Misunderstanding

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/benjamin_bailey/58/
1 Introduction

A degree of intersubjective understanding is the foundation of social life. It represents a link between conscious minds in distinct bodies, and it is implicit in the achievement of coordinated social action and the constitution of larger social structures and institutions. Language, our primary symbolic medium, is intertwined with the achievement of understanding, and language-in-use is itself an exemplar of coordinated social action.

The fact that we regularly coordinate social action in our daily lives can make understanding seem transparent and a natural condition. It is when we misunderstand each other – when we encounter “problems” in interaction or undesirable consequences of interactions – that we examine the process of understanding. Examining misunderstanding can thus help to illuminate processes of understanding by rescuing them from an underanalyzed naturalness.

As a marked form – the negation of the affirmative “understanding” – misunderstanding points to an implicit ideology of communication: that to “understand” is normal, and to “misunderstand” represents a breakdown or failure of something that is natural. The positive value assigned to understanding veils the conflict, ambiguity, and uncertainty that are part-and-parcel of social and communicative worlds. This ideology backgrounds the material and political conflicts that are inherent in a socially and economically stratified world, serving the interests of those who would portray the status quo as equitable and harmonious.

While folk notions of communication and understanding center on referential, or propositional, meanings, misunderstandings at this level are relatively easily recognized as such and are commonly repaired by interlocutors. In the following segment, for example, interlocutors quickly attend to a problematic reference to A’s employer, and clarify it:

(1) (adapted from Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977: 368):
A: Well I’m working through the Amfat Corporation.
B: The who?
A: Amfah Corporation. T’s a holding company.
B: Oh.

The very frequency and distinctive structure of such everyday conversational repair procedures highlights our ability to achieve a degree of intersubjective understanding (Schegloff 1992). Misunderstandings along more pragmatic dimensions of communication, in contrast, are often more persistent, confounding, and linked to debilitated social relationships.

Analysis of inter-group misunderstanding provides a window onto the workings of larger-scale social processes and relationships. Notions of understanding are commonly seen as undergirding social commonality, i.e. common social identities, while misunderstanding is seen as both a cause and an emblem of social difference. By looking at misunderstandings in interactions across boundaries of apparent social difference (e.g. race or culture) we can see some of the ways in which power, culture, and social identities are negotiated through talk and social interaction.

In this chapter, I first address questions of what it means to understand, highlighting the impossibility of complete intersubjectivity and reviewing communicative practices through which a degree of intersubjective understanding is constituted. I then review several non-referential levels of meaning and activity in talk and interaction that are central to pragmatic notions of understanding. Everyday communicative behavior includes multiple levels and dimensions of meaning-making and interpretation, which means that understanding and misunderstanding are neither monolithic nor entirely discrete. Finally I consider how “misunderstanding” or “miscommunication” has been addressed in two strands of research in inter-cultural and inter-gender communication. In the first of these strands of research, misunderstandings are explained as communicative phenomena resulting from cultural and linguistic differences between groups. In the second of these traditions, misunderstandings are seen as local, linguistic enactments of larger-scale, pre-existing conflicts. In both types of analysis, communicative behavior at the local level is linked to social relationships and structure at a larger level, making such analyses of particular interest for students of culture and communication.

2 UNDERSTANDING

Everyday notions of understanding assume that conscious minds that exist in separate bodies can experience an intersubjective link. At the most fundamental level, “understanding” and “misunderstanding” are about the nature of this intersubjective connection. To what extent can two minds share a common perspective, idea, experience, or emotion? The notion of an intersubjective link can be difficult to reconcile with the individualist theories of person and mind that are common in Western cultures. The individualist perspective privileges the privacy, inviolability, and continuity of the individual’s mind, conditions which are at odds with the idea of intersubjective understandings.

Language is popularly conceptualized as a symbolic means of overcoming this isolation and linking individual minds, and in many ways it serves this function.
The human capacity for the use of signs that bear arbitrary, conventional connections to meanings enables our communicative interactions ranging from using sign language, to reading, to verbal talk. Words, for example, are a powerful reference system for invoking aspects of the world. The arbitrary nature of the relationship between a string of phonemes, e.g. /kæt/ ‘cat’, and a mental representation of an entity in the world makes language an extremely compact, convenient, and flexible semiotic system. This referential, or propositional, character of language has long been the subject of attention of formal linguists (e.g. Lyons 1977) and of philosophers interested in logic and truth-values.

