Shared subjectivities: Enigmatic moments and mundane intimacies

Abstract

This paper describes a phenomenon in everyday interpersonal interaction in which one participant displays an awareness of another's subjectivity via unusual turn design: a word selection error or a phrase that is conspicuously ill fitted to the interactional moment for which it was produced. This phenomenon, called poetic confluence, has enigmatic properties, in that these oddities seem to exhibit one person's apparent awareness of a co-participant's interior subjectivity. The phenomenon is traced historically, via work in psychoanalysis and studies of conversational interaction. Three examples from the author's corpus of instances are examined to identify the transactional dynamics that may mediated in poetic confluence. The paper concludes by arguing that studies of the relationship between subjectivity and social action may be usefully informed by observations from research on everyday social interaction.

Key words: Subjectivity; Enigmatic communication; Relationality; Poetics; Interaction

Introduction

In this paper I describe a phenomenon in interpersonal interaction in which one participant displays an awareness of another's subjectivity, an awareness that has enigmatic properties in that it suggests the operation of communicative capacities that go beyond known forms of communication. The phenomenon takes the form of a speech event in which one participant produces a spoken turn that inadvertently exhibits a poetic relationship to a co-participant's *unspoken* thoughts or *unarticulated* mental imagery: a poetically realised confluence of interiority and talk. Close examination of the details of this poetically realised confluence of one person's talk and another's (ostensibly) private subjectivity suggests a form of transactional relationality. It is transactional in that it points to an emergent relationality that transcends the physical and mental boundaries of the person. So, while it arises from interactional events (the production of turns at talk between two or more physically individual speakers) it suggests that, on occasions, the self is porous, and intimately subject to the interiority of the other.

Across the social sciences, there are numerous accounts of intersubjectivity, transactionality, fields, relationality, the transmission of affect, of the permeability of the physical body, and of the porousness of self. Blackman (2012) provides a comprehensive genealogical analysis of the various arguments that question the essentialist understanding that we are separate physical entities, and that collective behaviour is to be understood merely as a consequence of individual aggregation rather than in terms of moments in which perceived boundaries of the body, mind and self seem to be fluid. Ranging across (amongst others) discussion of neuroscience and biology, psychology and cultural studies, she makes a compelling case to reject the assumption that 'from the outset…you can separate the inside from the outside, the

psychological from the social and natural from the cultural' (Blackman, 2012: 103). Although largely framed as an exploration of the trans-subject articulation of affect, she evaluates various concepts that try to capture the curious occasions when notions of individuality seem inadequate to describe experience, such as attunement, reverberation, rhythm, contagion, and mimetic communication.

The analysis in this paper contributes to the broad movements that Blackman identifies, and in particular, tries to sketch out more formally the 'communicative' dimensions of a class of incidents in which the boundaries between individuals seem less than secure. Specifically, it explores how moments of interior experience may be brought into public by the mundane process of word selection error, or in slightly malformed turn design, and identifies the range of emotional affective subjectivities that seem to be at play. The focus then, is on specific details of interpersonal interaction (in this case, how turns are designed) that are more conventionally studied in conversation analytic research on the organised competencies that underpin mundane talk. As such, although the analytic observations offered here are not an example of conversation analysis, but they are informed by the empirical focus associated with that discipline.

Historically, scholars in a range of disciplines have noted and tried to understand instances profound transactional relationality. One of the founding figures in the Society for Psychical Research, Frederick Myers, coined the term 'telepathy' to capture the experience of having some form of affective knowledge of another person, unmediated by known sensory channels of communication (Luckhurst, 2002). In the more formal language of experimental parapsychology, they are often referred to as forms of extra sensory perception (ESP, or

anomalous mental phenomena (May, Utts and Spottiswoode, 1995) or anomalous cognition (Palmer, 2015).

