**Poetic confluence and**

**the public formulation of others’ private matters**1

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**Abstract**

This paper is an exploratory empirical study of a form of interpersonal relationality that takes the form of a speech event in which one participant produces a spoken turn that exhibits a poetic relationship to a co-participant's *unspoken* thoughts or *unarticulated* mental imagery. The data consist of anecdotal reports, which are analysed in relation to empirical findings from conversation analytic studies of formulations in institutional and naturally occurring talk. The first part of the paper establishes its robustness, and describes some recurrent properties. The analysis shows how poetic turns formulate modulated versions of others’ sensitive or delicate thoughts or imagery, thereby performing a form of Goffmanesque remedial work. In the discussion, methodological and substantive implications of this phenomenon are discussed, specifically: the use of anecdotes in sociological research, the porousness of personal boundaries and theoretical accounts of relationality.

**Keywords**: relationality; poetics; resonance; formulations; telepathy; interiority; interaction

**Introduction**

This paper is an exploratory empirical study of a form of interpersonal relationality that occurs naturally in social interaction, both in everyday conversation and in interaction in institutional settings. It takes the form of a speech event in which one participant produces a spoken turn that exhibits a poetic relationship to a co-participant's *unspoken* thoughts or *unarticulated* mental imagery: a poetically realised confluence of interiority and talk, seemingly unmediated by everyday communicative processes.

In this the phenomenon is relevance to a number of literatures across the social sciences and humanities. It suggests a form of telepathic communication of the kind examined by Pile and in his analysis of space and spatial relations informed by readings of classic psychoanalytic texts (Pile, 2012; see also Campbell and Pile, 2010). Indeed, it is closely related to phenomena that numerous psychoanalysts of all theoretical persuasions have recognised since Freud (Author, in press; Brottman, 2011; Totton, 2003). It echoes the way that scholars in cultural studies working on affect and embodiment have explored the connections with and relevance of historical and contemporary investigations of ostensibly paranormal phenomena (Blackman, 2012). It exemplifies a form of non-mechanistic or unmediated social organisation as theorised in field theory and some forms of relational sociology (Martin, 2003). And it speaks to interpersonal resonance in intimate personal relationships (Miller, 2015; Monson, 1996; Mülhoff, 2014). What is common to these (and other) studies is a concern to rethink and challenge the empirical adequacy of the individual/society binary that informs social sciences. Although emerging from disparate disciplines with distinct intellectual histories, these studies can be said to share a concern to explore the value of transpersonal or transactional approaches to social phenomena. However, these arguments have been made primarily on the basis of theoretical or conceptual positions. There is little sustained empirical analysis of the sociological properties of transpersonal relatedness that might be variously described as ‘resonance’, ‘transference’ or just plain old ‘telepathy’.

For example, take the argument that the concept of resonance can provide a way to move beyond binary conceptions of individual and society or social structure. Miller (2105) provides a valuable account of the roots of the concept in various sociological theories, and outlines the conceptual infrastructure of a theory of resonance. One upshot of the kind of theoretical harmonisation that Miller achieves is that we can see more clearly how and where, and empirical examination of the concept could occur. So, he argues that ‘(r)esonance, and the intersubjective sameness that it implies, should not be viewed abstractly…but (as) a lived reality involving bodies, action and movement (Miller, 2015: 6.2); and, in connection to a discussion of affect and resonance, he states that ‘resonance….is a co-production of sense and meaning created through Being-in-relation. That is, resonance is a product of relational subjectivities’ (2015: 7.2) and ‘a relational dynamic force which can be seen as a *higher order derivative of the social interaction itself*’ (2015: 7.3, emphasis added). Which raises a range of questions for empirical research: where in interaction, and how, does this kind of intersubjective relationality occur? Out of what practical, structural dimensions of face-to-face conduct does it emerge, and, with respect to precisely which kind of interpersonal contingencies?

The preliminary analysis presented here tries to sketch the kind of empirical work that might be done on the kind of intersubjective relationality that concepts like resonance seek to clarify. Consequently, in the final part of this paper, I frame the phenomenon of poetic confluence in relation to these established areas of inquiry, and show how it provides empirically grounded contribution to research on the relations between socially organised interpersonal action and ostensibly private interiority (such as thoughts, images, consciousness and attention).

**Poetic confluence (and the ESP pun): a robust phenomenon**

The form of relationality examined here emerges from social interaction, and involves utterances that are conspicuous or malformed, but which, in their peculiarity, seem to chime with a co-participant’s unspoken private thoughts or imagery. Taken individually, each case seems to be a mere coincidence, a pleasing happenstance with no deeper import. It is therefore necessary to establish that this form of relationality is a recurrent phenomenon with robust properties. The identification of formal recurrent properties of this relation between public utterance and private thought in turn allows us to identify the core sociological concern: it is a tacit association between participants, in that the spoken turn seems conspicuously designed to stand in a particular normative relation to another's unspoken thoughts.