The referential power of language and our faculty for its use (Chomsky 1977; Pinker 1994) are not sufficient, in and of themselves, to ensure intersubjective understandings, however. What a given person understands by the word “cat,” for example, may be very different from what another person understands by it. A veterinary surgeon, a child keeping a cat as a pet, the bird-loving neighbor of cats, and a pet shop owner may all have different understandings of “cat.” Even for a single actor, the meaning of “cat” will vary across contexts according to his/her practical purposes in using the term; for example, “Did you feed the cat?” versus “Cats are mammals” (cf. Schutz 1962: 21).

These differences in perspective on “cat” are a result of the inherently individual, subjective perception and structuring of the world. From a phenomenological perspective, our mental worlds are not reflections of an independently existing reality, but are constituted through our individual acts of consciousness (Husserl 1970 [1901]). Given individual and situational differences in subjective structuring and experiencing of the world, no two individuals share identical perspectives or understanding of any subjectively constituted phenomenon, including linguistic signs. Communication via linguistic and other signs can thus only approximate an absolute form of understanding. While the word “cat,” for example, may provoke similar constitutive acts of consciousness in two individuals, it will not provoke identical ones:

‘Intended meaning’ is therefore essentially subjective and is in principle confined to the self-interpretation of the person who lives through the experience to be interpreted. Constituted as it is within the unique stream of consciousness of each individual, it is essentially inaccessible to every other individual. (Schutz 1967 [1932]: 99)

Intersubjectivity, as an ideal form of understanding, in which subjective experiences are held in common, is impossible. Thus, even when participants in an interaction – and analytical observers of that interaction – find no evidence of “misunderstanding,” the understandings that do occur are necessarily incomplete or partial.

While intersubjective understanding is impossible as an ideal form, we know that we constantly and successfully approximate understanding as we lead our lives. We greet our neighbors, talk to our bosses, and give advice to friends. Following Husserl (1970 [1901]) and Schutz (1967), Garfinkel (1967) and ethnomethodologically oriented researchers have conceptualized intersubjectivity and understanding precisely in terms of such everyday, practical action. Approaching intersubjectivity in terms of social activity helps to avoid the theoretical impasse posed by the impossibility of intersubjectivity as an ideal type. From this ethnomethodological perspective,
the goal of the researcher is to explore the means by which interlocutors coordinate the social actions of which intersubjectivity is a characteristic. Thus, understanding is not an independent state that precedes and affords coordinated social action, but rather a dimension of coordinated social action itself: “The appropriate image of a common understanding is therefore an operation rather than a common intersection of overlapping sets” (Garfinkel 1967: 30). Thus, understanding is not a state or condition in which minds have common content – or pass information back and forth, as in a conduit metaphor (Reddy 1979) for communication – but rather a contingent dimension of particular communicative activities and procedures.

Conversation analysts (see Goodwin and Heritage 1990 for a review) have approached everyday conversation as just such a form of coordinated social action. In analyzing the structures and patterns of this coordinated action, they identify a structural basis of intersubjectivity. In their seminal piece on turn-taking in everyday conversation, for example, Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) identify turns as a fundamental unit of social interaction and coordinated social activity. Because everyday talk proceeds on a turn-by-turn basis, interactions are built up incrementally, sequentially, and interactionally.

This turn-by-turn process of building a conversation can be likened to individuals jointly building a column of wooden blocks. The building of the column is incremental (with blocks as units) and sequential, with blocks higher in the column placed after those that are lower in the column. The building of the column is also necessarily interactional, in that each person’s placement of a block is made with reference to previously placed blocks, and each newly placed block simultaneously shapes future block placements.

Building a conversation, like building a tower of blocks, is a sequential, interactional project, in which turns at talk are doubly contextual (Heritage 1984: 242). Each turn at talk depends for its interpretation on the context created by prior utterances, while at the same time each utterance creates a new context in which subsequent turns and social action will be understood.