The history of psychoanalysis is replete with discussion of mysterious forms of interactions between patient and analyst. Therapists make practical use of these experiences in therapy, even if they do not acknowledge just how mysterious they may be (see for example, Cambray, 2011; Cimino, and Correale, 2005). Freud took telepathy seriously, although he was conspicuously ambiguous about it his publications and public pronouncements about (Campbell and Pile, 2010; Massicotte, 2014; Thurschwell, 1999), others that came after were more willing to explore telepathic phenomena and its psychoanalytic significance (for example, Brottman, 2011; Devereux, 1953; Dieckmann, 1976; Ehrenwald, 1956; Eisenbud, 1946; Mayer, 2001; Rosenbaum, 2011; Silverman, 1988; Weiler, 1967). Indeed, some psychoanalysts have quite explicitly drawn the links between psychoanalytic concepts and unusual forms of communication between patient and analyst. For example, the blurb on the cover of Totton's (2003) edited collection on psychoanalysis and the paranormal asks: 'What is the medium through which counter-transference, projective identification, unconscious communication all happen - if not telepathy?' Others have argued that the more mysterious features of the patient-analyst relationship have been recognised - and effectively sanitised - in ostensibly scientific sounding concepts. For example, Brottman makes this point with respect to the Kleinian notion of projective identification (Brottman, 2011; see also, Campbell and Pile, 2010). In a later paper, Totton (himself a Reichian analyst) goes as far as to suggest that the psychoanalytic theories of the leading British analyst Wilfred Bion amounts to 'a textbook on telepathy' (Totton, 2007: 394). Analysts working in the relational psychoanalytic tradition have been particularly open to exploring the implications of enigmatic moments between patient and analyst (for example, see the recent publications, and their subsequent

commentaries, in the flagship relational journal, *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*: Burton, 2012; de Peyer, 2016; Massicotte, 2014).

The focus of this paper is on the socially organised properties of the affective relationships that seem to be mediated in these moments of engimatic intimacy. This is motivated in part by recognition that a common feature of enigmatic communications in therapy is that they invariably involve affect and strong emotional states (for example, Fodor 1947; Hitschmann, 1953; Schneider and Grady, 2014; Schwartz-Salant; 1988; Silverman, 1988). It is as if highly affective moments are susceptible to processes of communication and connectedness that seem to challenge the idea of independent subjectivities. Reflecting on her own experience as group analyst, Roseneil has written

> 'In thinking about the most puzzling, moving and mutative moments in my experiences as both member and conductor of group analytic groups – the moments when affect passes through people like electricity, when the atmosphere palpably changes, when members are able to grasp another's psychic reality despite the inadequacy of language to represent its depth and complexity – it is not for concepts of individual and society that I reach, [but the language of] *relationality, of process, permeability, and trans-subjectivity*. (Roseneil, 2013:207l emphasis added.)

It is not difficult to find other examples in the psychoanalytic literature in which enigmatic communications leads analysts to question the assumed impermeablity of individual personhood. A nice example is Ogden's reflections on his analytic experiences, when he coyly uses scare quotes around the phrase 'his own' to refer to the analyst's significant reveries (Ogden, 1994:3), and there are many others.

Scholars working in traditions outside psychoanalysis and psychotherapy have also examined unusual forms of communication to help them articulate the way that affect and emotions can be understood as emergent and dynamic flows between people. For example, Blackman's analysis of affect explicitly draws on the concept of telepathy (Blackman, 2010; 2011). In a detailed analysis of the structure of jazz performance, Monson notes that experienced musicians use the concept of ESP to account for the way that they seem to be able to anticipate and thereby contribute to others' spontaneous and unrehearsed improvisations (Monson, 1996). And the geographer Steven Pile has examined the implications of unconscious affective communication for ideas about spatiality, and the relationship between participants in research interviews (Pile, 2010; 2012).

This is important work. Much of it however, is conceptual or theoretical; empirical work has been relatively neglected. For example, Wetherell's (2012) comprehensive critical review of competing epistemological and ontological positions in research on affect and emotions provides little guidance as to how we might try to grasp what Csordas has called 'the filaments of intentionality that crisscross between and among us (Csordas, 2008:118) in everyday life. The phenomenon I describe here speaks precisely to interiority and subjectivity in everyday life. This is because it emerges in details of mundane interaction.

Here is an example. What follows is the text of an email sent to me by a fellow academic who is aware that I have been collecting instances of this kind of ostensibly telepathic experience. This, like all the instances in my collection, is anecdotal. This is unavoidable, as the experience consists in part of the phenomena of private consciousness: images, thoughts and

feelings. The email is produced exactly as it was sent, with the exception that, where possible, identifying details have been removed or changed.

