

Whistling in the Dark: Notes from the Other Side of Liminality¹

Emanuel A. Schegloff²
University of California at Los Angeles

1. Thematic Introduction

One of the better known aphorisms from the corpus of Harvey Sacks' work has it that one stance we may take up toward the orderliness of the social world is "...that there is order at all points (in Atkinson and Heritage, 1984:22; originally in lecture 33 for Spring, 1966, in Sacks, 1992, I:483-88)." Though the conversation-analytic research conducted under the auspices of this stance has been productive, cumulative and sustained for some 40 years now, the aphorism is vulnerable to misunderstanding. One possible misunderstanding (on which I will not linger here) arises when persons disengage the aphorism from the context in which it was introduced, where it was offered as a contrast to the stance underlying a substantial range of work in the social sciences (Atkinson & Heritage, 21-27; Sacks, *ibid.*) to support a new initiative.

Another misunderstanding can arise from the wording "order at *all* points." I do not myself believe that there is order at *all* points, nor do I think that Sacks believed this. If it were so, there would be no need to show that some particular manner of speaking was a "locus of order," that it was oriented to by participants, etc. If there was order at *all* points, social life -- and talk-in-interaction in particular -- could always be examined productively at *any* point and in *any* respect. In that case, there would be no need for new initiatives. The stance being put forward might instead better be put as "order *possible* at any point;" that is, *no aspect of talk-in-interaction can be excluded a priori as a locus of order.* If

¹ "Limen (Latin for threshold; introduced as equivalent of German 'schwelle' by Herbart in 1824). The limit below which a given stimulus ceases to be perceptible." Oxford English Dictionary, I, 1215. "Subliminal. Below the threshold of sensation or consciousness; said of states supposed to exist but not strong enough to be recognized." Oxford English Dictionary, II, 2169.

² Aside from specimens which I have culled from recorded data, cited from published work in either written or broadcast media, or personally observed in unrecorded interactions, I have benefitted from the alertness and generosity of others -- friends, relatives, colleagues, and students -- who have shared observations of their own with me -- usually self-observations. Of the 30 exemplars presented here, 16 were contributed by these "collaborators" -- numbers 9, 12, 13, and 17-30. So my thanks go to (in alphabetical order) J.M. Atkinson, Jacob Ballon, Michal Chafets, Rebecca Clift, Sally Jacoby, Geraldine Leydon, Jenny Mandelbaum, Barney McGrane, Jerome Rabow, Federico Rossano, Naomi Schegloff, and Jean Wong, some of whom have contributed more than one specimen. Altogether these specimens were collected between 1973 and 2004.

participants can endow any feature of their talk, conduct, setting etc., with relevance, then investigators have to hold themselves open to the possibility that any aspect of persons' conduct might be a locus of orderliness, and a potential target of productive inquiry. And the import and scope of its relevance for the conduct of inquiry could not be projected from the common-sense or vernacular view of its "importance" or "relevance" for conduct in interaction.

Recurrently over the last 40 years, new phenomena (whether of great or merely passing interest) have come into view when someone seriously entertained the possibility that something they had noticed which was ordinarily dismissed as trivial, arbitrary, random, merely amusing, insane, etc. might be a locus of order and an instrument of action. What I present here is an instance of this, and a museum of specimens of its pursuit, together with some grounded conjectures about its possible import. Whether this is of considerable or passing interest, or, indeed, of any interest at all, will need to be determined by others.³ I start with an observation which was entirely personal and not entertained as of any relevance to the work in which I was engaged. But that changed. The fact that much of the data I can provide is anecdotal and personal will, I hope, not be a decisive consideration in evaluating the merits of what is proposed. Even areas of inquiry strongly disciplined by the constraints of experimentalism can now entertain such sources of new observations, phenomena and understanding (Roberts, 2004; Schegloff, 2004).⁴

2. First Glimpses

³ In my teaching, I have presented the material on whistling/humming together with material on puns (both along lines presented in Sacks, 1973 and others, including so-called "ESP Puns," cf. Schegloff, 2003a), reappearance of suppressions (Schegloff, 2003b), vernacular poetics or what Jefferson (1996) terms the "poetics of ordinary conversation" (and see also her earlier paper, Jefferson, 1974) and other such "oddities" which have not yet been written up (e.g., materials on "gist-preserving errors," "carryover replacements," and others). They are treated pedagogically under the rubric "environmental ordering of word selection and other conduct," because this appears to be one order of organization in which they are implicated and to which they give us some access. Here, however, I limit myself to one of these phenomena -- contextually sensitive and ambivalently revelatory whistling/humming, establishing its existence and merely beginning the task of registering its import and evidentiary value.