The orientation of turns to immediately prior ones is crucial to achieving a degree of intersubjectivity, because it is a means for interlocutors to display incremental understandings of ongoing talk. In the following sequence, for example, a mother’s turn displays her understanding of her child’s initial turn as a summons to attract her attention:

(2) (adapted from Atkinson and Drew 1979: 46)

Child: Mummy
Mother: Yes dear.
Child: I want a cloth to clean the windows.

The child’s second turn (‘‘I want a cloth . . .’’) similarly displays an implicit understanding of the mother’s immediately preceding turn: by proceeding with a request, the child treats the mother’s turn as a satisfactory response to the child’s initial summons. There is thus a continuously updated, and incremental, display of understandings at each turn in the conversation (Heritage and Atkinson 1984: 11). It is through the step-by-step structure of turns that interlocutors negotiate and approximate common understandings of the activities in which they are engaged.
The incremental and interactional structuring of conversation provides participants with regular opportunities to repair or head-off potential misunderstandings (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977). Repair includes a range of techniques used by both parties in interaction to resolve what they perceive as some problematic aspect of the talk. This repair can be initiated by speaker or hearer, and the repair itself, for example the correction of a name on the repetition of a phrase, can be executed by either the speaker or a hearer of the problematic bit of talk.

In the following bit of talk, for example, Louise uses her turn to draw attention to a potentially problematic aspect of Ken’s first turn, his use of the word “selling.” Ken then uses his subsequent turn, the third in the segment, to repair the problem to which Louise had alluded:

(3) (adapted from Jefferson 1987: 86)

Ken: Hey, the first time they stopped me from selling cigarettes was this morning.

Louise: From selling cigarettes?

Ken: Or buying cigarettes.

The turn-by-turn structuring of talk, in which turns both display interpretations of prior turns and project future ones, affords this interactive, joint construction of meanings. This example also points to the sociocultural matrix of knowledge and practices of which social interaction is a part. Although Ken’s initial turn is well-formed grammatically and semantically, Louise finds the proposition that it expresses problematic. Louise’s initiation of repair is based not on linguistic knowledge as such, but on social knowledge: of Ken, of buying and selling cigarettes, and/or of the activities in which this utterance is produced. Paradoxically, Louise appears to have “understood” a meaning of Ken’s initial utterance that was directly contrary to the conventional meaning of the words that he was using. It is only through such prior, sociocultural understanding that Louise could initiate repair on the phrase “from selling cigarettes.” At the same time, however, this sociocultural knowledge (that Ken meant “buying”) does not obviate the need for a repair procedure. In this case, sociocultural knowledge is activated and a local conversational repair procedure is initiated, which allows interlocutors to achieve a joint construction of meaning and understanding.

Even when a turn at talk is not explicitly problematic, interlocutors do repair-like work to display and confirm understandings of their ongoing talk. In the following segment, Marcia explains to her husband that her son cannot drive home because the top of his (convertible) car was “ripped off.” The phrase “ripped off” could mean “stolen” or it could refer to the kind of tearing that might happen to a convertible car’s fabric top. All three of the turns in this sequence display possible efforts to disambiguate the phrase “ripped off” and to thereby achieve a common understanding.

(4) (adapted from Schegloff 1992: 1302)

Marcia: Because the top was ripped off of his car, which is to say somebody helped themselves.
Tony: Stolen.
Marcia: Stolen. Right out in front of my house.

In her first turn, Marcia clarifies her use of “ripped off” by specifying “somebody helped themselves,” which helps make clear that the top of the car wasn’t torn off by some accident. In his turn, Tony displays an even more specific candidate understanding (“Stolen”) of Marcia’s turn, in repair-like form, and in her final turn, Marcia confirms this candidate understanding (“Stolen. Right out . . .”). The task of achieving a degree of understanding is an omnipresent one, and interlocutors regularly do work to make it possible, even in the absence of apparent errors or misunderstandings.

In examples (3) and (4), aspects of new information that speakers were presenting were treated as potentially problematic: Ken’s use of “selling” and Marcia’s use of the ambiguous “ripped off.” As described above, however, turns at talk not only present new information and project future action, they also display understandings of prior turns. Repair can also thus be directed at the dimension of a turn that displays a potentially problematic understanding of a prior turn.

