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# Misunderstandings – a Sociolinguistic View on Meaning

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## 1 Introduction

It is well-known that language reflects our identity, social group membership, values and beliefs, and that it can sometimes happen visibly and sometimes invisibly.

The way we use language determines how we perceive the world. Of course, the more languages we learn, the more open to new ideas and behaviors we get. But sometimes there are exceptions, and if we are not prepared for some responses or attitudes, and we may tend to interpret things in a different way than it was intended by the sender. According to Richards (1980), participants in conversation share assumptions about what conversation is, and we are (consciously or unconsciously) aware of the strategies and social norms for the realization of speech acts, such as adjacency pairs, openings and closings, turn-taking, topicalization, among others. However, very often we get more of a reaction than we expect, that is, the listener perceives the speaker's intentions differently, causing a discrepancy between intended meaning and interpreted meaning (Woods, 1994).

According to Brown (1995), misunderstanding is a regular non-extraordinary feature of human interaction, whether communicative interaction is cross-cultural or not. Bou-French (2002) argues that we if we tackle the study of misunderstandings from different angles – from an eclectic or transdisciplinary perspective

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– we can gain insights about the type of reasoning processes and interpretation mechanisms of the parties involved.

This leads to some questions:

- is our thinking constrained by our language?
- is our perception constrained by our language?
- Why do people misunderstand each other when using the same language?
- When are these misunderstandings cross-cultural?
- What are the implications of the knowledge of these facts for classroom practice?

I will try to answer these questions using the situations presented in section 3, taking into consideration the speech events in which the conversations occur, and I'll try to support my views with basis on Bou-French's transdisciplinary perspective. Sperber and Wilson's (1995) Theory of Relevance will be used as a foundation for the analyses. I want to make clear that the interpretations of the speaker's utterances are my own, and I take whatever responsibility for them. In the conclusion section, I will try to explain my perception of the implications of this knowledge to both teachers and learners.

## 2 Some issues on Misunderstandings – The Relevance Theory and other views

As already mentioned, misunderstandings are part of human communication. Sperber and Wilson (1995) offer an ostensive – inferential model stating that understanding is not a feature of communication, as when we communicate, we can not replicate our thoughts or emotions, but we use a creative model for transforming and interpreting what is being conveyed. The authors claim that we are always reconstructing similar thoughts. Sperber and Wilson's influential theory presents the human mind as designed to extract relevance from the environment and to offer it to others through language (Dessalles, 1998). Relevance is defined as a property of stimuli that allows us to draw inferences for a low cognitive cost. This view allows us to choose to utter messages that trigger rich and costless inferences in the addressee's mind.

Sperber and Wilson (hereforth S&W) state that if communicators wish to convey a representation, they have to offer evidence of their thoughts – they call it ostensive behavior – and the audience make inferences as to what was intended from the evidence given. Therefore, S&W claim that understanding cannot be taken for

granted, as both communicator's intentions and the audience's reasoning need to be "synchronized", and as we all know, this is not always the case. The Relevance Theory claims that what distinguishes verbal communication from other types of communication is that speakers actively help their listeners to understand their intended messages. However, the linguistically encoded form of the utterance is only a starting point to infer speaker's meaning. According to S&W, the processes in comprehension are:

1. obtaining a logical form by decoding the linguistically encoded meaning;
2. recovering explicatures through inferential processes of disambiguation, sense and reference assignment and enrichment of the logical form;
3. recovering of implicatures;
4. selecting appropriate contextual assumptions to process new information
5. achieving relevance.

This inferential process suggested by S&W plays an important role in research on human communication.

Brown (1995) also suggests that interpretation is dynamic, and as we input information, we rectify, modify or reject it, reaching new ones.

According to Bou-French (2002), in dialogical interpretation the pair speaker-hearer must not be considered equivalent to the pair communicator-interpreter. "Communicators primarily speak but also interpret the hearer's reactions and the interpreter primarily understands but also produces short messages that guide the communicator's contribution".

Dessalles (1996) goes one step further, describing relevance as constituting the core of our linguistics competence. Argues that relevance and irrelevance are decided on the basis of formal properties that are present or absent in the situation made manifest by the utterance. While S&W use inferences to define relevance, Dessalles considers that inferences are guided by relevance.