The conversation analyst Emanuel Schegloff (2003) reported a form of this phenomenon in a chapter exploring puns in social interaction. While that chapter was the first English language description of the phenomenon, many of the key properties were originally described in an article in German from 1933, written by the Hungarian psychoanalyst, István Hollós, published in the journal *Imago*.

Hollós reports that he had been noticing telepathy-like events in his clinical practice for a period of 20 years, and had been taking detailed notes for over a decade. As a result he had a corpus of approximately 500 cases (some of which had been provided by colleagues aware of his interest in this topic). He acknowledges that he first interpreted these events as coincidences; but it was the regularity in circumstances of their appearance and their form that led him to reject the explanation that these were mere happenstance. He argues that they tend to occur when he was thinking about something that affected him emotionally. Here is an example of the phenomenon from Hollós’ paper, and relates to an episode that happened during a therapy session with a patient.

**Example 1: 'Shoots around the flat' (Hollós, 1933: 534)**2

I was agitated because the next patient, who had pointed a revolver at me during the last session, was already in the waiting room. He was a hot-headed young man. Worried, I thought that he could shoot his gun in the other room in this very moment; in my imagination I already heard the shot. The female patient talked about her mother who does not leave her in peace and who walks around the flat furiously:  
 “Then she shoots around in the flat”, she says in Hungarian. However she uses the German word but in a butchered Hungarian phrase - “schiesszol ide - oda”. In correct Hungarian one can only say: she ran back and forth.

The analyst is thinking about what the next patient might do, anxious about - and indeed even anticipating - the possibility of a shooting. At that point in the current patient's free association she describes the behaviour of her mother using a phrase that seems to connect with the analyst's concerns about his next patient. 'Shoots around' seems conspicuously to chime with anxieties about gun violence; indeed, the analyst's anxiety stems from his knowledge of the next patient's volatile nature (he is described as hot headed), and 'shoots around' captures fear of indiscriminate violence. Hollós notes a peculiar feature of the patient’s utterance, in that the phrase she uses to refer to her mother’s ambulation contains a form of linguistic error. It is ‘butchered Hungarian’ with (presumably unexpected or inappropriate) elements of German contaminating a conventional Hungarian figure of speech.

Hollós’ analysis of the phenomenon reflects psychoanalytic theory. He argues that patients' ostensibly telepathic utterances seemed to allude to the analyst's thoughts or wishes that are of 'an ego-dynamic and unpleasant idea of a personal nature, which has little to do with what the patient is saying at the time'. He concluded that telepathic events in analytic practice had similarities with the phenomenon of slips of the tongue (Freud 1975[1901]), with the key difference being that in these experiences the 'slip of the tongue', which reveals the unconscious thought, is not made by the person who repressed that thought in the first place, but by someone else. In a way, the patient seems to “make the analyst's slip of the tongue"' (Devereux, 1953: 202).

Schegloff’s (2003) paper primarily catalogues instances in which one person’s turn seems to stand as a pun on a co-participant’s unarticulated thoughts or mental imagery. He reports how the phenomenon first came to his attention. He observes that, like many scholars of communication, he is in the habit of noticing instances of phenomena of analytic interest as they occur in everyday life. One such phenomenon is puns. One day he was working in his office with colleague Gail Jefferson. Jefferson was smoking a cigarette, and using her other hand to make notes with a pencil. At one point, Schegloff noticed that Jefferson brought the pencil to her mouth instead of the cigarette. This reminded him of an event he had witnessed as a graduate student when, during a lecture, the distinguished sociologist S.M. Lipsett had used a piece of chalk to relieve an itch in his ear, only to leave the chalk protruding from his ear when he subsequently removed his hand. Schegloff's subsequent text is presented here as example 2:

**Example 2: 'Earmark' (Schegloff, 2003: 531-2)**

The recollection of [this] incident apparently brought a smile to my face, a smile which Jefferson noticed and understood to be responsive to her miscue in bringing the pencil rather than the cigarette to her mouth. Displaying her grasp of my smile’s source, she remarked, “Oh, that’s an earmark of mine.”

I registered the pun-like character of her remark, the interest in vernacular poetics being one shared by the two of us... I was about to comment on the one I had just heard from Jefferson when I realized that the comment “Oh that’s an earmark of mine” constituted a pun on *something which had not been said but had only been ‘thought’ or ‘recollected’ or ‘flashed*’. It was, in that sense, an ESP pun, however absurd that appeared to be to someone who did not believe in parapsychological phenomena. (Original emphasis.)

Both Hollós and Schegloff openly acknowledge the mysterious quality of their experiences. The spoken turn that seemed to capture their private thought was noticeable because it was not easily explained in terms of what was known in context, or well established communicative practices and inferential processes. The extent to which these experiences seem to be mysterious is reflected in the title Hollós chose for his paper, the English translation of which is 'The Psychopathology of Everyday Telepathic Appearances'. Schegloff also recognized the ostensibly parapsychological dimension of the phenomenon, calling it an ESP pun, where ‘ESP’ stands for extra sensory perception.

