

On ESP Puns

Emanuel A. Schegloff

University of California, Los Angeles

I eventually provide an analytic map locating the topic of this discussion within the larger domain of phenomena and practices of talk-in-interaction. But let me begin with an anecdotal account of the initial glimpse of the phenomenon. This is not only a convenient way into the matter, but turns out to be peculiarly apt to the topic, and, in a curious way, methodologically inescapable in explicating it.

In the late 1970s, Gail Jefferson and I were doing some work together in my office at UCLA. She was making occasional notes about the discussion and so sat with a pencil at the ready in her right hand. In her left, she held the cigarette she was smoking. At one juncture, in launching a move to take another drag on the cigarette, she brought to her mouth the hand holding the pencil rather than the one holding the cigarette. Seeing that move triggered in me the following recollection.

While a graduate student at Berkeley in the late 1950s, I once served as a reader for a course in political sociology taught by the distinguished political sociologist, Seymour Martin Lipset. One day, while lecturing, he was fiddling with a piece of chalk when he apparently experienced an itch in his ear. To relieve the itch he brought the piece of chalk to his ear and inserted it, but then removed his hand while leaving the chalk sticking out of his ear! There is a clear relationship between my noticing my colleague's physical movement in my office and this recollection that it triggered —a clear basis for the triggering: A writing implement (pencil/chalk) brought to a bodily orifice (mouth/ear) for which it was inappropriate.

The recollection of the Lipset incident apparently brought a smile to my face, a smile that 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 at once the pun like character of her remark, the interest in vernacular poetics being one shared by the two of us and our then-recently-

departed colleague, Harvey Sacks (see, e.g., Sacks, 1973, and Jefferson, 1996).¹ I was especially sensitive to puns in ordinary conversation, which are overwhelmingly unintended and unheard, and I had developed an annoying habit of taking overt notice of such otherwise-unheard puns when they occurred in conversations in which I was a participant. 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 that had not been said but had only been "thought" or "recollected" or "flashed."* It was, in that sense, an "ESP pun,"² however absurd that appeared to be to someone who did not believe in parapsychological phenomena.

With considerable animation (and puzzlement) I pointed out what had just happened to Gail. The next day, she reported the following incident, the account of which I reproduce here from the note that she sent me.

Specimen #2:

'Telepathic pun' Jefferson, March 9, 1978

I'm at the bank with my mother, who is doing a transaction. I'm leaning against the counter, right next to her, idly gazing at the teller who is working on the transaction with her. I look at the next teller, and it turns out that both tellers are wearing identical earrings, little gold dots. I'm thinking it seems to be a fad, they're both wearing button earrings. At which point, the teller working on my mother's stuff says to her, "Right on the button!".

Aside from providing a "second case," the importance of this incident is that it partially addresses an inescapable feature of this phenomenon, one that makes it virtually impossible to engage while respecting the usual methodological constraints of conversation analytic work. That feature is the key role played in the phenomenon of something that was not said or physically done but only "thought." It is that feature that makes the anecdotal character of the present report inescapable (as suggested in its first paragraph), for there is no other way of bringing what is punned-on (or the "pun-source") into the account than to have the one who "thought it" recount it.³

But another consequence of this feature is the unchallengeable authority claimed by the noticer of an occurrence of the phenomenon; no one else can lay claim to access to what they were "thinking," or can claim to describe it

¹ Accounts of my own long-standing interests in puns, sound phenomena, gist-preserving errors, context-sensitive whistles, and the like have until now been restricted to the classroom, except for one conference presentation, (Schegloff, 1997).

² For those unfamiliar with the usage, "ESP" is an acronym for "extra sensory perception."

³ Indeed, there is no one else who can know that a possible event of this sort has occurred, although speakers of the pun-containing utterance may subsequently report having registered something "noticeable" about their utterance, without knowing quite what or why, as reported in some of the exemplars recounted later.

differently, or to correct it, or otherwise take exception to it. Accordingly, it is especially important to collect specimens for which the author of this chapter, and the principal investigator of its candidate phenomenon, is not the key "informant." And Jefferson's anecdote speaks to that issue. It is she, not I, who tells what she was "thinking" or "about to say" when another said something for which it served as pun-source or punned-upon.