> Hi
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> Sorry, I can't remember what your phenomenon is called. But here is an example that occurred between me and Lisa at the weekend.
>
> We were chatting on the phone. The discussion turned to work related matters and I was telling Lisa about my [career] plans and researching housing. Lisa told me about the good things happening at [her university] in relation to researching health and the urban. In fact, she said some of her colleagues had just returned from a relevant conference in New York and were excited about it all. I then said, 'look at us, riding on the cusp!' Lisa replied that it was funny I'd said 'cusp' because when she had referred to the conference in New York, she had deliberately selected 'New York' as a reference I would recognise. The conference was actually CUSP - which I think is the Centre for Urban Science and Progress, but Lisa can correct me on that!
>
> Weird eh?

There are three observations on this episode. First, the reporter's use of 'cusp' seems to capture, in some enigmatic manner, something that was in Lisa's mind, but which was not articulated, or known to the reporter: the acronym of the academic centre in New York that she had just visited. Second, the acronym CUSP was in Lisa's consciousness, as she later

reveals that she had not mentioned it as she anticipated it would not be relevant to her co conversationalist, as they worked in different academic areas. Third, the reporter's use of 'cusp' is slightly ill-fitted to the kind of turn she was producing. 'Riding on the cusp' is not a common idiom, and cusp refers to a boundary state, or a point of transition, especially in astrological terms; a more appropriate turn (and I suspect, what the reporter was aiming for) would have referred to 'riding on the crest' or being at the cutting edge. But 'cusp' does connect directly to Lisa's decision not to refer to the acronym of the academic centre she had recently visited. This minor word selection anomaly, then, suggests a deeper enigma, as it constitutes a display of one person's tacit awareness of another person's private subjectivity. It is this everyday phenomenon, which I have termed poetic confluence (Author, under review, a) that is the focus of this paper.

It is likely that many readers will assume that this curious alignment of slightly malformed utterance and another's subjectivity is purely coincidental. It is important, therefore, to demonstrate that this is a recurrent phenomenon, and not merely happenstance. In the following section I briefly outline how others have identified and examined this phenomenon, and illustrate some of its more robust properties.

Poetic confluence in therapy and everyday life

In 1932 the Hungarian psychoanalyst, István Hollós published a paper in the journal *Imago*, the English translation of the title of which is 'The Psychopathology of Everyday Telepathic Appearances'. In this paper he documents and analyses personal experiences of telepathic episodes in therapy. Based on a collection of several hundred cases, collected over a 20 year period, he argued that a core feature of these episodes is that, during their free association or

reports of their anxieties, patients would say something said something that chimed conspicuously with his private thoughts or preoccupations at that moment. As a psychoanalyst, Hollós was primarily interested in psychodynamic implications of these experiences. However, it is clear that a common feature of his cases is that the telepathic connection seems to be revealed through unusual turn design or word selection. Sometimes Hollós himself notes this linguistic oddity. For example:

> 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.' (Hollós, 1933: 534)

Here, the combination of German and Hungarian in the utterance in which the patient describes how her mother 'shoots around' her flat is sufficiently unusual for Hollós to draw attention to it. In other cases the patient's choice of words, though not exhibiting the conflation of languages seen in the prior extract, are highly unusual, and unidiomatic.

> I had just found a drawing within my notes that I had once made for the amusement of my son and in which I was carrying him on my neck. I looked at the picture and thought of adding a sketch of the window that was in front of me as a background. I also thought of a young painter I am acquainted with, who told me about the

difficulties of accurately copying a window when drawing. Just then the female patient said:

> "I live behind a wall of glass; I am born, yet I still live like a kangaroo with my mother." In Hungarian, the verbatim translation of kangaroo is son-carrier or boy-carrier. (*Fiahordó*). (Hollós, 1933: 538)

There is something ill fitted about the female patient's use of 'live like a kangaroo' to describe her domestic circumstances; especially as the verbatim Hungarian translation refers to boy or son carrier. Yet it this curious phrase that seems to allude to his inner thoughts about a picture depicting him carrying his son on his shoulders.

Hollós interprets these experiences in terms of psychoanalytic drives and forces. He argues that in almost all cases, he is trying to repress some psychological material, and it is this that seems to be allusively or obliquely targeted by the patient's utterance. He draws a parallel to the Freudian notion of slips of the tongue, in which latent anxieties or neuroses can erupt unbidden into public life through speech errors; the difference, though, is that in these cases it is the patient who makes the slip of the tongue on the therapist's behalf.

