

# Attention, ritual glitches, and attentional pull: the president and the queen

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**Abstract** This article proposes an analysis of a ritual glitch and resulting “misfire” from the standpoint of a phenomenologically informed anthropology of human interaction. Through articulating a synthesis of some of Husserl’s insights on attention and affection with concepts and methods developed by anthropologists and other students of human interaction, a case is made for the importance of understanding the social organization of attention in ritual encounters. An analysis of a failed toast during President Obama’s 2011 State Visit to the United Kingdom is used to illustrate how attention is directed toward certain participants, actions, and objects – as opposed to others. Affect-loaded empathic reactions are explained by the protracted temporal unfolding of an action whose successful conclusion – or “repair” – is ostensibly and publicly delayed.

**Keywords** Anthropology · Phenomenology · Attention · Affection · Attentional pull · Empathy · Ritual · Husserl · President Obama · Queen Elizabeth

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In this article we discuss the role of attention in culture from the standpoint of a phenomenologically informed anthropology. As we shall see, for us this means an

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integration of some of Husserl's insights on attention and affection (e.g., Husserl 2001a) with concepts and methods developed by anthropologists and other students of human interaction (see Duranti 2009, 2010; Throop 2003, Throop 2010a; also Desjarlais and Throop 2011). It is through the merging of Husserlian transcendental phenomenology with anthropological research on human social encounters and language socialization studies that we have come to conceive of the organization and regulation of attention as a key dimension of our cultural existence, which is at work in all kinds of settings, from those with a few participants to those with large groups of people.

As our analysis will show, in a formal and public setting participants' postures and gestures as well as the many "objects" that surround them, including non-linguistic sounds, are endowed with properties that attract or detract attention and as such they constitute, together with language, the distinctive patterning of the events the participants find themselves in the midst of. Most importantly, we focus on the temporally unfolding dynamics of culturally directed attention during an extended speech act, i.e., a toast,<sup>2</sup> that "misfires" (Austin 1975) and claim that the publicly perceptible glitch or "mishap" (as described by *The Telegraph*, see below) has the pragmatic force to evoke, manage and, to some extent, regulate observers' empathic attunements to participants' emotional responses, thereby informing practical, ethical, and aesthetic evaluations of the actions as they unfold.

Whereas many philosophical, cognitive, and social scientific approaches to empathy have focused on situations in which a single person is deemed a "target" of empathy, our example highlights how empathic responses may arise in complex semiotic settings in which interactions involve multiple human participants, material artifacts, and other cultural products or phenomena (e.g., music). Significantly, we see empathy in this regard as a dynamic process of pre-cognitive embodied understanding, attuning, and orienting to others that simultaneously calls forth and is subject to the cultural organization of attention (see Throop 2012a; Zahavi 2010). More specifically, we argue that prominence as an aspect of empathy is an intersubjectively constituted feature of interaction that arises in a fluctuating tension between attentional activity and differing forms of attentional pull.

The toast in question was made by U.S. President Barack Obama to the Queen<sup>3</sup> of England, Elizabeth II, on the occasion of an official visit to England. As we shall see, and as schematically represented in Table 1 below, the toast first seems to "misfire," in the sense of the term introduced by J.L. Austin for procedures that are disallowed, botched, or are not accepted (Austin 1975: 16, 25, 27). But then the toast is carried to completion through a sequence of non-verbal and verbal acts that, borrowing a term from conversation analysts, we will consider an example of a "repair" (Schegloff et al. 1977; Schegloff 1979).

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this article we will consider the toast as one single speech act, even though when a toast is as elaborate as the one performed by President Obama the verbal and non-verbal sequence of acts could be seen as a combination of a series of different types of speech acts, which are subsumed under the speech act "toast." For an analysis of toasts in informal settings, see Solomon (1999).

<sup>3</sup> In the rest of the article, following common usage in the popular press and taking advantage of the fact that there is one and only one "queen" that we write about here, we will refer to Queen Elizabeth II as "the Queen." As for President Obama, we will alternate among a variety of referential expressions, including "The U.S. President," "President Obama," and "the President." The use of the last name was felt appropriate and in some cases necessary given that Queen Elizabeth has interacted in her life with other eleven U.S. Presidents, including George W. Bush, whose toast to the Queen will be briefly discussed in this article.

**Table 1** Macro-sequential description of President Obama's "toast"

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1. The U.S. President makes a verbal toast to the Queen.
  2. Instead of responding to the toast by raising her glass and turning to face the President, the Queen remains standing and facing ahead, like the other guests at the head table;
  3. The President turns to face the guests and puts down his glass, remaining standing, thereby conforming to what everyone else is doing;
  4. Thirty seconds later the Queen picks up her glass, lifts it and turns toward the President, who has in the meantime mirrored her behavior by lifting his glass and turning to face her;
  5. The President repeats, softly, "to the Queen," thereby completing and de facto "repairing" the completion of the toast that had "misfired."
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As we shall explain below, there is a crucial element of the event that is not part of the "toast" but does seem to be involved in its performance and the misfire, namely, the band's playing of "God Save The Queen" while President Obama is continuing his verbal toast and then for an additional 22 s before the Queen and everyone else at the table reciprocate by raising their glasses and thus allowing the toast to be "repaired" and brought to conclusion.

Even though our analysis in the rest of this article is mainly focused on this sequence of actions and the reactions in the media, as we will show, verbal or non-verbal glitches and (depending on one's analysis) potential or actual "misfires" during the performance of a toast are not unusual. One issue, therefore, will be why the occurrence of such glitches and what turn out to be "on the spot," or improvised "repairs" in some cases attract the attention of participants, viewers, or the media. In this comparative perspective, we are thus interested in elucidating what made President Obama's misfire vulnerable to a higher level of scrutiny and affect-loaded reactions than some of the other ones.

Our analysis, which draws from the televised event and the subsequent commentaries in the media, is meant to highlight the fact that an interaction and its unfolding interpretation relies on both the participants' agentive participation (e.g., in the words used, timing of acts) and the attentional pull of non-human entities (e.g., the position of a glass) and phenomena (e.g., music). Before returning to President Obama's toast and its problematic aspects, we will provide a brief overview of the ways in which attention is guided by different types of acts, events, and human and non-human entities.

## 2 The distribution of attention

We believe that by identifying the ways in which attention works, we have a powerful instrument for understanding how people respond to, interpret, and engage with their surrounding world. As a start, we propose to focus on attention in situations in which it is an intersubjective process, that is, a combination of acts and responses that are distributed across subjects through the rich sensory-material world within which they find themselves enmeshed. In this perspective, the production of culture that occurs in face-to-face interaction is not merely a problem of linguistic or symbolic communication. It is also a practical problem of beings living in a lifeworld populated with phenomena that not only may arouse our interest, as posited by Carl Stumpft in his

original view of attention in relation to musical sounds (see Depraz 2004: 15–16), but also need to be responsively engaged with in order to be interpreted and integrated with the predictable and scripted aspects of social life.

