

# Miscommunication in post-Gricean pragmatics: The utterance-meaning mismatch

Chi-Hé Elder

University of East Anglia

AMPRA

Indiana University

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## 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)

- Meaning arises through the speaker having a specific **meaning intention**
  - Successful communication relies on hearers inferring speakers' intended meanings
  - Meaning<sub>NN</sub> = what is said + what is implicated
- ▶ What is 'what is said'?

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

## Example

Every bottle **on the table** is empty

- 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 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**

Let's change the assumptions...

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

- ▶ 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 imperfect communication

## 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.

(Savva 2016)

## Possible completions

- You get twenty-five points in this round
- Your word is worth twenty-five points
- I'm writing down twenty-five point for you
- ...



## 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

- 1 Is that sort of official or... [perhaps I shouldn't have asked?]
- 2 Is that sort of official or... [perhaps 'being official' is not relevant in this situation?]
- 3 Is that sort of official or... [do we have to register it somewhere?] (when clearly intended as exclusive)
- 4 Is that sort of official or... [is this in the contract?] (when clearly intended as inclusive)

(Jaszczolt et al. 2016: 258)

“When the disjunction is open-ended, the speaker allows the addressee some freedom of choice concerning the types and the range of possible completions” (Jaszczolt et al. 2016: 259)

## 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)

## 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

Between Clark and a Waitress

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)

- ▶ A case of unproblematic miscommunication

- On the post-Gricean account, meanings 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)
- Similarly, theorising about Model Speakers gets around the problem in virtue of the fact that Model Speakers would have determinate intentions!
- 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**
- ▶ But if meanings are co-constructed, it is not always easy to attribute meanings to specific utterances

- Speakers do not always have determinate intentions to be recognised
- Meanings cannot always be attributed to a specific utterance

- ★ The form-meaning mismatch is well attested in ordinary discourse
- ★ We now also have to consider that there is an **utterance-meaning mismatch**

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)

“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)

- 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”

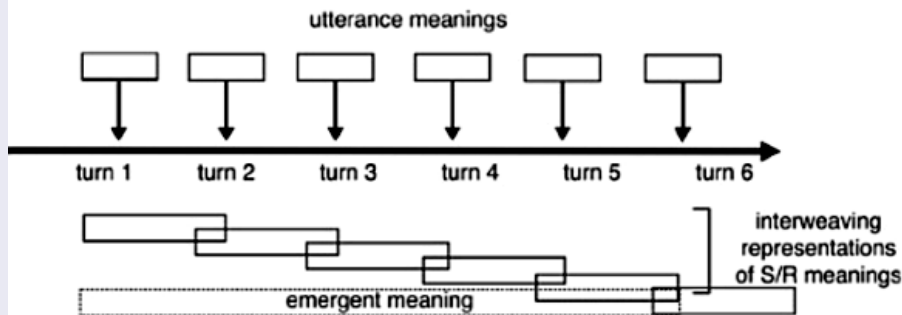
(Schegloff et al. 1996: 40)

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



- 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)



- Savva (2016) argues that for subsentential speech, all viable completions subsume an 'informationally 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]

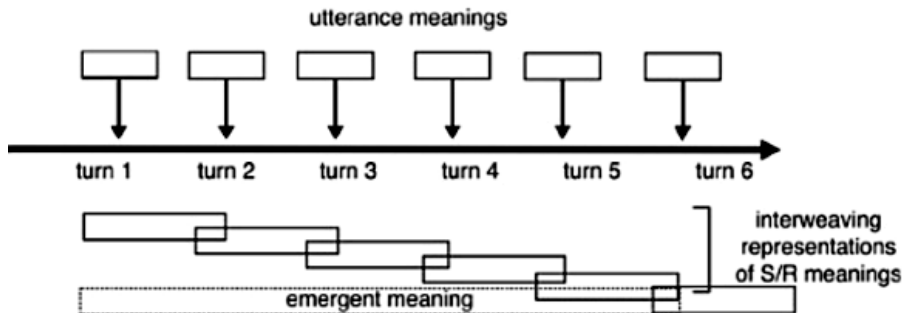
A: Twenty-five.

- 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.
- 
- The basic proposition communicated is 'word  $x = 25$  points'

- Such a basic proposition departs from the standard contextualist aim of enriching the logical form to obtain a determinate proposition
- Note also that this is not the same thing as a basic proposition in a semantic minimalist sense
- 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')

- 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

- 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

- 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
- But often such miscommunications are trivial enough that speakers do not draw attention to them (e.g. Clark's 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 In preparation)

★ 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

- ▶ Only a radical contextualist account of meaning can adequately explain the form-meaning mismatch in ordinary discourse
- ▶ However, a theory 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'



- ▶ In seriously aiming to identify the general mechanisms of language comprehension, we have to depart from the intention=inference model of meaning
  - ▶ A formal theory of meaning does not need to – and should not – be committed to the idea that speakers have determinate intentions
  - ▶ Nor need it ignore the fact that miscommunication in interaction is rife, but not necessarily to the detriment of information flow
- ★ We need to shift the focus of meaning-theorising to acknowledging and understanding the **utterance-meaning mismatch**

- [c.elder@uea.ac.uk](mailto:c.elder@uea.ac.uk)
- [www.chiheelder.com](http://www.chiheelder.com)
- [uea.academia.edu/chiheelder](http://uea.academia.edu/chiheelder)

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