Such initiation of repair on displays of (potential) misunderstanding typically occurs in the turn immediately following the problematic display (Schegloff 1992). In the following segment of interaction, for example, a caller to a radio show expresses fear about driving over a bridge. Repair is initiated by the radio host in the fourth turn, based on a potentially problematic display of understanding in the third turn.

(5) (adapted from Schegloff 1987: 211)
Caller: I have fears of driving over a bridge. And seems I just can’t uh- if I ever have to
 cross a bridge, I just don’t (do the) trip at all.
Host: What are you afraid of?
Caller: I don’t know, see uh-
Host: Well, I mean wait a minute. What kind of fear is it? Are you afraid you’re going
to drive off the edge? Are you afraid that you’re going to get hit while you’re on
it?
Caller: Off the edge or something.

The radio host’s “What are you afraid of?” could be interpreted as either (a) a rhetorical question that is a reprimand for having irrational fears, or (b) a request for the details of the feeling of fear. When the caller’s response (“I don’t know . . .”) suggests that the question is interpreted as a reprimand, the host takes action (“wait a minute. What kind of fear is it? . . .”) to engender a different kind of sequence, one in which the caller will specify a type of fear.

Because interlocutors display their (mis)understandings of prior turns to each other on an ongoing, turn-by-turn basis, they have an opportunity at each turn to confirm or make problematic the understanding that has just been displayed. These built-in locations for self-righting in talk enable interlocutors to coordinate their talk and achieve a degree of intersubjective understanding. Paradoxically, talk that is treated by participants as containing (potential) misunderstandings clearly illustrates the self-righting processes in talk of which intersubjective understanding is a dimension.
3 Levels of (Mis)Understanding

The number of ambiguities associated with the notion of “understanding another person” becomes even greater when we bring in the question of understanding the signs he is using. On the one hand, what is understood is the sign itself, then again what the other person means by using this sign, and finally the significance of the fact that he is using the sign, here, now, and in this particular context. (Schutz 1967: 102)

Communicative behavior is inherently polysemous and multi-functional, and speakers engage in multiple activities, at multiple levels, as they speak (Goodwin 1981). In the above quote, Schutz suggests three levels at which understanding (and presumably misunderstanding) takes place. The first level, “the sign itself,” corresponds roughly to the referential meaning of language; the second level, what a “person means by using this sign,” is similar to the level of activity addressed by philosophers of language in speech act theory and related traditions; and the third level, “the significance of the fact that he is using the sign, here, now, and in this particular context,” links understanding to a broader range of sociocultural meanings and sociohistorical relations among people. In this section, I focus on the second of these levels of meaning or understanding, with some overlap into the third.

In the three examples of repair given above, interlocutors were oriented toward each other’s words – they displayed understanding of those words – but they were also oriented toward what their interlocutors were doing with words. In example (5), for example, the fundamental issue that needed clarifying was not the words used by the radio host, but the activity in which he was engaged. Was he (a) reprimanding, or (b) relatively sympathetically asking for details?

Such seeming disjuncture between the literal meanings of words or utterances, and what interlocutors treat them as doing, are not uncommon. Indirect requests, for example, regularly take the form of questions about a state of knowledge (“Do you know what time it is?”), but they are generally treated as requests for action (in this case, to tell the asker the time). This discrepancy between propositional meanings and interactional behavior suggests the need for units of analysis other than words. Philosophers, anthropologists, and sociologists have proposed overlapping ways of conceptualizing some of the utterance- and discourse-level activities in which speakers engage.

