

MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND (MIS)UNDERSTANDING: A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS

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In this paper linguistic misunderstandings in natural interaction are analysed using a pragmatically-oriented model of communication. Utterance functions are regarded as subjective cognitive entities from the speaker's and hearer's points of view. A three-level concept of communicative functions, making use of some fundamental concepts of speech act theory, leads to a classification of three major types of misunderstanding. An investigation into the relationship between misunderstandings and phenomena such as nonunderstanding and unnoticed misunderstanding will show that 'total' understanding must be regarded as a social construct rather than as an interactive reality.

Pragmatics, speech act theory, model of communication, utterance function, understanding, types of misunderstanding.

1. INTRODUCTION

Misunderstandings have been investigated in a number of linguistic disciplines over the last two decades. In a sociolinguistic perspective, the analysis of miscommunication allows conclusions as to the nature of group-specific and individual conversational strategies (Gumperz and Tannen, 1979; Milroy, 1984; Varonis and Gass, 1985). Feminist linguists have shown misunderstanding to be a manifestation of power asymmetries between men and women (Hendley and Kramarae, 1991), whereas Tannen (1991) advocates a difference rather than a dominance approach to gender-related communication problems. Grimshaw (1980 and 1982) offers

a classification of the possible outcomes of communicative events such as nonhearing, non-understanding and misunderstanding. Other approaches focus on the interactive structure (Humphreys-Jones, 1986a and 1986b) as well as on consequences of misunderstanding and on ways of dealing with it. Linguistic strategies that are used to negotiate meaning and repair miscommunication play an important part in language socialization (Ochs, 1991). Drummond and Hopper (1991) and Weissenborn and Stralka (1984) analyse verbal means to avoid communication problems and to secure understanding. (For a detailed overview cf. Falkner, 1997: ch. 2).

The pragmatic analysis of misunderstandings presented in this paper is based on a concept of communicative function as part of a model of communication. This model (2.) incorporates the different factors that determine the production and interpretation of an utterance in a speech situation. In misunderstandings there is obviously a disparity between what is meant by the speaker (S) and what is understood by the hearer (H).¹ The model takes this into account by distinguishing between S's and H's knowledge about an utterance. These discrete cognitive entities need to be analysed independently from each other and assigned equal value as far as the negotiation of meaning between interlocutors is concerned. This means that utterance function is not objective, but always subjective.

The concept of communicative function will be specified as consisting of three levels on which misunderstandings can be located (3.). Earlier suggestions by Zaefferer (1977) and Dascal (1985) will be discussed. The analysis results in a typology of misunderstandings. In the final paragraph (4.) I shall consider what implications the subjectivist model of communication developed for the analysis of misunderstandings has for 'functioning' interaction and suggest an answer to the question of whether understanding actually exists from a linguistic point of view.

2. A MODEL OF COMMUNICATION

The model of communication on which the following analysis of empirical data is based (see fig. 1; cf. also Falkner, 1997: ch. 4) allows for a description of all factors relevant to a speech situation and for a systematic distinction between what S intends to express in an utterance and what H receives and interprets. In their communicative behaviour, both S and H are influenced by the extralinguistic context on the one hand and by the linguistic context or co-text on the other. In a given speech situation S has a certain communicative motivation that leads him or her to produce a string of acoustic signals which I call *phonic event*. Apart from the phonic event there is nothing objective about what is transmitted from S to H. H interprets the phonic event, and this interpretation is based on a more or less specific set or spectrum of expectations concerning possible utterances and communicative functions in the situation in question. This is rather obvious in cases involving the second parts of adjacency pairs (cf. Schegloff and Sacks, 1973), but interlocutors may also have quite specific expectations in other situations. When we are approached by a stranger in the street, e.g., our spectrum of

1 The concepts of speaker (S) and hearer (H) are used here as a simplification, S denoting the interlocutor who produces an utterance that is misunderstood and H the one who misunderstands (but cf. the concept of speaker-hearer as advocated, among others, by Goodwin, 1981).

expectations of what may or may not be said is also rather narrow: A request to tell the time or to give directions is 'expectable', but a question like *Where were you last night?* is not.