To many, the idea of parapsychological communication will seem preposterous. While I think it would be intellectually dishonest simply to ignore this feature of the phenomenon, it is not the objective of this paper to attempt to identify the mechanisms by which the phenomenon occurs, parapsychological or otherwise, but to establish its sociological character. Consequently, this paper focuses on the socio-normative dimensions of the relationship between one person’s unarticulated private thought and another’s utterance.

The following is a summary of preliminary observations from Hollós and Schegloff. First, the phenomenon is a confluence of talk and consciousness in which an utterance not intended to reflect the private thoughts or imagery of a co-participant does precisely that (that is to say, the turn at talk is produced with respect to the on-going interactional business at hand, and is not produced as an attempt to guess or mimic what the other is thinking about). Second, the allusive turn contains a speech error, or an infelicitous or unusual phrase; but it is this feature that constitutes that utterance’s relation to the co participant's imagery or thoughts. For example, in the instance in which Schegloff first noted the phenomenon, ‘oh that’s an *earmark* of mine’ is an attempt to convey that bringing the pencil rather than the cigarette to the mouth is a personal characteristic: that is a ‘hallmark' or 'trademark’. Third, it is through this linguistic curiosity that the allusive orientation of the turn is achieved. For example from extract 1, Hollós notes that the patient’s utterance would not have resonated with his ongoing internal experience had it not contained a particular and peculiar concatenation of Hungarian and German.

Fourth: The lexical choices out of which the poetic turns are constructed are not routine figures of speech used by the participants. Fifth: Schegloff notes that the poetic turn may be mildly inappropriate or ill fitted to the context for which it is produced. Finally: the turn that appears to capture the other’s mentation has poetic, sometimes playful qualities.

Schegloff identified the phenomenon as an ESP pun to reflect the apparent operation of some form of parapsychological connection between the person whose imagery is the source of the subsequent pun and the person whose turn then articulates a punning relation with that imagery. However, there are arguments for abandoning this term. There are grounds for focusing on the more general term poetics, rather than puns. This is because puns are one class of everyday poetics; or at least, this is the way in which Sacks treated them in his lectures (Sacks, 1992) and in subsequent research (Hopper, 1992; Jefferson, 1996). Focussing on the poetic aspects of the phenomenon leads to a series of observations about more structural components of the relationship between source consciousness and articulating utterance. The use of the term 'ESP' is also problematic: it presumes an explanation, in that it frames the phenomenon in terms of (unspecified) parapsychological operations. It seems premature to adopt nomenclature that implicitly adopts a particular intellectual framework prior its sustained investigation, especially if that framework directs attention away from sociological properties. It is for these reasons that I have adopted the term *poetic confluence*. Admittedly, this is a clumsy term, and no way near as elegant as 'ESP puns'. But it does capture - and without importing an explanation - the way in which the private experience of consciousness and the public utterances of participants in interaction appear, on occasion, to come together and find expression in poetic forms.

In his discussion of the ESP pun, Schegloff acknowledges that the cases he presents are no more than a *prima facia* case that there is a robust phenomenon. He concludes:

'If there is a real phenomenon here, and if the exemplars [the candidate instances described in his paper] are apt and well chosen, it is their cumulative effect which will render the phenomenon visible, and by no means unthinkable' (Schegloff, 2003: 539). If Hollós’ account is correct, he had several hundred other similar cases that were not discussed in his paper. Further examples from my corpus will be presented later in this paper, in full and in summary form. Not all instances exhibit exactly all the same characteristics. There is, though, a degree of consistency, across a number of cases, collected from different sources, from different countries, in different periods of history, and in languages other than English. This consistency goes some way in establishing the cumulative effect that Schegloff anticipated were the phenomenon to have robust and recurrent properties: that is, to be more than happenstance.

**Data and Method**

The following analytic observations are based on my own corpus. I have a collection of 52 candidate cases, at the time of writing. I am the source for the conscious imagery or thoughts in 18 cases, but most are reports of other people’s experiences. They were submitted to me by email by students, colleagues and friends who know of my interest in this phenomenon. I made notes of instances that involved me as soon after the event as possible, which were then written up more formally when I got to work or home. In writing up my experiences I have tried to record factual details uncontaminated by my ideas on the phenomenon. All instances occurred in English, except one, which occurred in German, and was translated by the participant whose thoughts were poetically captured by another's turn. In all, over 46 people are represented in the corpus, either as the source of the thoughts or the producer of the subsequent poetic turn. There are instances that occurred between relative strangers, professionals and their clients, close friends, acquaintances, domestic partners, work colleagues and family members. There is no common topic in the conversations into which the poetic turn intrudes.