⁴ Aside from pursuit of this phenomenon (if it *is* a phenomenon) in its own right, another interest informs the present undertaking. Efforts to ground analytic characterizations of conduct in interaction in the demonstrable orientations of the participants are subject to challenge if the participants do not overtly announce such orientations. Can an utterance in conversation be treated as gender-linked, for example, if the parties do not more or less explicitly make such a connection? How in that case can a claim be warranted? Or how can such linkage be *disputed* if there are theoretical grounds for expecting it? In general, how do we know anything about the orientations of persons to their environment, setting, "umwelt," "context," etc., or specific aspects of it, without their articulate expression? *Can* we know such things, and, if so, how? Do participants "give off" (a usage I have from Erving Goffman, but whose first appearance I have been unable to track down) evidence of such tacit orientations, evidence which can be registered and specified if we are analytically alerted to it, evidence which can then serve to ground claims about what is informing their conduct -- or their uptake of *others'* conduct -- in interaction? Oddly enough, however apparently remote from this issue, humming and whistling may shed distinctive light on it. (Exhibits 8, 20, 21, 25, 26, 29 and 30 may be specially telling in this regard, as the participants themselves register *in the occasion itself* -- in most cases as something amusing -- the aptness and import of the whistling/humming to their actual circumstances.) That is, the phenomenon is treatable and treated by them as notice-able, register-able, and accountable without respect to any research interest in it.

It started -- at least I first noticed it -- one day in the late 60's or early 70's, while I was walking the two blocks from the bus stop at Broadway and 86th St. In New York City to our apartment house. I "caught myself" incessantly whistling a fragment of a melody from a then-popular tune. It was driving me crazy. What *was* that?!! When I finally figured out the words -- in fact, the words that are carried by that fragment of the melody which I had been repeating -- I was taken aback. Although I no longer recall either the melody or the words, they virtually named a matter I knew myself to be concerned with, but had not been aware I was concerned with just then. It was like the surfacing of a "leak" from a stream of "subconsciousness." Here was a new way of "knowing myself," and I undertook to try to be more alert to what it could tell me.

Not long after that, I caught myself again in that repetitive cycling through a snatch of melody, but could not retrieve the words. When I got home, I whistled it for my wife, who supplied the missing words, which I recognized as soon as she said them. Bingo. Again, they named an ongoing pre-occupation which I had been revisiting unawares.

And again a few days later. And again I could not retrieve the words. And again my wife could, but this time they were strange to me; I was unaware of having known them before, or, indeed, of knowing them now that I had been told them. Nonetheless, they uncannily touched on an ongoing concern, which apparently found a way to sneak out through words -- or rather, "lines" -- I didn't know; and, furthermore, sneak out without being articulated at all, but hidden behind the melody which was their storage device. This was getting bizarre.

Of course, not every tune that insinuated itself into my head and came out via whistling or humming was a secret message from veiled consciousness. Some were replays of melodies I had been recently exposed to -- either by intentional listening or by exposure to a passing car with open windows and overloud radio -- or to the University's carillon. Others were prompted by a passing waft of perfume or pipe smoke which, in a flurry of synaesthesia, summoned up memories of a person, a place and an accompanying musical motif. And many simply did not yield a "solution:" some because they were wordless (e.g., a Bach Partita); some because no one I turned to could recognize the specimen; and so forth.

None of this would be of any interest to anyone but me had my observations been limited to my own "performances." Things changed, however, in the Summer of 1973, when I served on the faculty of the Linguistic Institute, held that year at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. The theme of the Institute that summer was something like the social and communication-oriented understanding of language, and one of the varieties of inquiry invited to participate was what came to be called "conversation analysis," represented in the faculty by my friend and colleague, Harvey Sacks, and me, and, in the larger body of participants, by quite a few other people at different points in their academic trajectory who were interested in what we were up to, including some who were bent on becoming parties to its development.

Among the weekly activities that summer were meetings for so-called "data sessions," in which the focus was on data with video -- the first such specimen of a quality that sustained the then-current state of analysis. A bit of the video of a naturally occurring ordinary interaction would be played and we all would try to make observations about it that might be cultivated into recurrent practices of talk and other conduct.

At one of these sessions we were looking at the very start of a dinner at the home of a couple in the graduate student population at an eastern university at which another couple arrives with "take-out Chinese" food. Also present are the host couple's two young children and a house guest -- a young man who would not be joining them at dinner but who is speaking on the telephone near the video camera as the taping begins. Just as the tape starts running, the house guest hangs up the phone and passes in front of the camera on his way to the room in which he is staying. As he does so he is whistling. [Specimen #1 at 00:21 into the clip]⁵

In the continuing search for what elements of interaction were beyond the reach of the research program we were exploring, and drawing on my own personal experience, I called attention to the bit of whistling on the tape and asked if anyone recognized what was being whistled. There were no takers; indeed, no one appeared to think the question worth pursuing, and we went on to other things.