Philosopher John Austin (1962), in his theory of performatives, focused on the social action inherent in utterances. Austin argued that when we speak, we are not just describing, or reporting on, the world, we are also doing an activity. Thus when we say “Be careful!” we are not just talking about a pre-existing world, we are doing something, namely, warning a person. Thus, besides conventional meanings based on propositional content, our utterances have particular forces rooted in the activity (e.g. warnings) that they instantiate as well as potential wider social effects, depending on social circumstances (see also Searle 1969 for related speech act theory). Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein uses the metaphor of “language game,” which emphasizes the social situatedness of the activities in which we engage when we speak. The metaphor of game captures the sense of social rules and roles and unconscious practices that we follow in everyday talk and interaction, just as players in a game negotiate a playing field within a certain set of accepted rules or procedures.
In anthropology, Dell Hymes (1972: 56) defined a unit of analysis, the “speech event,” as “activities, or aspects of activities that are directly governed by rules or norms for the use of speech.” The speech event is a social unit, emphasizing that we do not just speak to describe the world but that we engage in social and cultural activities through speech. In conversation analysis, the units of analysis, such as turns and sequences, have been interactionally achieved activities, rather than words themselves. In analyses of misunderstandings in conversation analysis, it is difficulties in coordinating sequences, rather than understanding words, which is presented as the source of problems (Schegloff 1987; Whalen, Zimmerman, and Whalen 1988). Each of these analytical traditions has emphasized the activity(ies) inherent in talk and interaction, shifting attention from referential and purely ideational functions of language to the activities of human agents, and, to varying degrees, the sociocultural embeddedness of these activities.

As argued by Schutz in the above quote, the ambiguities inherent to signs become even greater when we consider what a person is doing with those signs, the communicative activities in which he/she is engaging. Sequences of interactional behavior do not have one, unambiguous, explicit meaning, and activities that are very similar in form can have very different meanings and implications. What differentiates a wink from a blink (Geertz 1973: 6)? How do we know if a person is engaging in a joking activity or a serious one? On what basis can we achieve mutual understanding of interactional activities if the form of disparate activities, such as winking and blinking, is essentially the same?

Several students of social interaction have emphasized that our communicative activities include a metacommunicative dimension that helps to disambiguate them. As we engage in talk and interaction, a dimension of our very talk comments upon itself, giving clues as to what activities are being done and how they should be interpreted. Framing/keying (Bateson 1972; Goffman 1974), footing (Goffman 1981), contextualization (Gumperz 1982a, 1992), and metapragmatics (Silverstein 1993) are closely overlapping ways of conceptualizing this metacommunicative dimension through which interlocutors mutually coordinate the conversational activities in which they are engaging.

John Gumperz (1982a, 1992), for example, argues that we communicate rapidly shifting communicative/interpretive frames through conventionalized surface forms, which he calls contextualization cues. These contextualization cues – “constellations of surface features of message form” – are “the means by which speakers signal and listeners interpret what the activity is, how semantic content is to be understood and how each sentence relates to what precedes or follows” (1982a: 131). These surface forms vary greatly, ranging from prosody, to code and lexical choice, from formulaic expressions or sequencing choices, to visual and gestural phenomena. They are united in a common, functional category by their use, commonly in constellations of multiple features, to instantiate particular frameworks in which inherently ambiguous communicative behavior can be interpreted to have more particular meanings. As described in the section below, contextualization cues have been a key construct in one tradition of explaining inter-group miscommunication and misunderstanding.
4 INTER-CULTURAL AND INTER-GENDER MISUNDERSTANDING

Among students of language and social life, research on misunderstanding, particularly under the rubric “miscommunication,” has focused largely on inter-cultural and male–female miscommunication and misunderstanding. In such research, the problematic communication is across lines of apparent social difference, and the misunderstandings are linked, sometimes causatively, to the poor quality of inter-group relations. This type of misunderstanding is thus different from those that are recognized and locally repaired by participants. In examples (3–5) of repair above, for example, the misunderstandings served to illustrate the structures by which intersubjective understandings were instantiated. Studies of inter-group miscommunication, in contrast, commonly focus on misunderstandings that (a) are not explicitly treated as misunderstandings as they occur, (b) are not successfully repaired, and (c) are seen as related to poor inter-group relations on a larger scale (cf. Banks, Ge, and Baker 1991: 105).

Examples of such inter-group miscommunication commonly include asynchronies and asymmetries, rather than explicitly referenced misunderstandings and repair procedures, and participants appear to have difficulties achieving satisfactory, joint activities. When one participant initiates an activity, for example making an assessment such as “It was so good” (Goodwin and Goodwin 1992: 166), the other participants may not respond with a turn that complements or builds on the initiated activity in an unmarked way.