It is our view that in the midst of complex interactions involving multiple participants living in a materially and sensorially rich world, there are some aspects of those interactions (with people and “things”) that emerge as more relevant than others. Significantly, inherited cultural assumptions and dispositions play an important role in defining what is taken to be the most prominent and relevant features of social life. In this regard, we conceive of human interaction as a dynamic cultural process that is significantly predicated upon – as pointed out by such leading phenomenologists as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty – pre-cognitive embodied forms of understanding, attuning, and orienting to others, events, and situations in publicly accessible ways. And yet, the phenomenal world in which we find ourselves living often exceeds our expectations (as culturally shaped or otherwise). Accordingly, it is important to recognize that intersubjectively and inter-materially constituted features of interaction arise in a fluctuating tension between a projected next action and the surrounding phenomenal world that is to some extent independent of the intentions, consciousness, and will of some (or all) of the human agents living within it (Rosen 1995; Murphy and Throop 2010; Duranti 2015). As beings, we are responsive to, and affected by, a world that surpasses us, even as we work in culturally prescribed or acceptable ways to make our way through it.

As phenomenological anthropologists we are thus concerned with the double task of illuminating the role of cultural processes in modulating these moments of tension and being open to the possibility that there are properties of the phenomenal world, like loudness, duration, and the handiness of specific material objects, which are likely to be of pan-human relevance, while easily adapted to local understandings of actions and events.

### 3 The organization of attention

We start from the phenomenological assumption that our daily affairs are marked by shifting horizons of foreground and background that gives rise to variable forms of prominence (e.g., Husserl 1962: §27). The background can refer to objects, actions, events, and others that are not noticed at all or have only “a dimly apprehended depth or fringe of indeterminate reality.” (Husserl 1962: 92) This perceived indeterminacy corresponds to those aspects of our surrounding world that are taken for granted and unexamined. The surrounding world is not, however, a neutral canvas upon which subjects freely paint their experiences. Depending on the context, at any given moment we may be drawn to notice or engage with certain aspects of the world and not others. “All perception begins,” Bernard Waldenfels observes, “with something coming to my attention, imposing itself on me, attracting or repelling me, affecting me” (2011: 63). There is, Waldenfels (2011:59) reminds us, tension (Lat. *tensio*) in attention (Lat. *attentio*). Attention does not “freely” organize our world of experience. It is also responsive to it, or, in Husserl’s language, is affected by it. Our noticings may thus be directed by the actions of others who share that world with us, as well as by the objects, events, and activities that transpire within our surroundings, and/or by our habitual (what Husserl called “natural”) dispositions, orientations, and expectations.

For Husserl, the shifting of attention that characterizes our being-in-the-world can be understood as a series of “modifications” (Depraz 2004) of our intentional acts. Such intentional modifications, in turn, are habitually patterned (Duranti 2009). It is for this reason that we conceive of the habitual patterning of attention as a core dimension of what anthropologists refer to by the term “culture.”

While cognitive anthropology has been concerned with both foregrounded and backgrounded knowledge (see D’Andrade 1995), social anthropologists have documented, analyzed, and compared scores of rites of passage events where statuses, relationships, and norms are evoked and reaffirmed for all members to notice and remember (see Bell 2009). At the same time, ethnographers’ proximity to and participation in everyday life routines has made possible the study of less public and sometimes subversive activities where statuses, roles, and norms are explicitly questioned or momentarily suspended (see Ortner 2006). Over the last three or four decades the use of audio- and visual recording has made some of these contexts available to the careful moment-by-moment analysis pioneered by conversation analysts (e.g., Sacks 1992; Sacks et al. 1974; Goodwin 1981; Heritage and Clayman 2010) and integrated with ethnographic accounts by some contemporary linguistic anthropologists (e.g., M.H. Goodwin 1990, 2006; Duranti 1994, 1997a; Keating 1998).

An area of research that has benefited from the combination of ethnographic observations of everyday life routines with the use of audio-visual technologies has been language socialization understood as socialization through and to the use of language (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984; Duranti et al. 2012). In this research paradigm, to become socialized means to acquire habitual ways of being oriented to and understanding the world, situations, events, and others. Communicative practices play an important but not exclusive role in this process that includes an ever-evolving familiarity with persons, artifacts, and features of the built environment (Ochs and Schieffelin 2012: 4). In this article we extend these insights from language socialization research to an understanding of culture as including a deeply sedimented habitual organization of attention aimed at highlighting some aspects of the surrounding world while making other aspects less conspicuous. In this perspective, we see our “familiar” ways of being in the world as constituted through culturally-mediated attentional practices that typically obscure the arbitrary or conventional aspects of existing dispositions, arrangements, and routine activities.

For instance, as we have learned from ethnoarchaeologists and environmental anthropologists (Lawrence and Low 1990), the built environment is culturally organized to deploy and focus attention in particular ways. After years of schooling, almost nobody notices the ways that chairs and desks are positioned to direct the attention of students and instructors in particular ways. And yet, they experience the situation of the classroom by means of the body’s position in chairs, at tables, facing forward toward the lectern, displaying an embodied attentional stance which includes patterns of eye-gaze and eye-contact, etc. As a result of our habitual conditioning to certain culturally meaningful spaces that we regularly inhabit, when we look around a room, like a classroom, some things stand out for us and some are barely noticed at all. Borrowing from Husserl, we can say that the uneven distribution of noticeable facets of a space like a classroom is significantly shaped by the “values and practicalities” associated with them (Husserl 1962: 93).

A similar attitude pervades our spatio-temporal relationship with and embodied dispositions toward other humans. Human beings are beings who stand out from other beings and entities in a special way, and yet not all human beings attract the same level of attention. As Husserl (1962: 93) notes, some of them “are my ‘friends’ or my ‘foes,’ my ‘servants’ or ‘superiors,’ ‘strangers’ or ‘relatives,’ and so forth.” All kinds of human and non-human aspects of our surrounding world often draw our attention away from other human beings, who may fall into the “background” like the walls of a classroom or the music that is being played through the speakers in a store or in a restaurant. The “servants” coming in and out of the kitchen while a host and his or her guests eat, the piano player in the lounge of a hotel, or the students waiting outside the office of a colleague could be examples of such “background” characters. Such a differentiation in foregrounded vs. backgrounded human participants is further constituted by specific habitus, some of which involve language. For instance, verbal routines like greetings seem designed to acknowledge the presence and relevance of certain participants and leave others excluded (Sacks 1975; Duranti 1997b; Duranti 2004). Significantly, our attention to human participants can also be modified by the disposition and use of artifacts (Clark 2003), or by the presence of other elements of the situation that cannot be easily ignored (Goodwin 2003). Such elements of the context can together work to amplify feelings and/or thoughts we might have had about those others, our consociates, who share our surrounding world with us. They can also trigger new feelings or thoughts about them.

When defining the notion of “affection” in the context of his discussion of different levels of sense constitution, Husserl (2001a: 196) suggested that various aspects of our surrounding world exercise a “pull” that is relaxed once those aspects become an object of attention for the Ego. It is the attraction of a given object or property of an object that awakens human intentionality thereby constituting our meaning-filled world. Some philosophers have argued about whether affection should be considered a precondition for the constitution of meaning (Bégout 2000; Steinbock 1995). We are interested in examining this issue empirically, focusing on the dynamics created by the attentional attraction of human and non-human entities within particular social contexts. Despite the very special forms of prominence that human beings typically have for other human beings, the surrounding world of objects implicated within particular events, what many social scientists term the “context,” is closely tethered to the ways that human beings become prominent to one another (Goodwin and Duranti 1992), including the very special forms of prominence that are evidenced in moments of empathy (see Hollan and Throop 2008, 2011; Throop 2010b, Throop 2012b).