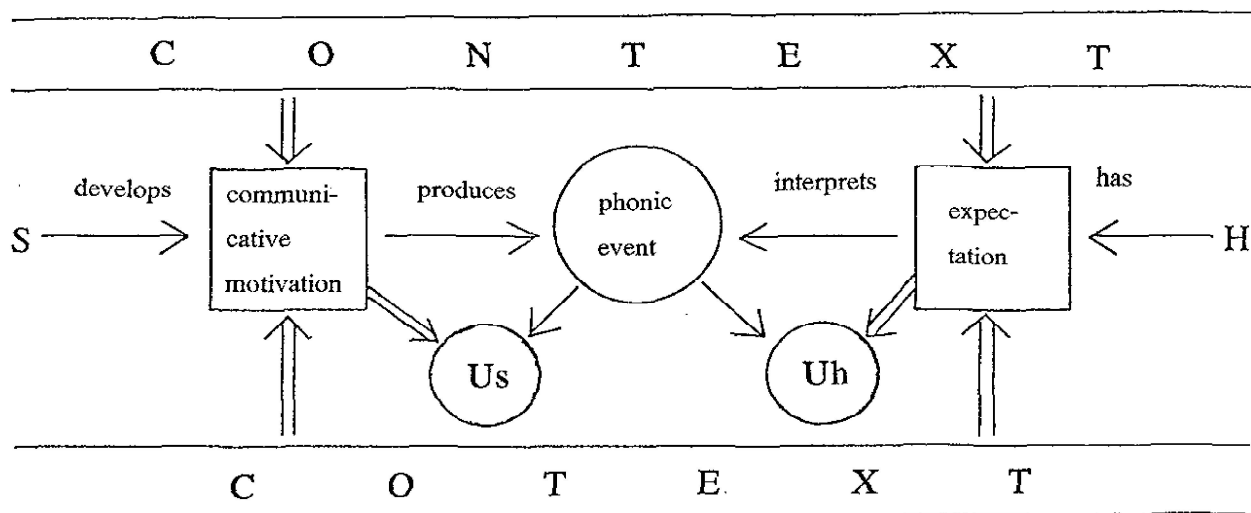


Fig. 1. A model of communication

The different dimensions of this model that determine the speech situation - such as context, cotext, and expectation - can serve to identify possible causes of misunderstanding (for a detailed discussion cf. Falkner, 1997: ch. 5.1). As a result of the phonic event both S and H are left with a certain knowledge about the utterance. These cognitive entities can be called the utterance from S's point of view and the utterance from H's point of view, symbolized by Us and Uh in the diagram. From this knowledge S and H start negotiating if they realize that something has gone wrong; the model is based on the assumption that neither S nor H are 'correct' in their interpretations of the utterance because there is no 'objective' communicative content.

The utterance as seen from the participants' respective points of view consists of a linguistic structure (xs/xh) and a communicative function (Fs/Fh), as symbolized in fig. 2. The concept of communicative function comprises all that is meant by S and all that is understood by H.

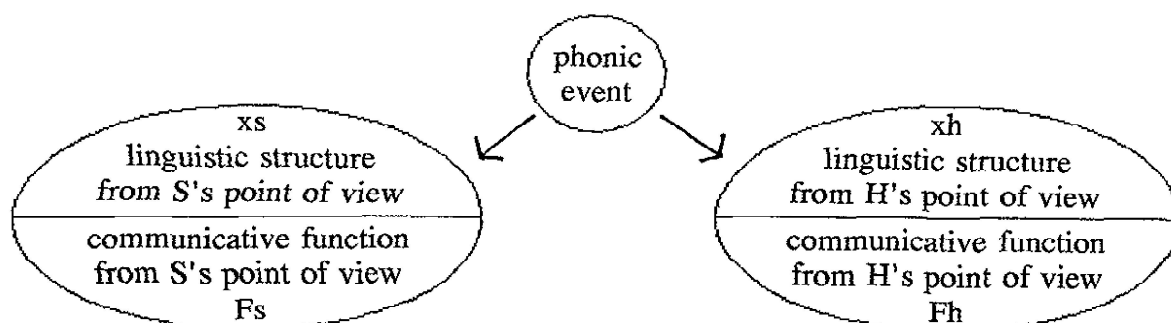


Fig 2. Linguistic structure and communicative function

H assigns a linguistic structure to the utterance on the basis of the phonic event received. A problem in the transmission of the phonic event does not necessarily result in mis- or non-understanding, as the following example² shows:

Ex. 1 [Near Hampstead underground station, London, shortly before 8 p.m. S (f.) and H (m.) do not know each other. S is obviously in a hurry.]

