

## InqScribe

From Inquirium, LLC, Chicago

Reviewed by Murray Garde, *Australian National University*

**1. INTRODUCTION.** InqScribe is one of a growing number of tools for transcription of digital audio and video. Developed by Inquirium and available commercially, InqScribe is available for both Windows and Macintosh platforms. This review deals with version 2.1 and examines the functions of the software, as well as where InqScribe might fit in the ever-expanding range of annotation tools now available for those involved in language documentation.

According to the developer's website, "InqScribe is primarily designed for transcription, annotation, and light analysis work. For more complex analysis work, many researchers turn to other applications, including Excel, NVivo, or a custom database application."<sup>1</sup> For more complex linguistic analysis, we can certainly add the annotation tool ELAN<sup>2</sup> to this list, but in the daily grind of language documentation we all have transcription tasks for basic analyses that need to be performed frequently (and if possible, quickly); InqScribe has, in my experience, been extremely useful in carrying out these kinds of tasks. Although there is no evidence that it was designed for linguistic applications, InqScribe is designed for a broad range of uses, and the website's list of its "wide variety of applications" includes "social scientists analyzing video of ethnographic data."<sup>3</sup> An attractive additional feature of InqScribe is that it also allows for the quick and easy conversion of a transcript into a subtitled movie.

**2. USING INQSCRIBE.** Depending on what your goals are in a transcription task, the kind of simplicity offered by InqScribe can be a limitation or an advantage. For example, there is no layered structure as in ELAN and therefore no need to define features such as tiers and their dependencies, nor to deal with abstractions such as "linguistic types" and "controlled vocabularies." On opening InqScribe, the process is uncomplicated—the user is prompted to navigate to a single media file (only one media file can be linked to an annotation) and the console appears with the video screen in the top left, a timeline and media controls underneath, and the annotation area which links to the media file on the right (Fig. 1). The video display size can be changed either through preset percentage sizes in the view menu or by using a window splitter control, which allows the user to resize the video by using the mouse to drag it to the desired size. On the downside, there is unfortunately no waveform display, so tools such as ELAN, Audacity, Transcribe!, or Praat remain preferable for

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.inqscribe.com/docs/transcriptiontips.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.lat-mpi.eu/elan>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.inqscribe.com/>

analysis requiring waveforms.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, a dedicated tier for interlinear glossing is not available in InqScribe.

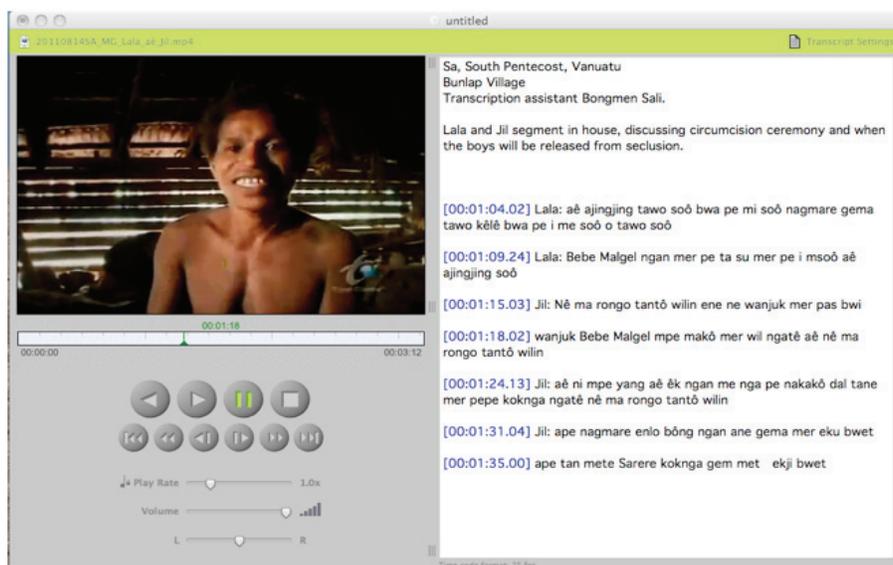


FIGURE 1. InqScribe media and annotation console

Certain customizations are necessary to get started, however. Settings can be either transcript-specific (Transcripts > Transcript Settings in the drop-down menu) or they can be set to apply to all new annotation documents (Preferences > New Document pane). The main two areas of customization are user-defined “shortcuts” and “snippets.” The on-screen media playback control can be set up with keyboard shortcuts that map any keystroke to any media control, according to your preferences. I have the arrow keys on my keyboard set to toggle Play-Stop, Skipback (with time adjustable to users’ preferences), and insertion of the current time code. Playback speed, direction, single-frame advancement, and rewind may be controlled with shortcuts, as well. Snippet shortcuts insert elements common to transcripts (known in InqScribe as “variables”), such as speaker initials, transcription system symbols, or other information. Snippet combinations, such as a speaker’s name or initials together with the time code, can also be set up and then assigned a keyboard shortcut. A time code format must also be chosen, and for video there are 10 to choose from (e.g., traditional film, PAL or NTSC standard, digital video, and various others). The format chosen must match that of the media file.

