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Misunderstanding and language comprehension

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Abstract

This paper studies the relationship between misunderstanding and language comprehension. A misunderstanding is the communicatee's choice of an interpretation for an utterance which is not the one intended by the communicator. This faulty interpretation can be ascribed to the inconsistencies that occur during the comprehension of a linguistic message and to the interference of emotions with that comprehension. This paper tries to identify these inconsistencies and to explain their relationship to misunderstanding. It also tries to find evidence of the interference of emotions with language comprehension and its contribution to misunderstanding.

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1. Introduction

Interest in the study of misunderstanding is not recent. Many attempts have been made towards the analysis of misunderstanding so far. They varied in accordance with the aim of, and the approach followed in the analysis. However, the interest in misunderstanding culminated in 1999 in allocating a special issue of the Journal of Pragmatics (31, 1999) for papers addressing this phenomenon. Among the contributors to this special issue were Dascal (1999), Bazzanella and Damiano (1999), Weigand (1999), and Weizman (1999).

Some of the studies of misunderstanding addressed the management of misunderstanding, i.e. how often misunderstanding occurs during a communicative act (Fraser, 1993) and how misunderstanding is

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detected and repaired (Bazzanella&Damiano, 1999; Schegloff, 1992). Other studies were interested in what is misunderstood (Bazzanella&Damiano, 1999; Weigand, 1999).

However, most of misunderstanding studies concentrated on the causes of misunderstanding. Milroy (1984), for instance, tackles dialectical misunderstandings, i.e. misunderstandings which arise between people using different dialects, aiming at highlighting the sources of misunderstanding in cross-dialectal communication. Examining material of miscommunication data from Hiberno-English dialect, Milroy suggests that the causes of misunderstanding are located in a "disparity between the *inferences* which conversational participants draw from a given utterance, rather than in a disparity … between the *semantic structures* from which they derive that utterance" (p. 24).

Dascal (1985) singles out four causes of misunderstanding, viz. faulty assignment of reference, faulty identification of the topic of conversation, divergence between the intended meaning of utterance and the one chosen by the interlocutor and stylistic variation.

Blakemore (1989) shoulders the communicator the responsibility of the occurrence of misunderstanding suggesting that the choice of the message on the part of the communicator has a role in the occurrence of misunderstanding. The more implicit the message, the more likely the misunderstanding is.

Yus (1998, p. 82; 1999b, p. 219) ascribes all types of misunderstanding to "the combination of three pragmatic continua: (a) the intentional vs. unintentional continuum; (b) the verbal vs. nonverbal continuum; and (c) the explicit vs. implicit continuum". In the first continuum, Yus focuses on the communicator at the expense of the communicatee and regards a stimulus *intentional* only if its content is deliberately intended. This, of course, excludes the role of the communicatee in interpretation. The second continuum states truly that misunderstanding is possible in nonverbal as well as verbal communication. The third continuum depends on the degree of contextualization accompanying a stimulus. A stimulus is *explicit* when its interpretation is satisfied with minimal contextualization, whereas it is implicit when the interpretation demands extra contextualization.

Bazzanella and Damiano (1999) study misunderstanding with respect to two dimensions: the *level* at which misunderstanding occurs and the factors – which they call *triggers* – that facilitate the occurrence of misunderstanding. That is, they are interested in both what is misunderstood and why it is misunderstood.

Weizman's (1999) account of misunderstanding is based on the view that conversation is a *collective action*. The merit of this view is that misunderstandings can be sorted into two types: the "I-level" and the "We-level" misunderstandings. The former refer to "individual speaker's meanings and the latter to the collective, shared direction of an exchange" (p. 837). Applying this two-level distinction of misunderstanding on a Hebrew text, Weizman (1999) tries to show how miscommunication of the I-level is exploited to build true understanding on the We-level.

Bou-Franch (2002, pp. 324-325) divides sources of misunderstanding into two categories: *external* sources and *participant-related* sources. Among external sources of misunderstanding she identifies "disturbing background noise and/or troubles related to the use of a foreign language". Regarding participant-related sources of misunderstanding, she singles out two subcategories: sources related to the speaker (henceforth speaker-related sources) and sources related to the listener (henceforth listener-related sources). The former (speaker-related sources) have to do with ambiguity. The speaker either holds information necessary for the listener to interpret the message, or the speaker may think that the

cues he/she provides are sufficient enough for the listener to interpret the given message. The latter (listener-related sources) may be phonological (e.g. mishearing, intonational contours), lexical (e.g. misrecognizing the meanings of some words), syntactic (e.g. misparsing part of the utterance), or pragmatic (e.g. the context, lack of cultural background).