- S: Excuse me, how do I get to the Every* [*some syllables inaudible due to traffic noise, also because S tries to move out of the way of other pedestrians on the narrow pavement and turns her head away from H*] *ema?
 H: The Everyman cinema ... back up the hill to the tube station, then turn left, and first right again
 S: Thanks

In ex. 1, the string of sounds received by H is incomplete (*Excuse me, how do I get to the Every [...]* ema). However, H is able to reconstruct the missing sounds without any problem because of the situational and background knowledge available to him. The introductory *Excuse me, how do I get to ...* in S's question clearly invokes a script³, 'Asking for directions', and, as I have already pointed out, the spectrum of possibilities as to what S might normally want in a situation as in ex. 1 is not very large anyhow. In such a script it is clear that what S will be asking for is directions to a certain street, place, restaurant etc. It might also play a role for H's interpretation that S is in a hurry; someone in a hurry is not unlikely to be on the way to a theatre or cinema performance or some other event which starts at a certain time, especially when it is shortly before the full hour. All this, and the fact that H knows the 'Everyman' cinema that is nearby, lead H to reconstruct the missing part of the linguistic structure instantly and to understand S's question. The repetition of *the Everyman cinema* in H's response - not in the form of a question because H is sure he has understood correctly - would open up the possibility of repair if there was a misunderstanding.

Of course, misunderstanding can be caused by incomplete transmission of the phonic event - or by misarticulation, as in ex. 2:

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- 2 The examples used have been collected via the 'diary method' (cf. Humphreys-Jones, 1986a). In examples 1-6, 8 and 12, I was a participant or overhearer, 7 and 9-11 have been reported by participants. The following typographical conventions are used: *f.* and *m.* indicate whether S and H are female or male, /// marks a pause in conversation. In misunderstandings, the utterance marked <<<...>>> is the **origin**, i.e. the utterance which is misunderstood, and >>>...<<< marks the **manifestation** of the misunderstanding, i.e. a reaction to the origin in which the difference between Fs and Fh becomes obvious (cf. Humphreys-Jones, 1986a and 1986b). CAPITALS mark stressed syllables. Simultaneous phonic events or extralinguistic actions are indicated by asterisks (*...*).
 3 For the concept of script cf. Schank and Abelson (1977: 38), for a more recent discussion Ungerer and Schmid (1996: ch. 5.1).

Ex. 2 [S (m.) is invited for dinner at H's (m.) and has been late. H had intended to wait and do the cooking together with S, but then started cooking on his own because of the delay.]

S: [with his mouth full] <<<Why did you cook it with the bone?>>>
 H: >>>I was so hungry I couldn't wait any longer<<<
 S: I said why did you cook it with the bone

H is aware that S's articulation is not clear, but he thinks he has understood the question why he (H) did the cooking on his own. The situational context suggests that such a question is plausible, so H decides in favour of this interpretation.

In ex. 2, different communicative functions correspond to the assigning of different linguistic structures to the utterance by S and H. Many misunderstandings, however, do not involve a difference in linguistic structures perceived by the participants (see examples 3, 4, 6-11 below). What is constitutive for the definition of misunderstanding, then, is a difference between Fs and Fh; in addition there may be a difference between xs and xh. It is also important that H is certain about the interpretation of the utterance. If H is aware that there may be a problem, then this is not a matter of misunderstanding, but of non- or partial understanding. In such cases H will normally ask back and thus signal that something has gone wrong.

3. MISUNDERSTANDING ON THREE LEVELS OF COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTION

If the communicative function of an utterance comprises all that is meant by S and all that is understood by H, then it is obviously quite a complex concept. Misunderstandings offer an opportunity to gain insight into the structure of communicative function, because what goes wrong in individual cases can be located on different functional layers or levels. This point has been made by Zaefferer (1977) and Dascal (1985). Zaefferer distinguishes between three types of misunderstandings, using the speech act theoretical concepts of proposition and illocution: misunderstandings concerning the illocutionary force, those concerning the propositional content and those concerning both aspects. Dascal suggests an "onion" model of the "significance" of utterances, which also operates with the concepts of proposition and illocution and incorporates Grice's (1975) implicatures. These different functional elements are compared to the layers of an onion. Both approaches are interesting in that they establish a connection between different aspects of utterance function and the analysis of misunderstanding, although neither of them offers a coherent pragmatic model of analysis that is able to accommodate the whole range of phenomena involved, which may also be due to the fact that neither of them are based on empirical data (cf. Falkner, 1997: 31 ff., 48 ff. for detailed discussion).

An empirical analysis of cases from face-to-face interaction shows that **three** levels of communicative function can be distinguished on which misunderstanding can be located: the **proposition**, the **illocution**, and a third level, the **modifying level**.

3.1 Proposition

Misunderstandings on the level of the **proposition** can involve different interpretations of the reference of a linguistic expression (other examples will be discussed in 4.). In ex. 3, S's question refers to a person different from the one H thinks S is talking about:

Ex. 3 [S = teacher (m.), H = student (f.). S has just entered a seminar room where H has already been for a few minutes.]