#### 4 Varieties of attentional pull

The ways in which our attention to our surrounding world is dynamically organized, distributed, and arrayed is, at least in part, shaped by the context of our historical emplacement in specific communities, which includes a continuously updated process of socialization. We are interested in identifying the different ways that our attention can be “pulled.” Building upon the work on attention by Husserl and the discussion of

equipment by Heidegger, we propose that there are at least five basic types of what we are calling attentional pull.<sup>4</sup>

- 1) *Things are ready to be used.* The first type of attentional pull arises in the context of our habitual embodied practices, interpretations, and interactions. When we enter into a space, a context, or an encounter that we are familiar with, our attention is habitually pulled toward some aspects of the situation and not others. When we enter our office at work our attention is drawn to the objects, implements, and tools that we regularly use, the books on the shelf, the computer and phone on the desk. This is a type of pull that activates our memory to check whether things are where we thought we left them and where they are supposed to be. Evoking possibilities for future actions, the objects in the room display themselves not only as ready-to-be-used (Heidegger 1962: §15, §16) but also ready-to-be-moved in case they do not fit whatever plan we have for the immediate future (e.g., turn on the computer, find a note we wrote the day before, pull out a book, clear up part of the desk).
- 2) *Something is not working/Breakdown.* A second type of attentional pull is at work in situations when things breakdown or do not work as expected. John Dewey (1922: 178) mentioned that our habits tend to be unconscious and only “a hitch” in the way in which something works “occasions emotions and provokes thought” (see also Mead 1934). Martin Heidegger also used the case of damaged equipment in *Being and Time* as an example of a thing whose condition allows for a non-pragmatic understanding of a tool, i.e., as a present-at-hand (or objectively present) as opposed to a ready-to-hand entity. We are interested in these cases as one subset of a wider range of situations where our attention is redirected toward something that is not happening in the way we expected and that as such might invite some form of “repair” whose accomplishment has been shown to be skewed toward giving the one who made the misstep a chance to fix it (Schegloff et al. 1977; Schegloff 1992).
- 3) *Something is missing/Absence.* A third closely related type of attentional pull happens when things depart, disappear, or are no longer in their place. For instance, when we enter the lecture hall and notice immediately that a desk that was up against the wall is no longer there. While on an average day we barely notice the desk’s presence in the room as we walk up to the front of the class to pull out from our briefcase our notes for the lecture, the absence of the desk pulls our attention toward its previous presence in that place. This can also happen in deeply embodied ways as we may feel that our pocket is lighter just prior to realizing that our office keys are missing (see Berry 2012). The death of a loved one can also evoke such forms of attentional pull. For instance whereas we might never have noticed it before, when we walk into our grandfather’s study after his passing our

<sup>4</sup> As readers familiar with Heidegger’s writings will immediately see, we have incorporated several of Heidegger’s insights into the different ways in which human relate to equipment or, in Heidegger’s language, equipment reveals itself to human users, but we have taken the liberty to remix some of the features of his three-way distinction among conspicuousness, obtrusiveness, and obstinacy (Heidegger 1962, §16, and footnote 1 on p. 104) to fit our own goals, which include a concern for the degree of human agency in a world populated by both people and things and not as much interest in the implications of tool-use in the history of western metaphysics.



attention is drawn immediately to the place where he kept his glasses by the computer.

- 4) *Something is conspicuous and cannot be ignored/Breakthrough.* A fourth type of attentional pull involves moments when something “breaks through,” such as those instances when a loud noise shocks us, when a car veers unexpectedly from its lane toward us, when a pain in our stomach that was not previously there suddenly afflicts us, or when we begin to notice the early signs that we are coming down with a cold or a flu. In each case, our attention is drawn toward a new, intense, or unexpected phenomenon that was previously not part of our awareness. This is a type of phenomenon where the personal, cultural, and natural history of our engagement with particular aspects of our current environment – including our own body – are entangled in such a way to produce considerable differences across individuals and groups. For example, whether or not the music in a store is loud enough to be noticed and even recognized depends on our familiarity with the music that is being played through the speakers and whether it is played in a social context that either enhances or diminishes its prominence. Similarly, a feature of the ground or of the “dirt” might be conspicuous to an attentive archaeologist but not to others (Goodwin 1994).
- 5) *Something affecting us directs our attention to something we had not noticed before.* A fifth and final type of attentional pull, which may in fact be understood to be implicated in each of the four others, occurs when our emotions, feelings, and/or moods direct our attention to aspects of a situation or event that we would not have otherwise noticed. Feeling worried and upset after our child hits his head on the corner of the table and then noticing for the first time all of the other sharp and unyielding surfaces in the house is one example. Feeling sad when your friend tells you of her cancer diagnosis and then noticing the bags under her eyes from sleepless nights is another. In both of these cases the experience of a particular emotion or mood expands our attention toward a range of phenomena we would not have noticed before (see Throop 2010b, 2012c, 2014). It is also possible however for our attention to be pulled to the experience or expression of particular emotions themselves. We might find ourselves fumbling over our notes in lecture before our attention is pulled away from the lecture itself to palpable feelings of anxiety or embarrassment. Others’ emotions also pull our attention, so much so that in noticing another’s shame or anger we might be able to notice little else of salience in the situation.<sup>5</sup>

These varieties of attentional pull play a part in defining the shifting prominences that populate our everyday experiences with the others, events, and objects that surround us. They can help us in our understanding not only of what others are up

<sup>5</sup> One of our reviewers insightfully noted that this form of attentional pull may indeed generatively contribute to debates in the literature over how best to conceptualize the role of emotions in the experience of empathy. As she or he noted, while many scholars (see Decety 2011, D’Vignemont and Jacob 2012, Snow 2000) wish to “restrict empathy to cases in which the target experiences some emotion,” many phenomenologists tend “not to restrict empathy in this way” (see Gallagher 2009, Zahavi 2010). Significantly, the perspective advanced in this article holds that the attentional pull of others’ emotions may importantly modulate our empathic engagement with them as differing aspects of their first-person perspective on the world are, in the process, made increasingly salient to us.



to, but also of what we should or might want to do next. The different types of attentional pull can then each be seen as a different stage for empathy to kick in or play its part.

