Научная статья / Original Article

Good Reasons for Poor Passing: A Video-based Study of Incomplete Passes in Football

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Рекомендация для цитирования:
Матвиенко Р. (2025) Хорошие причины плохих пасов: видеоанализ неточных передач в футболе. *Социология власти*, 37 (2): 142-156. EDN:

For citation:
Matvienko R. (2025) Good Reasons for Poor Passing: A Video-based Study of Incomplete Passes in Football. *Sociology of Power*, 37 (2): 142-156.

Поступила в редакцию: 28.02.2025; прошла рецензирование: 11.04.2025; принята в печать: 15.04.2025
Received: 28.02.2025; Revised: 11.04.2025; Accepted: 15.04.2025

Abstract: This report examines breaches in coordination between members within an activity where embodiment is the primary source for the practical treatment of actions by fellow others. The perspicuous activity under scrutiny is passing the ball in association football; the practical phenomenon is the misplays between teammates who fail to complete the pass, not because of a lack of technical skill, but rather because of a breakdown in coordination between them. Prior findings suggest that competent members of a practice manage to coordinate their courses of action within collaborative activities by anticipating and projecting the actions of their fellow members. The machinery behind this relies on the ability of members to recognise the trajectory of actions and relate to it through their own contributions. Practical competence is crucial in this respect, as it enables members to "read" actions-in-progress and complement them accordingly. This report treats coordination as a methodic interactional achievement. It extends prior analysis by focussing on the moments in interaction when practical competence is insufficient to establish and maintain mutual understanding of an ongoing situation between members. The findings reveal that the source of misunderstanding between members are the moment-to-moment shifts in the relevance of particular details of an ongoing situation, as multiple courses of action unfold simultaneously. Members display their orientation towards emerging problems by adjusting their actions according to the course of action, projected by their fellow member. The data for this report

consists of video fragments taken from televised broadcasts of elite level professional association football.

Keywords: embodied interaction, association football, passing the ball, action coordination, action projection, video analysis

Хорошие причины плохих пасов: видеоанализ неточных передач в футболе

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Резюме: Члены общества регулярно сталкиваются с заминками при совместном исполнении повседневных и рабочих задач. Конверсационный анализ достиг значительного прогресса в систематическом изучении причин проблем в разговорном взаимодействии и членских методов их «починки»; проблемы в телесном взаимодействии до недавнего времени получали недостаточное исследовательское внимание. В этой статье исследуются проблемы координации действий между футболистами при передаче мяча от одного игрока другому с особым вниманием к неточным пасам, которые не достигли партнера по команде не вследствие плохого технического исполнения передачи или перехвата мяча соперником, а стали результатом несогласованности действий футболистов одной команды. Материалами для исследования являются фрагменты трансляций футбольных матчей между профессиональными командами. Этнометодологический видеоанализ свидетельствует, что источником несогласованности выступает ограниченная проективность действия вследствие несовпадения полей зрения футболистов и внезапных смещений в релевантности деталей текущей ситуации по мере одновременной развертки нескольких траекторий действий. Футболисты демонстрируют ориентацию на возникающие проблемы посредством поправок траектории собственных действий в соответствии с траекторией, спроектированной их партнером.

Ключевые слова: телесное взаимодействие, футбол, пас, координация действий, проективность действия, анализ видео

Introduction

The transfer of objects from one person to another is common to many mundane and institutionalized social practices. Sociological, anthropological, ethnomethodological, and interactionist studies of object transfer highlight its cross-cultural, organized and contingent character as members' methodical achievement [Hindmarsh & Pilnick,

2002; Roberts & Bellman, 1977; Tuncer & Haddington, 2020]. Seemingly unproblematic and seamless interaction in the process of object transfer requires members to coordinate their actions to avoid possible delays and interruptions. Often, especially in institutionalized practices, such coordination requires not only a general competence in the activity at hand, but also a practical experience of working as a team in a given collective [Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2002, p. 255].

The organized character of transferring objects is evident in situations where members experience interactional difficulties in the form of delays and interruptions. Lerner and Raymond (2021) locate the source of these difficulties in the reduced projectability of an action, the interruption of the progressive realization of an action, and the premature (mis)recognition of an emerging action. This paper builds on the existing research to examine embodied and organizational resources involved in accomplishment of object transfer.