The time codes can be embedded anywhere in the annotation text, which means that overlapping speech can be dealt with by transcription of distinct speaker turns, but similar time codes at the start of each of these simultaneous turns will preserve overlaps if so

<sup>4</sup> Audacity: <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>; Praat: <http://www.fon.hum.uva.nl/praat/>; For Transcribe!, see <http://www.seventhstring.com/>. Transcribe! is reviewed by Barwick (2009).

desired. Unfortunately, it is not possible to select a portion or chunk of the timeline for examination, which also means that looping a selection is not possible. Setting the skipback function to the number of seconds desired would be a solution to this problem. Skipback can be set to an unlimited number of seconds, and the Pause-Play toggle function can also be set to incorporate skipback.

It is also possible to use a foot pedal with InqScribe, with a dedicated setup wizard assigning pedal button shortcuts (Edit > Set Up Foot Pedal). Most USB foot pedals are supported (e.g., Vpedal, Infinity IN-USB-1, X keys USB).

**3. COMPATIBILITY.** As InqScribe supports any type of file that QuickTime or Windows Media Player can read, there is a large number of media file formats that are supported. The most common are listed below:

- QuickTime movies
- MPEG 1, MPEG 2, and MPEG 4 movies
- MP3, AIFF, and WAV audio files
- Most AVI movies
- Windows media files (.WMA and .WMV)

InqScribe is Unicode compliant, so annotation can be made in a variety of languages—or combinations of languages—in a single document. InqScribe can import data in three general formats: plain text, tab-delimited text, and XML. A third-party format, Scenarist Closed Caption (SSC), is also supported. In addition to the import formats listed above, InqScribe also exports in XML, HTML, and third-party formats Final Cut Pro XML, SSC, Spruce STL, and Subrip.

In recent years, I have been working with an ethnographic filmmaker on a series of films in and about endangered languages in Northern Australia; as the project's linguist, I have been producing the transcriptions of video files in InqScribe, and these are then exported for subtitling in Final Cut Pro. This can be achieved by creating an XML template in Final Cut Pro, which is loaded into InqScribe to serve as the template for the exported subtitles (Fig. 2). Using this method allows users to control preferences for how the subtitles appear in Final Cut Pro (font, size, position, etc.). Helpful instructions on how to proceed with most functions of InqScribe are incorporated into the actual dialog boxes, which makes for a very user-friendly experience (for example, see the explanation in the rightmost region of the Export Settings dialog box in Fig. 2).

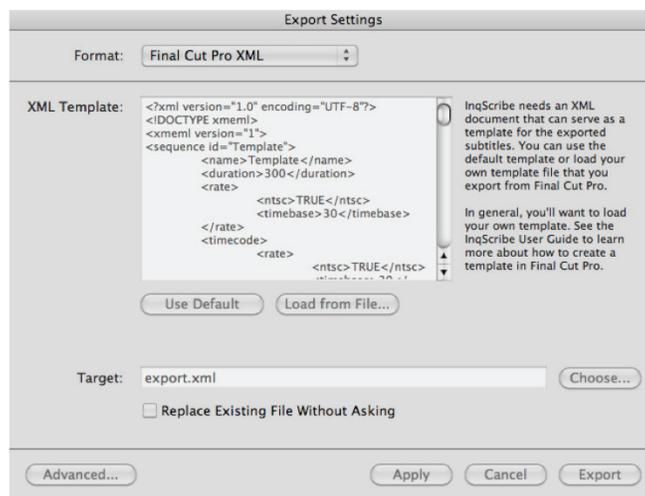


FIGURE 2. Exporting subtitles to Final Cut Pro

It is more likely, however, that most linguists involved in language documentation do not need to produce high-end film work in Final Cut Pro; rather, they likely have a more frequent need to create short video clips for presentations, website uploading, local community archiving, or other language resources to be returned to the community. In such cases, InqScribe can export transcripts into a subtitle text track that will become incorporated into a QuickTime movie. QuickTime is required in order for users to generate such subtitled movies, and the layout of time codes and subtitle texts need to conform to certain criteria which are described clearly in the documentation. The Save Subtitled QuickTime Movie export feature presents a dialog box with which the characteristics of the subtitles are controlled. There are 33 different language scripts available, and all the usual formatting features for text and subtitle placement on the screen are controlled from this dialog box.