Data collection is entirely opportunistic. It is not possible to seek out these experiences; one simply has to wait for candidate instances to happen. Consequently, my corpus was assembled in the same way that Freud collected instances of slips of the tongue (Freud, 1975 [1901]), linguists collect speech errors (McKay, 1980) and psychologists collect moments of inadvertent behavioural transgression (Norman, 1981).

The home environment of the phenomenon of poetically realised confluence is social interaction: face-to-face encounters in everyday life or in broadly institutional settings. Its defining feature is the way that a spoken turn seems conspicuously to connect with, or display an awareness of, another’s unarticulated, simultaneous conscious experience. Word selection and turn design is therefore one locus for sociological investigation. Analysis of the way that the spoken turn connects with the unspoken thought will point to broader interpersonal dynamics relevant to this phenomenon.

The analysis of word selection and turn design is a core feature of conversation analytic (CA) studies of talk-in-interaction (Schegloff, 2007). Empirical work in this tradition examines talk as social action, and seeks to describe how discursive social actions are coordinated through the sequential, turn-by-turn unfolding of verbal activities. Empirical work requires audio and video recordings of naturally occurring interaction. However, the analytic techniques developed in CA can not be applied to reports of poetic confluence, as the data are by necessity retrospective reports of moments in which a conscious experience seems to be reflected in another’s turn at talk. Such private conscious phenomena are not publicly displayed in the turn-by-turn unfolding of naturally occurring interaction. While it is not possible to do a technical CA analysis of the phenomenon, in which close description of the production of turns in sequence is essential, findings from CA studies of social interaction can inform a more interpretive preliminary assessment of the kinds of interpersonal dynamics at play in poetic confluence.

**The interpersonal orientation of poetic confluence**

A focus for conversation analytic research has been on formulations: the ways that a turn can provide a summary assessment of on-going interaction (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970), or describe a place, event or a person (Sacks, 1979; Schegloff, 1972), or can be used to by a speaker to propose their understanding of the sense, relevance or import of another’s immediately prior talk (Heritage and Watson, 1979). Most CA research on formulations in interaction have extended the line of inquiry first explored by Heritage and Watson, exploring how gists or upshots can preserve, delete or transform aspects of the prior talk so as to pursue particular interactional objectives. Much of this work has been done on talk from work related settings, and has shown how formulations may be a vehicle for the pursuit of specific institutional goals (Antaki, 2007, 2008; Drew, 2003; Weiste and Peräkylä, 2013; Weiste, Voutilainen and Peräkylä, 2015; van der Houwen, 2009; but see also Bolden, 2010). Formulations in interaction do pragmatic work by virtue of the inferable relation between formulation and the turn(s) so formulated. Here is an example form Heritage and Watson’s analysis of formulations, which comes from a radio interview with a winner of a 'Slimmer of the Year' competition. The interviewee is describing how being overweight made her feel.

(From Heritage and Watson, 1979: 132; ‘IE’ = interviewee, ‘IR’ = interviewer.)

IE: You have a shell that for so long protects you but sometimes

things creep through the shell and then you become really aware

of how awful you feel [*some lines omitted*]…I got to this stage where I almost jumped in the river. I just felt life wasn't worth it any more - it hadn't anything to offer and if this was living I'd had enough.

IR: You really were prepared to commit suicide because you were

a big fatty

The interviewer’s turn implies scepticism of the notion that the interviewee’s weight problem was sufficiently serious that she might contemplate suicide. This scepticism is achieved through its design. The phrase 'a big fatty' retains the focus of the prior talk -being overweight - while offering a less serious and much less sympathetic formulation of obesity. The pragmatic force of the formulation emerges in the relation between the alternative references to obesity.

There are important difference between formulations in talk-in-interaction and the spoken utterance components of poetic confluence. In talk, formulations target others’ utterances. In poetic confluence, utterances seem to index experiences in others’ consciousness. Second, the poetic utterance reflects private experience, not public speech. Finally, formulations in interaction are demonstrably consequential to the subsequent interaction; this is because they constitute actions that set a sequential context to which subsequent turns respond. There is no evidence from these data that moments of poetic confluence have a similar consequence for the on-going trajectory of interaction.3

Those caveats aside, it is still analytically useful to think of the spoken utterance components of poetic confluence as exhibiting a relation to the other’s unspoken mental imagery in the same way that formulations stand in relation to the prior utterance(s) to which they refer. They capture the other’s key emotional or arresting imagery, but re cast that transient private moment, often in playful or less serious terms. The first case from the Hollós corpus provides an example. Hollós’ patient uses the unusual phrase ‘shoots around’ to describe how her mother walks about her flat, a phrase that exquisitely echoes his anxiety about, and imagery of, his next patient shooting a firearm in his waiting room. The imagery of a patient discharging a firearm is self evidently extraordinary and alarming. The patient’s selection of ‘shoots around’ captures the ‘shooting’ element of Hollós’ imagery while adopting it to report a manner of movement that is a minor domestic annoyance. The referent of ‘shooting’ is transposed from ‘guns’ to ‘perambulation’ and is thereby its more personally troubling associations are neutralised.