The activity studied in this paper is the passing of the ball in association football (hereafter, football). Unlike the handling of objects in the most of mundane and institutionalized settings, where an object is transferred from hand to hand, in football the passed ball travels at a distance, i.e. there is a time gap between a player in possession kicking (passing) the ball and a teammate receiving it. This gap allows to account for an interactional work on the part of both the producer and the recipient of an action, since the completion of the pass requires both players involved to project the action of a teammate and, if necessary, to adjust their course of action.

Passing is the basic skill and the most common action with the ball in football. It features recognizable motion pattern as the player in possession must run up to the ball, plant a supporting foot, swing and kick the ball in order to make it move to a teammate. Passing also features a recognizable organizational pattern, as the player in possession has to target a teammate or an area of the pitch to transfer the ball to. Although a folk wisdom proffers that a good clearance is always a pass, the difference between a pass and a clearance (and indeed any other kind of ball kick) is telling in that, after a clearance, a ball recovery by the same team is merely accidental rather than designed.

Most of attempted passes in football are completed, i.e. after the pass the ball is recovered by a teammate of the player who kicked it. However, missed passes are a regular occurrence. In many cases, these are the result of poor technique and execution or the uncertainty of contests. Often, however, passes are not completed because players from the same team fail to coordinate their actions. In this paper, I focus on the latter because the attention to these mis-coordinated efforts allows for a systematic analysis of components involved in the concerted production of object transfers in fast-paced, dynamic embodied interaction.

Data and case selection

The data for this study are extracts from broadcasted professional football matches. Televised footage, in most cases, effectively captures the action on the pitch as it naturally occurs. Recordings of the football matches are available on streaming platforms and in video archives. For each example I analyse, I specify the match and the time at which the match episode began, so that interested readers can refer to the original footage in addition to my textual description and still images.

The main limitation imposed on the analysis by the televised nature of the recordings I used is the lack of access to verbal exchanges between players during matches. Some of the matches I watched were broadcasted with stadium sound (without commentary), with players and coaches at times shout over the crowd. These shouts and personal experience of playing football and other team sports lead me to believe that most of the verbal exchanges are in fact complementary to embodied conduct in the case of the focal activity. Players in possession typically "scan" the space around them to find a teammate to pass to, while teammates offer themselves as potential targets by moving into open spaces and, sometimes, making recognizable gestures (waving hands or outstretched arms). As visible bodily conduct is effectively captured by the footage, I do not consider the lack of verbal exchange to be a critical for the analysis.

For the purposes of this report, I have watched around 300 football matches played between 1988 and the present day. The choice of matches I watched was driven by my general interest in football, rather than any form of sophisticated sampling methodology. Most of the matches were played between men's teams in the top tiers of English, German, Spanish, Italian, French, Dutch, Portuguese, and Russian professional association football, as well as international club and national competitions and friendly fixtures. I also spent some time watching matches between men's teams in lower tiers of club competitions in the United States, Germany, and Russia, and between top-flight women's clubs and national sides. I can conclude that, despite the differences in the level of execution between top and low tier professionals and between men and women, the very same things occur and recur in every football match in the manner I report in the analysis.

For the analysis, I have selected extracts from the footage that exemplify various "why is that now?" of missed passes. The selection is made by the way of noticing peculiarities and curiosities in the course of football matches: *usually* football players *complete* passes, thus, it is *peculiar* when they manage to miss a pass, and it is very *curious* what it is about an otherwise well-executed pass that does not find a teammate.

Graphic presentation of video materials leads to inevitable loss of interactional details. I adopt the approach proposed by Heath, Luff, and Hindmarsh (2010) to present video materials through a series of static images (stills) drawn from the source. Given the complexity of interaction on the football pitch, for analytic and narrative purposes I first introduce a fragment with three stills: the first one captures the initial touch on the ball by the player in possession, the second one — his last touch, and the third one — the resolution of the play episode (one of the player receiving the ball, the ball going into touch, etc.). The successive stills or series of stills serve to illustrate a specific analytic point about relevant players' actions in the course of a play situation. The recurrent use of certain stills and addition of the new ones allows to reconstruct to a certain degree the complexity of interaction and account for its minute details.