In this paper, misunderstanding is hypothesized to be causedby the inconsistencies which take place during comprehension and to the interference of emotions with comprehension. This hypothesis stems from the fact that language comprehension is more complex than we might think. It involves the communicatee's capturing of "the content, structure, and sequencing of verbal messages, as well as the paralinguistic cues, gestures, facial expressions, body movements and cues provided by the physical environment that accompany verbal messages" (Burgoon et al., 2000, p. 106). The multiplicity of tasks in the comprehension process casts heavy unconscious burden on the comprehender, which renders comprehension potentially risky and liable for interpretive errors. Such errors may preclude extracting the intended meaning behind a piece of discourse causing misunderstanding.

The researcher, therefore, traces the path of the comprehension process to identify the inconsistencies which may trigger misunderstanding, and to seek evidence of the interference of emotions with comprehension and their contribution to misunderstanding.

2. What is misunderstanding?

Misunderstanding occurs "when a hearer (H) fails to understand correctly the proposition (*p*) which a speaker (S) expresses in an utterance (*x*)" (Humphreys-Jones, 1986, p. 109).

Blakemore, (1989: 37) ascribes misunderstanding to "the sender's choice of a certain stimulus, which increases, reduces, or even makes it impossible to access the intended interpretation".

Yus (1999a, p. 10; 1999b, p. 218) defines misunderstanding as:

> (a) the addressee's inability to select one interpretation, among all the possible interpretations that a stimulus can have in a context C, which is precisely the interpretation that the addressor intends to communicate; and (b) the addressee's inability to process optimally the contextual information that the socio-cultural environment exudes, as it were, without any prior intentionality in its communication.

Weigand (1999) tries to define the *standard case* of misunderstanding. Following a model of *dialogic action games*, she proposes five*constitutive* features of misunderstanding:

- Misunderstanding is a form of understanding which is *partially* or *totally deviant* from what the speaker intended to communicate.
- As a form of understanding, it refers to the reverse side of meaning or to the reverse side of the utterance, and represents a *cognitive* phenomenon belonging to the interlocutor.
- The interlocutor who misunderstands is *not aware* of it.
- Misunderstanding cannot be considered as a cognitive act because the hearer is not aware of it; instead, it represents an *ability* or inability of the hearer.
- Misunderstanding will normally be corrected in the course of ongoing dialogic action game. We may be confident that we will arrive at an understanding in the dialogic action game as a whole even if an utterance has been misunderstood. Meaning and understanding or misunderstanding of an utterance is not an autonomous unit by itself but a part of the dialogic interaction. It is

because of the general Dialogic Principle that language use can tolerate cases of misunderstanding (pp. 769-770).

According to Ardissono et al. (2004) a misunderstanding occurs "when an interactant chooses an interpretation for some turn which is complete and coherent from his point of view, but is not the one intended by the speaker" (p. 1). Here, there is an implicit shift of misunderstanding from semantics to pragmatics. Firstly, a role is given to inference in choosing the message interpretation. Secondly, misunderstanding takes place if the sender's intention is not correctly recovered.

Throughout this paper, misunderstanding will be seen as the communicatee's choice of an interpretation for an utterance which is not the one intended by the communicator.

3. Some characteristics of the linguistic input

Connected speech is strikingly characterized by the high speed with which it arrives to the listener. Studies have shown a speech rate average between 140-180 words per minute in everyday conversation (Wingfield, 1993). Moreover, analyses of the acoustic material of ordinary speech have found that the linguistic elements of speech (words, phrases, clauses,) are so tightly woven that no clear regular breaks between them are detectable. It is the listener's task to find out the boundaries of the linguistic constituents of the incoming speech waves depending on the whole meaning of the sentence. Again, not all the linguistic elements of the incoming speech are articulated as clearly as required. Some elements lack the necessary clarity for their correct identification (ibid.).

These demands as well as the continuity of incoming speech as the listener is "still analyzing or attempting to integrate what has already been heard" (ibid. 228) and the immediacy of processing (Lewis, 1993, p. 13) render it unwarranted for all the sentences to have been processed before the listener responds. Thus, "if any of the sentences or a part thereof fails to get processed or the processing happens to be disorderly, the idea which is communicated by the sentence will be deficient, deformed, or reversed" (al-Jawadi, 2002, p. 32).

