

# When implicatures fail: Miscommunication in post-Gricean pragmatics

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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)

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

## Working definition

**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

## 1 **From Grice to the status quo**

(Post-)Gricean assumptions about 'successful communication' do not adequately describe what is going on in actual communication

## 2 **Problematic examples**

An adequate theory of meaning has to account for cases of 'imperfect communication'

## 3 **What is said: A proposal**

An attempt to account for such imperfect communication

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'?

- 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)

- ▶ Sometimes the implicature is the speaker's main, intended meaning
- ▶ 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)

- Speakers have a multitude of communicative intentions per communicative act
  - Speakers can have 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)
- ▶ There are different ways in which a hearer can recognise/misread a speaker's communicative intention



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

# 1. Indeterminate meanings

## Example

A: And Karen and Ian want to buy her half of the mortgage out, so they'll have too much mortgage

B: Yeah...it really is...

A: I know. With Ian only a tennis coach

B: Well even now. I mean, **if he has good rates, good bank rates, and he's got a steady job...**

A: That's true.

(ICE-GB: S1A-036, 035; Elder & Savva (forthcoming))

① ...he could afford to pay the mortgage

② ...he shouldn't worry about it

③ ...I think he'll be okay

- ▶ 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
- ▶ Clarification/repair would be costly and unnecessary

## 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

W: And what would you like to drink?

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

W: That was Earl Grey?

C: Right.

### 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)

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

#### Example

Telephone conversation

G: ...d'ju see me pull up?=  
S: =.hhh No:. I w'z trying you all day.=en the line w'z busy fer like hours.

G: Ohh:::::, ohh:::::, hhhhh We::ll, hhh I'm go'nna c'm over in a little while help yer brother ou:t

S: Goo[:d

G: [.hh Cus I know he needs some he::lp,

S: .hh Ye:ah. Yes he'd mention'that tihday.=

G: =Mm hm.=

S: =.hh Uh:m, .tlk .hhh Who wih yih ta:lking to.

(Heritage 1990/1991: 317)

“I w’z trying you all day.=en the line w’z busy fer like hours”

- 1 The implicature ‘who were you talking to?’ fails, reinforced later with “Who wih yih ta:lking to”
- 2 G questions the motivation for the call with ‘d’ju see me pull up?’, to which S offers an explanation for the call now

(Heritage 1990/1991; Haugh 2008)

- ▶ Assuming interpretation 1, there was a miscommunication when the main intended implicature was not acknowledged
- ▶ But as analysts, which interpretation do we go with?

### 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)

- ▶ Speaker has a determinate meaning intention
- ▶ Hearer misconstrues the intention without speaker awareness
- ▶ Problematic if miscommunication is unnoticed
- ▶ Cost of repair is presumably low enough that once the miscommunication is noticed, repair would be expected

### Example

M: Got the keys (ambiguous intonation)

...

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" *(Friends S01E09)*

- ▶ Speaker may or may not have a determinate meaning in mind
- ▶ Interlocutors disagree on the speaker's communicative intention
- ▶ Speaker and hearer have different beliefs about 'what is said'



- 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 (cf. implicatures)
- Sometimes a speaker may 'misutter'; but as long as the interlocutor recovered the intended message, there is no problem to communication—or the theory
- But information flow isn't always this simple: sometimes main messages aren't recovered, but we wouldn't always call these cases 'communication breakdown'

- ★ Speaker may not have a determinate meaning in mind
  - ★ Speaker may have a determinate meaning in mind, but there is a problem with production (lexical, phonetic, misreferring, ...)
  - ★ Speaker may or may not have a determinate meaning in mind, but interlocutors have differences in pragmatic expectations (situation of discourse, intended implicature/speech act, politeness, relevance, ...)
  - ★ Interlocutors may have radically different conceptions of 'what is said'
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- ▶ To identify where misunderstandings arise, we can defer to the form of the utterance as the **publicly available information**, which interacts with context to generate 'what is said'

## 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.

- 1 You get twenty-five points in this round
  - 2 Your word is worth twenty-five points
  - 3 I'm writing down twenty-five points for you
- Savva (2017) 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'

- Such a basic proposition departs from the standard contextualist aim of enriching the logical form to obtain a determinate proposition
- Context interacts with the words 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')

- 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)
- The 'basic proposition' view of utterance meanings both allows speakers to communicate indeterminate propositions, and highlights where speakers' determinate intentions are not successfully recovered

- Miscommunication arises when the basic proposition does not correspond to the hearer's understanding—it is never grounded
  - ▶ a speaker may mis-communicate
  - ▶ a hearer may mishear
  - ▶ a hearer may misunderstand – implicatures may fail to go through
- But often such miscommunications are trivial enough that speakers do not draw attention to them (e.g. the Earl Grey case)
- In fact, miscommunication can lead to an enriched common ground, as serve as a vital component of progressing information flow (cf. Elder & Beaver 2017)

★ It is when a speaker and hearer have **radically** different views of 'what is said' that miscommunication is a problem to communication, as no mutually accepted meanings are grounded

- ▶ Miscommunication is a phenomenon that can contribute to the process of communication
- ▶ 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'

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