Visual monitoring and projectability of action

Action projection and timely remediation of mis-coordination

The seamless and unproblematic object transfer results from members' interactional work and as such is their methodical achievement. This interactional work consists in the continuous visual monitoring by the parties and concurrent alignment of their action trajectories. Visual monitoring allows a member to inspect every next increment of the action [Lerner & Raymond, 2017] by the other, to recognize shifts from one course of action to another, to project the completion of an emerging or realizing action, and to adjust one's own action trajectory accordingly to eventually conclude the cooperative effort. The concurrent alignment of the trajectory of action takes the form of a mere simultaneous deployment of bodily conduct, with each increment of one's action serving as a resource for projecting its completion or recognizing the change in the trajectory of action.

Football players routinely proceed with the task of receiving the ball before the player in possession kicks it to them. This is possible because of the recognizable organizational and kinesthetic gestalt of passing as a play action. The position of the player in possession on the pitch and the orientation of their body allow teammates to project potential passing lanes and to recognize themselves as target players. Furthermore, the transition from possession to kicking is marked by the visible change in bodily conduct, as the player in possession has to run up to the ball, plant a supporting foot, swing and kick the ball in order to make the ball travel to the targeted player or space. Therefore, visual monitoring of the course of action realized by the player in possession allows teammates to timely recognize an emerging play action as pass and complete it with own actions.

In the following example[1], two teammates (Dawson and Semedo) complete a basic short pass near their penalty box (Figure 1). The pass goes unproblematically as the passing lane in not contested by the opposition and the distance between players is short.

Figure 1. Dawson passes the ball to Semedo.

As Dawson possesses the ball, his teammates (Semedo, Lemina, Sabaria, Aït-Nouri) monitor his actions and move into open space to offer themselves for a pass. Remarkably, Lemina and Sabaria turn their gaze to Semedo a moment *before* Dawson kicks the ball, while Semedo keeps monitoring Dawson's actions (Figure 2). The change in Dawson's body orientation (turning body towards Semedo) and kinesthetic gestalt allows Lemina and Sabaria to project the continuation of Dawson's action trajectory as the pass to Semedo rather than to one of them. They re-orient themselves to the anticipated player in possession (Semedo) in order to monitor his actions as the game progresses[2]. Semedo, on the other hand, maintains his gaze orientation to Dawson until he plays the ball.

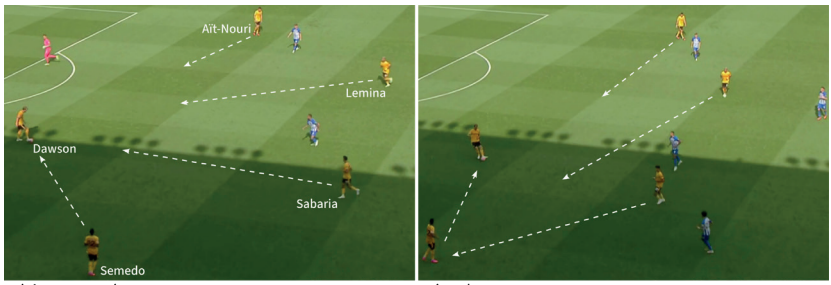

Figure 2. Off the ball players shift their gaze away from the player in possession (dashed lines represent gaze orientations).

1 Wolverhampton Wanderers v Brighton and Hove Albion (English Premier League — August 19, 2023), 70:06-70:08 of the clock.

2 There is no evident shift in Aït-Nouri's gaze direction. He "looks right" throughout the fragment as both Dawson and Semedo are on the far side of him.

While Dawson possesses the ball, Semedo backpedals towards the penalty area (Figure 3.1). He does so in order to receive the ball in the open space (far away from the opponents) and towards opponents' goal (to be ready for a progressive play shall he possesses the ball). He keeps backpedaling when Dawson kicks the ball to him (Figure 3.2), so he has to interrupt his movement (Figure 3.3) and make a step forward to recover the ball (Figure 3.4).