Of the 20 candidate instances that I have collected, I am the authoritative *rapporteur* for 11 of them. I wish the distribution were skewed the other way, but conditions make that difficult. Only persons who have been alerted to the possibility of such a phenomenon are in a position to register that a "something" may have happened when all the ingredients are present, and are in a position to recognize features of the moment as ingredients-of-a-possible-ESP-pun. Only some of them will find it worthy of writing down and collecting. In a sense, the contribution by others of 9 candidate instances is remarkably high given its unusual and (for academics) counter intuitive premises, given the very small number of people who have had it called to their attention as a possibility, and given the fact that virtually all reports from such persons have been contributed within a day or two of their exposure to the possibility of this phenomenon, after which its relevance to them fades, and with it the likelihood of their recognizing a possible instance or registering its occurrence. I suppose that this more than offsets the well-known propensity of persons to "cooperate with science" by being forthcoming with what they believe an investigator wants to hear (Rosenthal, 1966).⁴

Before recounting a number of additional instances of candidate ESP puns, I want to simply note several features of the candidate phenomenon, using the first one described earlier—"Oh, that's an earmark of mine"—as a case in point where possible. These features often reappear in other specimens, although in some instances it has not been possible to establish their presence or absence.

First, the utterance that contains the pun—and the pun itself in particular—may involve a slight error, and one germane—even critical—to constituting the pun. For example, in the first case, "earmark" is not quite right; the common expression is that something is a "*hallmark*" of some person or place or institution. "Earmark" is thus a slight error, one apparently prompted by the very pun-source that the pun is locating ("thinking about putting chalk in ear"), the "locating" relationship being constituted by the distortion in the original expression (from "*hallmark*" to "earmark").

⁴ Let me here express my appreciation to the following persons—colleagues, friends, graduate students, and undergraduate students (categories that are not mutually exclusive)—who have taken the trouble to write down the episodes they noticed and contribute them to the collection, but whose contribution may or may not be reproduced here. In addition to Gail Jefferson, I want to thank (in alphabetical order) Kelly Glover, Chuck Goodwin, Celia Kitzinger, Amy Snyder Ohta, Lisa Pizzurro, Mel Pollner, Jonathan Stewart, and Myrna Gwen Turner.

Second, the ESP pun is not a customary or stereotypical usage by the speaker. In collecting puns of all sorts, it is important to avoid ones that could be the product of random permutation and combination. For example, some speakers have as a distinctive stylistic practice a frequent use of *apparently* to begin utterances. On occasion, an utterance that has begun in that way will have as its topical content something about children, yielding the apparent pun combination of "apPARENTly" and "child." But in such a case, the underlying phenomenon that makes puns of interest—namely, the coselection of words composing an utterance by reference to features of sound, semantics, metaphor, and so on, and the sequential organization implicated in that—is not in fact instantiated by the event, which is simply the product of a repetitive use of *apparently* across utterances of diverse topical content. This consideration applies to all puns, and requires the exclusion of candidate instances that can have been produced by this kind of juxtaposition. It holds as well for candidate ESP puns. In the first instance reported previously, then, it needs to be said that "That's a hallmark (or earmark) of mine" is not a recurrent usage by its speaker.⁵

Third, the punning utterance is often slightly unidiomatic or inappropriate in context. This feature has been noted about other word-selection phenomena or aspects of vernacular poetics as well. For example, Jefferson (1996) remarked regarding a particular sound-row usage:

(3.a.1) [GJ:FN]

Martha: I called Terry and told her to come over around
 nine thirty.
Jan: It's nine thirty now.
Martha: Well then she'll be here momentarily.

There's something in this instance that we've noticed now and then. Sometimes a word occurs that seems a bit special, maybe out of character, maybe not register fitted to the surrounding talk. In this case, *momentarily* is such a word. And it may have been selected from alternatives such as "any minute now" by the sound relationship between the word "Terry" and the last bit of "momentarily." A sound-row. What we're learning to do is to track back into the talk and see if we can find a possible source for some striking word.

This feature of inappropriateness or ill-fittedness does not seem to characterize the two candidate ESP puns so far introduced, but it may be exemplified in the following one from the collection.