Hollós' contribution to the study of this form of experience is largely unacknowledged within the psychoanalytic literature, probably because his paper was published in German, and there is no published translation (although Devereux, 1953, did provide a detailed summary of the paper). There is certainly no evidence that the conversation analyst Emanuel Schegloff was aware of Hollós' work when he published a chapter titled 'On ESP Puns' in 2003. In this chapter he identifies a form of pun that occurs in everyday conversation that seems to reflect one person's awareness of the contents of another's consciousness. The following three

examples come from Schegloff's own everyday interactions, and include his reflections on the unusual turn design features of the phenomenon.

> My wife and I are visiting our daughter at college. Sitting at lunch, I ask my daughter what she'll be working at after lunch. She says, "recycling" (this being a volunteer activity previously described to us as involving picking up recyclable trash left by residents of the area). I think to myself, "my daughter the garbage collector," and my daughter says/continues, "…hence the garb."
>
> I take it that "garb" is a term ill-fitted (or only ironically fitted) to the topic and the register otherwise in effect for the talk then in progress. (Schegloff, 2003: 535)

> A colleague is recounting what he hard heard about a recent conference in which a number of mutual colleagues had participated. He allows that his account is based "…on a biased sample of reports." He continues (and at this point I am wondering about the reception accorded my colleague Lucy Suchman, who was on the program), "I didn't hear paeans of praise that such and such had given a wonderful paper."
>
> I note only that "such and such" is not the ordinary form for this kind of unspecified definite person reference; rather the form is "so and so." Again, the "thought" appears to have invaded and slightly malformed the utterance being produced in a manner reflecting its own constitution. (Schegloff, 2003: 536)

> I encounter in the hallway of my Department's offices a colleague who I know is being courted by a number of other highly regarded universities. As we approach one another, I greet him conventionally with "Howyadoin'," while reflecting that he is #1 on a prominent school's recruitment list, and preparing to follow up my initial inquiry

> with 'Are you staying or leaving?" Before I ask that, however, he answers my initial inquiry, "Neither here nor there." In this case, I took the occasion to recount to my colleague what had just happened. His response: "That's pretty good." Note, by the way, the slight inappropriateness of the response; it is of the genre "commi ci, comme ça." or "so so"; but neither here nor there"? (Schegloff, 2003: 535)

These cases illustrate how the punning components do not exhibit explicit error, but both seem mildly inappropriate or ill-judged given the activity designedly performed by the utterance they wholly or partly constitute.

Hollós reports collecting over 500 instances of what he calls telepathic experiences; these mostly his experiences, but some were supplied by psychoanalytic colleagues who knew of his interest in these kinds of incidents. In his chapter, Schegloff uses 15 examples from a corpus of 19 (at the time of publication). I have a collection of 55 candidate cases (at the time of writing) in which a speech error or conspicuous word selection chimes with another's unarticulated subjective experience. I am a participant in 22 cases; the rest were supplied by colleagues, students and friends who know of my interest in this phenomenon. I prefer to call it poetic confluence, as this term captures the curious coming together of talk and interiority better than a vague and loaded term, such as ESP. Moreover, not all cases involve explicit puns, and 'poetic' more accurately captures the range of playful relationships between overt verbal action and consciousness.

Poetic confluence and transactional subjectivity

So what kind of transactional relationality is mediated through poetic confluence? Let us re examine the ‘cusp/CUSP’ case.

> Sorry, I can't remember what your phenomenon is called. But here is an example that occurred between me and Lisa at the weekend.
>
> We were chatting on the phone. The discussion turned to work related matters and I was telling Lisa about my [career] plans and researching housing. Lisa told me about the good things happening at [her university] in relation to researching health and cities. In fact, she said some of her colleagues had just returned from a relevant conference in New York and were excited about it all. I then said, 'look at us, riding on the cusp!' Lisa replied that it was funny I'd said 'cusp' because when she had referred to the conference in New York, she had deliberately selected 'New York' as a reference I would recognise. The conference was actually CUSP - which I think is the Centre for Urban Science and Progress, but Lisa can correct me on that!
>
> Weird eh?