In the following sequence, a Korean immigrant storekeeper in Los Angeles asks an African American customer who had just returned from Chicago about the weather in Chicago. When the customer emphasizes the cold of Chicago with considerable affect, including an exclamation, lateral headshakes, a potentially humorous anecdote, and laughter, the storeowner responds with a factual comment:

(6) (adapted from Bailey 1997: 340)
Owner: Is Chicago cold?
Customer: Uh! ((lateral headshakes) ) Man I got off the plane and walked out the airport I said ‘Oh shit’.
Customer: heh heh heh
Owner: ((no smile or laughter) ) I thought it’s gonna be nice spring season over there.

The customer repeatedly displays his affective stance toward the extreme cold of Chicago, which provides an opportunity for the storekeeper to engage in complementary displays, but the storekeeper does not do so. The two interlocutors demonstrably understand each other’s words, but they fail to construct a culturally appropriate joint activity of assessing. Over the course of this entire encounter, multiple instances of such exchanges initiated by the customer give the interaction a stilted, one-sided feeling.

Chick (1990: 227) likens the coordination of intra-cultural interactions to the synchrony of “ballroom dancing partners of long standing, confident in the mutual knowledge of the basic sequence of dance steps and of the signals by which they inform one another of changes in direction or tempo, moving in smooth harmony.”
Inter-cultural encounters, in contrast, are more like ballroom dances between strangers who “misinterpret one another’s signals, struggle to develop a sequence or theme, or establish a rhythm, quarrel over rights to lead, and, metaphorically speaking, trample one another’s toes.” It is thus the seeming inability to engage in coordinated discourse activities, rather than the occurrence of sequences that interlocutors explicitly treat as misunderstandings, which is characteristic of these encounters (cf. Erickson and Shultz 1982).

The combination of (a) problematic communicative interactions, (b) boundaries of apparent social difference, and (c) debilitated inter-group relationships make such misunderstandings particularly interesting to students of language and social processes. While agreeing on the empirical characteristics of such encounters and intergroup relations, analysts have differed in their explanations of causal relations. Communicative behavior is both reflective of social worlds and also constitutive of them. Because of this dual functioning of language, it can be difficult to determine whether particular social relations cause particular communicative patterns, or whether particular communicative patterns partially cause particular social relationships (Bailey 2000).

One tradition, associated with the work of Gumperz (1982a, 1982b) and his students, has emphasized the constitutive power of face-to-face interaction in the shaping of inter-group relations. In exploring the contingent details of face-to-face interaction such researchers have argued that problematic communicative interactions at the microlevel contribute to poor inter-group relations at the macrolevel. A second tradition, which emphasizes social inequality at the macrolevel, has interpreted the same data as simply reflections of pre-existing social conflicts (e.g. Park 1996). Asynchronous and stilted inter-group interactions are seen as local enactments of more long standing, structural, conflicts rooted in inequality, whether ethnic, racial, national, gender, etc. In simplified form, these two contrasting explanations for inter-group misunderstanding can be represented by “A” and “B,” respectively, in figure 17.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A.</strong></td>
<td>Macrosocial constellations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misunderstandings in face-to-face interaction based on cultural and linguistic differences</td>
<td>Mutual, negative stereotypes created; inter-group boundaries reinforced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior of individual social agents</td>
<td>Sociohistorical conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B.</strong></td>
<td>Microsocial behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macrosocial Constellations</td>
<td>Perceived lack of common interests; use of language to express disaffiliation and highlight pre-existing boundaries and power differentials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social hierarchies (e.g. gender or ethnicity)</td>
<td>Communicative behavior of individual social agents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 17.1** Directions of causality between microsocial behavior and inter-group relations
In this first tradition, Gumperz’s (1982a, 1992) seminal work on discourse strategies illustrated how sociocultural background shapes the moment-to-moment management of interaction and achievement of intersubjectivity. His use of audio recordings of inter-group interactions in conjunction with analyses by native consultants enabled him to link specific surface forms of discourse with broader communicative activities and interpretive patterns. When consultants from given social groups consistently provide a group-specific interpretation of behavior and cite group-specific surface linguistic bases for that interpretation, it provides evidence for socioculturally specific contextualization conventions. Thus, while two groups may “speak the same language,” i.e. share syntax, phonology, and vocabulary, they may differ in the ways they metacommunicatively define the moment-to-moment activities in which they are engaging.