S: <<<Have you seen Linda recently?>>>
 H: >>>Oh she just walked out didn't you see her?<<<
 ///
 S: Oh sorry I mean Linda BLACK

The reference of *Linda* in the origin is ambiguous, but at first neither S nor H are aware of this ambiguity. The student S asks H about, Linda Black, has not attended classes for two weeks. H and Linda Black are in the second year together, and S knows that they are friends. S saw Linda Myers, a first-year student, on his way into the building. What S does not know is that H also saw Linda Myers. S is not even sure that the two know each other since they are not in the same year. This is why S thinks that *Linda* is sufficient to denote Linda Black. H's reaction, the manifestation of the misunderstanding, makes S aware that he did not express himself clearly enough and gives him an opportunity to specify his question. Similarly, in ex. 4 *plans* refers to something different for S and H.

Ex. 4 [S (American, f.) and H (German, m.) on the telephone. They haven't been in contact for quite a while. During their conversation they talk about H's and S's work and then about H's last holiday. Then S asks:]

S: <<<So what are your plans for next year?>>>
 H: >>>Work harder<<<
 S: I mean, are you planning a major holiday or anything?

From S's point of view, the question concerning H's plans refers to the immediately preceding part of the conversation, whereas H takes *plans* as referring back to the previous topic, work. In both examples 3 and 4 the illocutionary point of the utterance is not affected at all by the misunderstanding. H recognizes the utterance as a question and answers accordingly; the 'locus' of misunderstanding lies exclusively within the proposition.

3.2 Illocution

In other cases, the **illocution** of an utterance is interpreted differently by S and H. A possible and very obvious indicator for that is when the action obligation established for H on the basis of the speech event differs from that intended by S. In example (5), S intends to compliment H on his new glasses, whereas H understands a request to pass S the ashtray:

(5) [S (m.) and H (m.), friends, are standing at the bar in a very noisy pub. S has just lit a cigarette for himself. Behind H on the bar there is an ashtray. H is wearing new glasses.]

- S: < < < Your glasses are fashionable > > >
 H: > > > [turns round, gets an ashtray and hands it to S] < < <
 S: [surprised] Oh thank you
 ///
 H: Didn't you say ...
 S: I said your GLASSes are fashionable
 H: Oh I thought you'd asked me for the ashtray
 S: No I didn't

The misunderstanding is caused by the surrounding noise. Again, as in ex. 1, H does not receive the complete phonic event as produced by S, but reconstructs the linguistic structure of the utterance as being *Could you pass me the ashtray*, which is phonologically similar to *Your glasses are fashionable*. Furthermore, the function H assigns to the utterance, the request to pass S the ashtray, seems plausible enough under the given circumstances for H to decide that his interpretation is correct. S's surprise as a reaction to H giving him the ashtray then raises H's doubts. H asks back (*Didn't you ...*) and thus initiates the repair of the misunderstanding. As ex. 5 shows, different illocutions in Fs and Fh involve different propositions as well.

In ex. 6 there is no difference between the linguistic structures from the participants' points of view. The misunderstanding is also illocutionary.

Ex. 6 [S (m.) and H (m.), who do not know each other, meet at a party. Both S's and H's name is Wolfgang.]

- S: [extends his hand] < < < Wolfgang > > >
 H: [extends his hand] > > > Ja? < < < (Yes?)
 S: [shakes H's hand, smiling] Hallo - ich heiß' Wolfgang (Hi, I'm Wolfgang)
 H: [laughs] Ach so - ich heiß' auch Wolfgang, hallo (Oh I see - my name is also Wolfgang, hi!)
 S: [laughs] Ach so (Oh I see)

H's reaction shows that, like S, he is unaware of the fact that they both have the same name. H interprets the origin utterance as a pre-sequence to initiate further conversation, e.g. ask a question, assuming that H knows him from somewhere. S's intention, however, is to introduce himself to H. If S knew that he and H both have the same first name, he would probably take that into account and introduce himself in a different way such as *I've heard your name is also Wolfgang* in order to avoid a misunderstanding.

3.3 Modifying level

In other cases, the two levels of proposition and illocution are not sufficient.

Ex. 7 [S (f.) and H (f.), friends, are planning to go to the cinema.]

