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Poetic Confluence:

The Social Organization of a Telepathic Experience[1]

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Abstract: This paper is an exploratory sociological analysis of poetic confluence, a spontaneous telepathic phenomenon that occurs in everyday social interaction. In poetic confluence, one person's talk exhibits an enigmatic relationship to another's unstated thoughts or imagery at that moment. The analyses draw from an empirical approach called Conversation Analysis, a formal qualitative method for the analysis of naturally occurring interaction in everyday life. In Conversation Analysis, talk-in-interaction is analyzed as coordinated and sequentially organized action. The focus on the action orientation of talk informs this analysis, treating poetic confluence as a form of social action. The data are (unavoidably) anecdotal accounts of experiences. Although the techniques of Conversation Analysis cannot be applied to anecdotal reports, its methodological principles and substantive focus can inform a systematic analysis of anecdotal data. A case is made for the robustness of poetic confluence via analysis of recurrent properties found in examples from three corpora of candidate cases. The analysis identifies three interpersonal functions of poetic confluence: its role in restoring mutual attention; its affiliative, affective function; and its role as a mechanism for managing threats to social propriety, or keeping "face." In the discussion, alternative skeptical explanations are assessed; the empirical approach is framed in terms of Cardeña's (2019) observations on the metaphoric quality of some psi phenomena and Carpenter's (2012) first sight theory, and some suggestions are offered for further research on social interaction and psi phenomena.

Keywords: Poetic confluence, spontaneous cases, interaction, turn design, face-work, psi.

Highlights

• This paper offers a sociological analysis of poetic confluence, an ostensibly spontaneous telepathic phenomenon that occurs in everyday social interaction.

• The analysis is informed by an empirical approach to the analysis of interaction that treats talk as social action, and the vehicle for the management of interpersonal relations.

• I argue that poetic confluence is a resource for the coordination of mutual attention, affective affiliation, and the management of threat to social propriety.

This paper is an exploratory sociological analysis of a telepathic phenomenon that occurs in naturally occurring social interaction. The phenomenon, which I call poetic confluence, occurs when one interlocutor's turn seems to refer to, allude to, or "capture" another's unstated thoughts or imagery at that moment. Here is an illustrative example. This is the text of an email sent to me by one of my former undergraduate students, in which she describes part of a conversation between her partner and his friend, which her partner, aware of her interest in the phenomenon, related to my student to pass on to me.

Example 1: Rattled/Ratted

A and B used to work together until B moved to a different job to become a manager, they now frequently meet in the pub in which B works to catch up. A had just been fired from his job and was in the pub telling B about how it had happened, however, B was preoccupied thinking about a rat he had seen earlier in the day and how disgusting it had been. A then announced that the whole situation that led to him being fired had really 'ratted' him, going on to correct himself to 'rattled', which directly articulated the thoughts that B was having regarding the rat.

One interlocutor's turn, in which he incorrectly uses the word *ratted* to convey his response to being fired from a job (ratted being a UK vernacular term for drunk), seems to chime with the other's contemporaneous recollection of being revulsed by his encounter with a rat. On first inspection, this seems like mere coincidence. I will make the argument that there is evidence for the robustness of this phenomenon in a later section. But first

it is necessary to outline the value of a sociological approach to understanding this form of ostensibly spontaneous telepathic experience.

Research on spontaneous psi experiences is longstanding and diverse (White, 1992). From the early days of psychical research, investigation of spontaneous cases tried to establish the objective reality of mind-to-mind contact (Gurney et al., 1886) and precognition (Besterman, 1932-33; Saltmarsh, 1934). Louisa Rhine's analysis of the several thousand unsolicited epistolic accounts submitted to the Rhine laboratory at Duke led to a thematic classification of types of experiences and the conditions in which they occurred (Rhine, 1981, 2018; see also Kelly & Tucker, 2015; Stevenson, 1970). Survey based research has revealed the incidence of subjective paranormal experiences in various populations (Castro et al., 2014; Haraldsson, 1985; Palmer, 1979), and there has been research to identify psychological features, such as associated imagery, vividness, and degree of conviction (Alvarado, 1996). Since the 1980s there has been interest in the phenomenological features of spontaneous cases (Alvarado 1984; Drinkwater et al., 2013; Schlitz 1983; Simmonds-Moore, 2016).

There are some common themes. First, there is a focus on what Carpenter (2012) calls *lightning bolt* examples of spontaneous experience, such as inexplicable awareness of a distant other's death or injury. There is much less attention given to more mundane experiences. Second, parapsychological research on spontaneous cases reflects the concerns of the parent discipline, psychology. There is a focus on psychological correlates of experiences, and there is an assumption that psi is a form of information exchange between discrete brains. Apart from some sociologically informed survey work, there has been little interest in the sociological contexts and correlates of spontaneous experiences, even though the potential relevance of social and cultural variables is occasionally acknowledged in the parapsychological literature (Edge, 1986; Radin, 1997: 293; Schmeidler, 2018), and explored in work on paranormal beliefs and themes in popular culture (e.g., Jenzen & Munt, 2013). Finally, there is an assumption that research on spontaneous cases is less scientifically valuable than experimental research. This was explicitly articulated by Louisa Rhine in publication (1981) and in private conversation (Alvarado & Zingrone, 2008); this is also reflected in the sheer volume of experimental research compared to studies of spontaneous psi experiences.

