question could determine whether we perform such basic tasks as modernizing spelling.

Iconicity is another inherent aspect of all discourse, although it is highlighted in some cases more than others. Iconicity is the extent to which the structure of language mimics what it is expressing. Onomatopoeia is an example of strong iconicity, as is representing a loud sound with big letters (e.g., EGADS). Dictated texts are icons of their spoken source, and many see language itself as an icon of thought and feeling. Less obviously, commas in many colonial Spanish documents seem to represent pauses in the writer's thought or speech, and it might be interesting to search for the Ancient Secret of Capitalization. Furthermore, some have argued that writers are more likely to position words or phrases close together when they associate them strongly. For example, the following sentence structures each relate the actor, verb, and object differently in terms of agency, order, and proximity: (1) I hit the ball. (2) The ball was hit by me. (3) The ball, I hit.

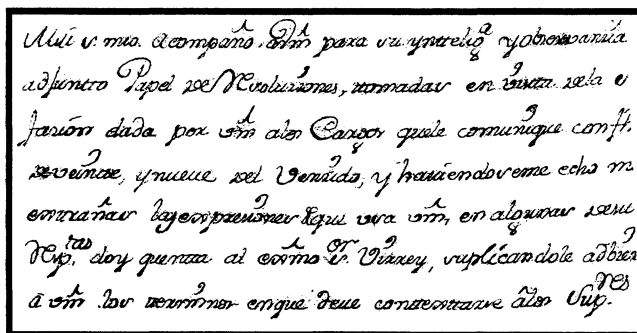
In short, editors should aim for a high level of iconicity between the transcription and the translation. As part of this effort, we should strive to re-produce the source's iconic features. Thus, the many desirable goals that we must balance include: re-producing the order of elements in a sentence, paragraph, or document; translating onomatopoeia into equivalent onomatopoeia; re-producing practices of punctuation and capitalization; re-producing verb tenses and agency (active vs. passive); and other iconic features.

Dysfluency occurs when someone stumbles over his or her words—for these purposes more than usual. Depending on the context, researchers have analyzed this difficulty as an index of the speaker's or writer's personal ideological conflict, confusion, or depth of feeling. Thus, it is important for historical editors to present dysfluent passages as such and to not sacrifice this information to the god of "readability."

Examples from the Rubí Inspection

In 1766, the Spanish Crown ordered the Marqués de Rubí to perform a comprehensive inspection of garrisons on the northern frontier of New Spain. From 1766 to 1768, Rubí and his entourage traversed more than seven thousand miles and wrote correspondingly lengthy reports, letters, and journal entries. Rubí's reports, travel diary, and correspondence, combined with his engineer's travel diary and a variety of maps, provide a uniquely detailed snapshot of this vast region, exposed mostly through the lens of a particular Spanish officer and gentleman.

At *Documentary Relations of the Southwest*,² we are finishing a selection of writings produced during Rubí's inspection as part of our series, *Presidio and Militia in Northern New Spain*. The following texts include several versions of a single passage: a fairly literal transcription, a more highly transformed transcription, and three possible translations, each defensible for different reasons. The discussion of each version of the passage highlights the changes to, or re-production of, selected iconic and indexical aspects of the transcription. The purpose of this exercise is to show that knowing even a little linguistic theory can help to clarify the balances that we inevitably will strike as editors.



Opening section of a letter from the Marqués de Rubí to Don Pedro de la Fuente, captain of the Presidio of El Paso, communicating the conclusions of his inspection (1766). Courtesy of the Archivo General de Indias, Sevilla, Spain.

Indexicality & Iconicity

In this passage, Rubí sends the results of his inspection to the captain of the presidio, or garrison, at El Paso. It is transcribed fairly literally:

Mui s^{or}. mio: acompaño avm[^] para su yntelig^a. y observanzia el adjunto Papel de resoluciones, tomadas en vista dela satisfazion dada por um[^] a los Cargos quele communique con fhá deveinttel,[?] y nueue del Venzido, y haviendoseme

echo muy extrañas las expresiones de que use vmd, en algunas de sus respuestas, doy cuenta al excelentísimo señor Virrey, suplicándole advierta a vmd los términos en que debe contestarse a los Superiores.

I feel strongly that projects such as ours should make this sort of literal transcription easily available—for example, on a website. Simply interpreting the handwritten text (which frequently is difficult to obtain) is a considerable aid to other researchers, who might be interested in linguistic questions such as an author's education or accent. Also, it helps scholars to check our interpretations when we produce a more accessible transcription and translation. That is, the indexicality and iconicity of the original are re-produced here to a greater extent.

The following translation quite faithfully re-produces the experience of reading the transcription above:

Very much my lord: I am sending along to you for your intelligence and observance the attached Sheet of resolutions, taken in view of the satisfaction given by you to the Charges that I communicated to you with the date of the twenty-ninth of the Past [month], and having been made to me very strange the expressions that you use, in some of your answers, I am giving account to the most excellent lord Viceroy, beseeching him advise you the terms in which Superiors must/should be answered.

Is this useful? Perhaps a sample phrase such as this should appear somewhere in a volume, to help the reader understand that the editor has performed significant transformations. But few in our potential audience would benefit from, or submit to, reading this sort of translation.⁴ So, at the expense of some iconic and present-day indexical fidelity, we should produce and highlight more readable versions.

A more readable translation should match an easily available, more readable transcription. Otherwise, the reader will have nothing by which to evaluate the translation. Also, native readers of the original's language deserve this much consideration. Choices made for the main transcription and translation should be made in conjunction: for example, if spelling is modernized in the English translation, it should be modernized in the Spanish transcription, too.