The following three cases further demonstrate how spoken turns may, in various ways, modulate, neutralise or detoxify the others’ private concerns, or the extreme or evocative manner in which they manifest in thought or imagery.

The target images may have personal significance because they consist of memories of events or experiences that are important or memorable events in the life of the reporter. The next case occurred during a talk by a visiting academic to a small group of graduate students and researchers.

**Example 3: 'No bones'**

The experience happened in today's informal discussion with a visiting scholar - Beth Gordon. Beth was talking about the professional/personal dilemma of being a Reiki practitioner in her personal life whilst working in a post-structuralist cultural studies department in her professional life.

At some point during the talk, I started to think about the one time I had had Reiki treatment. The therapist had picked up some problem in my...uhm...middle area (?!). This was 'correct' in that during my fourth pregnancy I had suffered with Symphysis Pubic Dysfunction (SPD). This is a condition in which the connective tissue that holds the two pubic bones together over-softens, making movement difficult.

During Beth's talk, I had a very strong visual image of two bones being separated by a large gap - the image was very vivid and an exaggerated version of SPD. The image was accompanied by a strange sensation of my head being open - almost that my thoughts were visible to others.

At the moment I had this image, I heard Beth say '...you know, I make no bones about that'. The coincidence struck me immediately. Unfortunately, I had been too lost in my own thoughts to hear what had led up to Beth using this phrase. It is worth noting, though, that later, on hearing the story, she spontaneously said that it was not a phrase that she uses.

Here the reporter is recalling a medical condition following the birth of one of her children. The author’s reference to ‘my...uhm...middle area (?!)’ explicitly acknowledges the intimate nature of the condition. The phrase 'make no bones' is a literal allusion to the reporter's evocative and exaggerated imagery of her experience of Symphysis Pubis Dysfunction. It is a phrase conventionally used to point to a person's honesty or principles, and as such, glosses over the more evocative features of the reporter's imagery, and its associated physiology and medical implications.4

In many cases, reporters describe imagery or thoughts that are mildly transgressive, in that they breach decorum, ‘good taste’ or diverge from conventionally accepted standards and expectations. The following example provides a clear case involving highly sensitive imagery. The reporter is a personal acquaintance who described in an email (reproduced exactly below) an experience that happened to his wife, a podiatrist, two days after they had attended a public lecture in which I discussed the phenomenon. It revolves around UK slang to describe gay male sexual orientation that is both homophobic and extremely distasteful (hence the reporter's expressed doubt as to its usefulness as an addition to the corpus). For non-UK readers, 'chutney' is a dark brown relish made from fruit, spices, sugar and vinegar. It is also conventionally known as 'pickle'.

**Example 4: 'Chutney ferrets'**

Got a great one from Kathy: very amusing and I think very real!! Although not sure you can use it. Kathy (K) is talking to a patient (P) who is describing the fact that she was walking her (extremely camp, completely raving) gay neighbours' dogs yesterday afternoon as she does regularly. On hearing 'extremely gay neighbours' the phrase 'Chutney Ferrets' popped into K's head. She is just thinking ' Chutney Ferrets' and inwardly laughing to herself at the phrase when P says

'Yes and the dogs running around got me into a right pickle!'5

A number of interpersonally sensitive issues underpin this instance of poetic confluence.The podiatrist displays awareness of a highly offensive homophobic slang that is not (in my experience) well known; she is not repelled or surprised by its appearance in her consciousness, but finds it amusing; and it momentarily becomes the focus of her attention while her patient is telling an anecdote (and, presumably, having professional treatment requiring concentration, the application of expert skills and so on). The imagery/phrase ‘chutney ferrets’ is an extreme and disrespectful representation of gay male sexual behaviour. The potentially homophobic element of the imagery is modulated by the patient’s report of being ‘in a pickle’ when walking her friends’ dogs. The vulgarity and personal hostility implied by ‘chutney ferrets’ is detoxified via a synonym for being flustered.

A difficulty here is that there is no way of being certain that the use of the word 'pickle' in this context is unusual for that participant; it is certainly a term that is used conventionally to refer to being agitated, flustered, etc. For that reason, we might be circumspect about the value of this instance to the analysis. However, there seems to be a relationship between 'pickle' and the offensive phrase 'chutney ferrets' that matches the relationship between imagery of intimate medical problems and the phrase 'no bones'.

The final instance was provided by one of my graduate students shortly after I discussed Schegloff's paper with them. It is slightly different from previous instances in that it concerns not an image or thought, but the failure to bring to mind what should be an easily recallable fact. In this, it concerns not a transgression of norms, but a momentary personal failing.