This analysis complements these themes. It examines a phenomenon rooted in everyday concerns, not exceptional lightning bolt moments, and develops a distinctly sociological approach, in that it proposes that poetic confluence should be examined as a form of social action, not information transfer. Finally, it emphasizes the importance of the naturally occurring social contexts out of which instances of the phenomenon emerge.

It has been long acknowledged that if telepathic communication is real, then its home environment is not the laboratory, but everyday life (Irwin & Watt, 2007). And if it is a form of communication – albeit one whose mechanisms and properties are by no means fully understood – then we may ask how it connects to other forms of more mundane communication, such as ordinary conversation. We have the basis for this broadly comparative interest. Since the 1960s, there has emerged in sociology an approach to the study of conversational interaction which has come to be known as Conversation Analysis, or CA. Despite its origins in sociology, it is now influential in many social science disciplines concerned with what is referred to as *talk-in-interaction* (e.g., Schegloff, 1987). A key assumption of CA (and one that emerged from empirical analysis) is that talk is not merely a mechanism for the exchange of information but a form of social action: we use it to do things to each other, and with each other. In this, it reflects Wittgenstein's later philosophy of language (Wittgenstein, 1953), and the speech act theory proposed by the philosopher J.L Austin (1962). However, CA is not a philosophical perspective but a highly technical and detailed empirical analysis of the organization of interaction at a micro level. The empirical objective is to identify and describe robust sequential patterns in talk through which speakers produce orderly and intelligible interaction. Part of that enterprise is to explicate the tacit norms and assumptions that underpin social interaction. This reflects the influence of Erving Goffman, whose pioneering research into the normative basis of face-to-face interaction established the micro social order as a legitimate domain for sociological inquiry (Goffman, 1983).

Although the phenomenon of poetic confluence cannot be examined using the techniques of CA (for reasons which will become apparent) it is still useful in two senses. First, there is now a substantial and cumulative understanding of the formal properties of talk through which people manage social actions such as turn-transfer, correction and repair, person reference, affiliation and alignment, and storytelling, among many other features of everyday talk. The findings from CA research can therefore help us understand the social dimension

of telepathic experience. Second, it provides a distinctive empirical perspective, a "conversation analytic mentality" (Schenkein, 1978), which offers new ways to think about telepathic communication as a form of social action.

Data and Analytic Method

At the time of writing, I have 60 candidate cases. It is not possible to generate examples of this experience; I have to wait for people to send me accounts of their spontaneous experiences and monitor my own everyday interaction for examples. Consequently, the corpus was developed in the same way that Freud collected instances of slips of the tongue (Freud, 1975 [1901]), linguists collect speech errors (MacKay, 1980), and psychologists collect moments of spontaneous inappropriate conduct (Norman, 1981). Seven cases were published in books or articles about paranormal experiences and were spotted by readers aware of my work, who then sent me photocopies of the relevant page(s). Of the remaining 53, I am involved in 20 examples. The remaining 33 cases come from friends, colleagues, and undergraduate and postgraduate students. All were sent to me via email, and the senders were aware that their accounts would be included in my research before they sent them. Three cases used in this paper are second hand in that they occurred to acquaintances of the person who sent an account to me.

Most cases arise in ordinary conversation but there are some examples in work settings. There is no common topic in the ongoing conversation into which the apparently telepathic turn intrudes. Neither do the data suggest any common relationships between the people involved, as there are instances that occurred between relative strangers, professionals and their clients, close friends, domestic partners, work colleagues, and family members. When presenting the cases below submitted to me via email, I have retained the original spelling, formatting, typos, and grammatical lapses. All names have been anonymized. Where possible, other identifying details have been removed or anonymized. I have also used examples from two other collections as evidence of the robustness and consistent features of the phenomenon.

The data are unavoidably anecdotal and so there are issues of accuracy of recall, selectivity in reporting, the effects of confirmation bias, and so on, but there is no alternative form of data. If we are to investigate this phenomenon (if it is accepted that there is a phenomenon), then retrospective anecdotal accounts are all we have. However, we can develop a more formal empirical analysis of these data if we draw from Conversation Analytic research on naturally occurring social interaction. To grasp what CA can offer, it is helpful to discuss an illustrative example. This does mean a momentary detour from a focus on the telepathic experience. However, it allows me to provide a rationale for the way that I subsequently go on to build the argument that poetic confluence is a robust phenomenon and illustrates the claim that talk is a form of social action (introductions to CA can be found in Atkinson & Heritage 1984; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Sidnell & Stivers, 2013).

CA and the Study of Talk-in-Interaction

In CA research analysts work with corpora of audio and video recorded data of naturally occurring interaction, transcribed to capture aspects of talk normally excluded from more conventional orthographic transcriptions. It is conventional for corpora to be shared in the CA community (and beyond). Thus, when beginning analysis, researchers may have access to several hundred hours of transcribed recordings. Analyses may proceed with a specific question, for example how are repairs/corrections organized? However, many projects begin with an unmotivated noticing of something of interest.

Such was the origin of Drew's (1987) study of teasing. From working with various corpora, he noted that on occasions, a speaker may produce a joking or playful tease directed to another. The target laughs, recognizing the playful nature of the remark, but then they produce a serious response. Drew was puzzled: why would someone respond seriously to an utterance they have demonstrably recognized to be non-serious? Here is an example, which comes from a video recording of a family dinner, recorded to collect a corpus of video and audio data of ordinary family activities. (This is a heavily simplified version of the transcribed data).