Figure 3. Semedo adjusts his course of action. Time is relative to Figure 1.1.

Although the pass here is completed, i.e. ball eventually finds Semedo, a minor mis-coordination is evident as Semedo has to pivot [Lerner & Raymond, 2017] his course of action to recover the ball. The source of this mis-coordination is in the ongoing orientation of Dawson on the ball rather than on the teammate. Semedo has enough resources to anticipate the pass (as evident from the absence of shift in his gaze), yet not enough to project the finite passing lane. However, his ongoing orientation on Dawson and the ball allows him to prevent the ball loss. In a sense, Dawson relies on the interactional infrastructure to compensate the partial distraction from the teammate.

Distraction as the source of mis-coordination

Resources at hand of a player and overall interactional infrastructure may be insufficient to compensate the partial distraction. In the next example[1], off the ball teammate (Vlašić) does not monitor the player in possession (Brozović) at the moment the latter kicks the ball to him (Figure 4.2). As evident from the direction of his movement towards the opponent's goal, Vlašić projects a progressive pass as the continuation of the play. However, he does not see the very moment Brozović kicks the ball, because at this point he is turned towards the penalty area and dashes forward (Figure 4.3). When Vlašić returns gaze to Brozović, the ball slips under his foot so he misses the opportunity to recover it immediately and run one-on-one with the goalkeeper.

1 Morocco v Croatia (FIFA World Cup — November 23, 2022), 36:06–36:09 of the clock.

Figure 4. Brozović passes the ball to Vlašić

Vlašić's distraction from Brozović does not allow him to inspect the critical increment in the latter's action (proceeding from possessing the ball to kicking it) and align their courses of action. His returning the gaze to Brozović displays that he anticipates the pass to him, but does not project the exact moment the pass is performed. The absence of mutual monitoring here becomes crucial for the coordinated team effort.

Reduced projectability of action and uncertainty of its recipient as the source of mis-coordination

As shown before, timely projection of the action by the other is critical to coordination. However, there are practical reasons for members to try to reduce the projectability of their actions. It is especially the case for antagonistic interaction, where action projection serves not only as a resource for collaborators, but also as a resource for competitors, who seek to disrupt the effort of their counterpart.

In the example above, a momentary distraction from Vlašić would not be so crucial for the coordination if Brozović delayed kicking the ball. Yet, the delay would also be detrimental to the offensive effort, as Brozović is attempting a pass under pressure from Amallah, who is a player from the opposing team. To avoid tackle from Amallah, Brozović has to modify his course of action and turning his final step to the ball into a sliding swing-and-kick (Figure 5). Vlašić does not anticipate this change and returns his gaze to Brozović *after* the latter kicks the ball.

Brozović alternates the kinetic gestalt of the kick inadvertently, but it can also be done deliberately to prevent projection from the opponent; however, it also affects the projection of the action for the teammates. In the following example[1], Ødegaard makes a backhill pass, but the ball ends up at the feet of Dendoncker of the opposing team (Figure 6).

1 Aston Villa v Arsenal (English Premier League — February 18, 2023), 81:25–81:30 of the clock.

1 (time = 1.2) 2 (1.3) 3 (1.5)

Figure 5. Brozović modifies his final action on the ball. Time is relative to Figure 4.1.

1 (time = 0.0) 2 (3.6) 3 (6.0)

Figure 6. Ødegaard passes the ball with the back of his heel. Dendoncker recovers the ball.

Throughout the episode, two Ødegaard's teammates, Jorginho and Saka, monitor his actions on the ball. However, none of them anticipates to play the ball next. Saka comes back from behid the offside line and is at the side of Ødegaard. The direction of the passing lane does not coinside with the direction of his movement, suggesting that Jorginho will recover the ball. Organizational gestalt, however, suggests that the ball should be recovered by Saka, as it is usually the case, when the backhill pass is made between closely positioned players in the wide area in the opposite third of the pitch.