Rather than using the word ‘reporter’, we will call her Beth. There are some contextual details that are relevant here. Beth and Lisa are both academics, and, at the time, were developing new lines of empirical research. They had previously worked in the same institution, but Lisa had recently moved to a different university. Beth’s misuse of cusp indexes these contextual features, but they are not central to the relationality I wish to explore. Rather, the speech error, and the awareness of Lisa’s interiority that it seems to exhibit, addresses more pragmatic concerns that are common to social organisation of talk-in-

interaction in everyday settings. These concern alignment, and the negotiation of epistemic asymmetries. Insofar as these matters revolve around how participants in interaction propose and negotiate their stance with respect to co participants, these may be described as features of everyday interpersonal politics.

It is clear from Beth's account that she was aligning with Lisa in respect of the way that their careers were developing. The topic of the conversation had been on positive recent career developments in their respective research areas, projects to which they were both personally and intellectually committed. The misuse of 'cusp' occurs in an explicit recognition of the parallels in their career trajectories. This is explicit in Beth's report of her direct 'look at us, riding on the cusp!' in which, I think it reasonable to infer, Beth was initiating and inviting a shared celebration that each of them was, in their own way, at the vanguard in their respective areas. But there is a more implicit form of alignment. As part of their work news, Lisa has been recounting a story of her travels to New York, to work at the research centre whose acronym is CUSP. She could have used that title, but she did not; indeed after Beth's use of 'cusp', Lisa remarks that she had chosen to refer to New York instead of CUSP as the latter would not have meant anything to Beth. This is a perfectly routine feature of recipient design: studies of ordinary interaction have revealed that we build turns we turns with respect to what we figure the recipient will know, or find relevant. Most of the time this turn building is a tacit competence, but in this case, Lisa was able to reflect on her word selection processes in the moment of producing the report of her trip. Beth's misuse of 'cusp', exhibits that, in some sense, she is attuned to Lisa's subjectivity and the filaments of attentional consciousness that momentarily occupy her. It is extraordinarily delicate, but it is a further demonstration of the alignment between the two that has been the explicit topic of their conversation

In recent years, conversation analytic studies of mundane verbal communication have begun to examine epistemic relationships that are negotiated in the turn-by-turn unfolding of talk-in-interaction. Epistemics here refers to tacit understandings of interpersonal rights and obligations that rest on claims to knowledge states, and the moral or normative expectations that are attendant on such rights and obligations. These epistemic matters are not necessarily addressed explicitly in the content of what people say, but are negotiated and modified in the design of turns in interaction that address routine interactional business: telling stories, asking questions, making offers and invitations, and so on (Heritage and Raymond, 2005; Raymond and Heritage, 2006; Stivers, Mondada and Streensig, 2011; Weiste, Voutilainen and Peräkylä, 2015). It is not possible to do a conversation analysis of the conversational exchanges reported by Beth. This is because empirical work in this tradition is focused exclusively on analysis of audio and video recordings of naturally occurring interaction recorded as it happened in real time, and not post hoc recollections of interaction. However, research on epistemics in interaction can inform our interpretation of the episode in Beth's report.

Lisa's report of her visit implicates a range of epistemically relevant considerations. She occupies an epistemically advantaged position in relation to Beth, in that she knows the acronym of the research centre she has visited, and she figures that Beth does not. It points to her expert knowledge, and Beth's lack of equivalent professional knowledge with respect to what CUSP could stand for. There is another epistemic angle: its not only that Lisa knows something that Beth does not, but on the basis of this knowledge, she decides not to use that term because she assumes that it would not be a turn that Beth recognises. Putting it bluntly, Lisa knows something, and she figures that Beth does not, and acts upon that assumption in the design of her turn in the exchange. At that moment in their conversation, Lisa's stance towards Beth assumes, and acts on, an epistemic asymmetry between them. One key finding

from studies of epistemic negotiations in interaction is that stances that exhibit one speaker's relative advantage with respect to relevant knowledge can be countered by another's turns that assert their equivalent epistemic rights. Asymmetries in knowledge (and what they entail for the participants) can be challenged, negotiated and corrected. And that is what Beth's misuse of 'cusp' does here: her use of the word, albeit in transposition, directly lays claim to a co equivalence with respect to Lisa's knowledge of CUSP.