- H: Lucy hasn't seen *The English Patient*. Maybe she'd like to join us
 S: < < < Yeah, that's a GREAT idea > > >
 H: > > > Have you got her phone number? < < <

- S: Listen, I can't help working with her, but I'd prefer not to get any closer with her if I can avoid it
 H: Didn't you just say -
 S: No, I didn't mean that, I was being sarcastic, sorry
 H: Oh sorry I didn't get that

In ex. 7 the misunderstanding can be located in the irony that S intends and that H does not notice. This shows that there is a third level of communicative function, which I call **modifying level** because it modifies the communicative function of the whole utterance. In this case, the irony as intended in Fs has the function of turning what could otherwise be a way of agreeing with S's suggestion into disapproval. This means that the illocutions in Fs and Fh differ as well. Yet an analysis that would locate the misunderstanding in the illocution alone would obviously be unsatisfactory. As other examples show, a difference on the modifying level can also affect such factors as humour and politeness (cf. Falkner, 1997: 140 ff.). In ex. 8 the origin is intended as humorous, but H does not notice and takes the utterance seriously:

Ex. 8 [S (m.), a linguist, H (f.) and others are on their way to visit the Cliffs of Moher in the West of Ireland.]

- H: What's *Moher*? Does it mean something?
 ///
 S: <<< Yeah - that's Old Celtic, it means dangerous slope where the world ends >>>
 H: >>> *[nods]* <<<
 Others: *[laugh]*
 H: Are you joking?
 S and others: [laugh]

H at first believes what S says because S, as an 'expert', might indeed know the answer to her question. The other participants' reaction shows H that S's answer cannot have been serious. Of course, in cases like ex. 8 there is no misunderstanding in the proper sense because S **intends** his utterance to be taken seriously (in order to increase the humorous effect), and H actually 'understands' the origin as intended by taking it seriously. When the distribution of humour between Fs and Fh is the other way round, i.e. when H takes an utterance non-seriously that is actually intended to be entirely serious, the result is real misunderstanding:

Ex. 9 [At a Christmas party in a linguistics department. S = professor of linguistics (f.), H = visiting scholar (m.), O = S's colleague (f.). Some time ago, S wrote a letter of recommendation so that H could use the university libraries. Two weeks before the party, S was informed by one of the libraries that H had not returned borrowed books in time, and asked H to return them as soon as possible.]

- H: I have talked to the library staff. It was their fault. I had returned the books in time but they did not have it in their computers. They were quite embarrassed.
 S: That's good to hear. <<< Mind you, this business has started me thinking about all these letters that I write for people like you. They have told me that I will be held responsible if someone disappears with their books. [smiles]
 >>>

- H: >>> Mm, that's terrible. [smiles]<<<
 S: <<< I think it's strange that they allowed you to take out books in the first place. I quite deliberately write something like 'please give him access to all the books he needs'. This doesn't imply borrowing, does it? [smiles]>>>
 H: No, that's true, you're right. >>> But you see, once you have your Bodleian card, the other libraries don't worry any more. [smiles]<<<
 S: <<< Hm, is that so? I think I have to talk to them about it. >>>
 H: >>> Yes, perhaps you should. After all, you are basically in my hands now. If I ran away with all these books they could send you to jail. [laughs]<<<
 O: [laughs]
 S: Well, no, I am quite serious about this, *you know*
 H: [*stops smiling*]
 S: I don't see what advantage people have who enrol as regular students and pay a lot of money when people who don't are entitled to the same rights, at least in the libraries
 H: Yes, of course, you're right. That's not fair.

H reports to have thought that S was giving a parody of bureaucratic regulations, but S did not intend to be funny at all, as is made explicit in *Well, no, I am quite serious about this, you know*. This turn instantly makes clear to H that he has been mistaking S's intention. The structure of the misunderstanding is very complex because not only one, but three of S's turns (marked as origins), accompanied by smiling, are (mis-)interpreted as humorous by H, and this interpretation is manifested in as many as three of H's turns (marked as manifestations).

Politeness is a particularly important element of communicative function because, as opposed to irony or humour, it plays a role in every utterance to some degree (cf. Leech, 1983; Brown and Levinson, 1987). In ex. 10, S and H assign different degrees of politeness to an utterance:

Ex. 10 [S (f.) and H (m.) are colleagues. They see each other again for the first time after H has been away on a holiday.]

- S: <<< Wie war's im Urlaub? >>> [How was your holiday?]
 H: >>> Schön [Very nice]<<<

[The topic is changed immediately after this exchange.]

H interprets S's question as a mere politeness formula and does not assume that S is really interested in any details about his holiday. S, on the other hand, does want to know more and is puzzled by H's answer. The misunderstanding is only cleared up some days later when S asks again.

3.4 A typology of misunderstandings

The analysis outlined here results in a typology of misunderstandings based on the level of communicative function on which they can be located. Communicative function is seen as consisting of three levels:

Communicative function = proposition + illocution + modifying level.