4. Immediacy of processing

Immediacy of processing refers to the speed at which the speech stimulus can be processed. The wealth of data available has shown that the computation of all levels of linguistic representation is carried out on a word-by-word basis. That is, an incoming word is immediately integrated into a partial syntactic structure, a partial semantic representation and a referential representation (Lewis, 1993). The bulk of evidence for language processing immediacy comes from speech shadowing experiments (Marslen-Wilson, 1973), eye movement studies (Carpenter &Daneman, 1981) and cross-modal experiments (Tyler &Marslen-Wilson, 1982).

Immediacy of processing "determines whether all the sentences listened to or read will have been processed before the listener, because of his personal temperament, decides to make his response" (al-Jawadi, 2002, p. 32). Improper and/or incomplete processing owing to immediacy of processing often results in "deficient, deformed or reversed" (ibid.) meaning which is likely to cause a misunderstanding.

5. Syntactic processing

The listener produces syntactic representation to make the syntactic discriminations which are necessary to arrive at the correct meaning (Lewis, 1993). In order to construct a syntactic representation, the listener has "to break up incoming sentences into their constituent clauses" (Wingfield, 1993, p. 209). This, in turn, involves identifying boundaries of sentence constituents; this identification relies heavily on

the processing of the prosodic features that accompany sentences (ibid. 215). However, it is not always the case that successful identification of linguistic structure boundaries is achieved. Under certain conditions, listeners misidentify these boundaries, and as a result misunderstand the meaning underlying the linguistic structure. Consider the following example adapted by Weigand (1999, p. 775):

1. (A is a student; B is a professor).
A: I have to indicate two topics for exam.
B: Which ones did you choose?
A: Dialogue grammar and communication disturbances.
A: You should see me once again and tell me about your preparation. Did you attend the lecture on communication disturbances?
A: Yes, naturally.
B: O.K. And what is your second topic?
A: Communication disturbances.
B: Oh, now I understand. These are two topics. I thought it was one but the relation between dialogue grammar and communication failures sounded strange to me and therefore I asked you to show me your work for the exam.

The misunderstanding in this exchange is a result of improper syntactic processing owing to failure in prosodic processing. That is, B failed to correctly locate boundaries of the incoming structures, constructed a syntactic representation which was inconsistent with the actual structure .The structure "dialogue grammar and communication disturbances" was processed disorderly as one complex phrase rather than two coordinated phrases.

Related to syntactic processing is syntactic ambiguity. There are two types of syntactic ambiguity; *local ambiguity* which refers to cases where substructure of a sentence is not clear unless the whole structure of the sentence is complete; and *standing ambiguity* which refers to "cases of sentences that remain syntactically ambiguous even when all of the lexical information has been received" (Wingfield,1993, p. 226). Following Baech (1991), Wingfield stressed the role of prosodic features in resolving such ambiguities. Unfortunately, the prosodic features which accompany sentences are not always clear.

Under such circumstance, syntactically ambiguous sentences will make processing difficult. Evidence in support of such difficulty comes from Tabor et al. (2004) who carried out three experiments to examine the effects of local syntactic coherence on language processing. They found that the participants experienced difficulties in processing sentences with local syntactic coherence. They explained this finding saying that "local syntactic coherence in the input can result in the construction of syntactic analyses which are inconsistent with the global syntactic context" (p. 356). That is, they are likely to trigger misunderstanding.

6. Semantic processing

The listener must also build "a reference–independent semantic representation that corresponds to sense" (Lewis, 1993, p. 11). Such a representation is necessary for comprehension for two reasons:

1- Uncovering the semantics of a sentence is a necessary step to producing the referential representation.
2- The sense of an expression is sometimes independently needed in order to understand the expression. (ibid.).

Building a semantic representation requires the listener's access to the mental lexicon "the storehouse of our words and what we know about them, both on the semantic and syntactic level" (Wingfield, 1993, p. 211). That is, developing a proposition of an utterance involves activation of the senses of the lexical items that utterance consists of. Owing to memory limitations and psychological distracters sometimes contextually inappropriate sense of a lexical item is activated, which affects the overall interpretation assigned to the utterance. Add to this the risk of ambiguous lexical items which may activate more than one sense. Although contextual information is critical on deciding which sense to choose, on some occasions the wrong sense is selected, thus a faulty interpretation is developed.