Beth's mis use of 'cusp' appropriates Lisa's subjectivity to address an epistemic asymmetry between them, and thereby establish an alignment. As such, it points to the interpersonal politics of relations. These are matters of stances, rights, obligations and positions (not in a Foucauldian sense) that underpin mundane interaction, the kind of web of tacit expectations and interpretations that Goffman explored in his studies of face to face behaviour, and which are omni relevant in all social interaction, regardless of the closeness of the relationship between the participants.

The argument then, is that, through some mechanism that remains enigmatic, the ostensibly minor malformation of Beth's turn reaches out, or appropriates, or demonstrates awareness of, Lisa's subjectivity, and in so doing, addresses various interpersonal matters: it is a demonstration of alignment, of Beth's 'mind on' Lisa's interiority; a 'me too' epistemic positioning and claim for co-equivalence.

Not all cases of poetic confluence crystallise precisely these kinds of mundane, interpersonal dynamics. Indeed, some instances seem to be primarily directed to managing and coordinating rather technical aspects of interaction between people, such as maintaining co-participant attention (author, under review, b). But there are other cases where it is easy to

identify a range of interpersonal dynamics at play. For example, the cases from Schegloff's collection offer some parallels. In the first example, a daughter's reference to her clothing as 'garb' seems to address her father's less than enthusiastic thought: 'my daughter the garbage collector'. In the second example, a thought about a colleague's job prospects is reflected in the use of the phrase 'Neither here nor there'. The examples from the Hollós paper offer very striking examples of the way that another's malformed turn can engage with the delicate or personal thoughts of the other, in that they 'call out' his momentary preoccupations with possible gun violence and intimate relations with his child.

Here are two more examples from my corpus. The first was provided by one of my graduate students, shortly after I had discussed Schegloff's paper with them in class. The interpersonal delicacy here is that is revolves around a minor and momentary personal failing: forgetting what should be an easily recallable piece of information.

> 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 reporter's friend makes a word selection error: in a jokey response to the reporter's account of waiting to cross the road, he conflates the colours of the two main political factions in Northern Ireland, describing the green man on the roadside traffic lights as the 'Loyalist man'. But in this error, he reproduces the momentary lapse of memory - and locally relevant political knowledge - that the reporter has experienced. She could not think of the word 'Republican', and his error mirrors that lapse and reproduces it as his own error: she, privately, could not locate the right word, and moments later he produces a turn in which the speech error is also the absence of the word 'Republican'. This instance of poetic confluence 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.

The final case from my corpus was provided by an academic colleague. Certain details have been omitted to preserve the anonymity of the reporter and relevant others.

I was standing in the corridor at the [*local pub*] by the serving hatch. This corridor connects the front and back bars. I was passing time by reading web pages on my phone. I was wholly preoccupied by recent events that had sent me into an emotional turmoil. First, it was only a few days after [*an event related to a new romantic relationship with 'A'*]. This had made me realise that I had to think very seriously about my feelings for A and try to decide what I wanted from whatever our relationship had been up until then. This was also a week after B [*an ex partner with whom the reporter had had a 20 year relationship*] had called, out of the blue, desperately concerned to try to address what she perceived as emotional damage inflicted on me as a consequence of her ending our relationship nearly four years earlier. Although she made it clear that she did not want to rekindle our relationship, her sudden and highly emotional intervention in my life dredged up a wave of feelings that I had, over the past year, learned to manage. So I was in a mental and emotional state in which relationships with two women were pulling me in different directions: one to a possible future, the other reminding me - and making me long for - a life I no longer had.

A male (late twenties/early thirties) walked past me towards the front bar, from the direction of the toilets behind me. I had not noticed him as he walked to the toilets. I did not know him. I did not recognise him from the pub. As he approached the door that led to the front bar, he turned to me and said, 'You're in purgatory here.' And then he carried on out of the corridor. Nothing else was said. I don't think I acknowledged his remark, except with a smile. I assumed at that moment that he was referring to my being between the two bars, but not in either, standing in the corridor.

> But purgatory seemed to capture my emotional state very well: essentially in an unpleasant limbo, caught between two states, one past life, one (possibly future) life.

