

# Communicating by miscommunicating

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The Practical and Theoretical Implications of  
Defective Communication



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The starting point:

Successful communication as intention recognition



## Meaning<sub>NN</sub>

'A meant<sub>NN</sub> something by x' is (roughly) equivalent to

'A uttered x with the intention of inducing a belief by means of the recognition of this intention'. (Grice 1957: 220)

- Successful communication relies on hearers inferring speakers' intended meanings
- ▶ Meaning arises through the **speaker** having a specific **meaning intention**

**Miscommunication** occurs when a hearer fails to recognise a speaker's communicative intention

- Miscommunication is typically contrasted with successful communication
- When things go wrong, interlocutors can pose clarificatory requests and engage in repair sequences (Schegloff et al. 1977)
- This model assumes a goal of **perfect alignment**, where interlocutors share attitudes towards issues of relevance, including beliefs about communicative intentions

- ▶ To show that cases of 'miscommunication' lie on a continuum ranging from beneficial to catastrophic
  - ▶ Miscommunication is not always a bad thing!
- ▶ To show that an adequate theory of meaning has to look at patterns of language use – including cases of 'imperfect communication'
- ▶ To sketch a proposal of 'speaker meaning' that can account for such imperfect communication based on interactional principles

- 1 The meaning a speaker **intends** to communicate
- 2 The meaning a speaker **is presumed to have intended** to communicate
- 3 The meaning a speaker **is taken** to have communicated, regardless of whether he/she intended it

To account for cases in which meanings are communicated but not overtly intended, we can incorporate both speakers' and hearers' perspectives in the process of **meaning negotiation**

- Speakers have a multitude of communicative intentions per communicative act
  - Intentions about form, (propositional) content, implicatures, speech acts, preserving face, ...
- Speakers' intentions can be more or less determinate, and more or less inferable (Sperber & Wilson 2015; Moeschler 2012)
- This implies that there are different ways in which a hearer can recognise/misread a speaker's communicative intention

Let's change the assumptions...

- ★ What if hearers fail to recognise a speaker's intentions?
- ★ What if speakers don't have determinate intentions to be recognised?

- ▶ The following 5-part hierarchy of miscommunication focusses on cases with no immediate repair
- ▶ This hierarchy shows the range of miscommunication from less to more problematic, based on type and severity of the miscommunication



- Misalignment with respect to some non-crucial aspect of an utterance, e.g. phonetic, syntactic, lexical disparities
- Can arise due to communicative disturbances, slips of the tongue, syntactic indeterminacy, inaccurate descriptions...
- Despite disparities in alignment, hearer nevertheless recovers the main intended message

## Example

[A and B are discussing air pollution]

A: But, **then I still cars going** down the road with all this smoke pouring out the back end of them

B: Uh-huh

(Switchboard 2082)

- ▶ Misalignment is not functionally significant
- ▶ No clarification/repair necessary
- ▶ Intended message is easily recoverable

- Speaker doesn't have a determinate meaning in mind
- Hearer recovers a message which is compatible with possible speaker intentions, but may be more determinate
- Hearer's uptake contributes to process of grounding

### Elective construals

“speakers deliberately offer their addressees a choice of construals, so when addressees make their choice, they **help determine what the speaker is taken to mean.**” (Clark 1997: 588)

## Example

D: Like it's his own bed-sit and he rents out three bedrooms

A: It's shared but... Oh right.

B: *Is that sort of official or...?*

A: No.

D: Well no

B: I don't know how it works

A: But a lot of people do that sort of thing you know.

(Jaszczolt et al. 2016: 257)

## Example

Is that sort of official or...

- ① ...perhaps I shouldn't have asked?
- ② ...perhaps 'being official' is not relevant in this situation?
- ③ ...do we have to register it somewhere?
- ④ ...is this in the contract?