From Drew, 1987, p.22.

Dot: Do we have two forks 'cause we're on television?

Mother: No we-

Angie: (Laughs)

Mother: (Laughs)

Father: Yeah (laughter) probably the answer right there

Mother: You have pie- You have pie tonight

The tease "Do we have two forks 'cause we're on television?" refers to the presence of the camera and is addressed by a daughter to her mother. The mother begins to respond to the tease by saying "No we-" which is the start of a rebuttal and an account for the unusual presence of two forks. Angie begins to laugh, recognizing the tease, and the father joins in. Then the mother joins in. When the laughter has subsided, she resumes and completes her account, stating that the additional forks are on the table because she is serving a pie for dessert.

Drew collected numerous other instances of what he terms a po-faced, or serious response to teases. Many cases exhibited the same pattern: the tease, the target's recognition of the tease through laughter, and then their serious response. Drew's analysis shows that the design of the tease ascribes a mildly deviant identity to the teased party or proposes that the teased party's behavior is marginally out of the ordinary. So, "Do we have two forks 'cause we're on television?" implies that Mother is being pretentious in her choice of cutlery simply because they were being video recorded ("on television"). Drew's analysis shows how the po-faced response undercuts the ascribed deviant identity and re-asserts a non-deviant identity. For example, Mother's "You have pie tonight" offers a pragmatic explanation for the presence of the additional forks and thereby rejects the ascription of pretentiousness.

This is a very short account of a detailed analysis, but it demonstrates three features of the CA approach that can inform an analysis of telepathic moments in social interaction. First, it is necessary to establish the recurrent properties of the phenomenon. Drew did this by demonstrating the same tease – laughter – po-faced response sequence over numerous extracts taken from various corpora. Second, he shows how the design of turns produce social actions. So, the selection of the word television (as opposed to, say, camera or video) constitutes that turn's action as a tease. Finally, his analysis of the way that mildly deviant identities are ascribed and resisted in tease sequences demonstrates how interpersonal relations are tacitly negotiated (and resisted) in the moment-by-moment unfolding of talk.

The data for CA research are recordings of interaction and their transcriptions. It focuses exclusively on what can be publicly observed and recorded. For that reason, it is not possible to use CA to examine cases of poetic confluence, as they necessarily involve an introspective element that cannot be recorded. However, the focus on patterns, the actions produced through talk, and the negotiation of interpersonal relationships can *inform* our analyses of anecdotal accounts of this kind of telepathic experience.

The Case for Poetic Confluence

Poetic confluence is a playfully realized confluence of one person's interiority and another's talk, seemingly unmediated by everyday communicative processes. The first formal identification of this phenomenon in English appears in a chapter by the conversation analyst Emanual Schegloff (Schegloff, 2003). One day, working with a colleague, Gail Jefferson, he observed her bring a pencil to her mouth, rather than the cigarette she was holding with her other hand. Immediately, Schegloff was reminded of an incident he had witnessed as a student when, during a class, a very famous academic used a piece of chalk to scratch his ear, and absentmindedly left the chalk protruding as he continued his lecture. This is Schegloff's (2003) description of what happened next.:

> 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. (pp. 531-532, emphasis in the original).

Having initially noticed the phenomenon, he had other experiences, as did colleagues and students to whom he had spoken of his experiences, building a small corpus. His 2003 chapter is not a formal analysis, but a presentation of 16 examples in this corpus, which at that time consisted of 20 cases.

Schegloff noted that throughout his collection, the turns that appear to connect to the other's unstated thoughts exhibit unusual features in that word selection may be in error, clumsy, or ill-fitted to the context, and is not an idiosyncrasy of that person. For example, in the case with Jefferson, what Schegloff termed an ESP pun is constituted by Jefferson's use of the word *earmark* to capture the kind of recurrent trait or characteristic which would normally be described as a trademark, or hallmark. Although this word is not fitted to the kind of turn she was making, it seems to have a conspicuous relation to the imagery that had come to Schegloff's mind when he saw her bring the pencil rather than the cigarette to her mouth. This conspicuous turn design is common to the phenomenon. Here is another example from Schegloff.

> I am visiting with friends in England, talking about the behavior of fans at sporting events. He is comparing cricket and football (soccer) in England. I am thinking of telling, when the turn is mine, about the soccer game my wife and I attended in Campinas, Brazil, after which the fans set fire to newspapers in the stands. My friend is telling me that families go together to cricket matches but not to football, and says "They've burnt off families going." Subsequently he says that he "flashed on" the phrase "burnt off" a few moments before using it, which would be just as I was forming up my next tellable. And, it turns out, this is not an ordinary usage of his, and is unidiomatic in context. (Schegloff, 2003, p. 538)

"Burnt off" seems to reflect the experience that Schegloff was planning to report in his next turn; it is not, though, a phrase conventionally used to describe how people might be deterred from attending sporting events, or indeed, any event.

Schegloff, however, was not the first to publish accounts of this kind of telepathic incident. In 1933 the Hungarian psychoanalyst István Hollós published examples of the many hundreds of telepathic experiences with patients he had observed during his career (Hollós, 1933). A translation of this paper revealed that many of the cases match the features of the Schegloff collection and my corpus. 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.