Below are the more-readable transcription and translation of the passage above. I have expanded and italicized abbreviations and modernized word separation, spelling, and accent placement. However, I have retained

capitalization, phrase order, and punctuation.⁵

Why these particular changes? Keeping in mind that the experience of a text differs across time and between people, I decided to try to re-produce the experience of a present-day, practiced researcher in these materials. As a result, features that undermine this goal have been altered to serve it.

Muy señor mío: acompaño a vmd para su inteligencia y observancia el adjunto Papel de resoluciones, tomadas en vista de la satisfacción dada por vmd a los Cargos que le comunicué con fecha de veinte y nueve del Vencido, y habiéndome hecho muy extrañas las expresiones de que use vmd, en algunas de sus respuestas, doy cuenta al excelentísimo señor Virrey, suplicándole advierta a vmd los términos en que debe contestarse a los Superiores.

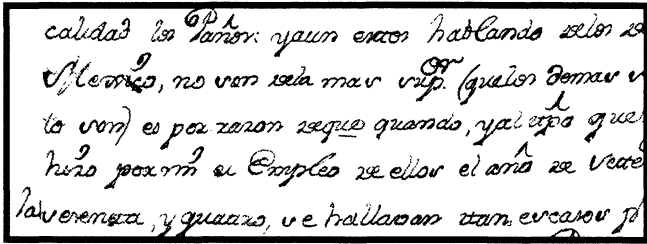
Very much my lord: I am sending along to you⁶ for your intelligence and observance the attached Sheet of resolutions, taken in light of the response given by you to the Charges that I communicated with the date of the twenty-ninth of the Past [month], and the expressions that you use having seemed very strange to me, in some of your answers, I am informing the most excellent Viceroy, beseeching him advise you the terms in which Superiors must/should be addressed.

This translation is not so loose as the following:

My dear sir, I enclose for your information and observance the attached sheet of resolutions taken in light of the response you gave to the charges that I sent to you dated the twenty-ninth of the past [month]. The expressions that you use in some of your responses seem to me to be very strange. I am informing His Excellency the Viceroy, requesting that he advise you as to the terms with which [you] should answer your superiors.

This translation is too close to a paraphrase. It demonstrates the tendency to alter meaningful features in the process of making the "content" more readable. For example, the salutation is not only anachronistic but culturally inappropriate. Also, if a phrase is so obscure that it requires clarification, then the clarification should be marked as editorial, perhaps by locating it in the intro-

duction or a note. Last, we certainly would not transcribe a passive construction as an active one. Why do so in translation?



Possibly dysfluent text by Don Pedro de la Fuente, captain of the Presidio of El Paso, replying to charges made by the Marqués de Rubí (1766). Courtesy of the Archivo General de Indias, Sevilla, Spain.

Dysfluency

As discussed above, it is tempting to resolve an author's or translator's confusion or ambiguity without marking the "improvement" as editorial. In the following passage, the captain at El Paso defends himself against charges that he sold improper goods at elevated prices to his soldiers (emphasis added in all):

Y aun éstos, hablando de los de México, no son de la más superior (que los demás sí lo son). Es **por razón de que, cuando y al tiempo** que se hizo por mí el Empleo de ellos el año de setecientos sesenta y cuatro, se hallaban tan escasos . . .

And even these, speaking of those from Mexico, are not of the most superior [quality] (which the rest are). [This] **is for reason that, when and at the time** that their Use was made by me the year [1]764, they were found to be so scarce . . .

When reading this document in its larger context, I interpreted the awkward, redundant phrase "for reason that, when and at the time" as dysfluency—the captain was having difficulty justifying his actions. However, a looser translation elides the possibly dysfluent section by improving the fluidity of the captain's style:

Even these, when speaking of those from Mexico City, are not of the best quality (which the rest of them are). **This is because, at the time** that their use was made by me in the year [1]764, they were scarce.

It is plausible that my interpretation of dysfluency is wrong, but we should re-produce the evidence. More generally, the captain appears to express himself with much more assurance and coherence in the second translation than I sense when reading the original.

Here, then, are a few suggestions:

- Editors should apply linguistic theory in choosing aspects of discourse to alter or re-produce in their transcriptions and translations.
- Editors should make available a highly literal transcription and a clarified transcription and translation that match each other.
- When in doubt, literalness is preferable in scholarly editions, but literalness must include style and content integrally.
- Beyond issues of paleography, no transcription or translation should be clearer than its source unless the clarification is marked as editorial.
- Aspects of style—for example, indexical and iconic features—that are not re-produced in the main text of the translation should be noted elsewhere.

Although it is unlikely, we might make the same editorial choices without knowing theory that we would make in applying it. But this would be coincidence. Theory helps us to understand and ameliorate the ramifications of our choices, beyond common sense. For example, theory allows us to define with precision the various ways in which style is content.

Notes

1. My treatment of these concepts derives from their use in linguistic anthropology. However, indexicality and iconicity have roots in the writings of Charles Sanders Peirce, and the analysis of dysfluency springs from elaborations on Mikhail Bakhtin's work.
2. DRSW is part of the Arizona State Museum, at the University of Arizona. The NHPRC has funded our documentary history projects.
3. Either meaning is possible.
4. Thus, *genre* is also important.
5. These features are simply a sample: I actually have tracked nineteen indexical and iconic aspects of the text. The others include documentary context, letter shape, contractions, explicit message, sentence-level order, agency, fluidity, word choice, spelling, phrase length, verb tense, and language.
6. *um* could be *vuestra merced* or *usted*, since they were synonyms at the time. I have translated it *you*, but it could easily be *your mercy*.