7. Inferential processing

Syntactic processing and semantic processing are primarily linguistic, i.e. only knowledge about the language is accessed. However, comprehension involves accessing knowledge about the world. The necessity of inferential processing is demonstrated in numerous studies (Bransford& Johnson, 1973; Chiesi et al., 1979; Dooling&Lachman, 1971; Spilich et al., 1979). Bransford& Johnson (1973), for instance, asked readers to comprehend and recall paragraphs that contained a number of vague referring expressions. These paragraphs elicited low comprehension ratings and poor recall. Comprehension ratings and recall improved significantly when readers were provided with a title that evoked relevant world knowledge.

One of the functions of inferential processing is the building of a referential representation which relates lexical items to their referents. The nature of this representation is specified by Lewis (1993) in stating that "comprehension builds a referential representation which contains information about the particular referents of the discourse in the particular situation described by the discourse—" (p. 9).

According to Bransford et al. (1972), comprehension constructs a representation of the described situation that integrates the information explicit in the input along with inferred or background information. The result is a single coherent representation of the context.

Reference assignment is sometimes problematic, especially when the referent is not clear and needs to be inferred, and when the interlocutor is misled by the context. Here, the researcher recalls Austen's (1813: Ch. XIII, P. 54) dialogue between Mr. and Mrs.Bennet:

2.Mr.Bennet: I hope, my dear, that you have ordered a good dinner today, because I have reason to expect an addition to our family party.
Mrs.Bennet: Who do you mean, my dear? I know nobody that is coming, I am sure, unless Charlotte Lucas should happen to call in, and I hope my dinners are good enough for her. I do not believe she often sees such at home.
Mr.Bennet: The person of whom I speak is a gentleman and a stranger.
Mrs.Bennet: A gentleman and a stranger! It is Mr. Bingley, I am sure.
Mr.Bennet: It is not Mr.Bingley; it is a person whom I never saw in the whole course of my life.

Mr.Bennet's description of the person whom he was talking about as a gentleman and a stranger made its referent unclear, for so many persons are gentlemen and strangers. The unclarity of the referent tempted Mrs.Bennet to wrongly activate the most relevant one from her point of view, Mr. Bingley who was also a gentleman and a stranger; thus the dialogue ended up in a misunderstanding.

Similarly, the physical environment misled Marco to assign a wrong location reference to Beatrice's utterance in the following exchange:

3. Beatrice: My God. So how long you want to stay?
Marco: With your permission, we will stay maybe a ----- .
Eddie: She don't [sic] mean in this house, she means in the country.
Marco: Oh. Maybe four, five, six years, I think.
(Miller, 1955, Act I: 29)

Being in the physical context of Beatrice's house, Marco misinferred the correct location Beatrice was asking about. He activated a referent demanding minimum contextualization.

Therefore, comprehending discourse requires more than simply accumulating the meanings of the propositions that make up the discourse (Brookshire, 1987). It often involves "generating inferences" (Wright &Newhoff, 2004, p. 450).

Inferential processing relies on our previous knowledge which consists, according to Schank& Abelson (1977), of two classes: *general knowledge* which "enables a person to understand and interpret another person's actions simply because the other person is a human being with certain standard" (p. 37) and *specific knowledge* we employ "to interpret and participate in events we have been through many times. Specific detailed knowledge about a situation allows us to do less processing and wondering about frequently experienced events" (ibid.).

Escandell-Vidal (1996) argued for cultural variation in specific knowledge. The reason behind this variation is that "the situations that crystallize in specific knowledge show a high degree of variation from culture to culture" (p. 636).

In view of Schank& Abelson's (1977) statement of specific knowledge, an evidence of an individual variation assumption is not unattainable. First, the assumption is evident by the specificity of knowledge. Being specific, *specific knowledge* must vary across individuals. Second, our experience of the situations and events that specific knowledge represents is highly influenced by such variables as age, sex, and education. Thus, we conceive of situations and events differently from perspectives that coincide with our interests and preferences. If we select a random group of people and ask them to view a *mosque*, for instance, the expected result is a variety of descriptions corresponding to the different frames they have mentally constructed of the mosque. Similarly, if we test males' and females' frames of *marriage*, we also expect differences in their conceptualization. Even within the same sex group, framing variation is likely to be found.

Further argument for inferential individual variation comes from Long et al. (1994) who examined the performance of skilled and less skilled readers on comprehension tasks which require inferential processing. The results of their study demonstrated that "skilled readers are more likely than less skilled readers either a. to generate a topic-related inference on-line during comprehension b. to generate a topic-related inference to integrate a test item into a preceding discourse context" (p. 1466).