Here there is a clumsy phrase which, according to Hollós, contains an explicit error. The patient refers to her mother walking around the flat in "butchered Hungarian" with (presumably unexpected or inappropriate) elements of German contaminating a conventional Hungarian figure of speech. Yet this clumsy phrase captures Hollós' unarticulated anxieties about the next patient who had, in the previous session, brandished a firearm.

This example illustrates another recurrent feature of the phenomenon. The imagery or thoughts captured by the spoken turn seem to concern unusual events, evocative imagery, or emotional themes. The cases so far: encountering a rat in a pub, an esteemed professor leaving chalk in his ear; recollection of people starting fires in a sports stadium, and concerns about a possible shooting. Here is an example from my corpus, sent to me via email by a colleague who had attended a talk by a visiting academic.

Example 2: SPD/Make 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 while 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.

During the talk, the reporter's thoughts drift to her recollection of developing Symphysis Pubis Dysfunction during pregnancy. This is clearly a sensitive issue. Her use of 'my...uhm...middle area (?!)' to refer to her pubic area explicitly acknowledges the intimate nature of the condition. Her imagery of her bones physically separating is an evocative exaggeration of the condition. The speaker's use of the phrase "make no bones" (which is conventionally used in US and British English to convey unapologetic honesty) is a literal allusion to the reporter's imagery. Though we cannot be sure that the phrase was ill-fitted to the precise moment of the talk in which it was used, it is notable that the speaker later confirmed that it is not an idiosyncratic phrase.

Schegloff called these apparently parapsychological connections between imagery and utterance ESP puns. Although this is an arresting term, there are grounds for exploring alternatives. Puns are just one of a range of conversational poetic forms (Jefferson, 1996; Wooffitt, 2011; Wooffitt et al., 2021b), a range reflected in reports of poetic turns. Moreover, the use of "extra sensory perception" rooted as it is in experimental parapsychology, focuses on cognition, and overlooks the social and interpersonal features of the phenomenon. For these

reasons I have adopted the term *poetic confluence* to capture how private conscious experience and public utterances appear, on occasion, to come together and find expression in poetic forms.

Drawing from Schegloff's initial observations and my own analysis of all available cases (my collection and the examples presented in the publications by Schegloff and Hollós), there seem to be robust and recurrent properties of poetic confluence in social interaction.

• The phenomenon is a confluence of public talk and unarticulated conscious experience.

• The turn which seems to allude to the other's private thoughts contains a speech error, or an infelicitous or unusual phrase.

• That turn is concerned with the business at hand - the conversational topic at that moment - and is not produced as an attempt to guess or mimic what the other is thinking about.

• It is this incorrect or unusual word or phrase selection that constitutes that utterance's ostensibly telepathic relation to the other person's imagery or thoughts.

• The turn that appears to capture the other's imagery or thoughts has poetic, sometimes playful qualities.

• The imagery or thoughts which are captured by the spoken turn seem to concern unusual events, evocative imagery, or emotional themes.

Before we proceed with a sociological analysis, it is important to recognize that there is a clear parallel to features of Freudian slips of the tongue (Freud, 1901/1975), in that the speech error seems to give voice to the kind of sensitive imagery or thoughts a person might not wish to disclose. What is unusual is that the utterance voices another's unarticulated concerns: these are slips made on behalf of the other, not inadvertent disclosures about self. This dyadic foundation makes relevant several interpersonal issues, some of which are explored in more detail later.

Having established the features of the phenomenon via examination of three corpora, we can begin to examine three social functions: the coordination of mutual attention required for turn-taking, affective affiliation, and managing face, or social propriety.

Mutual Coordination and Turn Transfer

Ordinary conversation requires us to take turns. Turn transfer is so ubiquitous and central to social life that it is difficult to imagine that it requires concerted and collaborative effort. Yet it is an extraordinary achievement. At the start of a conversation, it is difficult to predict the topics that might arise (even if there is an intention to raise some specific matter); there are no restrictions on the length of turns, and there are no rules determining the type of turn that a speaker might produce. Interaction involving more than two parties adds to the difficulty of determining who among the possible next speakers will take the floor as we do not enter into conversation with a pre-allocated turn order.

Conversation analytic research on turn transfer has established that turns are designed to project when they may be coming to an end, which allows possible next speakers to anticipate the onset of a normatively appropriate (that is, not interruptive) moment for turn transfer (Sacks, et al., 1974). Syntax, prosody, turn design, and body and head orientation are some of the cues projecting the end of the current turn (for an overview of research on turn construction and turn transfer see Clayman, 2013; Hayashi, 2013). The requirement to anticipate when turn transfer may be normatively appropriate provides a motivation for current non-speakers to pay close attention to the unfolding design of the ongoing turn. Although this monitoring may be entirely tacit, and unnoticed by conversationalists, it is well documented in empirical research; for example, at the onset of turn completion potential next speakers can be heard to take inbreaths in anticipation of speaking or begin their turn just prior to the projected turn completion. Mutual attention to ongoing talk is therefore fundamental for the achievement of orderly turn transfer.