(Jaszczolt et al. 2016: 258)

- ▶ Miscommunication is rhetorically harmless
- ▶ Beneficial if it helps interlocutors develop their joint attitudes within the conversation
- ▶ Clarification/repair would be costly and unnecessary

- Speaker has a determinate intention
- Hearer misconstrues the intention
- Speaker accepts the misconstrual

### Accepted misconstruals

“speakers present an utterance with one intention in mind, but when an addressee misconstrues it, they change their minds and **accept the new construal.**” (Clark 1997: 589)

## Example

W: And what would you like to drink?

C: Hot tea, please. Uh, English breakfast.

W: That was Earl Grey?

C: Right.

"I initially intended to be taken as meaning one thing, but I changed my mind. Speakers may accept a misconstrual because they deem it too trivial, disrupting, or embarrassing to correct. Still, once it is grounded, **it is taken to be what they mean.**" (Clark 1997: 589)

- ▶ Rhetorically significant miscommunication is resolved by acceptance
- ▶ Repair is too costly due to production effort, or social reasons

- Speaker has a determinate meaning intention
- Hearer misconstrues the intention, but without immediate speaker awareness
- If miscommunication is unnoticed, this will have negative consequences
- However, in this case the miscommunication is not over deeply held beliefs, so there is potential for reconciliation (cf. case V to come!)



## Example

B aims to telephone a retail store to buy a new television, but mistakenly calls speaker A at a repair centre

A: Seventeen inch?

B: Okay.  
((pause))

A: Well is it portable?

(Varonis & Gass 1985)

- ▶ Rhetorically critical miscommunication may be later reconciled through repair sequence
- ▶ Cost of repair is presumably low enough that once the miscommunication is noticed, repair would be expected

- Speaker may or may not have a determinate meaning in mind
- Interlocutors disagree on the speaker's communicative intention, and the misalignment involves deeply held contrary convictions (possibly involving disagreement about form)
- Speaker and hearer cannot reconcile their disagreement

## Example

M: Got the keys (ambiguous intonation)

R: Okay

...

M: Why are we standing here?

R: We're waiting for you to open the door. You got the keys

M: No I don't

R: Yes, you do. When we left, you said, "got the keys"

M: No I didn't. I asked, "got the ke-eyes?"

R: No, no, no, you said, "got the keys"

C: Do either of you have the keys? (*Friends* S01E09)

- ▶ Unresolvable miscommunication with detrimental effects
- ▶ Speaker and hearer have different beliefs about 'what is said'

- I Pseudo miscommunication
- II Benign miscommunication
- III Conceded miscommunication
- IV Severe miscommunication (reconcilable)
- V Severe miscommunication (catastrophic)

“Conversational speech is full of disfluencies, which actually help listeners parse utterances and determine what speakers mean. Listeners also recognise that speakers can change their mind and leave part of the construal of utterances to them.” (Clark 1997: 589)

- On the post-Gricean account, meanings of utterances are determined by the speaker's determinate intention
- Modelling hearers' comprehension gets around the fact that speakers do not always have determinate intentions (e.g. Relevance Theory)
- Instead of theorising about speakers' intended meanings or hearers' recovered meanings, one option is to theorise about the meaning that is **co-constructed by participants**

When my friend and I play a Mozart duet on the piano, we have to coordinate our individual actions: “Each decision – when to begin, how fast to go, when to slow down or speed up, when to play forte and when pianissimo, how to phrase things – must be a joint one, or the result won’t be Mozart.” (Clark 1996: 18)

- Meanings are **grounded** when they are established well-enough in the common ground for current purposes (Clark & Brennan 1991)
- Meanings are co-constructed by participants, attributed to a speaker-hearer dyad
- The unit of analysis has to be broadened beyond individual utterances

“meaning lies not with the speaker nor the addressee nor the utterance alone as many philosophical arguments have considered, but rather with the interactional past, current, and projected next moment”

(Schegloff et al. 1996: 40)

- ▶ The meanings that are interesting to a theory of communication are those that are grounded by participants

- In the ideal case, the meanings that are the most productive at progressing information flow are those that are the main intended meanings of the speaker and that are recovered by the hearer
- But information flow isn't always this simple; rather than assuming a one-stage process of 'speaker implicates, hearer infers', speaker meaning is often subject to a **three-part** process

- 1 A produces  $u_1$  (making available an inference about how  $u_1$  will be interpreted)
- 2 B responds to  $u_1$  via  $u_2$  (making available an inference about the meaning of  $u_1$ )
- 3 A responds to  $u_2$  via  $u_3$  (making available an inference about how B understood  $u_1$ , confirming or disconfirming as appropriate)



# 'Speaker meaning': An example

## Example

Mary: have a biscuit.

