

What is said in the face of miscommunication

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The starting point: Successful communication as intention recognition

Meaning_{NN}

'A meant_{NN} 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

Today's aims

- ▶ To show that current assumptions about 'successful communication' do not adequately describe what is going on in actual communication
- ▶ 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 on 'what is said' that can account for such imperfect communication

What is said? The traditional picture

Grice (1975, 1978)

Example

A: Do you want to go to a party tonight?

B: I have an exam tomorrow.

B's meanings

Sentence meaning: The speaker has an exam tomorrow
(**what is said**)

Speaker meaning: The speaker does not want to go to the party
(**what is implicated**)

- ▶ $\text{Meaning}_{\text{NN}} = \text{what is said} + \text{what is implicated}$
- ▶ What is 'what is said'?

'What is said'

What is said

“the particular meanings of the elements of S [the sentence], their order, and their syntactical character” (Grice 1975: 87)

- Sentence meaning corresponds to *what is said*, i.e. the semantic, truth-conditional meaning
- Two-tiered picture of meaning (in today's terminology: semantic minimalism)
- *What is said* includes disambiguation and reference assignment (e.g. of indexicals) (Grice 1978)
- Reference assignment requires recourse to **context**

- There are covert 'slots' in the logical form (e.g. Stanley 2002; Stanley & Szabó 2000)

Example

Every bottle **on the table** is empty

- ▶ Pragmatics is only called upon when the linguistic system demands it
- ▶ When the linguistic system demands it, pragmatics is required

Post-Gricean pragmatics: Contextualism

- Not all pragmatic processes are mandated by covert variables; pragmatic processes can also be **optional**
- The logical form of an uttered sentence can be **enriched** or **modulated** to determine truth-conditional content (e.g. Recanati 2010 among many others)

Example

- I haven't had breakfast **today / this morning**

Example

- Child: Can I go punting?
Mother: You are too small.
- The child is too small to go punting.
- **The child cannot go punting.**

(Jaszczolt 2010: 195)

- ▶ A theory of meaning should be concerned with “the full, intuitively most plausible, meaning as intended by language users on a particular occasion.” (Jaszczolt 2016: 8)

Default Semantics (e.g. Jaszczolt 2016)

Default Semantics aims to “offer a formal account of how a Model Speaker constructs meaning in his/her head, and how a Model Addressee recovers this intended message.” (Jaszczolt 2016: 10)

- A radical version of semantic contextualism in which the truth-conditional unit pertains to the **primary, intended content** of the utterance
- To generate such a unit, the logical form of the utterance may be enriched **or even overridden**
- ▶ A completely pragmatic, contextually-driven theory of communication

What does it mean to recognise a speaker's intention?

- 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

The questions

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?

Five ways to miscommunicate (Elder & Beaver 2017)

- ▶ In what follows I present a 5-part hierarchy of miscommunication, focussing 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

Case I: Pseudo 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

Pseudo miscommunication: Missing words

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

Case II: Benign miscommunication

- 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)

Benign miscommunication: Open-ended disjunction

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)

Benign miscommunication: Possible interpretations

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

Case III: Conceded miscommunication

- 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)

Conceded miscommunication: 'Accepted misconstruals'

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

Case IV: Severe miscommunication (reconcilable)

- 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!)

Reconcilable miscommunication: Misaligned background

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

Case V: Severe miscommunication (catastrophic)

- 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

Catastrophic miscommunication: Phonetic ambiguity

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'

The 5 cases: A summary

- 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)

Rethinking the role of 'determinate intentions'

- 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**

Language as joint action

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)

Grounding

- 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”

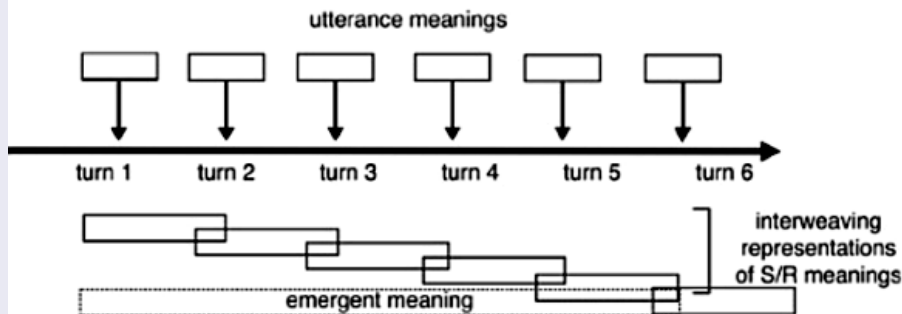
(Schegloff et al. 1996: 40)

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

But what are utterance meanings?