It is a common feature of many accounts of poetic confluence that the reporter describes being distracted from the ongoing conversation just prior to the experience. There are reports of daydreaming, minds wandering,

and the onset of inwardly focused reverie. In these moments, when reporters disattend to the ongoing talk, they momentarily fail to meet the basic requirement for coordinated social interaction. There is evidence, though, that poetic confluence works to restore attention and mutual coordination. This is because the turn that constitutes the telepathic connection seems to restore the other's attention to the here-and-now. In the following case, for example, the reporter finds herself distracted by images of injury from a skiing accident, such that she misses part of a friend's ongoing story.

Example 3: Leg Break/SNAP

> I also had another paranormal pun, while I remember, my friends B, K and I were talking about a skiing holiday B had been on in Easter, while talking about what a nice time she had, I got an image of me skiing down the hill and breaking my leg in some horrible way, which made me do a bit of a shudder, at which point my friend K said, 'SNAP' really loudly, about another part of the story I had missed, which brought me out of my day dream! I'm not sure if that's a very good one though...

The friend's SNAP captures the unpleasant imagery, and more significantly, brings the reporter out of what she describes as a daydream. Here is another case, by a then PhD student, who knew the reporter.

Example 4: Mushroom Cloud/Fallout

> This is from my friend in Belgium:
>
> It's going to be a bit high level as the full story is technical and would contain very confidential information... If you need it fleshing out more, just let me know. I'm a bit tired, so it's not going to be Shakespeare either.
>
> I was sitting in on a project planning meeting for the upcoming quarter. A few other developers were in the room, and our business and tech management were on video conference from our main office. Our manager got to a point of talking about continuity of business on a global scale, and asked us to look into the possibility of planning a strategy for shifting the physical locations of where our pro-

grams run in case of disaster. He used the far east, specifically Seoul, as an example. This was about the time that North and South Korea were close to going to war, with shots being fired by both sides. At that point an image got into my head of a "mushroom cloud". I was snapped out of this morbid vision, when I heard my boss saying "control the fallout". The usual technical term being overflow or failover in this situation.

Hope that's what you're after.

In this case, the ill-fitted word "fallout" both connects to the reporter's dramatic internal imagery and refocuses his attention on the meeting. On occasion, then, poetic confluence seems to work as a mechanism to ensure the mutual attention required for coordinated turn transfer.

There is further evidence for this conclusion from the psychoanalytic literature. Analysts report that they experience being caught out not paying attention to the patient via an utterance that seems to have telepathic qualities. The following comes from an account of an experience during therapy and concerns the patient's apparently telepathic awareness that the analyst (who refers to himself in the third person) was preoccupied by a letter.

on this occasion… I positively yearned to wind up this letter business... I was impatient because time had been lost. I also had some guilt feelings because I had done an injustice to the patient, who had a right to the analyst's undivided attention. In addition to feeling guilty, I also harboured the hope that the patient would not notice my lack of attention. Hence, when the patient suddenly asked a question about the matter which preoccupied the analyst… the analyst had the feeling that, somehow or other, he had been 'found out' or 'caught in the act. (Hitschmann, 1953: 129-130).

The analyst felt he had been found out not paying attention to what the patient was saying, which reflected the underlying normative understanding that one has an obligation to attend to co-participants in social interaction. Other therapists have made similar observations (for example, Balint, 1956, p. 32). There is evidence then, that on occasion, a person can be brought out of an inner reverie or internal preoccupation via another's spoken turn that seems to exhibit telepathic awareness. In this, poetic confluence may be just one mech-

anism for assuring mutual attention, which is normatively required and indeed necessary for coordinated management of orderly turn transfer.

Interpersonal Affiliation

Instances of poetic confluence suggest it may be a mechanism for one party to demonstrate or establish an affective, affiliative stance towards another. The interpersonal function is demonstrated in the following case. This was sent to me by a man I had met in a social context, and with whom I had discussed my work.

Example 5: Blube/Bluey

It's Tom, we were chatting in [*venue*] on Tuesday and you asked me to email you over an account of what I was telling you about. I'm not sure exactly what you need but I'll give you an outline.

Essentially my partner referred to a stuffed animal by a similar name to a childhood toy of mine. The two toys are

A. My partners stuffed toy, a little blue stuffed rabbit called 'Blube' (pronounced like 'tube' but with a 'bl' instead of the 't').

B. As a child my Mum got me a blue teddy bear, which I called 'Bluey' (pronounced like 'blue' but with an 'ey', or 'blue-ee'). My partner did not know about Bluey at the time.

This occurred a bit before the October lockdown. I think it was the afternoon of the 5th September 2020, which is the Saturday after my mums birthday. However, I may be wrong on the exact date but it was certainly around this time.

I was a bit upset as my mother passed away in July of 2019. My partner could see I was upset, moping/down in the dumps sat on our bed, she came in and in the course of chatting picked up and offered me Blube to try and cheer me up. I can't remember the exact words she used at the start of the conversation, something to the effect of "are you ok" and "how are you feeling" as she clearly knew I was upset (though to be honest I'm not sure she knew exactly why). She then said

"...take Bluey, he'll cheer you up."

whilst handing me Blube, she clearly meant to say "...take Blube, he'll cheer you up.". I then asked "Why did you call him Bluey?" and she thought she said Blube and had no recollection of saying Bluey, like when you make a slip of the tongue and don't even notice. She certainly did say Bluey though, it jumped out at me due to the significance of it.