We could not forget to mention Paul Grice, (1967) who introduced the modern concept of meaning, with his maxims of conversation. In Grice's first attempt to describe Meaning, the researcher argues that it must be possible to explain the meaning of an utterance as what their users want to say (or mean) by that utterance in a certain occasion. This concept was decisive for all work on Pragmatics. Communication, in its wide complexity, depends on Pragmatics in these aspects.

### 3 Pragmatic Inferencing

In the history of language philosophy, we can find a great number of researchers and theories that deal with Pragmatics. Frege (1892) seems to have been one of the first to detect the problem of presupposition related to context. He constructed a theory in an article called *Meaning and Reference*. Frege tried to show how a word is connected to something. According to Frege, the meaning is the way that takes us from a linguistic expression to reference. Meaning is the route which connects the name to the object. For Frege, what is in our minds is the representation. The name only expresses the properties. We must assume that the properties of objects is something objective; otherwise the relationship would be all mental and we would fall into the absolute subjectivism. Meaning, for Frege, is what connects language to reality. Morris (1938) established that pragmatics would be the official field of semiotics which would study the relation between the signs and their users. Austin (1962) produced his 'Speech Acts', which Searle (1969) improved and turned into a major theory.

It was Grice (1967/1975), who constructed the strongest theory of pragmatics, introducing constructs such as the Cooperation Principle and Conversation Maxims and concepts such as inferencing. In a series of influential and controversial papers (Grice 1957, 1968, 1969), Grice argued that the meaning of a word in general is a derivative function of what speakers mean by that word when uttering it in different moments. It is only fair to say that Grice's work has had much impact on modern work about language. His theory has become important due to a number of sources, which are summarized below:

- (a) implicature is a sample of the nature and power of pragmatic explanations of linguistic phenomena;
- (b) pragmatic inferencing lies outside the organization of language;
- (c) it provides explicit account of how it is possible to mean more than what is actually said.

Different interpretive strategies offer different possibilities for interpreters to deal with potential miscommunication, as we shall see in the analysis section.

### 4 Some Eclectic Analyses

#### *Sample dialogue 1*

*At the dentist's office (data obtained from Lauren Todaro)*

*L – I have a couple of questions to ask. It's about my insurance. I have this brochure that tells me the root canal is going to be \$160,00.*

*Please clarify me on that.*

*Receptionist – Ha! That must be really outdated, because I don't know anyone who does a root canal for \$160,00.*

*You are mistaken.*

*L – How much is a root canal?*

*So tell me what is price is nowadays.*

*Receptionist – Seven hundred dollars.*

*This is how expensive it is.*

*L – Well, it says right here that I pay \$160,00.*

*That is how much I can pay.*

*Receptionist – Oh, I see what you mean. You didn't actually expect that the root canal was only \$160,00, you meant that was the portion that you expect to pay.*

*Now I got it.*

*L – That's right!*

*Yes!*

*Receptionist – Oh, OK. That's right. You're right.*

When we assume that the addressees share the same background knowledge, we tend to be more direct and objective. If our assumptions are wrong, then that is when misunderstandings arise. I believe that's what happened in this interaction, and the 'hotspot' is when Lauren starts telling the receptionist that she had doubts about her insurance, but she never really asked anything, she just repeats what was written on the brochure. The message the receptionist received was "how much is a root canal?", while the actual question was "I have insurance, and it says here that I only have to pay \$160,00. Is that correct?". I believe the fault is the speaker's, as she violates Grice's (1967) maxims of quantity and manner. In other words, she is not being as informative or objective as much as she should be. It is only when Lauren utters "it says here that I pay \$160,00" that the message became clear, and both participants started sharing the same 'frame' (Gumperz and Tannen, 1978).