Mike: ↑o:h okay ↑yeah. ↑thank you.

...

Mary: ((while eating)) oh.(0.8)

Mike: [°mm°

Mary: [I don't have got any bread 'n butter plates but (0.4)  
*there's one in the cupboard if you want one.*

Mike: Mm? o::h should be okay. I'll ju-

Mary: you [alright?]

Mike: [do ya ] did you want one?

Mary: yea- ( ) well it is less messier actually =

Mike: = okay.

(adapted from Haugh 2009: 98)

$u_1$  (Mary): there's one in the cupboard if you want one

Mary makes available an inference to Mike that  $u_1$  is an offer with Mike as the beneficiary

$u_2$  (Mike): Mm? o::h should be okay.

Mike makes available his inference that Mary's  $u_1$  is an offer

$u_3$  (Mary): you alright?

Mary makes available an inference that Mike has understood  $u_1$  as an offer, but also that something is not quite right (disconfirms Mike's inference)

$u_4$  (Mike): did you want one?

Mike makes available his inference that Mary might have made a request

$u_5$  (Mary): well it is less messier actually

Mary makes available her inference that she made a request with both Mike and Mary as beneficiaries

- A and B's inferences about  $u_1$  are dependent on the inferences made available by the other; the meaning of  $u_1$  is not independent based on the utterance alone
- To formally represent the negotiation of meaning, we need to look at meanings with respect to utterances ( $u$ ), times ( $t$ ) and speakers (A, B, etc)
- This allows us to see where/when discrepancies in meanings arise between speakers
- At some point, speakers (usually!) converge on a meaning that they jointly make operative for the purposes at hand

- In the third turn, speaker A can make a number of moves
  - ① Corroborate that B has satisfactorily understood  $u_1$  (Case I, II)
  - ② Update their own belief on how  $u_1$  has been understood by accepting the response by B and responding accordingly (Case III)
  - ③ Repair the mismatch if there is one (Case IV)
- Note that it is not A's **intention** that becomes clear over time, as A can update/revise the meaning they ascribe to  $u_1$
- In that case, speaker meanings may be subject to complex inferential work that is a joint endeavour between participants

- Most of the time, speakers don't have any problems working out what has been said / what was intended
- Very often the three-turn process is short-circuited as the third turn simply confirms the hearer got it right
  - Explicitly ('that's right')
  - Implicitly (continuing the discourse)
- But a two-turn model of communication only provides a partial picture of what goes on in communication
- The three-turn model is a more fine-grained account of how speakers converge on a salient proposition in real time

- Successful communication is not just a matter of recognising speaker intentions
- Sometimes it is worth compromising **accuracy** of information transfer for the sake of **efficiency** of information transfer
- In fact, miscommunication can lead to an enriched common ground, as it serves as a vital component of progressing information flow
- Speakers have to calculate the perceived benefits of engaging in repair sequences against any potential negative effects due to the miscommunication
- It is when a speaker and hearer have radically different views of what was intended that miscommunication is a problem to communication, as no mutually accepted meanings are grounded

- ▶ Miscommunication is a phenomenon that contributes to the process of successful communication
- ▶ A formal theory of meaning does not need to – and should not – be committed to the idea that hearers always recover speaker's intended meanings, nor that speakers always have determinate intentions in the first place
- ▶ To capture both speaker and hearer perspectives in a single notion of 'speaker meaning' we have to move away from a two-stage encoding-decoding model of meaning
- ▶ Attending to the three-turn architecture of meaning allows us to account for both understandings and misunderstandings as they arise in conversation

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