I thought this was pertinent to what you are looking at as this slip of the tongue was related to my Mum, though I wasn't thinking about Bluey at that point (and to be honest hadn't thought about him in years). Furthermore, my partner did not know about this teddybear from my childhood, let alone its name.

The reporter's partner is clearly trying to cheer up the reporter via the playful offer of her teddy bear, but the error in her turn reproduces a toy's name central to the cause of the reporter's low mood. It is not the objective of this paper to delve into psychological explanations, but in offering the toy with the name of the reporter's childhood teddy the partner essentially enacts the absent mother's response to her child's distress or unhappiness. Affiliative enactment is also evident in the following case. This comes from a person who, with his partner, was involved in an expensive, lengthy, and highly stressful property renovation project.

Example 6: Absent Frenchman/Monsieur

My partner and I had arranged to meet Francois, the wood craftsman, at the hall at 8 am to discuss our ideas and requirements for a staircase which he was to design and build. He did not turn up. While we were waiting, becoming increasingly annoyed, my partner and I made some fairly ripe stereotypical remarks: that he will turn up on a bicycle, with a bag of onions, that kind of thing. After an hour of waiting around, Francois had still not arrived, or called, and we had to leave for work, now entertaining the idea of contacting someone else to do the stairs. We were both very frustrated by Francois' no show: apart from wasting our time, we knew that finding a new craftsman would be difficult so close to the end of the project, and his estimated fee had been very reasonable, and managing the cost of the project

was a constant source of stress for us both. As we were leaving I made a jokey remark to Neal, the site foreman, that eventually led to spate of interaction that centred on Francois' nationality: I said to Neal if a Frenchman turns up, tell him he's just lost a big job. Neal said 'muppet' [*used in the UK vernacularly as a derogatory term, implying foolishness - Author*] and I said "Le muppet' with French pronunciation, ie, not pronouncing the 'et', but saying 'ay'.

I arrived at work, extremely aggravated. At about 10 am, X [a colleague] came to speak to me. My door was slightly ajar but my back was turned to it. He knocked, I turned round, he entered the room and said, theatrically, 'Monsieur.' Before he had chance to ask me what he wanted to ask me I asked him why he had selected that term of address; he said he didn't know why. He hadn't addressed me like this ever before [or since]; he is not French, nor had he just been to France. But it seemed perfectly fitted to my pre-occupation with Francois and the way that his nationality had become invoked in a series of banterish exchanges with Neal.

The unexpected use of a French address term resonates with the reporter's preoccupations with a French craftsman. In addition, there is a performative and embodied aspect to this case. As he says Monsieur, the colleague is walking into the reporter's office, thereby physically presenting himself as a Frenchman to a person preoccupied with the absence of a Frenchman.

In the next case the poetic turn establishes an alignment between the two interactants. There is also an epistemic element, in that it revolves around momentary lapse in knowledge. This was sent to me by a then Ph. D. student, and concerns an experience that occurred while visiting Belfast, in Northern Ireland. Although the nationalistic and sectarian violence (known as the Troubles) have largely ceased since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, there are still significant tensions in Belfast between the pro-British Protestant Loyalists and the Catholic Republicans, who want to see a united Ireland (for example, Catholic and Protestant communities are still segregated by numerous barriers throughout the city).

Example 7: Green Man/Loyalist 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."

This, then, is a notable, albeit momentary, epistemic lapse on the part of the reporter. There is then a brief spate of interaction: the friend asks why they have stopped walking, and the reporter refers to the pedestrian crossing system which is yet to display an illuminated green figure indicating it is safe to cross. The friend appropriates the reference to the green man and makes a joke, saying 'Its not the green man, its the loyalist man' [sic]. This is, of course, an error. The friend's turn thereby alludes to the reporter's momentary preoccupation and produces as his public error precisely the category of epistemic problem the reporter was experiencing privately at that moment. His turn establishes that she was not alone in having trouble with the colors associated with local political and religious factions. In this, it demonstrates recognition of and alignment with her difficulty.

Managing Face

Earlier I discussed a CA paper on the organization of teases and po-faced responses. That analysis revealed how the tease attributes a mildly deviant identity to the target of the tease; and it showed how the po-faced response addressed and rebutted that identity. In this, the po-faced response is a form of what Goffman termed face-work. Goffman (1967) defines face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [sic]… during a particular social contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes…" (p. 5).

Face-work, then, refers to the social activities we engage in to present to others a positive sense of self. Threats to face may arise from momentary lapses in etiquette or competence, unintendedly inappropriate remarks, interpersonal stumbles, slips of the tongue, unexpected bodily emissions, and so on. These constitute departures from "approved social values" and can derail interpersonal conduct, as they require remedial work to manage the threat to face. However, the requirement to manage the presentation of self does not only apply to our own face but applies equally to the face of others: "A person will also have feelings about the face sustained for the other participants…they constitute an involvement in the face of others that is as immediate and spontaneous as the involvement in his own face. One's own face and the face of others are constructs of the same order…" (Goffman, 1967, p. 6). When others experience a loss of face, it threatens the collective moment, and thereby our participation in it; Goffman documents the various ways in which we can "counteract 'incidents' [that are] events whose effective symbolic implications threaten face" (Goffman, 1967, p. 12).