I subsequently pursued the matter myself and found someone who recognized the brief musical phrase, the song in which it figured, and the Broadway show for which the song had been written, and was able to supply the lyrics. A few days later, when I next saw the colleagues who had prompted the videotaping of the dinner, I asked them whether, by any chance, the houseguest had been having an affair with the lady of the house. They were rather taken aback by the question (especially since I had never met the people in question!). Yes, they said, the host couple were now separated; what had prompted the question?

What had prompted the question were the lyrics of the song he had whistled while leaving the room. The song was "Lover" from the Broadway show "Love Me Tonight" (1932, music by Richard Rogers, lyrics by Lorenz Hart). Its "lead-in" or verse ends with the words "When you are away it's awful, and when you are with me it's worse," and the opening words of its refrain is "Lover when I'm near you..." and, of course, he was about *not* to be (near her) for the remainder of the evening! (Later in the second refrain the words are: "Lover, it's immoral, but why quarrel with our bliss"!)

So it turned out that such a bit of whistling could serve to articulate a bit of otherwise tacit preoccupation not only to one's self; it might serve to convey it to others in the scene as well -- whether or not accessibly to "discursive consciousness" was unclear (other such episodes where it does clearly appear to be accessible are presented below in Exemplars #8, #25 and #29). In any case, what had been an instrument for my own self-knowledge now presented itself as a possible tool of empirical analysis -- providing access to another's possibly ongoing preoccupation to the external analyst and perhaps to interactional co-participants as well.

The remainder of this presentation is taken up with the results of paying close attention to the whistling and humming that can be observed -- at times recurrently and almost obsessively, at times, fleetingly -- both in occasions of interaction and in moments of solitude, and some reflections on these specimens. Relatively few of the specimens

⁵ Digitized sound clips may be accessed at my web site:

<<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/schegloff/>>. No sound is provided for specimens provided anecdotally by others; such specimens are marked by quotation marks at beginning and end. Where available, the original whistle or hum itself is reproduced; where not, a replica produced for this paper is presented instead.

come from recorded, replayable bits of conduct. The rest come from self-observation, both by me of myself, and by my students, friends, colleagues, relatives, etc.; for virtually everytime I have spoken about this possible phenomenon to my class or to acquaintances asking about some new curiosity I had come upon, I have harvested additional instances - - noticed by them in their own experience or in that of a companion, recognized as an instance of what I had told about, and reported to me accordingly. And then it would pass from their consciousness, and become once again a virtually invisible monitoring device for "consciousness," with non-articulatable results, and as yet unknown uses in this world.

Before turning to these specimens, however, it may be useful to take note of the sorts of occurrences that will not appear among them. Here's a whistle episode that "doesn't count," or "isn't interesting," or for which I have not yet registered HOW it is interesting.

My wife and I are making up a grocery shopping list, and I'm writing down the items as I think of them or as my wife calls them out while opening cupboards, refrigerator, etc. So I say -- as I am writing -- "three oranges, two grapefruit juice," and then, reminded of the the Christmas song "The Twelve Days of Christmas," I sing softly, "and a partridge in a pear tree." A while later, walking down the driveway with the morning's newspaper, I hear myself whistling "On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me." I try to figure out how come, what is subliminally preoccupying me, when I realize that this is "just" the persistence of the last "tune" I heard. Such environmentally prompted repetitive whistling (where I can myself be "the environment" for these purposes) is not what I am pursuing in this inquiry -- however interesting it may turn out to be on other grounds. Nor is the initial prompting of the melody by the cadence and literary form of what happened in the environment ("*three* dah-dah-DAH-dahs, *two* dah-dah-DAH-dahs") what I am pursuing. Both of these occasionings are rhythmically or melodically prompted (though it could turn out to be of interest that we have here evidence of attention to the rhythmicity of enviroing activities).⁶

The ones I *am* pursuing seem to rest on a linkage between a language-formed or even non-linguistic gist of an external environmental feature or event or an internal "sub-conscious" one, on the one hand, and the wording of some lyric, on the other; and then by the lyric's evocation of the melody that carries it or which is titled by it. Two sorts of analytic resonance invite consideration.

Those who come to this paper with neuro-scientific, cognitivist, and/or psycholinguistic interests might reflect on the processing apparatus that would have to be available to make these whistled or hummed displays of orientation to the world possible if the description in the preceding paragraph is near the mark, which it surely seems to be. What might a search procedure look like that finds (spontaneously and subliminally) the lyrics of a song not heard for many years which suits or "captures" an experienced but tacit sense of the environment or of a presently sustained "preoccupation," and retrieves as

⁶ Another sort of occurrence is missing from the collection of specimens which follows. Here an occurrence of the sort I am seeking out prompted a search for the lyrics which "go with" the tune that was noticed to be repetitively whistled or hummed. Its interest was fully grounded in the moment and was accordingly not registered in writing. And so I have ended up with the full lyrics, but with no trace of memory of the "co-incidence" which made these lyrics of interest. The realization of the "meaningful" co-incidence of some occurrence and the whistling/humming of some tune whose lyrics reflect on it is an ephemeral realization; unless registered while momentarily present, the tune vanishes into thin air, or the recollection of the event that (may have) prompted it and made it relevant to register is lost, and -- with it -- their combined import.

well the melody of the whole of the song, and often the specific musical phrase that “carries” the language which the search had found, and has it produced without that language? Readers with those interests might bear this question in mind as they engage the specimens to follow.