**Example 5:**  **'Loyalist man/green man'**

I had to email also as I think I experienced an "ESP Pun", and thought this may be of interest to you! I have been in Northern Ireland visiting a friend over the weekend. As we were walking into town (Belfast) we approached a set of traffic lights. There was one car waiting, but not knowing the roads I stopped on the pavement. On looking at the traffic light I had a sudden image of a flag come to my mind, initiated by the colours of the traffic light, which was on red. I thought to myself at that point, "What are the colours associated with the loyalist and 'other' group, that are in conflict over here" (at this point I had forgotten the name of the Republican group). This thought had come to mind because of the colours on the traffic light. Just after I had this thought Phil turned around to me and said, "Why are we waiting?", and I replied, "We are waiting for the green man", at which point he said, "Its not the green man, its the loyalist man" (as a joke).

This was of course interesting because he had just put into conversation what I was thinking about. However, what is more significant is that this was an error. The colours for the loyalists are red and blue, the colour for the republicans is green. Phil is very into his history, and very precise with facts, so it is unlike him to make this sort of error, and he did not even pick up on it. It was also interesting that I had a strong and spontaneous visual image at this moment, and also that I had forgotten the term "republican".

The poetic confluence delicately handles a potentially sensitive interpersonal issue. The reporter reveals how a momentary lapse in memory rendered her unable to locate the word 'Republican'. In the company of her friend, who is described as being keen on history (and presumably, in the context of a friend based in Northern Ireland, she is referring here to the fraught religious and political history of the area, and its long experience of sectarian violence), the failure to recall such a common term might be considered embarrassing. Indeed, in some contexts, and in some parts of Belfast, and at some points in history, the consequences might have been much more serious. The other's turn trades off the reporter's inner preoccupations, not only in that it alludes to her concern with the colours associated with local political and sectarian groups, but also in that it captures and reproduces *as his explicit error* the momentary word selection difficulty that *she* had just experienced. This is an inferentially sensitive operation, in that the significance of the reporter's lapse in local political knowledge is modulated by a public display of *alignment*: the poetic turn ensures that it is not only she who has erred in this potentially delicate matter.

To establish that this poetic relationship us not uncommon, here are the key relationships between thought and utterance from other examples. For the sake of brevity, these examples will be summarised. Take it that in each of these cases, where it can be known: [i] the utterance that constitutes the poetic confluence is not an idiosyncrasy of the speaker; [ii] the poetic turn constitutes an error, or is conspicuously formed, or slightly discordant in context, and [iii] the confluence of the poetic turn and the unarticulated thought is not easily explained by reference shared circumstance, topic of talk, intimate knowledge of one another, and so on. These cases point to some overarching themes in the kinds of thoughts or imagery that are poetically referenced in others’ turns, and illustrate the various ways in which a turn can establish the poetic relationship with another's unspoken thoughts.

There are instances that concern thoughts about sexual intimacies or sex related imagery:

**Example 6:** Person A is recalling being in bed that morning with a new and unexpected sexual partner. She is in an academic meeting. She then hears person B say (of possible collaboration): *“it’s not as if we have to get into bed with them”.*

**Example 7:** Person A is thinking about sexual activity with her new partner [NB: this is a different reporter to the previous example]. Person B is describing a yoga injury to her hip; she says *“I’m screwed”.*

**Example 8:** Person A is pondering the physiological effect of constant sexual activity on prostitutes’ genitals. He is wondering if there is etiquette such that the client is expected to apply lubricant, when he hears person B say (of an ambiguous political report) *“There are holes to be filled”.*

Poetic confluence can refer to personal anxieties:

**Example 9:** Person Ais anxious about an invitation, received moments earlier, to a university function called The All Professors’ Dinner hosted by the Vice Chancellor; a colleague at coffee asks “*How are you, Professor?”*

**Example 10:** Person A is preoccupied that a French building contractor missed an important meeting earlier that day; person B the addresses person A as “*Monsieur.*”

**Example 11:** Person A isdeclining an offer from person B of music equipment while thinking that finances are so tight it might not be a possible to buy furniture for a forthcoming house move; person B says “*I could furnish you with a mixing desk.”*

Poetic confluence can revolve around private thoughts that may be inappropriate or unkind:

**Example 12:** At a student newspaper editorial meeting, person A is bored by someone talking at length about the weaponry in computer games; person B offers him an assignment, remarking that person A will be *“gunning for it.”*

**Example 13:** Person A thinks that a co-interactant’s gestures reflect Jewish stereotypes; person B reports how her husband’s actions have been “*juvenile.*”

**Example 14:** Person A is formulating a ‘bad taste’ joke about a nationally known missing person case involving a woman called Claudia; person B reports how communication with an agency supplying children’s nannies had become “*cloudy*”.