According to Gumperz, cultural differences in contextualization conventions can undermine inter-group communication insidiously because individuals tend to be unconscious of this dimension of interaction (1982a: 131). The cues tend to be scalar rather than discrete in form, most are non-referential, and their meanings are a function of the context of their use. Pragmatic phenomena with these features are particularly difficult for individuals to consciously articulate and explicitly identify (Silverstein 2001). Gumperz (1982a: 173) reports, for example, how intonation affected interactions between South Asian immigrant cafeteria workers and Anglo-British workers at a British airport. When cafeteria workers asked employees if they wanted gravy, they said “Gravy” with a falling intonation contour rather than the rising one associated with Anglo-British question-asking. Because Anglo-British workers interpreted the falling intonation as contextualizing a statement (“This is gravy.”), they found the utterance “Gravy” (with falling intonation) redundant and rude. Neither British nor South Asian workers were able to articulate the role that intonation played in their problematic interactions until it was pointed out by outside researchers/trainers.

Because sociocultural differences in contextualization conventions are unconscious, they are not a readily available explanation to participants for breakdowns in communication or for stilted, asynchronous interactions. When a person recognizes the failure to achieve a synchronous interaction with another, a personality/psychological idiom is readily available to explain an interlocutor’s behavior: the other’s behavior is explained in terms of his/her rudeness, insensitivity, selfishness, etc. When such problematic interactions come to be associated with inter-group interactions, rather than just particular individuals, it can result in pejorative stereotyping of entire groups and the reinforcement of inter-group boundaries.

Scollon and Scollon (1981) followed this tradition in analyzing inter-cultural communication between Athabaskans socialized in Athabaskan communities and Canadians/Americans who had been socialized in dominant, Anglo-American communities. Although many of the Athabaskan subjects were monolingual in English, their discourse patterns reflected traditional Athabaskan ones. Among the differences in discourse patterns and expectations, Scollon and Scollon found that:

(a) While English speakers are relatively voluble in social situations with non-intimates, Athabaskans are relatively taciturn in such situations, becoming more voluble among intimates.
While American English speakers expect supplicants such as job interviewees and students to highlight their best qualities and abilities and project future accomplishments, Athabaskans avoid these self-displays and find it inappropriate and bad luck to anticipate and describe favorable future events.

Because of differences in the way topics are introduced and turns exchanged—non-Athabaskans are generally quicker to initiate topics and consider a turn finished after a relatively brief period of silence—non-Athabaskans generally control topics and dominate conversations.

In interactions between Athabaskans and non-Athabaskan English speakers, these differences contribute to negative stereotyping and outcomes that generally disfavor the Athabaskans. In such petitioning situations as job and social service interviews, for example, Athabaskans often end up feeling that they have not gotten served despite having taken the proper subordinate, petitioning position by not speaking and carefully observing the English speaker. English speakers, on the other hand, feel that Athabaskans being interviewed do not display enough of themselves for the interviewer to evaluate their need, that they have become sullen and withdrawn or perhaps even acted superior, as if they needed no help. (Scollon and Scollon 1981: 19)

Contrasts in discourse patterns in such encounters can become greater and greater as interactions progress, in what Tannen (1981), in a term borrowed from Bateson (1936), refers to as “complementary schismogenesis.” As each party pursues discourse patterns that seem illogical, confusing, or inappropriate to the other, each party clings more closely to its own, trying to build an intersubjective world through familiar patterns. As communicative patterns diverge more and more, the level of misunderstanding, and accompanying negative attribution, increases.

The model of inter-group misunderstanding based on cultural and linguistic difference has also been applied to inter-gender communication. Maltz and Borker (1982), for example, argue that males and females in the USA are socialized in different subcultures and follow distinctive interaction patterns, which make inter-gender communication problematic: “What we are suggesting is that women and men have different cultural rules for friendly conversation and that these rules come into conflict when women and men attempt to talk to each other as friends and equals in casual conversation” (1982: 212). They point out a number of differences between male and female communicative patterns that are particularly implicated in cross-gender misunderstandings, including the following:

(a) Men use and interpret minimal responses such as nods and “mm hmm” to mean “I agree” or “I follow your argument so far,” while women use them to indicate that they are listening.