Those who come this paper with pragmatic, discursive or conversation-analytic interests may weigh what follows as evidence for the claim that both co-participants in interaction and students of it may gain access to the momentary, or moment-to-moment orientations of others to the terms of the interaction without such orientations being articulated explicitly. Arguably, of the many ways of formulating the participants in an interaction, the “place” in which it is being conducted, the things that are being done there, and various other characterizing aspects of it, the ones which actually and demonstrably inform the conduct of the participants can claim priority, if not exclusive, relevance.⁷ If such orientations may infiltrate and inform the conduct of parties to an interaction as is exemplified in the specimens recounted here, then in principle such demonstrations are possible, and the search for other ways in which they are made manifest in interaction is to be encouraged.

So the specimens which are displayed in what follows are offered not as curious oddities in the world of conduct in interaction (and outside of it, as well); properly understood, they have potential consequences for inquiry.

3. Specimens

(1) Specimen #2

One evening I am giving a biologist colleague at UCLA and neighbor in Topanga canyon a ride home, where the roads are very winding and narrow. We are taking other than the usual route because of the mudslides caused by recent very heavy rains. It is still rainy and misty, and as we get off the freeway and start driving the canyon roads, the conversation between us lapses and he begins whistling. [Specimen #2] (Alas, the quality of my whistling has deteriorated, so I had better identify this specimen as the beginning of The Star Spangled Banner, the national anthem of the United States.) At first I don't get the point, and ask him if he has a grant application pending at a government agency, else why is he being so patriotic. “No,” he says. Then I catch on. “Are you worried that I can't see the road?” I ask. He almost rises from his seat in astonishment and asks how I knew that. I point out that the words to the part of the United States' national anthem that he was whistling are “Oh say can you see.”

(2) Specimen #3

The next day the same colleague/neighbor calls me to report another case. He has just moved to California after working and living in the Caribbean. The weather in Los Angeles had continued to be drizzly and cool. He reports standing at an outdoor food kiosk waiting to buy a sandwich for lunch. He catches himself whistling repeatedly the following line from a familiar song. [Specimen #3] This comes from a song titled “That's why the lady is a tramp” (from where? By whom?). The words at that part of the tune are (in one of the verses): “Hates California, it's cold and it's damp; that's why the lady is a tramp.”

⁷ Such an argument is put forward in Schegloff, 1988, 1991, 1997, building on Sacks, 1972a, 1972b.

(3) Specimen #4

One of the first hard-data payoffs of the self-observations on whistling (that is, one of the first that is based on recorded and repeatably inspectable data) -- which joined the previously recounted episode between houseguest and hostess -- took place in a car. Three generations of a family are on their way to an extended family Chanukah party: the grandfather is driving, the grandmother also in front, their roughly 2-year old granddaughter seated between them. In the back are the daughter of the grandparents (and mother of their grandchild) and her husband, as well as the grandparents' college-aged son. In the course of the brief ride, a bit of an argument breaks out -- mostly joking but occasionally verging on serious -- in which the grandmother claims that many years ago, when she was a single young woman in Brooklyn, she used to buy six pairs of shoes every six months, and must have had over a hundred pairs of shoes. This is disputed by her husband (who is a lady's shoes salesman) as an exaggeration, and they quarrel about it. The topic is changed soon after, and a bit later there is a lapse in the conversation.

In that lapse the grandmother starts to whistle a marching-band-type song, and the following phrase in particular. [Specimen #4] Listening to the tape later, I can not make out what that "song" is, nor can the same-aged women whom I ask, though the conjecture is that it is a commercial for hot dogs. When I next talk to the grandmother, I tell her that the song has been going through my mind, and that I am frustrated that I cannot "place it," and ask her to identify it. I start to whistle it for her, and after a bar or two, she starts to giggle; she asks how I know that song, and says that she hasn't heard it for some 40 years. When I press her for an identification, she describes it as a "football fight song from New Utrecht High School in Brooklyn."

Note the connections: "shoes"/*football*; "argument"/*fight*; and the common origin of both the topic of the fight and the tune in Brooklyn some 40 years ago. Consider then: when topics lapse, they do not necessarily disappear; they may linger (sometimes) just below the membrane of the conversation and find their way into the situation nonetheless.

(4) Specimen #5

I am standing in the check-out line at the supermarket in the early evening some years ago. The day had been special in "hosting" the occurrence of a rare-for-the-area solar eclipse. When I am next-in-line and can hear what is transpiring at the check-out stand, I hear the clerk whistling over and over again this musical phrase: [Specimen #5] The words to this bit of melody are: "Don't know why there's no sun up in the sky, (stormy weather)." As I approach with my purchases, the clerk remarks that she cannot get the tune out of her mind. I remark that it is an apt tune for the day, and she says she knows there is a special significance to the day, but does not remember what it is.