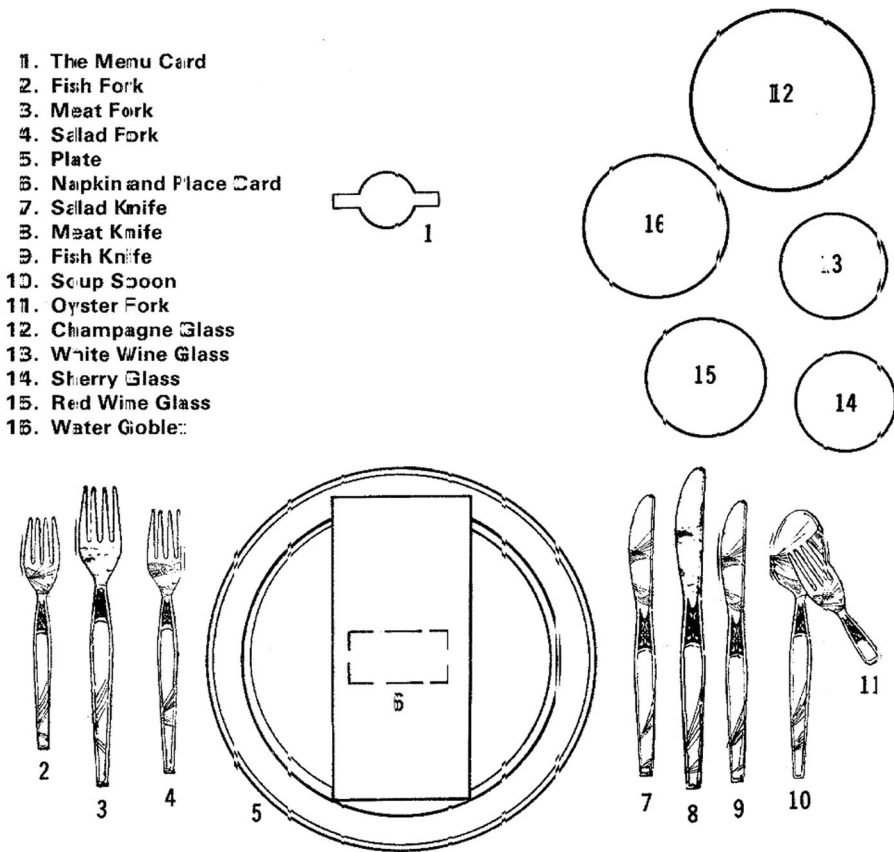
## 5 The president and the queen

Our conceptualization of attentional pull will be applied to an analysis of the above mentioned televised toast given by President Obama to Queen Elizabeth at a banquet offered in his and the First Lady's honor at Buckingham Palace during the 2011 State Visit to the United Kingdom. Before embarking on a detailed description and discussion of this particular event, a few remarks are needed on the nature of this type of ritualized event as seen from the point of view of the social sciences and anthropology in particular.

As a formal ritualized event, the banquet was a classic example of a gathering that entailed significant stretches of pre-scripted interaction. It also required that participants follow a royal etiquette that has a historical legacy of hundreds of years of court culture in the British Isles and Europe. Seating arrangements, protocols for when to sit, stand, speak or be silent, the proper use of utensils (see Fig. 1), the anticipated sequence of courses, and expected forms of politeness are apparently enacted without a second thought by those well versed in court etiquette. However, as we will show, even in the midst of such ritualized events, there is room for adjustments, corrections, and, thus, improvised behavior aimed at avoiding "misfires" or "repairing" possible "glitches" in order to keep the interaction as smooth and flawless as possible.

From a cultural point of view, there is no question that for someone socialized to the ritual, there are habituated forms of attentional pull resulting in comfortable familiarity with those aspects of the situation that are "where they are supposed to be" (type 1 above). While approaching the table, for instance, a guest's attention is predictably and aptly drawn to cards indicating where they are to be seated. Attention might also be pulled toward wine glasses at the top right corner of the table setting as a server (or "footman") approaches with bottles to pour. More generally, as pointed out by Judith Irvine (1979: 779) in her survey of recurring features of so-called "formal communicative events," a common aspect of ritual formality is "a main focus of attention" when some or all participants display "mutual involvement" (Goffman 1963).

Rituals are not exclusively about replicating and enacting pregiven habits, values and norms, however. Such historically sedimented expectations and pre-scripted behaviors need not necessarily lead to the public recognition or reproduction of existing status, roles, and rules. As richly documented in the anthropological literature, rituals may also be designed to bring about important transformations, shifts, and reversals, such as in the case of "rites of passage" and "rituals of rebellion" (Gluckman 1954; van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969, 1974; Irvine 1979; Drewal 1992). More importantly for the interaction we will explore here, the study of such ritualized events in anthropology has also taught us that even in the case of the most formal of interactions enacted in efforts to reproduce the status quo there are always also moments of contingency and improvisation entailed in shaping the event (see Sawyer 1996; Duranti 1994; Duranti and Black 2012). While all participants might know what their roles are and what the ritual requires of them, there are always issues that arise in efforts to coordinate one's actions with others in the event, in the practical realization of one's



Note: Each glass is removed with the course it accompanies. The dessert wine glass, however, stays throughout the serving of the demitasse. The salad and fishknives may not be needed, and only two wines, sherry and champagne, may be served.

Fig. 1 Place settings at formal dinners at Buckingham Palace <http://www.gentlemansgazette.com/dinner-etiquette-formal-dining/>

expected or publicly announced participation, in the performative felicity of what is said and done, and in responding to the reactions of the other participants and the audience (Duranti 1986; Goodwin 1981).

This means that in the midst of the most formal and ritualized event things can go wrong. A wine glass might be missing from the table (see #3 above, “something is missing”) or something might breakdown in the expected sequencing of events or in the physical implements being used (“something breaks down” #2 above). Something unexpected can happen that can disrupt the regular flow and timing of the unfolding of the ritual. For instance, a server might drop a tray of plates during a speech, the sounds breaking through to distract participants, perhaps even forcing the speaker to wait for the mess to be cleaned up before resuming his or her planned remarks (“something breaks through” #4 above). Such moments often call for adjustment or “repair” (as

conversational analysts might say) on the part of the participants. The speaker might make an otherwise unplanned joke about the force of their previously expressed political views startling the waiter for instance.

The ongoing flux of participants' emotional states, reactions, and moods may also impact the timing, sequencing, and unfolding of the ritual. Realizing that the audience is taking the force of his words in a direction that violates his own ethics or beliefs, a political candidate might decide to reframe what he just said (Duranti 2003). Noticing a fellow guest's interest in the story being told, other guests seated at another table might decide to quietly tell their neighbors about a similar story of their own ("something affecting us directs us to something new," #5 above) (cf. Sacks 1992). This means that any strip of interaction contains both ritualized, predictable, planned or scripted parts and improvised moves and acts that are contingently relevant to what has just happened or is understood or perceived to be about to happen. In fact, as the study of improvisation in music has shown, for any type of improvisation to be possible, performers must be able to rely on established conventions, expectations, and structures (e.g., predictable sequences of acts) (see Duranti and Black 2012; Sawyer 2001, 2003). Bourdieu recognized this aspect of social action through the adoption of the notion of *habitus*, which implies both regulated behavior and improvisation (Bourdieu 1977; Throop and Murphy 2002). We will expand and refine this idea by showing that in a situation in which key participants do not share the same *habitus*, the ritualized, scripted aspects of the interaction might inhibit the quick repair of a mistake in protocol while simultaneously activating a prolonged empathic reaction.<sup>6</sup> Such a reaction, we will later argue, is regulated by particular types of attentional pull.

## 6 Buckingham palace: ritual, formality, and the control of attention

On May 24, 2011, a banquet was held to officially welcome the U.S. President and First Lady to England and to Buckingham Palace. The event was hosted by Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip. Also in attendance among the many guests and seated at the head table were: the Prince of Wales and The Duchess of Cornwall, The Duke of York, The Earl and Countess of Wessex, The Princess Royal and Vice Admiral Timothy Laurence, The Duke and Duchess of Gloucester, The Duke of Kent, Prince and Princess Michael of Kent and Princess Alexandra, and the Honorable Lady Ogilvy.