In many of the poetic confluence cases, the reporter's thoughts or imagery constitute a transgression of moral and social boundaries, which, were they expressed in public, would likely be met with disapproval or embarrassment. It is a robust feature that the turn that establishes the psi relationship works to address and detoxify the transgressive elements of the other's inner experiences. The next example of poetic confluence provides a stark example.

Some ethnographic context is helpful. The reporter is a personal acquaintance who described in an email an experience that happened to his partner, a podiatrist, two days after they had attended a public lecture in

which I discussed the phenomenon. The example involves a homophobic and highly distasteful slang term in British English to refer to gay male sexual activity. The person who sent the email acknowledges the transgressive character of the phrase in his remark that I may not be able to use this case. For those unfamiliar with British food, chutney (also known as "pickle") is a dark brown relish made from fruit, spices, sugar, and vinegar.

Example 8: Chutney Ferrets/Pickle

> 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!'

The key element here is the phrase "chutney ferrets" that comes to the podiatrist's mind when the patient refers to the unambiguous sexual orientation of the dogs' owners. Although this account is second hand, coming via her partner, there is no evidence that she, the podiatrist, recognized the offensiveness of the term; indeed, she is described as finding it amusing, and, presumably, her finding the phrase to be amusing was included in the account as she reported it to her partner.

It is at this point that the patient reports that the dogs "got me in a right pickle," a British English idiom which is used to capture mildly difficult personal circumstances, often with non-serious or even humorous features. As a synonym for chutney, pickle therefore captures that component of the podiatrist's thoughts; but it also deletes the overtly homophobic and graphic bodily connotations of the phrase chutney ferrets. It displays awareness of the other's thought, but discretely overlooks the offensive component. In this, the poetic turn is a type of formulation.

In everyday social interaction, formulations are turns in which one person glosses the sense or upshot of either another's prior talk (Heritage & Watson, 1979) or their own prior talk (Wooffitt, 1991). Formulations

perform interpretive operations on prior talk, preserving, deleting, or transforming components, and thus can be the vehicle for a range of pragmatic actions. In this case, pickle deletes the sensitive and sanctionable components of the podiatrist's thought, thereby performing face-work, directed not to a lapse in public conduct but in private thought.

Here is another example of a poetic turn displaying recognition of what might be seen as an inappropriate thought (preparing for a "bad taste" joke) while deleting the inappropriate element.

Example 9: Claudia/Cloudy

> Three participants: A, B and me are in a bar. A had been talking about difficulties in securing a nanny for the two children. A first had to be sent home because she did not follow the mother's instructions. The second had arrived the previous weekend, but was so timid and so clearly unhappy about being in the UK, that A's partner took her to the airport to go home at the end of the first weekend in the job. A was reporting this primarily to B because I knew about the problems with the first nanny though not the second. As he was telling B about the second nanny the jokey idea formed in my mind that he was making claims that the nannies had been sent home or returned, but that in fact no one had ever seen them. My line of thought was arriving at a joke about murdering his nannies, and led to a connection to Claudia Lawrence the York chef who had disappeared in March 2009 and not been seen since. At the time that my mind was arriving at the name 'Claudia', A was reporting to B of his annoyance with the nanny agency who had sent him someone so clearly unsuitable and unprepared (for a second time). He was reporting how telephone conversations with the agency had been problematic. At the time the name 'Claudia' flashed into my mind he reported that communication with the agency had become cloudy.

> 'Cloudy' was not the right word. He was expressing his annoyance at their incompetence and the unsatisfactory outcome of their conversations. In that context the use of the word 'cloudy' did not fit the point he was trying to make, and the characterisation of the relationship with the agency in those conversations; it was a word selection ill fitted to the state of affairs he was describing, but entirely acous-

tically fitted to the image of the first name of the missing chef that flashed through my mind at precisely that moment.

The word cloudy articulates acoustic properties of the name Claudia and acts to call out and detoxify the bad taste joke about Lawrence's disappearance being formulated by the reporter.

Goffman's detailed ethnographic observational studies explored the web of moral and normative expectations that tacitly inform face-to-face-conduct. He identified the kinds of interpersonal sensitivities that can destabilize an encounter, which he described as the "judgemental contingencies of the situation" (Goffman, 1967, p. 31), and in response to which we use various interpersonal strategies of avoidance, resistance, or management. Poetic confluence appears to be one such resource for management potential threats of face.

On a less granular level, it is a very robust feature of poetic confluence experiences that the poetic turns address and manage the sensitive or evocative elements of another's private thoughts by offering a more normal or less evocative alternative. Consider the cases we have discussed so far:

Revulsion at the image of a rat in a pub/'Ratted' (being drunk)

Esteemed academic embarrassingly leaves chalk in his ear/'Earmark'

Fires in the stands at a football stadium/'Burnt off'

Concern about a shooting/'Shoots around the flat'

Imagery of separating bones/'No bones about it'

Imagery of skiing injury/'SNAP'

Imagery of mushroom cloud/'Control the fallout'

Thoughts of the loss of a parent/'Bluey'

Anger at absent Frenchman/'Monsieur'

Failure to remember political colours/'Loyalist man'

Homophobic term, chutney ferrets/'Pickle'

Formulating a bad taste joke about a missing woman named Claudia/'Cloudy'

In other cases in my corpus, poetic turns offer normalized versions of thoughts about, or imagery relating to, sexual activity, new sexual relationships, personal anxieties, and unkind or inappropriate thoughts about co-interactants. There are numerous studies of ordinary conversational interaction that show how turns at talk can be designed to address extreme, traumatic, or exaggerated claims in such a way as to scale down the implied seriousness or import (Antaki, 2008; Drew, 1987; Heritage & Watson, 1979; Jefferson, 2005). Telepathic communication mediated in episodes of poetic confluence seems to perform a similar range of interpersonal actions but directed to unstated thoughts and images.