Goffman was perhaps the first systematically to focus on the subtle interpersonal dynamics of everyday face to face conduct. He illuminated the way that even the most apparently banal of social moments can be charged with a rich dynamic of situationally specific evaluation, inference, impropriety, embarrassment, and so on. In his essay on face work, he refers to the kinds of interpersonal sensitivities that can destabilise an encounter - the 'judgemental contingencies of the situation' (Goffman, 1967: 31) - and in response to which we use various interpersonal strategies of avoidance, resistance or management. The phenomenon of poetic confluence resonates closely with this domain of interpersonal dynamic, realised through formulations. Like formulations in interaction, these poetic turns perform work on the materials so formulated. Some aspects of the source material are deleted or preserved; other components are transformed. Broadly: the poetic articulations address emotional, personal or inferentially sensitive properties of the target imagery or private thought; and in various ways, these are made safe. Poetic confluence is, therefore, a mechanism for what looks like face work to preserve the other’s situational propriety, but face work addressed not to normative slips in public behaviour, but to sensitive private thoughts or highly personal matters. It is a preventative, or remedial practice (Goffman, 1971), but done on behalf of the other:

‘Since the individual dislikes to feel or appear embarrassed, tactful persons will avoid placing him in this position’ (Goffman, 1956: 267). In this sense, the phenomenon of poetic confluence seems to exhibit precisely the kinds of interpersonal sensitivities and delicate interactional activities that we know to be characteristic of human communication.

**Discussion**

In this paper I have made the case that poetic confluence is not merely happenstance, but exhibits robust properties, identified previously by Hollós and Schegloff. The cumulative weight of instances from different times, languages and countries, as well as the recurrent properties, suggest that any satisfactory account may need to go beyond speculation about the role of contingencies such as topic, circumstance, and so on.

The phenomenon of poetic confluence raises many issues; some are quite pragmatic, others are more testing. I sketch just three, to do with *method* (how we might develop formal analyses of interpersonal moments which are partly constituted from private mental experience, and which are only available for academic analysis because of introspective reports), the role of *mind-in-interaction* (the agency of interiority in everyday social life), and the achievement of *tactful orientation* to the other.

***Methodological issues: analysing anecdotes***

The key methodological problem is that the data are, essentially, anecdotes; and the value of anecdotal evidence is at best, hugely controversial, beset with problems relating to the accuracy of recall, selectivity, self-presentation, and so on. But as Schegloff (2003) noted, however, there is not much that can be done about this; it is not as though these anecdotes were examined instead of an alternative, more reliable source of data. Anecdotes are all that are available, because a criterial component of the phenomenon is an internal experience within private consciousness. That realm of experience is not made public, and therefore open to analytic scrutiny, unless it is reported verbally or in writing.

If we are to take the phenomenon of poetic confluence seriously, then it means thinking again about how we might interrogate anecdotal data so as to overcome the well-known problems. It is encouraging that in recent years, scholars in a range of disciplines have begun to reconsider the value of anecdotal data, especially with respect to lines of empirical inquiry from which more conventional data sources are absent. For example, marine ecologists have found that anecdotal recollections from older fishermen have been helpful in determining fish species populations in decades prior to systematic scientific measurement (Sáenz-Arroyo et al. 2005).

One key difficulty with the analysis of anecdotal accounts is developing a formal account of the events that are reported. This is particularly acute when the detail of talk-in-interaction is central to those events. The attempt to reconstruct the dynamics of interaction is always going to be problematic, and will seem speculative when compared to empirically grounded analyses that come from conversation analytic research. However, the findings from CA research can inform the analysis of anecdotal data in such a way as to provide a grounding for empirical claims. In this paper I have drawn from CA studies of interaction, particularly formulations, to find a way into the phenomenon such that sociological properties might be discovered. It is not a CA analysis, but draws from its cumulative findings over decades of empirical inquiry to inform, and thereby warrant, an interpretation of core properties of the phenomenon.

***Mind in interaction and the porousness of personal boundaries***

Episodes of poetic confluence raise profoundly important questions about the role of mind and consciousness in social interaction. Traditionally, the inner world of experience and private thought was taken to be the domain of psychology and its cognate disciplines, and therefore beyond the bounds of sociology, even for sociologists as sensitive to the moral and inferential dynamics of social action as Goffman (Waksler, 1989: 6). As a consequence, the discipline has tended to ignore the sociological properties of interiority, such that '[t]o be a sociologist is often to engage in, implicitly or explicitly, a more or less immense, more or less manic denial of the internal world, an attempt to avoid an inner reality' (Craib, 1989:186). More recently, however, sociologists have begun to explore the sociological dimensions of interiority. Bailey (2000) observed there has been increased sociological interest in subjectivity, explored through topics such as individualism, intimacy, the everyday, self and the domain of the personal, all of which stand outside the core historical focus of the discipline. The agency of interiority is also a key feature of Archer's work on reflexivity, personal agency and social structure (Archer, 2003, 2007). The emotion management perspective opens up for sociological analysis the organization of inner affective states (Hochschild, 1979). Others have explored the way in which broadly psychoanalytic concepts and ideas can inform sociological analysis (Clarke, 2006; Lapping 2007; Roseneil, 2006). These studies establish as a viable research question how the dynamics of interiority can dynamically inform the external world of social action.