⁵ In what follows, I often decline to employ candidate ESP puns reported by others because the pun could plausibly be figured to be the product of such a permutation and combination with a recurrent usage, and no steps were taken by the rapporteur to establish that the usage was not a recurrent one for the speaker.

Specimen #3:

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 then says/continues, ". . . hence my 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.

These three features—nonhabitual usage, slightly-in-error construction, and slightly ill-fitted to the context—all suggest a virtual "reaching out" to talk in the fashion of the ESP punning utterance. Far from happenstance, these utterances have the feel of effortfulness about them, of being specially designed—and obtrusively so—to capture, and be affected by, what prompts them.

Here, then, are some more.

Specimen #4:

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 "comme ci, comme ça," or "so so"; but "neither here nor there"?

Specimen #5:

I am discussing with a colleague's wife the child-rearing practices of a family of mutual acquaintance, and, in particular, the inattention paid to cultivation of the body and physical activity. I am thinking, and "gestating" as a next utterance, something like "Why don't they just ride bikes together?!" when my interlocutor says, "Physicalness is actually derided."

Here again I undertake to describe to my coparticipant the phenomenon we had just brought off, and she remarks on having registered as odd and somewhat antique her use of the verb *derided* as she said it, and having attributed it at that moment to her recent reading of a novel by Dickens.

Specimen #6:

A colleague is recounting what he had 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.

Specimen #7:

I am in a coffee shop with seven other people taking a break from a working session, ordering lunch to take out. After completing some nth order, the clerk says, "Eight total?" I hear that as "ate Total" ("Total" being the name of an American cold breakfast cereal), and think to myself: "I wonder if that's what Chuck (another member of the party) had for breakfast," (knowing that he had had some cereal for breakfast). Just then Chuck says to Lucy (our host for this consultation trip), "By the way, I've been putting all the breakfasts on my bill; I hope that's alright." The incidental, unoccasioned, and even possibly misplaced production of this utterance is marked by the speaker's use of the misplacement marker "by the way" (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973) in launching it; it marks that there is no accessible local basis for saying that thing at that point. Is there then an inaccessible basis for it?

Now for a few in which I do not figure as *rapporteur*. I quote from the written accounts provided by those who noted the occurrence.

Specimen #8:

I was at work when a secretary came in looking for her pen. Long discussion ensued which didn't include or interest me and I began to daydream. The previous night the rivers in the area had flooded and we'd been out at the canoe club moving boats to higher ground, etc. We saw a picnic table which is usually on the lawn, floating, and two of us got some rope and were about to set off in a boat to secure it when someone told us it had already been tied to a tree. Just after my mind turned to this incident someone told the secretary that she should have the pen tied to her with a string.

Specimen #9:

I was speaking to M.G. [a mutual colleague-EAS] and he mentioned that he had to pick up his brother at the airport. I said that I looked forward to meeting him and that I liked to meet sibs generally so that I could see "what is genetic about

you and what is you about you." Mike said that I almost made a great pun because his sister's name is Janet.

Specimen #10:

Over the weekend I was talking with new friends who asked why my husband (who is Japanese) prefers living in the States rather than in Japan. I responded, "Well, he marches to a different drummer. He's not into group-think."

Returning home, my husband asked over dinner about my weekend, and I told him about this question I was asked as to why he prefers living in the U.S. Before I could say what my answer was, my husband began to "drum" his plate with his chopsticks.

Specimen #11:

The event in question occurred in Fall, 1991, around two o'clock in the afternoon on a weekend. My fiancé and I were driving around doing errands, and were on our way home from the grocery store. We were stopped at a red light near our apartment. We were both lost in thought, not speaking or listening to the car radio. I noticed a poster in a shop window that was advertising something. The colors were purples and pinks all swirled together encircling a person with wild and messy hair. I thought to myself, "That looks like something you'd see if you were on LSD." Just then, my fiancé started drumming on his steering wheel the opening rhythm to the song "Go Ask Alice," a nightmarish song depicting an episode from Alice in Wonderland through the eyes of a drugged-out protagonist. Startled, I told him what I had just been thinking, and he claimed he hadn't see the poster. (Handwritten postscript: "When I initially shared this story with our class, I mistakenly recalled the song in question as "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.")