Discussion

In this paper I have developed an approach to an ostensibly telepathic experience based on principles of Conversation Analytic research on talk-in-interaction. Although this is not a CA analysis, I have made a case for the phenomenon by examining recurrent features across collections, which is a methodological step common to CA research. I have then examined three interactional functions of poetic confluence, which reflects CA's examination of talk as a form of social action. Not all cases of poetic influence perform all actions; for example, there are fewer cases of poetic confluence restoring an interlocuter's attention to the interactional moment after a period of mind wandering than there are cases in which poetic turns call out and normalize internal preoccupations on evocative or sensitive matters.

There are several skeptical responses. The most compelling is that we cannot be sure how well these written accounts capture the actual dynamics of the interaction they relay. Moreover, we know talk and texts do not merely represent a factual world out there, but have a constitutive and constructive focus (Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wooffitt et al., 2021a). Furthermore, there are culturally based conventions for reporting unusual experiences (Neisser, 1982). There is, then, the danger of mistaking patterns in reporting for patterns in the social interaction they report. These are serious issues. Although the consistency in the structure of

the accounts goes some way to mitigating these concerns, it remains difficult to disentangle the mechanisms for reporting and the events reported.

It might be objected that once having been introduced to the phenomenon people then mistake everyday coincidence for something more intriguing because they are primed to interpret events as being examples of poetic confluence. From personal experience, I have not found this to be the case. I permanently monitor my own life for further cases, but that predisposition has not led to a glut of cases. I have not had an experience for several years.

The recurrent properties of the experience suggest that these are not coincidences. Moreover, reports of poetic confluence experiences have different discourse features than accounts of coincidences (Stockbridge, 2017; Stockbridge & Wooffitt, 2019). People routinely send me accounts of experiences which they think might be the kind of event I am studying, but they are not. These are recognizably mere coincidence, without any of the key features that have been identified in this paper. It is relatively simple to distinguish between accounts of coincidence and poetic confluence.

In his account of ESP puns, Schegloff (2003) addressed his own explicit skepticism about the phenomenon, writing: "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" (p. 539).

There are recurrent features across my corpus and the collections presented in Hollós (1933) and Schegloff (2003). The consistencies are in cases that date back to the 1920s and in cases collected from the 1970s to the present day. These consistencies come from instances that occurred in Europe and North America, and were experienced in German and in British and American English. There is a case, then, that the cumulative effect requirement proposed by Schegloff has been met historically, cross-culturally, and linguistically

The approach developed here is not parapsychological. It does, however, connect with themes in parapsychological research. In many cases there is a clear metaphorical dimension to the relation between thought and utterance. As Cardeña (2019) has observed, this metaphoric, often playful association is common to para-

psychological research using free response experimental design, and he draws clear links to work on telepathic associations in dreams. He proposes more broadly that metaphorical associations may be central to the porousness of self suggested by everyday psi related experiences. The phenomenon of poetic confluence also resonates with Carpenter's First Sight theory (Carpenter, 2012). Carpenter makes the case that unconscious psi mechanisms are fundamentally implicated in mundane cognitive processes. He thereby identifies the everyday as an environment in which psi processes may occur. His work is highly theoretical and is based on evidence from the literature of experimental psychology and parapsychology. But if everyday life is unavoidably underpinned by what he terms personal unconscious preconscious processes, then we should expect to see those processes implicated in everyday social interaction, from the technical requirements of turn transfer to the management of interpersonal relations.

This suggests several avenues for further research. Poetic confluence seems to be a moment of enigmatic relationality mediated by mundane process of social interaction, such as turn transfer, word selection, and turn design. But the processes of talk-in-interaction are extraordinarily complex and it may be that everyday psi is implicated in, or facilitated by, other sequentially organized episodes. Further analysis will have to move beyond anecdotal reports to focus on actual recordings of the talk which are associated with poetic confluence (or other forms of seemingly mysterious connection). Given the unavoidable introspective component of poetic confluence, collecting that kind of data presents significant challenges, requiring recordings of spontaneous events and subsequent interviews with the person whose imagery was apparently captured in another's ill-formed and incidental turn. But it would allow a sociological contribution to research on the conditions under which psi phenomena manifest in everyday life.

Skeptics often reject the possibility of telepathic communication because it cannot be accounted for in our current understanding of physics and biology. Poetic confluence, however, fits perfectly with what we know about the socially organized properties of talk-in-interaction. Poetic confluence works to ensure mutual attention for orderly turn transfer; it is a vehicle for affiliation and alignment; and it a mechanism by which sensitive imagery or thoughts can be reformulated and normalized. These are the kinds of interpersonal concerns and social actions that are routine in everyday talk. Sociologically, then, poetic confluence is an anomaly that is not

anomalous, as it accords with what we know about how social interaction works, and the relationships negotiated through talk.

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