The reception honoring the Obamas' visit to Buckingham Palace bears all of the elements of a ritual in the classic anthropological sense. There is pre-scripted and stereotyped sequences of events, ascribed roles and status taken up and displayed, as well as recognizable forms of honorific oratory, dress, and action (what practitioners of

<sup>6</sup> From our perspective, empathy must be understood as a process that is temporally arrayed, intersubjectively constituted, and culturally patterned. As a mode of reciprocal attunement, empathy necessarily arises within a fundamental asymmetry of perspectives. The persistence of intersubjective asymmetry is what in fact distinguishes empathic experiences from other forms of co-existence. As emphasized by Husserl (e.g., 1989: 177; see also Stein 1989: 10), for the empathizer, empathy is a primordial disclosing of non-primordial experience, that is, experiences lived through by another. Along these lines, Throop has argued elsewhere that "[i]t is never the first-person experiences as actually lived through by an empathizee that are 'seen' by an empathizer in an act of empathy. Nor is it their expressive acts qua acts that are. Instead, it is the disclosed experiences of the other 'shining through' (Husserl 2001b) such expressions that constitute an empathic experience of another" (Throop 2012a: 412; see also Zahavi 2010).

such events usually call “protocol”). As is evident from information that can be located on an official web page run for the Royal Family,<sup>7</sup> there is a royal procession, a predetermined menu with a preset sequence of dishes, as well as a predetermined musical program. There is also a dress code for the event that is evident in the images embedded in the webpage. In addition, there is a prearranged order of speakers who have prepared speeches that are to be followed by a toast. Looking at the macro-organization of the speeches the Queen, as host, is required to give the first speech, which ends with a toast to the President and the First Lady. Following this, the President as a royal guest responds in kind with his own speech and toast to the Queen. The ordered parallelism of this type of organizational structure is designed to recognize hierarchy (only some individuals are expected and allowed to speak), equality (both the Queen and the President give a speech and a toast), and different roles (hostess goes first, guest goes second). At the same time, as we shall see, the same structural aesthetics will turn out to create some problems once things do not go as expected.

Within this sequence of speeches and toasts, we will focus on the transition between the end of the President’s speech and its accompanied toast to the Queen. Significantly, it is in the context of this particular stretch of talk that a particularly intense attentional pull is exercised by the President’s actions, words included, and an empathic orientation is simultaneously generated by those actions in those viewing the interaction, as demonstrated by the affect-laden responses displayed in the media, which we will briefly document below, as well as by our own experience in viewing the toast and in showing it to groups of colleagues on two occasions.<sup>8</sup> As we will argue, unpacking the ways that attention is variously organized and pulled during these moments is key to understanding how an explicitly empathic orientation to the participants’ experience of the event is evoked.

## 7 The “misfire”

Our interest in this particular ritual and its unfolding stems from the ways that an unexpected breach in its protocol reveals not only cross-cultural differences and lack of knowledge of royal etiquette on the part of the U.S. President but also and crucially the specific ways that during the toast attention is controlled, organized, and pulled by a variety of phenomena, several of which do not involve talk and yet are in tension with what was being said or not said.

The “misfire” occurred during the toast delivered by President Obama to the Queen, as recognized by the media in the UK and the U.S. with titles such as the following:

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.royal.gov.uk/LatestNewsandDiary/StateVisitprogrammes/2011/Sta/TheStateBanquet.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> The video clip of the toast was shown to colleagues on two occasions, at a workshop at UCLA Center on Language, Interaction and Culture in February 2012 and at the Conference on Empathy organized by Dan Zahavi at the University of Copenhagen in October 2012.

“Barack Obama suffers royal toast mishap at Queen’s banquet” (*The Telegraph*, 0:09 AM BST 25 May 2011)

“Burnt toast: How Obama bungled his salute to the Queen” (*The Washington Post*, 5/27/2011)<sup>9</sup>

“President Obama Awkwardly Flubs Toast to The Queen” (MEDIATYPE, May 24, 2011)<sup>10</sup>

“President Obama makes royal gaffe during toast to Queen” (examiner.com, May 24, 2011)

“Queen humiliates President Obama at Buckingham Palace by refusing toast” (newsrealdemocracy, May 24, 2011)

Our first observation is that it is impossible to make sense of what *The Telegraph* called the “mishap” if one goes to the White House website where the text of the President’s toast is reproduced:

Ladies and gentlemen, please stand with me and raise your glasses as I propose a toast: To Her Majesty the Queen. For the vitality of the special relationship between our peoples, and in the words of Shakespeare, “To this blessed plot, this Earth, this realm, this England.” To the Queen. (A toast is offered.) (Applause.)<sup>11</sup>

Matched against what can be heard and seen in the video clips widely available on the internet, the text provided by the White House is a fairly accurate rendition of the *words* that were said by the President but not of the ways in which they were delivered and, even more importantly, of the concurrent non-verbal actions, including the participants’ facial expressions, postures, gazes of the Queen and other participants, the acoustic presence of the band’s music, as well as the tempo and timing of the President’s toast.

Anthropologists have long noted that when things go wrong, whether it be in the wake of conflict, turmoil, revolt, ineptitude, or misunderstanding, we are often given access to cultural interpretations, values, rules, and assumptions that are otherwise taken for granted, unexamined, and unvoiced (see, for example, Evans-Pritchard 1976). In such cases, tacit cultural understandings may be made explicit as actors involved in the situation work to make sense of what precisely went wrong. In this particular case, we find a description of “what happened” in a number of media outlets. We have chosen to start with the one given on May 25th by *The Telegraph*, which provides a good example of what we might consider an informed “local” or “native” account:

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/reliable-source/post/burnt-toast-how-obama-bungled-his-salute-to-the-queen/2011/05/26/AGtv3HCH\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/reliable-source/post/burnt-toast-how-obama-bungled-his-salute-to-the-queen/2011/05/26/AGtv3HCH_blog.html)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.mediaite.com/tv/president-obama-awkwardly-flubs-toast-to-the-queen/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/24/remarks-president-obama-and-her-majesty-queen-united-kingdom-dinner-toas>

The US President had just begun proposing a toast to the Queen when the orchestra accidentally struck up God Save The Queen.

However, rather than pause and continue the speech after the music had stopped, Mr Obama pressed on only to be rebuffed when he raised his glass to her.

The Queen did not seem to take offence at the mishap and appeared to stifle an embarrassed smile.

Protocol demands that people stand to attention when the national anthem is played.

Seated between the Queen and the Duchess of Cornwall for the white tie function, Mr Obama got to his feet and addressed the guests saying: “Ladies and gentlemen, please stand with me and raise your glasses as I propose a toast.

“To Her Majesty the Queen.”

Mistakenly believing that was their cue, the orchestra of the Scots Guard began playing the national anthem.

Mr Obama continued: “For the vitality of the special relationship between our peoples and in the words of Shakespeare to ‘this blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England’.”

Raising his glass, halfway through the anthem, he concluded “to the Queen”, but seemed baffled when she did not respond.

Looking around sheepishly at the rows of guests stood in silence, Mr Obama placed his glass back on the table and clasped his hands until the band had finished.

He then repeated the gesture to the Queen, who smiled again, as she finally raised her own glass to the President.

In this quite comprehensive “native” analysis, which is informed by local knowledge of the protocol in such events, we see that the timing of President Obama’s use of the phrase “To Her Majesty the Queen” was held to be key for understanding what went wrong and why the orchestra “accidentally” began playing the national anthem “God Save the Queen” too early. In addition, the fact that the President continued to give his toast while the anthem was played by the band was interpreted as a failure to understand what the writer takes for granted, namely, the shared cultural norm among the Queen’s subjects that one should pause (and stand still) while the band plays “God Save The Queen.” Instead of concluding the verbal toast, President Obama follows the phrase “to Her Majesty the Queen” with a series of additional remarks, which include a quote from Shakespeare’s *King Richard II*, Act 2, Scene 1. When we look at the delivery of the phrase “to Her Majesty the Queen,” we notice that right after he makes a

0.8 s long pause. This is longer than any of the other previous pauses with the exception of the one in which he announces the toast in-the-making (“As I propose a toast”). It is thus a combination of factors that produce the “mishap.” It is very likely that the band started to play “God Save The Queen” before the President’s toast was completed because the conductor had taken the combination of the “to” phrase and the pause that follows as a sign (an *indexical* one) of the conclusion of the toast.