The locus of misunderstanding can be on any of these three levels. The concept of communicative function can therefore be used as a basis for a classification of misunderstandings in three major groups: misunderstandings on the propositional, illocutionary and modifying level (cf. Falkner, 1997: 158 ff.). The propositional type allows for a further subdivision. In examples 3 and 4 above, the 'locus' of misunderstanding is the reference of a linguistic element. As the following examples show, there are other possibilities:

Ex. 11 [S (f.) and H (f.) are talking about getting tickets for a concert. It is November, the concert will be in March. A week earlier S told H that Myra, a friend of S's, might want to go to the concert as well but that Myra didn't know for sure because the tickets are quite expensive.]

- H: So if I get through I'm going to book three tickets shall I?
 S: < < < No, sorry, it's just the two of us. Myra isn't going - I thought she was going to phone you > > >
 H: > > > Oh - well o.k. I mean - sixteen quid isn't that bad is it? After all - < < <
 S: No, it's not that - she's going to the States in March, she was going to tell you

In ex. 11, what is misunderstood is not the content of the proposition itself, or of parts of it, nor is it the illocution or a modifying element. H misinterprets Myra's reason for not going to the concert because she lacks information that S assumes H already has. The only possible reason H knows about is the price of the ticket, and this is the **implicature** triggered by the information *Myra isn't going*. (The term 'implicature' is used here in a very general sense. For various reasons, I think that Grice's (1975) distinction between conventional and conversational implicatures is not useful for the analysis of misunderstandings - cf. Falkner (1997: 34 f., 128) for detailed discussion.) I think that this type of misunderstanding can be subsumed under 'propositional' because it is the propositional content that the implicature is based on.

In other examples, like 2 above, H's interpretation is based on a different linguistic structure than that articulated by S. This can lead to a misunderstanding on the illocutionary level (as in ex. 5), but in ex. 2 the misunderstanding is clearly propositional. What H understands is the question *Why did you cook it on your own?* The misunderstanding is caused by the fact that S's articulation is impeded while he is eating. The locus of the misunderstanding is clearly in the proposition. This is why I refer to examples like 2 as the **structural subtype** of propositional misunderstandings.

This analysis results in the following pragmatic typology of misunderstandings:

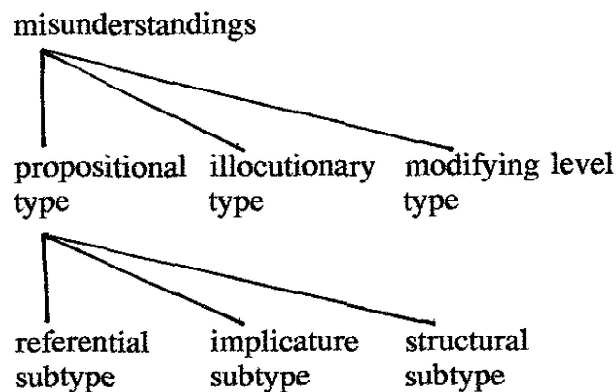


Fig. 3. A typology of misunderstandings

4. MISUNDERSTANDING AND UNDERSTANDING

I would now like to return to the three-level model of communicative function on which the typology of misunderstandings is based. The complexity of communicative function as outlined in this concept also allows conclusions as to the complexity of the communicative task of understanding. If the interpretations of an utterance by S and H can differ on three functional levels, then complete understanding can be seen as involving the full equivalence of F_s and F_h on all three levels. Taking into account the multiplicity of factors contributing to the communicative function of utterances, such full equivalence seems very unlikely; all the more so since there are often differences between what is meant and understood which are not even likely to be discovered by the interlocutors.

It is therefore necessary to make a distinction between misunderstanding as a general (uncountable) term for the phenomenon in communication where there is a discrepancy between intended and received message, and a misunderstanding (countable) as a concrete instance of such miscommunication. The German language has a useful distinction here, with *Mißverstehen* denoting the former and *Mißverständnis* the latter use of 'misunderstanding'. I find it useful to reserve the countable term for those cases in which the communication problem is detected by at least one of the interlocutors, and to use the uncountable in a more general sense for all cases, including those that are not detected and repaired. The consequence of undetected and unrepaired misunderstanding is a perpetuated discrepancy between S's and H's interpretations of a phonic event. The crucial point is that this discrepancy is perceived by the participants as understanding.

The modifying level is particularly prone to unnoticed misunderstanding because different interpretations of factors such as irony or humour do not necessarily disturb the functioning of interaction. Thus participants do not necessarily grow aware of a difference. If we react to a question or another kind of request by fulfilling the action obligation established by it, then modifying factors are simply an extra part of communicative function which may or may not be interpreted the way they are intended. On the level of interpersonal relationships such unnoticed misunderstanding can have serious consequences.