The evidence for such treatment of the situation comes from the series of changes in the visible conduct of Saka and Jorginho. A moment after Ødegaard passes the ball (Figure 7.1), Saka interrupts his run as he projects that Jorginho will meet the ball at the end of the passing lane (Figure 7.2). Jorginho, who had been moving slowly forward, also stumbles (Figure 7.3), as he does not project Ødegaard's action as a pass to him. When both players realize that neither of them is recovering the ball, they both run towards it (Figure 7.4). At the other end, Dendoncker, marking the entrance to the penalty area, does not project the pass either — there is a noticeable pause between Ødegaard passing the ball and Dendoncker starting to move. However, Dendoncker does not face the problem of uncertainty about the recipient of the action (as a player of the opposing team, one is

unlikely to be a recipient of an action by the opponent) and manages to start the action before Jorginho and Saka have resolve it (Figure 7.3).

Figure 7. Jorginho, Saka and Dendoncker immediately after Ødegaard passes the ball. Time is relative to Figure 6.1.

Ødegaard conceals pass execution inside his mode of possessing the ball by dribbling and keeping it under his body and close to his feet. His final step prior to the pass serves as swing for a backheel touch but it equally can serve as intermediary part of his dribbling (compare Figure 8.3 and Figure 8.5). This concealment is indeed effective against early projection by the opponents (Dendoncker does not run to break the passing lane immediately), but it also brings mis-coordination between Ødegaard and his teammates.

Figure 8. Ødegaards dribbles the ball before passing it. Time is relative to Figure 6.1.

Temporal misalignment between courses of action as the condition of mis-coordination

Temporal alignment of action trajectories

Coordinated efforts in embodied interaction are sensitive to the temporal alignment of members' courses of action. Coordination often requires simultaneous execution by the producer and recipient of an action. Alignment suggests that the recipient of the action initiates their course of action while the producer realizes theirs. It is particularly important for the focal activity, as the targeted space (the end of the passing lane) may be located at a distance from the targeted player. The targeted player must move in advance to meet the ball in the targeted space, because usually a kicked ball travels faster than the running human body.

In the following example[1], Messi possesses the ball and scans the space to the left of him (Figure 9.1). He maintains possession until Alba, his teammate, accelerates in towards the penalty area the wide area of the pitch (Figure 9.2). Messi kicks the ball into the penalty area (Figure 9.3), where it finds Alba (Figure 9.4).

Figure 9. Messi passes the ball to Alba.

This fragment exemplifies a fairly common organizational pattern in football, when the player in possession targets the space behind the defensive line with a teammate running there. In fact, for Messi and Alba this move became a hallmark of their partnership on the pitch [Herrero & Rueter, 2023]. However, its situational execution required both players account for each other's actions: Messi suspends his action (passing the ball) until Alba is ready to conclude their offensive effort. Alba's acceleration here serves as its trigger.

Crucial for the success of the play is the absence of action from Torres, an opponents' defender, who marks the wide area of the pitch. Torres orients his body towards own penalty area and monitors Messi's actions on the ball. He only casts a quick gaze back when Alba is in line with him behind his back. As Alba is out of his perceptual field, Torres does not project Messi's emerging action as the pass to the area he is responsible for. This "out of sight camouflage" [Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2002, p. 154] contributes to the successful completion of the offensive move.

Figure 10. Alba is out of Torres' sight all the time. Dashed lines represent the direction of Torres' gaze.

Since embodied conduct is, in principle, as visible to opponents as much as it is for teammates, players can project that their current action

1 Osasuna v Barcelona (Spanish La Liga — March 6, 2021) — 30 min of the clock.

has already been projected and countered by the opponent, and abandon it in its course. In the following example[1], Mitoma is accelerating towards the opposite penalty area, while his teammate Estupiñán has the ball. Just before Estupiñán kicks the ball, Mitoma interrupts his run and when the ball is kicked, he has to accelerate from a static position so that the ball hits the turf, Mitoma is well behind it (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Missed pass from Estupiñán to Mitoma.

The source of mis-coordination here is in temporal misalignment of courses of action between Estupiñán and Mitoma that results from interruption of action by Mitoma. While Estupiñán possesses the ball, Mitoma moves sideways towards the halfway line (Figure 12.1). He then sharply accelerates in the opposite direction (Figure 12.2; compare with Figure 9.2), triggering the patterned play. However, as Estupiñán swings at the ball, Mitoma interrupts his run (Figure 12.3). This interruption is not projected by Estupiñán, as he completes his kick (Figure 12.4). Mitoma only starts running again when the ball is almost in line with him (Figure 12.5).