Transcript # 1 (Seating arrangement at the head table from left to right: Camilla<sup>12</sup> Parker Bowles, President Obama, the Queen, Prince Philip, First Lady Michelle Obama. President Obama is standing, reading from what looks like a stack of 5×7 cards that he holds between his hands)

*Looks to his right*

Ladies and Gentlemen (0.5 s),

[

*looks down at card*

Please stand with me (0.6 s),

[

*looks up to his right*

[

*looks down at his card*

And raise your glasses (0.4 s),

[

*puts card down*

*Reaches for his glass with his right hand while Camilla looks at his hand.*

*The Queen stares ahead, without moving.*

*An attendant moves slightly forward to prepare to move Camilla’s chair*

<sup>12</sup> Following common practice in the media, hereafter we will simply write “Camilla” to refer to Camilla Parker Bowles, Duchess of Cornwall.



As I propose a toast. (4.5 s)

*Looks up while everyone stands*

To Her Majesty (0.3 s), the Queen (0.8 s)

The vit-ality of the special relationship,

(((point of overlap)))

*band starts to play “God Save The Queen”*

Between our people and

In the words of Shakespeare

To this blessed plot, this Earth

This throne, this realm,

This England.

To the Queen.

Our analysis of the toast supports the explanation provided by *The Telegraph* that the band mistook the phrase “To Her Majesty The Queen” as the end of the toast and thus as the appropriate time to start playing “God Save The Queen,” but it also shows that, contrary to what was stated in *The Telegraph* article, there was nothing “accidental” about this interpretation. On the contrary, it was a very reasonable move if we assume that the phrase with the preposition “to” followed by the target of the toast is the conventionalized signal (see below). This phrase, its position in the President’s speech, and the 0.8 s pause that followed it seem to be the misleading cues that were responsible for triggering the band to start playing the anthem. President Obama’s continuation of his toast over the playing of the anthem by the band can be attributed to either the fact that the President had not been informed about the protocol that requires silence during the performance of “God Save The Queen” or that once he realized that his speech was overlapping with the band playing “God Save The Queen” he did not feel like he could stop.

Before going any further with our analysis, we need to find some comparative data. We will do so by briefly examining two other toasts in a similar event. The first is the Queen’s toast to the Obamas earlier during the same banquet and the second one will be President George W. Bush’s toast to the Queen during the banquet in his 2003 visit to Buckingham Palace. The comparison will show that although the “to-phrase” is indeed an important cue for the band to start playing the national anthem (whether the British or the American one), there are “mis-haps” that happened on those two other occasions, although they did not seem to attract much attention by the public or the media.

## 8 The Queen's toast to the obamas

In her toast to the Obamas, while reading from a paper she is holding in her hands, the Queen invites all the guests to join her in raising their glasses “to the continued health, happiness and prosperity of the people of the United States of American, and especially to the health of President and Mrs. Obama. At that point everyone stands and the Band of the Blues and Royals plays the American national anthem “The Starred Spangled Banner.” As the last notes of the American anthem are played, the Queen leans over to reach for her glass, then she lifts it up while turning toward the President who turns toward her while standing with his hands clasped. They smile at each other. The President bows to her (see Fig. 2)

Were we to stop here, the Queen's toast would seem to be a perfectly executed performance of the toast, something that should have been emulated by the President, but, as we saw above, was not. The sequential account of the Queen's toast would thus look like the one described in Table 2.

Described as such and compared to the toast by President Obama, the Queen's looks like the ideal model for what should have happened later but did not. In fact, however, things were not as smooth as they might have seemed. We might wonder, for example, why the President does not raise his glass to the Queen and whether that could have been considered a breach of etiquette. If we continue the sequential analysis to include what the Queen does after exchanging the smile with President Obama, we find that she starts to turn left toward Prince Philip but stops short of it, perhaps having noticed with her peripheral vision that he was turned away from her and toward Mrs. Obama who was standing right next to him. A short and relatively contained burst of laughter by the British commentator on the MSNBC broadcast just after the closing of the exchange could be interpreted as a recognition of the awkwardness of the interaction between the royal couple. But there is something much more problematic that went on during the Queen's toast and yet was not obvious at first. To understand what happened, we need to look at what the Queen said and what happened immediately after.

Transcript # 2 (Same seating arrangement as shown in Transcript #1, but earlier in the evening. The Queen is at the end of her speech and begins her toast)



**Fig. 2** Completing her toast to President Obama Queen Elizabeth lifts her glass and smiles at the President who reciprocates smiling and bowing (May 24, 2011) (frame grab from BBC footage of event <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-13537972>)

**Table 2** Macro-sequential description of the Queen's "toast" to the Obamas

- 
1. The Queen makes a verbal toast to the President and Mrs. Obama.
  2. She puts down her speech.
  3. Everyone gets up.
  4. The band plays the American national anthem.
  5. The Queen raises her glass, followed by everyone else, but the President, who smiles and bows at her without drinking.
- 

I therefore ask you- now to join me in raising your glasses to the continued health, happiness, and prosperity of the people of the United States, of America, and especially, to the health of President and Mrs. Obama.

((7 s)) ((*the guests raise from their seats*))

((*The band starts to play the American national anthem*))

The transcript above shows that the Queen asked the other guests "now" to "join" her "in raising" their glasses, but the video shows that she does not raise her own glass. Instead, 7 s follow her last words ("and Mrs. Obama") before the Band of the Blues and Royals starts to play "The Star Spangled Banner." During this time the guests are shown (by a change of cameras) to get up from their seats and stand still (see 3).

What is not obvious at first and requires repeated viewings is that there are guests who, as they are getting up, follow the Queen's request literally and thus reach for their glass to toast but then quickly place it back on the table once the drums start to roll introducing the "The Star Spangled Banner." We believe that these actions undertaken by some of the guests could also be considered "glitches" or, rather, ritual "errors" (lifting the glass from the table at the "wrong" time) that required immediate "repair" (placing back the glass on the table) (Fig. 3).

If we go further back in time and examine the toast made by President George W. Bush at Buckingham Palace in 2003, we find a glitch of a similar nature. As shown in transcript #3 below, President Bush concludes his verbal toast to the Queen with a long "to-phrase": "And to Her Majesty, the Queen of the United Kingdom... of Great Britain... and Northern Ireland."

Transcript # 3 (Buckingham Palace - Nov. 19, 2003; President Bush is speaking while standing and holding sheets of paper from which he is reading)

Let us raise our glasses to our common ideals (1.5 s) to our enduring friendships (1 s) to the preservation of our liberties (0.5 s) and to Her majesty, (0.5 s) the Queen of the United Kingdom, of Great Britain, ((*puts down his written speech*)) and ((*while reaching toward his glass*)) Northern Ireland.