Additionally, if we read 'in between the lines' (or even my personal interpretation of the utterances) we can always say there is a metamessage implied in all conversations (see conclusion for more details). In this dialogue, there are strong intentional con-

straints on both participants' sides. Dessalles claims that this relevance constraint is part of our pragmatic competence. He goes on saying that the competence that allows us to utter relevant arguments in conversation is also what allows us to perform rational thinking. There are two principles which are at work both in what can be observed from spontaneous use of language and in the functioning of the central system: 1) detect some problematicity; 2) try to get out of it. Dessalles states that these two principles are constitutive of our pragmatic competence and guide our thinking.

#### *Sample dialogue 2*

*(this following data is from a movie with Meryl Streep, who plays the role of a woman who wants to adopt a baby. This is an excerpt from the telephone conversation between Meryl and the surrogate mother).*

*M - How's your pregnancy?*

*I want to know if you're healthy. If I am to adopt your baby.*

*SM - Fine, three, four and a half months.*

*If I am fine after the first months, it all indicates we're healthy.*

*M - Oh, great. Thanks for calling.*

*I am relieved and I appreciate the fact that you called to let me know about it.*

*SM - Are you calling it off?*

*Does it mean you are canceling the deal and hanging up?*

*M - No, no! Tell me about you. Tell me about your family.*

*No. I just thanked you. I need to know more.*

This dialogue is a typical example of how Hymes describes the term *speech event* – activities which are governed by norms for the use of speech. There are some certain rules for conversations, just like there are rules for other activities such as sermons, lectures, meetings, etc. Participants always have a set of unspoken agreement of their assumptions, and there are strategies we all use when participating in conversations. In the case of this particular dialogue, the sentence used by Meryl is commonly known as a closing of a dialogue, and she inadvertently used in the middle of the conversation. This caused a small misunderstanding, which was "corrected" by the surrogate mother's objective question "are you calling it off?". By explicitly stating her doubt, she had the chance to clarify what had gone wrong.

## 5 Conclusions

According to Richards (1980), conversation is related to what we think language is. It is usually described as a system of verbal communication, with rules which function at different levels of phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. It would be very easy if teachers taught their students these aspects, and this ensured communicative competence. Developing conversational skills involves being able to decodify, infer and behave according to each society's rules. Everytime we don't observe the norms of the target language culture, we run the risk of being misinterpreted. It is crucial, therefore, that teachers give opportunities for their students to experiment with situations which will enable them to discover that the conventions associated with speech acts in the different cultures may suffer variations.

As conversational competence is closely related to the way we present ourselves, students who transfer some L1 features into the TL structure may suffer more serious consequences that just errors at the levels of syntax, or phonology. Thus, when teaching speaking skills, teachers should offer tasks which aim at developing their strategies of interaction. It is also the teachers' role to focus on the message the learners are trying to convey, rather than on the form. If teachers are to develop learners' communicative competence (the knowledge of the cognitive processes and strategies in communication), then we have to argue in favor of the teaching and incorporation of pragmatics in textbook texts and class activities. Pragmatics plays a crucial role because it shows that the interpretation of meaning goes beyond that of knowing the literal translation of a word. Teachers play an important role guiding learners and conducting their thought processes in order to learn to capture what is not explicitly stated. According to Quinteiro Pires (2000) the teachers are, first of all, provided with a range of stimuli from which to choose: there is a continuum rather than a dividing line ranging from making their information strongly explicit, like translating literally first language meanings into second language forms to leaving meaning implied for learners to infer. By using only the translation method the teacher will be limited to the coding-decoding mode, therefore not yielding effective results on second language communication, as the teachers will be hindering both the possibility of interaction in the target

language as well as the exposition to authentic and naturalistic target language input. One of the teachers' roles is to make explicit the inferential processes to learners. For example, everyone has his/her own choice of style. Speakers must make some assumptions about the hearers' cognitive abilities and contextual resources, which will necessarily be reflected in the way they communicate, and in particular in what they choose to make explicit and what to leave implicit. One important aspect to comment here is the fact that inferencing is a process performing naturally in the native speaker. The role of the inferential process is automatic in L1, whereas in L2 it must be developed. In L2 teaching, what seems to attract writers and teachers is the lexical, formal structure of the language. The second and deeper layer, is simply overlooked. That is why learners have difficulty in understanding idiomatic expressions and jokes (among other things), as they require knowledge that goes beyond language: inferencing.