(5) Specimen #6

Late in the morning on which a great-aunt of mine has died in New York, I (in my capacity as co-owner of the burial plot) am called in Los Angeles to authorize the burial. Later my daughter -- then about ten years old but already adept at recognizing some conversation-analytic phenomena -- catches me whistling this: [Specimen #6]. The words: "Heaven, I'm in heaven..."

(6) Specimen #7

In July, 1986 I attended a conference at the University of York in England entitled, "Erving Goffman: An interdisciplinary appreciation." (Cf. the resulting volume, Drew and Wootton (1988)). Goffman had died some three years earlier; he had been my teacher and dissertation supervisor. My talk was not simply an appreciation of Goffman's contributions; it was a *critical* appreciation; our differences were at the center of the talk I had given earlier that day. The conversation in the car on the way to a dinner party that evening was mostly about that talk, and continued taking a critical stance toward much of Goffman's work. At a hiatus in that discussion, I look out the car window and up at the evening sky and said, "Hi Erving." A moment later I caught myself whistling: [Specimen #7] The words: "Hey there, you with the stars in your eyes."

(7) Specimen #8

In the run up to the 1967 Middle East war, the issue was whether Israel should launch a preemptive strike or wait to be attacked by its Arab neighbors. The United States had warned that if Israel acted alone, it would stand alone. However, after several additional weeks, it became apparent that if Israel acted, the United States would not oppose it. The question was when it would attack. What follows is the recounting by the wife of the then-Prime Minister, Levi Eshkol, as rendered by a translator in the program "The 50 Years War: Israel and the Arabs" on the Public Broadcast System, 1999 (at about one hour and twelve minutes into the first segment):

"We went for our usual walk. Suddenly Eshkol starts humming. He was completely tone deaf. He had this Chassidic song he liked to sing. He sang it over and over again.⁸ ((singing in Yiddish)) "The Rabbi has told us to enjoy ourselves. Because hard times are coming."⁹ So I asked him, 'What's happening, dearest?' And he told me, 'Tomorrow the war will start. There will be widows. There will be orphans. There will be bereaved parents. Who knows what tomorrow will bring?'"

(8) Specimen #9

"The time is Saturday night and I was getting out of the shower as I prepared for a social engagement that I was not looking forward to. As a perpetual whistler, I don't usually choose consciously what I will whistle. I then start to think about what I'm whistling. Lo and behold, the song I'm whistling is called "Waste" by the rock band Phish. The exact lyrics at that moment were, 'Come waste your time with me.'"

(9) Specimen #10

On the way to a meeting of the Graduate Admissions Committee for the Department of Sociology, I catch myself whistling: [Specimen #10]. When I register what I'm whistling, I realize that it alludes to the 4-5 applications from Turkey on which (among other things) we have to decide at the upcoming meeting. The lyrics to the melody? "It's Istanbul, not Constantinopol...!" (popular in the 1950's).

(10) Specimen #11

⁸ Literally, "He sang it and sang it and sang it, I didn't know what it was."

⁹ Repeated by her in the original Yiddish, but not in the translation.

In the midst of the rhetoric in the days preceding the American attack on Iraq, I catch myself whistling this: [Specimen #11]. It is, of course, the triumphal March from Verdi's Aida.

(11) Specimen #12

“While watching a colleague of mine at Applied Linguistics making editorial changes in a handout for a seminar presentation, I said, ‘I hate mice,’ referring to the mouse clicker control of the Macintosh he was using. Several minutes later, when chat had moved on to other things, he began singing, apparently apropos of nothing, ‘You Can Do It Cinderelly,’ to which I joined in in an Alvin-the-Chipmunk voice, like in the Disney film. Neither of us had as yet caught the connection. Suddenly I gasped -- I was the first to notice. ‘Patrick, do you know why you started singing that song?’ I asked. ‘No,’ he said. ‘Because about 5 minutes ago I said, ‘I hate mice.’ ‘Oh, God, yes, you’re right!’ Patrick laughed.”

(12) Specimen #13

“My mother passed away February 9, 1987. One week later I’m in the shower and singing (not having heard for 40 years) Marian Anderson’s ‘Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.’”