While still holding his glass in his left hand, President Bush sees that the Queen has not grabbed her glass and is standing facing ahead instead of turning to face him (see



**Fig. 3** Guests stand after the Queen has made a verbal toast to President Obama and Mrs. Obama (May 24, 2011)

Fig. 4). President Bush then “repairs” his (by now evident to him) “error” by quickly putting down his glass (see Fig. 5)

The rest of the interaction is without obvious “mishaps” and “repairs.” The band starts to play “God Save The Queen” while everyone is standing still. On the last note of the hymn President Bush first and then Queen Elizabeth look down and then they both lean over to grab their own glasses, which they raise while turning to look at each other, with the Queen smiling at President Bush. Then they both turn away from each other, raise their glass to others in the audience and then put it down without either one of them drinking from it. As soon as both the President and the Queen are



**Fig. 4** President George W. Bush realizes that the Queen is facing away from him and not reciprocating his toast by lifting her glass (November 19, 2003)



**Fig. 5** President Bush puts down his glass once he realizes that the Queen and others are not following him in raising their glass (November 19, 2003)

seated, the rest of the guests initiate applause. From the point of view of the analysis of the speech act “toast,” this case shows remarkable similarities with President Obama’s toast. President Bush’s verbal toast also “misfires” because he starts to complete the toast with the raising of his glass but this non-verbal part of the ritual is not reciprocated by the Queen, forcing him to give up on the completion and to wait until later to “repair” it by raising his glass *again* when the Queen raises her glass and turns to him after the end of “God Save The Queen.”

These examples of other toasts make evident that in the midst of a highly ritualized, formal event, “glitches” do occur so that “misfires” are possible and in need of “repair.” What is different about these two other toasts, however, is that we do not find any comments on them in the media or on the internet. The question then remains: why did Obama’s “glitch,” “mishap” or “misfire” receive so much attention? And why did it elicit such intense, affect-laden reactions by both progressive and conservative viewers and media outlets?

## 9 Reactions in the media

In trying to answer the question about why President Obama’s mistake was noticed, commented upon, and criticized but not some of the other glitches, we want to start by pointing out that the explanatory frameworks offered to explain the mishap are full of references to empathic assessments of the participants, that is, President Obama as well as Queen Elizabeth.<sup>13</sup> For instance, in the previously cited account given in the *The Telegraph*, the author claims that “The Queen did not seem to take offence at the

<sup>13</sup> In focusing on empathic assessments in such media reactions, we do not explicitly address the possible influence of race and racialization in the context of our analysis. For excellent linguistic anthropological discussions of media responses to Obama’s Presidency that could help better illuminate the potential impact of racial bias in amplifying, and in part shaping, these characterizations of the mishap in the media (especially in the US), see Alim and Smitherman (2012) and Jackson (In Press).

mishap and appeared to stifle an embarrassed smile.” In one of the captions for a YouTube video of the event, we similarly see the language of empathy used in the assessment that the “Queen humiliates President Obama”<sup>14</sup> and that “Obama suffers embarrassing royal toast mishap at Queen’s banquet.”<sup>15</sup> In one YouTube posting of the Fox News footage we are even invited to “Feel Truly Sorry for Obama’s Faux Pas as He Toasts Queen of England.”<sup>16</sup> Where do these empathy-based assessments and calls for empathy for the President come from? What aspects of the situation evoke them?

Looking at Fig. 6, extracted from the BBC footage, we can certainly see expressions on the President’s and Queen’s faces, as well as various other aspects of their bodily comportment, that arguably disclose their respective emotional responsiveness to the situation. Even in this digitally isolated and frozen capturing of a mere instant of what is actually a temporally extended set of interactions, there is a sensorially rich and complex surrounding scene within which these embodied expressions are emplaced. An important question raised by this fact, and one that we want to orient the rest of this article to addressing, is the following: What aspects of this situation pull our attention to President Obama and/or the Queen in an empathic way, that is, as subjects living through the ongoing encounter as opposed to simply being actors enacting pre-scripted social roles?

## 10 Prominence, attentional pull, and empathy

Looking at the concrete situation in which the President and the Queen are embedded, it is important to note that both participants embody socially recognized positions of high status. Their prominence in the situation is thus significantly culturally constituted in relation to their respective social statuses and roles. The fact that they are also seated at a table that is placed upon a raised platform and oriented so that they are directly facing the other guests further heightens their conspicuousness. Moreover, as a high status speaker who is standing and holding the floor during his speech, President Obama compels a significant attentional pull, and when attended to, a special prominence.

Looking at the scene again more carefully, however, we see that the setting also includes the Queen sitting next to President Obama to his left and Prince Philip seated next to her. Camilla Parker Bowles is to the President’s right (see Fig. 6). The Queen is wearing an ornate white gown with a blue sash. She has a diamond necklace, broche, and earrings. She is also wearing glasses. Both the Queen and her daughter-in-law Camilla are wearing crowns. Prince Philip is wearing a string of medals and a medallion around his neck. Everyone is in formal attire. There are also two attendants standing-by behind the head table (in black) and two partially visible guards (in red dress) behind them.

Also visible in the setting is a flower arrangement placed on top of a white tablecloth, a table, a wine glass, and what appears to be the top of a partially occluded pineapple in front of Prince Philip. In the bottom left corner of the frame are the tops of the heads of four guests who are facing the head table. The prominence of differing aspects of the setting are also framed by particular camera angles and digital images

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZCsfaOGdw>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNRXGRFJdDY>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tla7L-dIAL4>



**Fig. 6** Obama stands with his hands clasped as he joins the rest of the participants in listening to “God Save The Queen” after completing his verbal toast

that accompany differing media outlets’ efforts at capturing and broadcasting the event. Each of these objects and individuals exude differing intensities of attentional pull and are possible foci of attention. As a result, differing individuals may have attended in different ways to various aspects of the setting.

Other important and relevant aspects of the setting that bear a possible pull on our attention include the sonic qualities of the President’s voice which is electronically amplified so that it can be heard throughout the hall and above the din of any ambient noise emanating from the activities of the other participants and guests. Yet another notable feature of the situation is the playing of “God Save The Queen.”

When the band begins “God Save The Queen,” the music also evidences a strong attentional pull given the particularities of its own sonic properties (including its instrumentation, volume, melody, and rhythm). The prominence of the sonic properties of the music is also evident in the rhythm of President Obama’s speech, which seems to adjust to the piece of music as it unfolds through time (the music is, we should recall with Husserl (1964), an object that has temporality inherent in its very constitution).

The music is also culturally prominent given that it is a composition that was composed specifically to be played to honor the Queen of England and the State that she heads. Associated with it, and inscribed in its very phenomenal qualities, are distinctive embodied stances and indexical values connected to shared histories, emotional resonances, and standards of etiquette and ethics. The protocol associated with the music requires that participants should display their respect for the Queen by standing quietly at attention. For those raised in England, this goes without saying. It is something they have enacted countless times since the time of their childhood.

Participants’ sensitivity to the sonic and cultural prominence of the music (including the Queen herself) is evident in their embodied stances, their silence, and their displays of attention by gazing out toward a fixed horizon without looking at anyone in particular (this is a culturally inflected embodied stance that conveys concentration and the solemnity of the occasion). As is evident in his stumbling and stretching of the word “vitality,” and in the matching of President Obama’s cadence of speech with the



rhythmic properties of the music, his attention has been (probably unconsciously) pulled to the sonic properties of the music. He does not follow, however, the protocol associated with the music's cultural and situational significance.