Of course, insofar as it suggests the operation of parapsychological communication, poetic confluence constitutes a radical extension of sociological consideration of the way that mind (consciousness, the unconscious, interiority etc.) can impact on social action. However, the apparently anomalous features of poetic confluence resonate with a range of contemporary sociological questions. This is because poetic confluence constitutes moments of interpersonal relationality that appear to transcend the physical boundary of the embodied subject. This is familiar sociological terrain. The apparent porousness of the body is already explored in various social science studies of affect and (inter)subjectivity (Blackman, 2012; Brennan, 2004; Burkitt, 2010; Pile, 2012; Riach and Warren, 2014; Redman, 2009; Roseneil, 2013). The view of the self as a permeable and porous entity is given theoretical cogency by recent developments in anti-essentialist, anti-substantialist perspectives (Csordas, 2008; Emirbayer, 1997).

There is an intellectual dissonance that comes from being asked to take seriously episodes of interpersonal relationality that seem to operate beyond known communicative processes. But these anxieties are mitigated by developments in field theory, in which it is accepted that we can investigate transactional properties of relations between social entities in the absence of traditionally understood, Newtonian causal mechanisms. As Martin puts it ‘field theory is generally applicable for cases in which the alternative explanation involves action at a distance, a form of explanation that has generally been treated with suspicious dislike by Western….science’ (Martin, 2003:7). There may, then, already be grounds for a sociological accommodation of what seem to be radically transactional social phenomena. Indeed, the phenomenon of poetic confluence, and the questions about social relationality it raises, may inform critiques of Bourdieu’s work on field and relationality that highlight the lack of a sustained examination of actual social interactions between social agents (Bottero, 2009).

***Relationality, and orientation to the other***

Poetic confluence is a sociological phenomenon because it concerns the alignment or relation between individuals in social interaction, mobilised (in part) through turns at talk: the primordial site of sociality and the foundational blocks of intersubjectivity (Heritage, 1984: 254).

More broadly, poetic confluence resonates with notions of sociable association and tact. Simmel and Hughes (1949) write about ‘processes of association’ from which emerge sociability that has no ulterior motive (such as economic gain), and which are found in artistic activities and playful moments. Anticipating the focus of much of Goffman’s work, they point to the way that sociability relies on mutual co-operation, achieved through language; in particular they emphasise the role of tact in the achievement of purely sociable association:

‘It is for this reason that the sense of tact is of such special significance in society, for it guides the self-regulation of the individual in his personal relations to others where no outer or directly egoistic interests provide regulation. And perhaps it is the specific function of tact to mark out for individual impulsiveness, for the ego and for outward demands, those limits which the rights of others require.’ (Simmel and Hughes, 1949: 256.)

Poetic confluence is a process by which the ‘impulsiveness’ of the ego is managed with utmost tact (both in mundane interaction and in more institutional settings), not through self-regulation, but in interaction, by another’s misshaped utterance. It demands no explicit remedial action from the participant whose interior experience at that moment is allusively captured, and it has no immediate consequences for the trajectory of interaction. It is an almost unnoticeable noticing of private matters of import or sensitivity, but effects a public transformation of their seriousness. It is a process of association that, in Simmel and Hughes’ words, allows ‘heavily freighted forces of reality [to be] felt only as a form of distance, their weight fleeting in a charm’ (1949: 261).

Poetic confluence is at the same time puzzling and mundane: while it suggests the operation of communicative mechanisms that are *scientifically* controversial, its recurrent *sociological* properties resonate with familiar, everyday interpersonal concerns.

Whatever the processes that underpin its occurrence, however, its investigation may lead to a deeper understanding of the infrastructure of human sociality.

**Footnotes**

1. I would like to thank the reviewers of an earlier draft of this paper for their insightful responses. The research reported here was supported by a Bial Foundation Bursary for Scientific Research, no 51/12.

2. The paper by Hollós was translated by my research student, Dr Germaine Stockbridge, a German national who has been living in the UK since 2009.

3. For ease of reference, each case has an identifier that reflects the key features of the experience.

4. Except in those circumstances in which it is noticed and becomes topicalised in subsequent exchanges

5. Poetic confluence would be puzzling enough if it only occurred on occasions when people were somehow interacting directly with one another. It could then be understood as being rooted – somehow – in the interpersonal dynamics between those two participants. In this case, however, the speaker was not addressing the reporter directly, but the small academic audience of which she was one member; in Goffman’s terms, this is unfocused co-presence. So, although most of the cases occur in the context of co-present interpersonal action, poetic confluence may also operate beyond that domain.

6. The difficulty here is that there is no way of being certain that the use of the word 'pickle' in this context is unusual for that participant; it is certainly a term that is used conventionally to refer to being agitated, flustered, etc. For that reason, we might be circumspect about the value of this instance to the analysis. However, there seems to be a relationship between 'pickle' and the offensive phrase 'chutney ferrets' that matches the relationship between imagery of intimate medical problems and the phrase 'no bones'.

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