(13) Specimen #14

“A close friend announced to her husband that she had finally decided to enter psychoanalysis. The husband, a doctor himself, and a believer in psychoanalysis, became immediately enthusiastic about his wife’s decision. Right after they completed their discussion about the costs, the time involved, and the need to do some financial juggling, the husband got up from his chair and walked to his study. As he left the room, he started whistling a tune. The lyrics resonated in the wife’s mind. ‘Tonight you’re mine completely, but will you love me tomorrow?’ That tune could not be explained as an old favorite song (it was not a favorite) or as recent exposure (he had not recently heard it). The unexpressed feeling was one of fear of losing his wife. This was confirmed later by the wife who raised the incident with her husband.” (Rabow, Platt and Goldman, 1987:4-5)

(14) Specimen #15

I am cleaning out paper records regarding my handling of my late father’s affairs from 6-7 years earlier when he was soon to have a pacemaker installed. I catch myself whistling: [Specimen #15] The lyrics at the opening of this once-popular song: "Thanks for the memories."

(15) Specimen #16

“...He took a shower afterwards, toweling his head furiously, humming. What he was humming surprised him. It was an air from a popular musical and he hadn’t been conscious that it was apposite. But he’d have to change the genders. He wasn’t a woman and it wasn’t a man he was washing away. Right out of his hair. But that apart, it suited perfectly. It was queer how these things came up at you. Sometime he would consider it, but not just now. He didn’t want to think; he was content to feel, and what he felt was clean again.” (William Haggard, The Unquiet Sleep, Penguin Books, 1964)

(16) Specimen #17

“While on the phone, I discover that I have a pocket full of someone else’s money : the change from the money they gave me to buy them lunch with. I walk upstairs to return the money, my hand in my pocket. As I walk up the stairs I hear myself whistling. Since in class that morning we had talked about ‘the Monster’ visiting in whistling, I stop myself and ask: ‘I wonder what the lyrics are to the song which I’m whistling?’ I am extremely surprised to find that they are, ‘Bring it back, bring it back, please bring it back home to me.’

I’m particularly surprised by the fact that I’m whistling just the tune for these particular words, given their particular appropriateness to this situation, despite the fact that this song is one which I have always thought of as, and only as, a love song (the song is called ‘Love of my Life’, by an English group called Queen).

I’m even more surprised to find that the next phrase of the song (which I hadn’t yet whistled the tune for) is also uncannily translatable into the present situation” ‘...because you don’t know how much it means to me,’ since I don’t know how much the amount of money (which is large by my standards) means to the person from whom I have unintentionally been withholding it since lunch time.”

(17) Specimen #18

“After having worked on and off for the three days of the Topanga Days Country Fair, when asked if I would remain in the kitchen for the last 45 minutes, I said no. They begged me to stay for 10 minutes more and I agreed. I found myself humming a song by Sting for the next 10 minutes. The words I hummed over and over were, ‘After today, after today, consider me gone.’”

(18) Specimen #19

“My two-year old, Monica, and I set about to water the plants one evening. I took out the bottle of water which I keep under the kitchen sink for such purposes. As usual, I ran out of water before I had finished the watering and proceeded to go back to the kitchen sink to refill the bottle. Before I got to the sink I said something to Monica to the effect that : ‘Just a minute. I need to or have to get more water.’ Then, as I began to fill the bottle, I sang the word ‘Sylvie.’ I probably would have sung further except for the fact that the realization that I had just ‘done’ a ‘monster’ stopped me in my tracks. I was shocked. What was the monster? The rest of the lyrics following ‘Sylvie’ would have been:

‘Sylvie, Sylvie, I’m so hot and dry.

Sylvie, Sylvie, can’t you hear, can’t you hear me crying.

Give me a little water, Sylvie. Give me a little a little water now.

Give me a little water, Sylvie, every little once in a while.’

“We have this song on a Harry Belafonte album. And, I might add, the album and song is my husband’s. I’m not really a Belafonte fan nor do I consider that ‘Sylvie’ is part of my conscious song repertoire. Moreover, we had not recently played that album nor had I recently heard anyone sing it. It, quite literally, popped into my mind as I was refilling the water bottle. That was what seemed most shocking -- that it, ‘Sylvie,’ came from out of nowhere, and definitely came from somewhere -- the watering of the plants and the need for water.”

(19) Specimen #20

“While driving in our car at night, doing 55 to 60 mph, with somewhat poor visibility, my wife -- the passenger -- started humming, then singing, ‘Slow down, you move too fast, got to make the morning last,’ etc. (Peter, Paul and Mary song - I think). A few minutes later we both went ‘Ahhh!’.”

(20) Specimen #21

“After a somewhat stressful day of child-rearing (of our 5 year old), my wife, upon my arrival home to give her some ‘relief,’ started running water for a bath and simultaneously started singing “Oh sole meo...” After I pointed it out, she ‘ah-hah-ed’ and laughed.”