As one illustration of how this feature may be used, I was asked to review questionable subtitles that appeared on a commercially produced television documentary of life in a village community on Pentecost Island in Vanuatu, where I had also been working. I transcribed the relevant sections of the film, which had the original embedded subtitles, and then exported corrected “supertitles” with an English translation (in a different color) into an annotation pane created above the main QuickTime video display area (see figure 3). This kind of functionality effectively means that you can add a variety of annotations (in addition to traditional subtitling) to QuickTime movies based on the information created in the original InqScribe annotation file. The resulting movie, combining video and text, is a useful way to present combinations of media files and annotations which, in addition to subtitles, might include cultural information, notes on gesture, or other kinds of media file commentary relevant to the particular documentation goals.

**4. ADVANCED FORMATTING OF SUBTITLES AND ANNOTATION IN QUICKTIME EXPORTS.** When selecting Save Subtitled QuickTime Movie, there is an option to save tem-

porary text files, which are generated as part of the export process when creating a subtitled movie from your annotation file. Subtitle formatting can be modified by inserting QuickTime Text (or QTText) directives within these text files. This can be done by typing them in any text editor program and then opening the file in QuickTime Player to make your movie conversion. If creating a subtitled movie is the main goal of your InqScribe project, another option is to insert QTText directives directly into the InqScribe annotation console while transcribing. As InqScribe's subtitling functions are based on QuickTime text tracks, the added QTText directives will format the appearance of subtitles exported from transcription files.<sup>5</sup> The following time codes, transcript text, and QTText directives for text color are those used for the colored supertitles and translation which appear in Fig. 3.

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[00:02:14.12]
{textColor:65535,65535,65535}Kém mir gégênê aê kër bonga tê emir giginê re kêt.
{textColor: 65535, 32000, 0} We will share this with everyone, all of us.
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FIGURE 3: QuickTime movie with exported InqScribe annotations (at top)

There are even QTTime directives that can insert a clickable URL into the QuickTime movie, which when clicked will open the location in a browser window.

**5. A NICHE FOR INQSCRIBE.** While ELAN will continue to be the annotation tool of choice for many linguists conducting more complex analysis, most of us are aware of the steep learning curve that particular piece of software requires, as evidenced by the various

<sup>5</sup> An extensive glossary of text track descriptors that can be used with QuickTime Pro is available, together with other tutorials, at: <http://docs.info.apple.com/article.html?artnum=42643-en>

training workshops linguists are offered. Users don't need to attend a training workshop in order to learn how to use InqScribe. Further, ELAN is not a recommended annotation tool for working on a "first pass" of a transcript, because of the various time-consuming complexities associated with its "unwieldy interface" (Berez 2007:288). InqScribe, on the other hand, is perfect for such initial transcriptions—but there is no doubt the software would be greatly improved if it included an option for creating simple dependent tiers to link transcriptions, interlinear glossing, and translations. I have used InqScribe in a number of community language documentation activities, and it has never taken me more than about 20 minutes of explanation and setup to have native speaker project participants transcribing media files with gusto. The uncomplicated transcription capabilities of the software are well suited for those who have little experience in using computers, and if we are to encourage greater participation of the speech communities themselves in language documentation, this is certainly an important advantage of using InqScribe. I recommend it as a welcome addition to the many tools we now have in our media annotation toolkits.

Primary function: Linking simple annotations and transcription with time segments of digital media

Secondary function: Simple conversion of transcripts into movie subtitles.

Pros: Uncomplicated interface and simple setup procedure, new users up and running in minutes, good support and online manual, compatible with standard data formats, subtitling function

Cons: No waveform window, no loop function, no tier dependencies to allow for interlinear glossing and translation

Platforms: Windows, Macintosh

Open Source: No

Proprietary: Yes

Cost: Single user license (installed on up to two computers): USD \$99; employees of academic institutions: USD \$69; students: USD \$39. 30-day free trial version

Reviewed Version: InqScribe 2.1

Available from: Inquirium, LLC, Chicago, USA  
www.inqscribe.com/

#### REFERENCES

- Barwick, Linda. 2009. Review of Transcribe!. *Language Documentation & Conservation* 3(2). 236–240.
- Berez, Andrea L. 2007. Review of EUDICO Linguistic Annotator (ELAN). *Language Documentation & Conservation* 1(2). 283–289.

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