Quinteiro Pires argues that the teacher may use a similar code model of classroom communication but *in the target language*. She recognizes, however, that explaining vocabulary and grammar to learners using the target language is not enough for learners to access further inferential processes, which in turn, could also encourage spontaneous classroom interaction.

### 5.1 *Linguistics and Language Teaching*

Chomsky (In Allen and van Buren, 1971) has argued that language teachers must keep themselves informed of progress and discussions, and of the efforts of linguists and psychologists to approach the problems of language teaching from a principled point of view. We are trying to achieve a level of theoretical understanding that might enable it to support 'a technology of language teaching'.

Widdowson (1990) claims that the dangers of disregarding, by ignorance or design, the essentially conditional nature of abstract models and making data fit into preconceived categories are well attested in the theoretical domain. The same dangers appear in the practical domain; there are countless classrooms where teaching is confined to the transmission of textbook material rather than its exploitation for the negotiation of appropriate activities for learning. The relationship between theory and the

way language is actualized as behavior in contexts of use is analogous to the relationship between a pedagogic theory of language learning, the devising of teaching materials based upon it, and the way language is most actualized for learning in the classroom. The relationship is a pragmatic one in both cases: the connection between the ideal and the real needs to be established by mediation (p. 31).

The relationship between use and learning differs in respect to first and second language situations. In second language acquisition, learners have already been socialized into the schematic knowledge associated with their mother tongue. When students confront uses of foreign language, their natural inclination is to interpret them with reference to this established association, and rely on the foreign language as 'economically' as possible. They will invoke as much systemic knowledge of this language as it is necessary, and no more, using both first and second languages tactically as a source of clues to meaning, while taking bearings on their schematic knowledge. Up to today there are two basic pedagogical paradigms in language teaching; one focusing on meaning as transmitted by the medium of the language, concentrating on devising syllabuses of preplanned schemes of work based on text control, where students are gradually introduced to chunks of meaning; the other focuses on methodology, the instigation of classroom activity, allowing learners to manipulate and get more exposure to language. The latter view is the one I have been advocating throughout this article: the achievement of meaning by pragmatic mediation of the language user. Work in second language acquisition has suggested that it is the creative exploitation of language to achieve purposeful outcomes which generates the learning process itself. This view is obviously connected to more liberal ideas, allowing for discovery and self-expression, emphasizing initiative and autonomy of learning rather than the authority of teaching.

The traditional approaches to language teaching have an asymmetric relationship teacher-student. Students must be trained to *think*, as the place of the inferential process has shifted – the code is not central anymore, but it is an instrument of inference. Thinking about the language automatically (as opposed to structurally) must be the aim, learners must realize that they must think about the communicative act, what the speakers' intentions are.

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes it is not possible for teachers and material writers to use authentic texts, so they make adaptations to the learners' level and/or focus of the lessons. These adapted texts are said to have a naturalistic input for learners.

At this point, we can address Noam Chomsky's lesson on analyzing conversational competence – what he left us with is a method: behind any behavioral performance, try to discover an underlying competence, a simple procedure that accounts for the apparent complexity of the performance.

Chomsky claims we have an innate linguistic competence. Additionally to that, we can argue that this competence is pragmatic in nature, which is universal, and allows us to use language in concrete situations, and to utter relevant arguments.

Teaching the culture of the target language is as crucial as teaching its structure. If teachers offer activities which present an interdependence among the pragmatic, linguistic and social factors, learners will be able to realize their speech acts in the TL both effectively and appropriately.

Problematicity (as stated by Dessalles as the sensitivity to improbable, paradoxical or (un) desirable stimuli) lies at the core of our pragmatic competence. Another claim is that pragmatic competence is what best defines the rational side of mind. If we lacked this competence, we would be unable to utter relevant arguments or thoughts.

Misunderstanding is an ordinary aspect of human understanding and interaction. Communication is a complex phenomena in which cognitive, social, discursive and affective issues are part. As Bou-French argues, by applying different explanatory frameworks to the analysis of several sequences of misunderstanding and repair we can explain the richness and complexity of understanding and misunderstanding in discourse.

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