(21) Specimen #22

“After spending the best part of a day working on my paper, I was called on by John H. to walk from the hotel back to the Conference - in time for the next ‘Confrontation Session.’ Work had gone fairly well and I was in a fairly confident/optimistic mood. Walking from my room to the lift, where John had gone along ahead, I started whistling. Arriving at the lift I stopped and thought: Tune: ‘Gaudeamus Igitur’ chorus from Brahms’ Academic Festival Overture (‘Gaudeamus igitur’ = in Latin ‘Let us therefore rejoice’).”¹⁰

(22) Specimen #23

“After spending a day on my own, was somewhat less optimistic/ nervous/worried (my presentation was drawing much nearer). Walking from hotel to Conference alone up steep cobbled street: Tune: Theme music from BBC TV’s serialization of J-P Sartre’s ‘Roads to Freedom’ trilogy -- Title: ‘La Route est Dure’ (‘The Way/Road is Hard’).”

(23) Specimen #24

“In Ravenna with John H. and Steve L. visiting ancient church with amazing mosaics. Having earlier noted on all post cards, tourist materials, etc. mosaics of birds in various positions, I noticed a segment of floor as having a lot of birds depicted on it and said to John H.: ‘Hey - here’s the one with the bird theme on it.’ He walked off to look at other gems, and I went 5-10 yards in the opposite direction -- whistling. I stopped -- and was more stunned by this than either of the other two: it was Papageno’s song from Mozart’s Magic Flute: ‘Der Vogel-fänger bin ich ja.’ -- (Bird theme !!!) -- a tune, by the way, that I hadn’t heard, let alone whistled, for months -- indeed, I’m not sure I’ve ever whistled it before.”

(24) Specimen #25

¹⁰ About this and the next two accounts, the contributor provides the following note: “N.B. In each case, the music (?) had been underway for a while before I stopped and asked myself: just what is that tune? And in each case, it had ‘just started’ -- i.e., without pre-meditation (as far as I am able to recall).”

From a newspaper story about Hollywood photographer Eve Arnold, at this point centered on her relationship with Marlene Dietrich (Adams, 2002):

“Over the years that followed she shot Dietrich several times, and the actress shared confidences with her, notably about the time she slept with President Kennedy. He had, she said, arranged for a limousine to pick her up from a hotel she was staying at. And she was shown into a suite of rooms at the White House where a negligee waited for her. She was a little worried about the President’s bad back, but all went to plan, and afterwards Kennedy tried to persuade her to stay for ‘Just one more, Marlene’. She was late for a speaking engagement, however, and declined. On her way out of the White House, she told Arnold, she found herself humming a tune. And the song? ‘Miss Otis Regrets’.”¹¹

(25) Specimen #26

“I’ve been struggling with analysis for final PhD data chapter. Then over last few hours I felt that I might have it sussed and can begin writing. As I just sat down in front of my PC to start typing, I noticed that I was humming and my chosen tune was ‘Amazing Grace’. The only words I know are: ‘I once was lost, but now am found; Was blind, but now I see.’ The author of it was a slave trader who found Christ; me finding something to write about is not quite so impressive, and it is possibly even a bit grandiose to see a connection, but there it is!”

(26) Specimen #27

“My girlfriend and I broke up and she told me she didn’t want to see me anymore and that we are not going to be even friends. There is tension. Then after few days she calls me and we decide to meet for the first time since we broke up. As soon as I put down the telephone I start singing the beginning of a song by Nirvana called ‘Come as you are,’ and exactly the part in which it says: ‘Come as you are, as you were/ as I want you to be/ as a friend, as a friend.’ And this was exactly what I was looking for: the possibility of keeping in touch with a person I really liked and that I was going to get together with soon.”

(27) Specimen #28

“I am on a train and there are no seats available so I have to stand in the corridor. At a certain point, many other people come in and stand near me. And I start whistling a song by Black Eyed Peas called ‘Smells like funk’ and I am whistling the part that says: ‘If it SMELLS like funk it must be us.’ You can imagine the smell of many people standing close to each other in the corridor of the train!”

(28) Specimen #29

“I enter a bar with two friends and they ask me if I like it. I say yes, but it is really crowded and we cannot even find a seat. I keep whistling one line from a song called ‘Too many fish in the sea,’ and specifically the line that gives the title to the song and says

¹¹ For those unfamiliar with the song by Cole Porter, the lyrics for the first verse are:
 “Miss Otis regrets she’s unable to lunch today, madam. Miss Otis regrets she’s unable to lunch today. And she’s sorry to be delayed, but last evening down at lover’s lane she strayed, madam. Miss Otis regrets she’s unable to lunch today.”

'because there's too many fish in the sea,' and then my friends ask me if I am annoyed by the crowd.'

(29) Specimen #30

"My husband and I have been going through fertility treatments for a couple of years. As you might expect, the process has been somewhat of an emotional roller coaster, with hopes rising each month only to be dashed at the sign of a menstrual period."