Figure 12. Temporal misalignment of action trajectories between Estupiñán and Mitoma. Time is relative to Figure 11.1.

Mitoma's interruption of his action is situationally relevant to the actions of his direct opponent, Coufal, who marks the wide area of the pitch. A sudden change in speed and direction of movement

1 Brighton & Hove Albion v West Ham United (English Premiere League — August 26, 2023). 5:02–5:07 of the clock.

is a common offensive technique to draw an opponent out of their position and catch them on the counter (Figure 13.1 and Figure 13.2). However, Coufal employs a no less common "no nonsense" defensive technique of keeping a distance from the opponent and positioning himself between the opponent and the goal. This allows Coufal to timely recognize Mitoma's acceleration and fall back to prevent a progressive play by the offense (Figure 13.3). Mitoma tries to exploit Coufal's movement in another way and interrupts his acceleration to receive a short pass in an unmarked space (Figure 13.4). However, Estupiñán fails to recognize this manoeuvre and proceeds with kicking the ball.

Figure 13. Coufal prevents a progressive play by Estupiñán. Time is relative to Figure 11.1.

The defensive counterplay and layering of projections by the opponents in this example demonstrates the practical complexity of temporal alignment in fast-paced antagonistic embodied interaction. Because embodied interaction is not organized in turns, antagonistic interventions on the part of opponents affect the projected effect of the increment of the currently realizing action. However, sudden changes in the realization of simultaneously progressing actions threaten the coordination of cooperative efforts.

Late recognition of action trajectory

In its alternative form, temporal misalignment can be caused by a misprojection of a realizing action. In the following example[1], Minamino attempts a progressive pass to his teammate Singo to an open space in the wide area of pitch (Figure 14.2). However, Singo projects that he will receive the ball at his current position and remains static at the moment Minamino swings at the ball (Figure 14.2). Singo only accelerates towards

1 Monaco v Paris Saint-Germain (French Ligue 1 — March 1, 2024), 38:22–38:26 of the clock.

the ball when he recognizes its trajectory (Figure 14.3). Yet, it is too late for him to recover the ball as it goes into touch (Figure 14.4).

Figure 14. Minamino passes the ball to Singo.

The late recognition of Minamino's action does not give Singo enough time to remediate the emerged mis-coordination (compare to Figure 3). This highlights another perspicuous feature of embodied action, namely the uncertainty of its outcome. A frustrated rather than apologizing pose of Minamino (Figure 14.4) suggests that the ball ended up in the targeted space, yet this space has not been projected by Singo. Singo projects a pass from Minamino (he "steadies" to go), but it is *a different type* of a pass — a pass into the feet (so, he "steadies" not to go far), rather than a pass to go.

Discussion

The current study is consistent with the prior discussion of projection of an embodied action [Heath & Luff, 2021; Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2002; Lerner & Raymond, 2017] and mis-coordination of actions in embodied interaction [Lerner & Raymond, 2021]. Projectability of action is crucial for embodied interaction as it allows members to coordinate their courses of action. Visual inspection of every increment of action and timely detection of changes in the trajectory of action allow members to adjust their courses of action and remediate emerging interactional troubles.

Current study extends the existing research in that prior findings locate the sources of mis-coordination on the side of the producer of an action, granting only a passive role to its receiver. Specificity of the focal activity, namely, the spatial distance between the producer and recipient of an action allow to grasp the active role of the latter in the coordinated effort. It is shown that even an institutionalized action with a recognizable organizational and kinesthetic gestalt avoids unambiguous projection as its material (e.g. the distance between acting members, the speed of the ball) and interactional (coincidence of perceptive fields, antagonistic interventions, temporal alignment of simultaneously deployed courses of action) aspects provide for the uncertainty of its outcome.

Situated and uncertain character of an embodied action requires members to maintain concurrent involvement in the unfolding situation

of interaction rather than unproblematically rely on the interactional infrastructure. Practical competence in the activity is subsidiary to the practiced at every point interactional work involved in the concerted production of the activity at place.

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