It is only as he closes the verbal portion of his toast by turning to the Queen and then saying "to the Queen" – an abbreviated version of the earlier "to Her Majesty the Queen" (see Transcript # 1 above) – that the President is confronted with the "misfire." The Queen turns slightly to her right to look at the President for a fleeting moment and gives out a faint smile but does not fully engage in an official act of recognition of the toast. While the band continues to play, she remains standing at attention gazing out toward an indefinite horizon, as do the rest of the participants that are visible on camera. The President then puts down his glass and stands still emulating the posture of those around him.

### 11 Attentional pull of waiting

We would like to suggest that the attentional pull of the music, President Obama's ongoing speech and his offering of the non-verbal gesture that is meant to complete the toast, combined with a lack of an appropriate response by the Queen, produces an emotionally charged, and prominent, type of temporality and that it is this combination of temporally arrayed and constituted phenomena that pulls attention to Obama and the Queen in an explicitly empathic way. If we trace the moment by moment sequencing of embodied actions we can see how the particular prominences, in particular the prominence of the unfolding sonic sequencing of the musical piece, conspire to evoke an extended and emotionally charged mood that gives shape to a *temporality of waiting*.

After the Queen fails to fully respond to the toast, our eyes are on the President as we see him lowering his glass and looking down. A mere second later he pivots his body forward before putting his glass on the table. Looking up, he clasps his hands and stands at attention. A full 12 s pass before the music ends. As the final notes of the anthem are played Camilla and Prince Philip look down, followed closely by the Queen who reaches for her glass. A fraction of a second later Prince Philip reaches for his glass, followed by President Obama and Camilla. Raising their glasses, the President and the Queen finally turn to each other as the music ends and the President can finally successfully "complete" the performance of his toast, saying quietly under his breath again "To the Queen" (see Fig. 7).

It is important to note here that while President Obama offers his verbal toast (see Transcript # 1), the other participants' knowledge of protocol, including most significantly the Queen's own habitus, does not leave room for much improvisation in "repairing" the procedural "error" of speaking over the British national anthem. Once the President is finished speaking, and the Queen does not accept the toast even though she silently acknowledges by the way she slightly moves toward him that she has *heard* him toast to her, the music takes full prominence. By putting down his glass and waiting for the music to end the President is engaged in what conversational analysts would term a form of "self-repair." He finally does what everyone around him was already doing while he was completing his verbal toast, namely, wait for the music to end. Significantly, the temporality of his waiting now makes him prominent in a new way. Just like the actual length of the President's speech over against the sonically and



**Fig. 7** President Obama and Queen Elizabeth raise their glasses while facing each other after the band has just finished playing “God Save The Queen” (May 24, 2011)

culturally prominent music was already acting, we would argue, as an “amplifier” of the violation of the protocol, in watching him wait, we now have an extended opportunity to feel sorry, embarrassed for him, or annoyed by him.

President Obama’s exposure in those moments thus generates various possibilities for emotional laminations and responses. It also makes his person and his actions vulnerable to a variety of culturally, emotionally, and morally charged interpretations. It is simply not possible, we would argue, to disentangle the various prominences at play in this interaction from the ways in which our attention is pulled to the President in an empathic way, that is, to his experience of living through the event from a first person perspective.

## 12 An ending

To sum up, what makes this one particular interaction especially interesting for us is the fact that the event itself is a ritualized encounter in which formality and the enactment of a scripted protocol serve to foreground the roles and statuses of the participants, while backgrounding their ongoing subjective experiences of it. While empathy is arguably at work in all human encounters, formalistic/ritualized events such as these often function to control, direct, and in this case, dampen explicit empathic orientations (through controlling what is taken as prominent), focusing our attention instead toward the roles/statuses/proclamations enacted by the participants.

We have argued that there are several interactive and contextual phenomena that collectively pull our attention to President Obama’s emotional vulnerability in the moment after the misfire occurs. This includes the lack of coordination between the performance of his toast and the band’s cue to start the music, the prominence of “God Save The Queen” as an extended temporal object with a sonic intensity that competes with and at times seems to overtake the President’s speech, the Queen’s embodied gaze and posture in which her attention is directed away from him, and the President’s facial expressions, body position/posture, and utterances, including his eventual silence, downcast eyes, and embodied stillness. We could say that the band’s action (i.e., playing “God Save The Queen”) justifies or even motivates the Queen’s not doing what Obama and some of the viewers expect her to do (e.g., turn towards the President

while mirroring the lifting of the glass) and yet we cringe at the lack of recognition by the Queen (and we understand why someone would interpret her actions as an act of “humiliation” of the U.S. President).

Each of these aspects of the situation has in itself a particular prominence (nested within other elements of the situation that contribute to establishing the prominence of President Obama and Queen Elizabeth's participation in the event, such as the social status of the participants, the fact that they are the only two ratified speakers, their placement at the center of the table that is on a raised platform, etc.) that when taken together pull our attention to Obama's predicament and amplify our empathic orientation toward him.

As we have argued, our attention is always in part culturally organized in such a way that it is variously pulled to notice certain aspects of this situation and not others. For instance, our attention is drawn to the President and the Queen, as opposed to the footmen or guards standing behind them or the vase on the table. For someone who has never heard of the Queen of England or the President of the United States, and has never seen nor participated in a banquet or state dinner, an anthropologist from Mars let's say, other elements of the scene could very well draw their attention (and in fact this is one of the unstated assumptions guiding the special types of knowledge that ethnographic work produces – namely that by being out of place, anthropologists notice aspects of situations that their informants do not – see Throop 2012b). What is initially culturally configured as prominent in this scene by means of the scripted/ritualized structuring of the event is, however, reconfigured by the mistimed toast being spoken over the band's rendition of God Save the Queen. Resulting from this miscue is the coming into being of a new prominence as our attention is pulled first to the music, then to the speech and the breach, then to President Obama himself as he lives through the realization of his mistake. In this way our attention is modified and pulled toward Obama's subjective experience of the mistake, which entails an act of empathy on the observer's part. The President's vulnerability and our attention to it is then only further amplified by the prominence of the sonic properties of the music itself, the ritualistic embodied formal protocol that restricts possible responses on the part of the participants, and the extended temporal unfolding of the musical piece itself as well as the lack of both speech and gestures after the President has put down his glass on the table and waits for the music to end. The prominence of our empathic orientation to Obama's actions exerts a strong enough “pull” on our attention to propel it well beyond the confines of the event itself, including, we would argue, to later media and political reflections on it.

Finally, it is important to note the implications of our approach in this article to the study of empathy, broadly conceived. For most philosophical discussions of empathy, including many phenomenological ones, the analysis begins and ends, if we are lucky, with the embodied subjectivities of the empathizers who are either “simulating” the experiences of another (simulation theory), inferentially theorizing about them (theory theory), or immediately experiencing them (phenomenological accounts) (Zahavi 2010). In each case, an all too simplistic setting is often offered to track possibilities for empathy to arise between an empathizer and empathizee. If we wish to understand how empathy is emplaced in the concrete lives of actual individuals in the context of particular situations we will have to take seriously the culturally constituted, and often complexly layered material, interactional, and semiotic, contexts in which attention,

affection, and shifting prominences conspire to evoke particular empathic orientations to others. Empathy is not only then, a phenomenon that arises in discrete dyadic face to face encounters. It is instead a modality of being with others that is always embedded, as all human potentialities are, in the complex material, social, and cultural assemblages that make possible our particular vantage point on the world.

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