Of course it is not easy for a pragmatic analysis to say something about the statistical likelihood of complete understanding or the question of how often we actually misunderstand when we think we do not. Such statistical statements are not the aim of this paper. In order to clarify the relationship between understanding and misunderstanding in general, however, it is useful to look at the '**duration**' of **misunderstanding**, i.e. the time span during which the different interpretations of an utterance by S and H remain active before participants notice and repair the misunderstanding.

The minimum limit of the duration of misunderstanding is marked by the borderline between misunderstanding and nonunderstanding. The concept of misunderstanding presupposes that S and H both believe their respective interpretations of the utterance function to be the same and also to be 'correct', i.e. that Fs and Fh both have the status of undoubted cognitive entities. When H does not understand an utterance, as in ex. 12, and if H is immediately aware of not understanding, there is no such interactionally significant interpretation of the utterance function by H:

Ex. 12 [S (m.) and H (m.) are talking on the telephone and planning a hiking tour for the following weekend. They have been discussing two different options, one of which depends on good weather more than the other.]

- H: Maybe we should wait until Thursday and see what the weather forecast for the weekend will be like
 S: Yeah ... but then you can never really rely on the weather forecast, can you? I think we should do the easier route *no matter*
 H: *You think* we should do what?
 S: Take the easier route ... so we don't have to phone everyone if the weather forecast turns out to be wrong
 H: Yeah

H's question *You think we should do what?* is pronounced without a particular stress on *what* that would indicate that H understands S's suggestion but does not agree with it. The question itself as well as the further course of the conversation show that H simply does not understand what S is saying - more precisely, the phrase *(do) the easier route*, whereas the other part of S's utterance *I think we should (do)* is obviously understood and repeated in H's question. H makes no attempt at all at reconstructing the linguistic structure; in terms of utterance function, the illocution (a suggestion) is the same in Fs and Fh, but the proposition linked with the suggestion (i.e. what is actually being suggested) is *missing from H's point of view*. Thus, since there is no complete Fh and H is aware of this, the time span during which Fs and Fh differ can be regarded as zero.

When there are conflicting interpretations in Fs and Fh, i.e. when there is misunderstanding, then the duration of misunderstanding depends on how long it takes for the interactants to realize and repair the misunderstanding.⁴ This time span can be seconds, as in examples 2-8 and 11, with only slight differences from case to case. In ex. 2-4 and 11, this period is

4 For a detailed analysis of the interactive structure of misunderstandings and a classification of misunderstandings based on the participants' "states of realization" cf. Humphreys-Jones (1986a: 83 f., 147 ff.) and the discussion in Falkner (1997: 28 ff.).

shorter than in 5-8. In ex. 9, H's interpretation of S's serious intention as humorous remains active over quite a considerable stretch of discourse, for at least half a minute or so. In ex. 10, there is no opportunity for the participants to notice and repair the misunderstanding within the ensuing conversation. The difference between Fs and Fh prevails for a few days, with all the possible consequences this may have on the participants' relationship. S may be wondering why H does not want to tell her more about his holiday, and H may find his assumption (which motivated his minimal response in the first place) confirmed, namely that S is not really interested. That S asks again some days later gives the participants an opportunity to repair the misunderstanding.

In the following case reported by Varonis and Gass (1985: 330 f.), the duration of misunderstanding is even longer:

Ex. 13 "In this example, a correction was made a full year later. The male, a NNS [non-native speaker, W. F.] of English, uttered what he intended as a proposal of marriage: 'I want to make a life with you.' Sally understood: 'I want to make love with you.' Her response was nonverbal. A year later, after they were married, she was wondering why he had never made a marriage proposal. He, of course, insisted that he had. It was then that the correction was made and the misunderstanding cleared up."

Examples like 10 and 13 (and 9, to some extent) show that the point at which unresolved misunderstanding is noticed and repaired and thus becomes an instance of resolved misunderstanding is not brought about by interactive regularities of some kind, but can occur quite accidentally. The duration of misunderstanding in the different examples discussed here can be represented as a temporal continuum, where the time span assigned to each case marks the duration of unnoticed misunderstanding, ending when the misunderstanding is noticed by the participants:

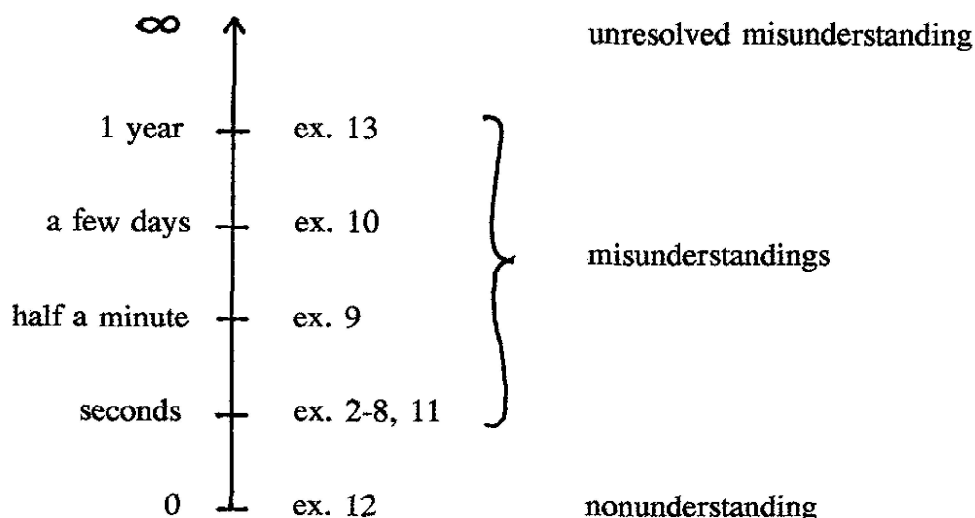


Fig. 4. The duration of misunderstanding

This scale contains essential information on the relationship between misunderstanding and understanding. As long as misunderstanding remains unnoticed and unrepaired, i.e., for a few

seconds, days, a year etc., participants are under the illusion of understanding. Before growing aware of the misunderstanding, S and H both assume that their interpretations of the phonic event are correct and also identical. In ex. 10, the misunderstanding is not detected at first because H does answer S's question, i.e. fulfil the action obligation, albeit not quite in the way S wants him to. After the question and answer in ex. 10, H feels confirmed in the assumption that S is not really interested in his holiday; S, on the other hand, thinks that for some reason H does not want to tell her more. This means that the unnoticed misunderstanding has psychological and social consequences for the participants. Ex. 13 is similar, in that Sally's assumption that her husband never made a marriage proposal is obviously important enough for her to mention it one year later, although the immediate interactive consequences of the misunderstanding are not problematic.

The frequency of cases in which participants experience understanding although there is misunderstanding cannot be quantified from a linguistic point of view. Such unnoticed misunderstanding is probably much more frequent than we think. From the point of view of the three-level concept of communicative function there are plenty of possibilities for a difference between Fs and Fh. S and H may associate different connotations with a linguistic expression used in an utterance. Their interpretations may differ in what Searle (1976: 5) calls "the force or strength with which the illocutionary point is presented": If an utterance is meant as a suggestion and understood as insistence, this may result in 'functioning' communication, but the participants' subjective impressions of the situation may differ quite significantly. Different interpretations of irony, humour and particularly politeness, as shown above, need not cause an interactive 'accident', yet they do have consequences.

Does full understanding exist? From a linguistic point of view, there is no evidence that it does. Yet despite this, in work on central pragmatic issues such as speech acts and communicative maxims, understanding, i.e. 'functioning' communication, has largely been taken for granted as the normal case in interaction. Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1988: 94) calls such views "telegraphic" models of communication - the message transmitted from S to H is regarded as an objective entity which H has to decode. In contrast, what Smith (1988: 109) suggests is an 'economic' model of communication where interaction is seen as "differentially consequential":

"It is inevitable that there will be disparities between what is 'transmitted' and what is 'received' in any exchange simply by virtue of the different states and circumstances of the 'sender' and 'receiver', including what will always be the differences - sometimes quite significant ones - produced by their inevitably different life-histories as verbal creatures."

This subjectivist view complements the pragmatic considerations outlined above on the relationship between understanding and misunderstanding. It explains why it does not make sense to look for an 'objective' meaning or function in communication. The only objective aspect of a speech event is a string of sounds. The communicative function of an utterance, however, always has to be looked at from both S's and H's perspectives, in order to account for the fact that their individual backgrounds, their conditions and interests, are never quite the same. It seems plausible, then, to apply the model of communication suggested in this paper not only to instances of miscommunication, but to communicative interaction in general. That the concept of the communicative function of utterances is relativized to separate subjective entities from S's and H's point of view does not contradict the common perception of under-

standing as being the regular outcome of communicative events. Close enough similarity between what S means and what H understands counts as understanding in human societies. Understanding is a social desideratum; Talbot J. Taylor (1992: 218) speaks about a "moral imperative to understand". From a linguistic point of view, however, understanding can never be taken for granted, because (mis)understanding is a gradual and highly complex phenomenon.

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