The reporter is aware of my interest in the relational dynamics that might be at play during poetic confluence; as a consequence, his account explicitly points to these features. This makes further analytic interpretation unnecessary, except to say that this is an instance that does not emerge from everyday social interaction. The participants did not know each other; and they were not engaged in any kind of conversation between strangers of the kind that can happen in pubs. Their exchange was limited to one four-word turn. This turn ostensibly addressed the reporter's physical location in the building, but in its selection of 'purgatory' exhibited awareness of his emotional and affective state as well. Whatever the transactional mechanism is at play here, it did not merely seep through into everyday conversational interaction, as in the other cases: it intervened in the world to shape conduct towards a tacit demonstration of shared subjectivity.

A contemporary psychoanalytic example of the way that conspicuous or incorrect word selection can point to a shared subjectivity between patient and analyst comes from a recent paper by de Peyer (2016), in which she reports an unusual experience during therapy with a patient called Jordon. Jordon was dealing with anxieties in relation to a childhood in which she routinely had to evade a violent brother by going to an unnamed nearby town, and more recent tensions arising from a commitment to caring for her husband, who was getting over a serious illness, and her interest in attending an out of town artistic retreat. De Peyer then reports the following exchange:

> Jordon was insisting that she could not go on the trip to Santa Fe: She would not leave George for a week, despite the fact that he was encouraging her to go. I felt my frustration mounting. She had coveted this photographic retreat for many months, had worked on themes of self-differentiation, yet was now about to succumb to old, self-destructive, relational patterns. She bemoaned that she just couldn't do it! Santa Fe was just too far away.
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> "It's not about the *geography*!" I finally declared. "You could always Skype or text with him from there….You could be in … ***Tuckahoe*** for that matter, and still talk it through with him!" ("Tuckahoe?" I asked myself. "Where did *that* name come from? I meant to say 'Timbuktu.'")
>
> She turned away, and with a curl of her lip she said, "How did you know that's where Alicia lived? Tuckahoe's the name of the town I've been talking about here for the past half hour…." (De Peyer, 2016a:157-158; original emphasis.)

The speech error here is explicit: de Peyer intended to say one word, but instead said another. Yet it transpired that the incorrect word connected to deeply significant events in the patient's early life, which had been the focus of the therapeutic sessions. Reflecting on this moment, de Peyer writes, '[s]ceptical as I was about my Tuckahoe slip, I became increasingly convinced that it served a relational function between us – as an action of an unconscious communication' (2016a:158). For de Peyer, this moment represents some deeper psychoanalytic or psychodynamic issue. But we should not be too hasty to rush towards psychoanalytic explanations. It is clear that the kind of experience that de Peyer relates is not confined to the therapeutic relationship, but can happen between friends or relative strangers in mundane moments of ordinary conversation. This would suggest that the home environment of poetic confluence is everyday life; and interpretations of their form and

function in everyday life should take priority over explanations based on examples in more specialised settings or institutional settings, such as therapeutic interaction.

Discussion

Understanding the phenomenon of poetic confluence may contribute to research and theorising on the role of subjectivity in social action. It is challenging, though, as it seems to suggest the operation of communicative processes that have been largely ignored in orthodox science, the evidence for which is hotly disputed and highly controversial, and for which there are no obvious underlying mechanisms. It has not been the intention of this paper to argue that poetic confluence constitutes evidence for telepathy, ESP, or whatever term may be used. It may be the case that an explanation will be found in the previously uninvestigated intersection of known communicative practices, tacit reasoning procedures and inferential processes. In short: that known communication mechanisms, in a manner not yet determined, lead to moments of interpersonal alignment described here (although it is difficult to imagine what processes of mundane inference could have led to the 'purgatory' case).

My objective here was to introduce this class of relational event and to make a case for its analysis. For that objective, it made sense to refer to the *phenomenon*, singular, of poetic confluence. However, it may be that there is a range of intersubjective processes at play here. While more granular analysis must wait for a subsequent paper, it is useful to acknowledge the various contours that are currently glossed by the term 'poetic confluence'. First, there may be a difference between instances that are manifest largely in practices of talk in interaction (word selection and turn design) and those in which an embodied component is at least as important in establishing the poetic connection between people. Space has not