Specimen #12:

Characters: Beth #1 and Myrna are former classmates from CSU, and Myrna and Beth #2 are former classmates from UCLA. Beth #1 and Beth #2 had not met each other before this day. Beth #1 and Myrna had already sat down at the table in the Café; our meals had been given to us in "proper" bowls and plates. Beth #2 sat down and I noticed that her meal was in a "take-away" box. Then:

Beth #2: I don't know why she [the server] gave me my meal in this.

Myrna: (thought to herself: cause you eat like a bird and you'll probably need to take home half of your meal anyway.)

Beth #1: she [the server] probably thought you looked like you were going to fly."

Specimen #13:

I was visiting my best friend at his parents' house. His sister was digging in the freezer; he was in an adjacent room unable

to see her, me, and the rest of his family. My friend said, "Dad? . . . Dad? . . ." as he tried to get his father's attention. (He, as I mentioned above, was in a different room.) Just as the sister extracted a popsicle from the freezer, my friend said, "Pop?" to call his dad. I mentioned this to him and his sister, and they both thought it was odd that he'd use that word, since none of us could remember him having used it before.

Specimen #14:

(Telling about a vacation trip to Thailand). "New Years Eve, not yet midnight, Sue has just changed her blouse and is talking about the day's snorkeling, and I am not giving her my full attention, but thinking instead (and thinking it preparatory to saying it, once she has finished talking) 'you've got a label sticking out at your neck.' I don't get to say it because she doesn't give me time - a split second after I've formed the thought 'neck,' she rushes straight from the end of what she is saying about snorkeling into the question, 'How soon do you think we can open our nectar?,' meaning the champagne, which isn't really champagne as that's ludicrously expensive in Thailand, but some sort of bubbly wine, and NEVER, EVER before has she referred to such a drink (or ANY drink) as 'nectar.' Spooky!"

Finally, two more from my own experience.

Specimen #15:

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.

Specimen #16:

I am chatting (at my home in a southern California canyon) with a British friend who is an academic. She is telling me about visiting Australia, and, in particular, about an encounter with aboriginal people in Alice Springs. Hearing that, I am "reminded of"- and am preparing to tell - my "Alice Springs story," about the power outage that hit while we were there, and that rendered the nighttime Southern hemisphere sky luminous and wonderful to behold. Then she, having just been talking about the Aborigines, sharply changes course, and asks whether from our house it is possible to see the then-close-to-earth Hale-Boggs comet. I am struck by her disjunctive shift to the astronomical observation question, that is, about looking

at the skies, at just the moment when I am about to tell just such a story.⁶ This is not, of course, a pun. But is it part of the same phenomenon?

The domain within which ESP puns—if they are real—are situated is that of word selection. Word selection is concerned with the practices that directly (by word selectional practices) or indirectly (by practices such as sound patterning, pun organization, or item carryover, which have word selection as a consequence) issue in the words that compose the units out of which are constructed the sequences of which are constituted the conversations that are one of our major research mandates. This is a very large domain and still a largely mysterious one, so mysterious that we must be prepared to entertain such apparently fringe possibilities as ESP puns. But it is worth pondering the import of the use of *fringe* here. It is the initial take on something unsuspected and "far out." As more and more cases are displayed, the fringe may turn out to be as robust a part of the fabric as any other—composed of the same warp and weft. It is only that we did not know how to look before. That is my rationale for filling this contribution largely with candidate instances, at the expense of other things to be said about them. If there is a real phenomenon here, and if the exemplars are apt and well chosen, it is their cumulative effect that will render the phenomenon visible, and by no means unthinkable.

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⁶ One colleague has suggested as a possible alternative account that I glanced up at the sky in unthinking anticipation of the tale I was about to tell. Alternative accounts may suggest themselves for other of the specimens reported above as well, prompted by the implausibility of what seems otherwise to be being proposed, and they may well be the more cogent accounts. This must be weighed against their grounding in the reader's imagination rather than the participant-observer's report, and the probability of each such conjecture turning out to have been correct (were such a "checking" even possible). For the present specimen, the fact that the conversation was being held indoors and not outside should be weighed in assessing the cogency of a glance upward, or of its being registered as "at the sky."

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