Experiments done by Garnham et al. (1982), Oakhill (1983, 1984) replicate this finding. These researchers carried out their experiments on subjects who were matched on tests of word recognition accuracy and reading vocabulary but differed on a test of reading comprehension. They found that less skilled readers relative to skilled readers (a.) benefited less from referential continuity in stories (Garnham et al., 1982, p. 40), (b.) made less use of context in the interpretation of a text (Oakhill, 1983, p. 447), and (c.) did more poorly on questions that required an inference even when the text was available during questioning (Oakhill, 1984, p. 37).

Since the decisive step in determining the intended meaning of a discourse is inferential, individual differences in executing this step are likely to develop different intended meanings of the same discourse, which increases the likelihood of misunderstanding. Additionally, there is the process of inference revision. The listener must revise a previously assigned interpretation of a discourse as further context is available (Wright &Newhoff, 2004) in order to comprehend the discourse successfully. Failure to adequately comprehend the further coming context or the unavailability of such context yields that either the inference revision is not successful or it is not done at all. In either case, a misunderstanding is likely to arise.

8. Comprehension and emotions

Language processing is not a purely cognitive process. Cognitive processes underlying language processing are always interfered with and filtered by emotions.

Imaizumi and colleagues (2004) found significant interaction between emotions and language.Theyargue that emotion "modulates linguistic processes not only in speech production but also in speech perception, and such modulations may differ between the genders particularly in perception" (p. 25). Such gender difference is crystallized in the male's need for more neural activation to understand "the female speaker's mind" (ibid.) than females, which may be attributed to gender asymmetry in the theory-of-mind. Thus "the theory of women's mind could be an enigma to men, and the theory of male's mind could be an enigma to women" (p. 23).

Nabi (2003) studied emotions as frames and their influence on information accessibility, information seeking and subsequent judgements. Framing is defined by Entman (1993) as the selection of "some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52); therefore, the perception and appraisal of objects and events in the environment is highly influenced by the frames we have constructed of those objects and events, i.e. according to their relevance to "personal well-being" (p. 226).

Associating certain emotions with particular ideas or events eventually shapes the way in which one interprets and responds to those events that in turn affect one's worldview. Once an emotion is evoked, its associated action tendency serves to guide information processing influencing what information is attended to and likely to be recalled and what is ignored, and motivates selective processing of information relevant to that emotion. This selectivity affects not only the nature of information processing but also the influence of emotion-relevant information on judgments (p. 227).

The following example shows the interference of emotions with language processing:

4. Irene and David are looking over their menus in a restaurant. David says he will order a steak. Irene says, "Did you notice they also have salmon?" This question exasperates David; he protests, "Will you please stop criticizing what I eat?" Irene feels unfairly accused: "I didn't criticize. I just pointed out something on the menu I thought you might like."

(Tannen, 2001, p. 15)

The misunderstanding here is caused by a faulty interpretation on the part of David. David and Irene go to have a meal in a restaurant. Looking over their menus, David decides to order a steak. Irene thinks that David has not noticed salmon on his menu, so she wants to tell him that there is salmon on the menu, if he is interested. She structures her notification in an indirect speech act: "Did you notice they also have

salmon?". Indirect speech acts assume more than one interpretation depending on the context in which they are uttered. Although Irene intends her indirect speech act to draw David's attention to an item on the menu he may like to order but he has not noticed, as her next turn explains, it is misunderstood by David as a criticism of what he eats. She thinks that she does David a favour by drawing his attention to something he might like to order, but David reacts by accusing her of criticizing him. David chooses this interpretation of Irene's utterance perhaps on the basis of past experience with Irene, i.e. she may have criticized him on many occasions; therefore, he expects her present utterance to be criticism, too, even though it is not intended to be so.

From consideration of the above data, we conclude that cognition and emotion collaborate to process language.

9. Conclusion

The data presented in this paper seem to be sufficient to conclude that there is a close relationship between language comprehension and misunderstanding. Language comprehension is not a straightforward process. It has inconsistencies at all levels of processing. These inconsistencies work to hinder the accurate processing of the linguistic input necessary for extracting its intended meaning thereby maximizing the likelihood of misunderstanding.

Besides, language comprehension is not purely cognitive. Studies have shown interference of emotions with comprehension. This interference filters our interpretations of the linguistic input. Thus, we make interpretations which bias to our emotions, diverging from the actual meaning of the linguistic input. This also maximizes the likelihood of misunderstanding.

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