- Just because a speaker doesn't have a determinate intention, there is still a sense in which individual utterances are meaningful
- The meanings that are grounded are not always the main, intended meanings of the speaker that are successfully recovered by the hearer

Kádár & Haugh (2013: 118)



A contextualist 'basic proposition'

Example

[Anna and George are playing Scrabble. George places a word on the board. Anna, who is responsible for keeping the score, sees it and grabs her pen]

A: Twenty-five.

- You get twenty-five points in this round
 - Your word is worth twenty-five points
 - I'm writing down twenty-five point for you
 - etc.
-
- Savva (2016) argues that in the case of subsentential speech, all viable completions subsume an 'informationally basic proposition'
 - The basic proposition communicated is 'word $x = 25$ points'

A contextualist 'basic proposition'

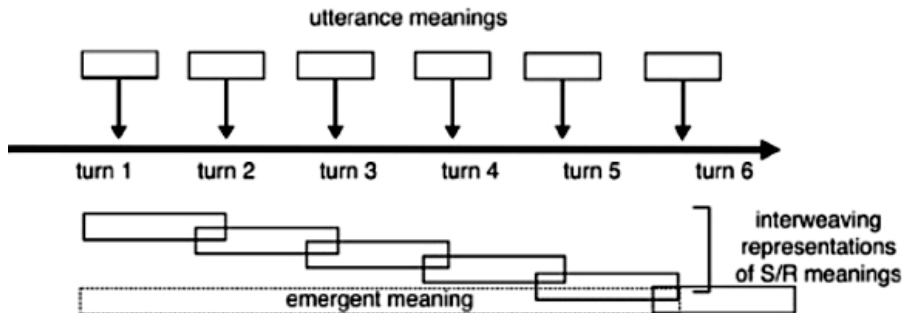
- Such a basic proposition departs from the standard contextualist aim of enriching the logical form to obtain a determinate proposition
- Context interacts with the word uttered to generate the required basic proposition
- Constraints on context prevent the utterance from overgenerating meanings (e.g. the basic proposition cannot correspond to 'it is 25 degrees outside')

‘What is said’: A proposal

- 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
- In some contexts and for some sets of interlocutors, these meanings may depart from the logical form to reflect the main intended speech act
- But information flow isn't always this simple; it is not always the case that we want to label an interaction as ‘communication breakdown’ just because the main message wasn't recovered

‘What is said’: A proposal

- The hearer’s uptake influences ‘what is said’ by making salient that the speaker’s intended meanings are successfully recovered
- The aim is to accommodate those cases where the main intended meaning is *not* recovered (perhaps because there was no determinate intention to be recognised in the first place)
- But the speaker’s utterance meaning cannot correspond to something the speaker did not intend—i.e. the hearer’s uptake cannot retrospectively update the speaker’s intended meaning
- We can defer to the form of the utterance as the **publicly available information**
- The propositional content of that utterance still requires a contextualist treatment—the ‘basic proposition’ is a plausible candidate to fulfil that role



The ideal case

- Speaker's intended meaning is successfully recovered
- Utterance meanings = speaker/hearer representations

The actual case

- Indeterminate intentions / intentions not recovered
- Utterance meanings \neq speaker/hearer representations
- 'What is said' corresponds to basic proposition

On miscommunication

- The 'basic proposition' view of utterance meanings still results in a view of miscommunication where speaker's intended meanings are not successfully recovered
- This includes cases where the basic proposition does not correspond to the hearer's understanding—it is never grounded
- But often such miscommunications are trivial enough that speakers do not draw attention to them (e.g. Case III - the Earl Grey case)
- In fact, miscommunication can lead to an enriched common ground, as serve as a vital component of progressing information flow (Elder & Beaver 2017)

★ 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

Summary

- ▶ A theory of meaning that captures *speakers' main intended meanings* does not capture the fact that hearers may not recognise those intentions, nor that speakers do not always have determinate intentions in the first place
- ▶ Instead, the meanings that are important to communication flow are those that are both intended by the speaker and recovered by the hearer, but these may not be the speaker's *main, intended meanings*
- ▶ In these cases, the meaning of interest can be 'stripped back' to a pragmatic, context-driven 'basic proposition'

Conclusions

- ▶ Miscommunication is a phenomenon that contributes to the process of communication
- ▶ A formal theory of meaning does not need to – and should not – be committed to the idea that speakers have determinate intentions
- ▶ In seriously aiming to identify the general mechanisms of language comprehension, we have to depart from the intention=inference model of meaning

Thank you!

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