A couple of months ago we had our first round of in-vitro fertilization. When the blood test came back negative I was disappointed but seemed (to myself and those around me) to be surprisingly calm given the circumstances. A couple of days later I got my period, the final proof that the cycle had in fact been unsuccessful. That day an Israeli song I like about a love affair gone sour was stuck in my head. At some point my husband noticed the repetitive verse I was singing and laughed, as it seemed to sum up our situation, both emotional and physical, perfectly: "You are shedding tears, I am shedding a little blood." [In Hebrew: "Lach yordot d'maot, Li yored k'tzat dam"]

4. A Closing Reflection

Some of these occurrences give evidence of the "melodist's" orientation to the surrounding context -- to its climate, whether meteorological ("hates California it's cold and it's damp") or social ("When you are away it's awful, and when you are with me it's worse"), to its mood ("gaudeamus igitur"), to a future tragic event unknown to others (the Levi Eshkol episode), and surely others yet to be described. What is striking is that (with the exception of the last) they are introduced into the setting in a specifically wordless form; after all, whistling and humming are ways of conveying the music *without articulating its words*. And yet it is the words that appear to drive the production of *this* music, *this* phrase in it, at *this* moment, in *this* setting. I say "drive" because in many instances (some of the reports do not speak to this feature) there is a kind of obsessive or compulsive repetition of the tune, and of some specific phrase in it. What is being conveyed is in this way both hidden and insisted upon -- a telling ambivalence at the margins of liminality. And so, it turns out, even this fugitive and ephemeral bit of apparent self-absorption can be -- and in these occasions has been -- made a locus of order, and another of the points which (it turned out) could not be exempted from analytic attention in the effort to understand human sociality.¹²

¹² And a postscript. A few days after completing (I thought) this manuscript, my wife and I were celebrating our 42nd wedding anniversary. Walking up to our seats in the theater where we were to see a performance of Steven Sondheim's "A Little Night Music," I hear myself whistling softly, repetitively and "mindlessly" a familiar melody; I try to think what it is without success, and turn my attention to finding our seats. My wife comments, "Y'know what that is;" I reply, "No, what?" and she gives me the lyrics to the melody, the initial bars of which I had been repetitively whistling. They are:

It's very clear,
our love is here to stay;
not for a year,
for ever and a day.

So, my engagement with these unarticulated displays of orientation to context and consciousness having begun with my dependence on my wife's capacity to help me recover and articulate the inarticulate, it seems fitting to end the story-so-far with another such episode, and to take the occasion to dedicate this piece to her, without whom none of it would have its current form.

References

- Adams, T. (2002). Stars in her eyes. *The Observer Review*, 7, 9.
- Atkinson, J. M., & Heritage, J. (1984). *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Drew, P., & Wootton, A. (1988). *Erving Goffman: Exploring the interaction order*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Haggard, W. (1964). *The unquiet sleep*. Penguin Books.
- Jefferson, G. (1974). Error correction as an interactional resource. *Language in Society*, 2, 181-199.
- Jefferson, G. (1996). On the poetics of ordinary conversation. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 16(1), 1-61.
- Rabow, J., Platt, G. M., & Goldman, M.S. (1987). *Advances in psychoanalytic sociology*. Malabar, FL: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company.
- Roberts, S. (2004). Self-experimentation as a source of new ideas: Ten examples about sleep, mood, health, and weight. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 27(2), 227-262.
- Sacks, H. (1972a). An initial investigation of the usability of conversational data for doing sociology. In D. N. Sudnow (Ed.), *Studies in social interaction* (pp. 31-74). New York: Free Press.
- Sacks, H. (1972b). On the analyzability of stories by children. In J. J. Gumperz & D. Hymes (Eds.), *Directions in sociolinguistics: The ethnography of communication* (pp. 325-345). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Sacks, H. (1973). On some puns with some intimations. In R. W. Shuy (Ed.), *Report of the twenty-third annual round table meeting on linguistics and language studies* (pp. 135-144). Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
- Sacks, H. (1992). *Lectures on conversation*. 2 volumes (Edited by G. Jefferson, with Introductions by E.A. Schegloff). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Schegloff, E. A. (1988). Description in the social sciences I: Talk-in-interaction. *IPRA Papers in Pragmatics*, 2(1), 1-24.
- Schegloff, E. A. (1991). Reflections on talk and social structure. In D. Boden & D. H. Zimmerman (Eds.), *Talk and social structure* (pp. 44-70). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Schegloff, E. A. (1997). Whose text? Whose context? *Discourse & Society*, 8(2), 165-87.
- Schegloff, E. A. (2003a). On ESP puns. In P. Glenn, C. LeBaron & J. Mandelbaum (Eds.), *Studies in language and social interaction: In honor of Robert Hopper* (pp.531-540). NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates.
- Schegloff, E. A. (2003b). The surfacing of the suppressed. In P. Glenn, C. LeBaron & J. Mandelbaum (Eds.), *Studies in language and social interaction: In honor of Robert Hopper* (pp. 241-262). NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates.
- Schegloff, E. A. (2004). Experimentation or observation? Of the self alone or the natural world? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 27(2), 271-272.

Department of Sociology
 University of California, Los Angeles
 Los Angeles, CA 90095-1551
 schegloff@soc.ucla.edu