permitted discussion of examples of these kind, but there are cases in my corpus (and in Schegloff's paper) in which one person's physical actions (in tandem with conspicuous word selection) constitute and indeed amplify the apparent resonance between one person's public actions and another's conscious preoccupations. Second, there are nuanced variations in the ways in which word selection establishes that resonance. For example, in the Hollós 'shoots around the flat' case, and in most of Schegloff's cases, there is a clear punning function of the spoken utterance. But that element of playful connection seems less clear in the 'green man/loyalist man' instance. Here, the other's turn seems to do much more overly pragmatic work in that it establishes an interpersonal alignment between participants. Finally in the 'purgatory' case, the interpersonal dimension is difficult to discern: the participants were not engaged in any interaction (nor had any kind of relationships) other than that enacted through one person's little turn 'You're in purgatory here'. Though there are variations in the interpersonal dynamics exemplified by the cases presented here, they all have in common that curious turn design component. For that reason, there is perhaps an underlying word selection phenomenon here, but one which is then modulated with respect to a more fine grained range of relational moments.

There is another key methodological issue. There is a body of work on the ways in which people report unusual experiences such as these reported here. For example, drawing on conversation analytic techniques, I have analysed how people report personal encounters with paranormal phenomena and the ways in which psychic practitioners (such as mediums and clairvoyants) convey information apparently from a paranormal source (Wooffitt, 1992; 2006). The objective of these studies was not to arbitrate on the objective reality of the experiences or claimed powers, but to analyse tacit communicative strategies by which, for example, reporters of paranormal experiences establish the authenticity of their experience

and their reliability as reporters. The same analytic focus could be addressed to the kinds of stories that constitute my data. This would undoubtedly be revealing: a cursory inspection suggests the kind of tacit, culturally available understandings of what counts as a legitimate or authoritative report that underpin the construction of these accounts. However, that broadly constructionist approach has not informed this paper. Following conversation analysis, I take it that there are objective and describable properties of talk-in-interaction, and have tried to draw from CA work to try to reconstruct these interpersonal activities from subsequent accounts. This reconstructive work is undoubtedly a tricky methodological step, precisely because of the fact that discourse is as much action oriented as it is a medium for reporting and telling.

The benefit of drawing from conversation analysis (and to a lesser extent, Goffman's ethnographies of mundane social order) is that, while recognising the methodological difficulties in using retrospective accounts such as these, it allows us to try to develop interpretations and analyses that are grounded in organisation of ordinary communicative practices. This goes some way to addressing Wetherell's critique of those studies of unconscious affective communication that edit out or ignore '…most of the social and discursive context. We are given very little information about the preceding interactions, about the "he said, she said" detail of what followed…' (Wetherell, 2012: 154). A firm understanding of how ordinary communication works, and analysis of collections of instances with similar features, goes some way to providing the social and discursive context that Wetherell calls for. It is an empirically grounded basis from which we can begin to explore the more enigmatic forms of intersubjective understanding that are suggested by poetic confluence, and other forms of unusual communication such as those from psychoanalysis variously labelled Freudian transference and countertransference, Kleinian projective

identification, ‘moments of meeting’ (Hogenson, 2009), ‘shared unconscious processes’ (Redman, 2009), ‘the dialogue of the unconsciouses’ (Bass, 2015), ‘boundaryless affective states’ (Burton, 2012), the ‘transcendent function’ (Ulanov, 1997), and so on.

If the analyses presented here have substance, it is hard to deny that a sharing of subjective interiority seems implicated in the phenomenon of poetic confluence - whatever its mechanisms. In many instances, a shift in attentional focus is indexed by the declared intention to speak at the next appropriate moment; reporters describe how imagery came to mind having lapsed into reverie or daydream; and their descriptions can suggest that sudden and evocative imagery or thoughts intruded in their awareness and transformed their conscious attention. The study of consciousness is a vast and complex field, and there is little consensus about what consciousness is, how it relates to brain processes, and the mechanisms of subjective experience. What will be of particular relevance to our understanding of poetic confluence are those studies of the way that the focus and experience of consciousness can change - not in experimental settings designed to elicit obvious alterations to the conscious experience, but in everyday life: those subtle modulations in the way that subjective awareness plays on the world, and which shapes and colours in almost unnoticeable ways our moment-by-moment experience and sense of being. Whatever processes are implicated in these experiential transformations may deeply be consequential to our understanding of the relationship between subjectivity and enigmatic transactional dynamics in everyday life.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my two anonymous reviewers, whose encouragement and insightful comments significantly helped me strengthen and clarify the argument of this paper. I would also like to thank Dr Germaine Stockbridge for translating the Hollós paper.

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