(b) Women tend to treat questions as part of maintaining the flow of interaction, while men view them primarily as requests for information.

(c) Women tend to discuss problems with each other as a means of personal sharing and offering reassurance, while men tend to interpret stated problems as requests for explicit advice or solutions.
In each of these cases, contrasting uses and interpretations of surface forms can lead to misunderstandings. The difference in use and interpretation of minimal responses, for example, can explain contrasting perspectives expressed in both male and female complaints regarding male–female interaction: men think that “women are always agreeing with them and then conclude that it’s impossible to tell what a woman really thinks” while women “get upset with men who never seem to be listening” (1982: 202). This cultural approach to male–female communication became well known through the work of Deborah Tannen (1986, 1990), particularly her best-selling book You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation (1990).

This model of inter-group misunderstanding based on linguistic and cultural difference privileges the power of primary language socialization (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984) and associated (and idealized) cultural beliefs and practices. Interlocutors are seen as reproducing cultural scripts for speech behavior and interpretation in inter-group encounters, even as these scripts appear to be less effective than in intra-group encounters. Larger-scale sociohistorical phenomena such as ethnic/racial identity formation processes and power differentials are backgrounded in this explanation.

Critics of this approach have argued that it mistakes power differentials for cultural differences and sociopolitical conflicts for linguistic-interactional problems. In this second approach, problematic interactions are seen as local enactments of larger-scale, pre-existing conflicts. From this perspective, individual social actors are not unwittingly reproducing culturally determined scripts in a politically neutral environment, but are using language to assert the legitimacy and positive value of their social identities and associated social perspectives. Problematic interactions are thus seen not as “misunderstandings,” but as a form of communication that highlights ongoing differences in perspective and sociopolitical interests.

These critics point out that most of the work in the linguistic/cultural difference tradition has looked at interaction between a dominant group and a less powerful group: Anglo-Americans and Native Americans (Philips 1983; Scollon and Scollon 1981); Anglo-Americans and African Americans (Kochman 1981; Akinnaso and Ajiorotutu 1982); Anglo-Americans and Chinese (Young 1982, 1994; Scollon and Scollon 1995); males and females (Maltz and Borker 1982; Tannen 1986, 1990); Anglo-British and South Asians (Gumperz 1982a; Jupp, Roberts, and Cook-Gumperz 1982); and white and black South Africans (Chick 1990). Because of this discrepancy in power between the groups studied, it is difficult to determine whether inter-group conflict is influenced by discourse patterns or simply resides in pre-existing inequality (cf. Murray and Sondhi 1987: 31).

Singh, Lele, and Martohardjono (1996: 240–1) ask rhetorically why “intercultural encounters involving, for instance, Swedish or German speakers of English have not been studied. . . . Such studies will, we believe, allow us to separate the linguistic from the nonlinguistic factors that throw discourse harmony out of gear.” They argue that the ability to avoid persistent misunderstandings – and to avoid their long-term damage to inter-group relationships – seems to depend crucially on non-linguistic factors. The differences in discourse patterns that appear to undermine relationships between ethnic/racial groups in relationships of domination or dependence do not appear to undermine relationships among groups of similar or equal power. They note, for example, that the reparability threshold of American business people “can be shown to increase in proportion to the weight of the Arab sheiks they deal with”
When there is significant social incentive to overcome differences in communicative patterns, they can be overcome. In the types of situations most often addressed by cultural/linguistic difference researchers, however, neither dominant nor dominated groups have such unambiguous social incentive to accommodate communicative patterns to each other.

Similar critical arguments have been advanced by researchers to counter linguistic/cultural explanations of male–female interactions. Henley and Kramarae (1991) and Troemel-Ploetz (1991) argue that the types of male–female discourse differences cited by Maltz and Borker (1982) are the very types of difference typical of dominant–subordinate relationships more generally. For example, men are constructed as experts (by treating questions and stated problems as requests for information and expertise) and as judges of women’s talk (through restricted and delayed use of minimal responses). If male–female differences in discourse patterns were merely cultural, discourse patterns associated with superior power would be equally shared by men and women. Henley and Kramarae (1991) further point out that the misunderstandings cited by linguistic/cultural difference researchers in male–female talk do not occur across all communicative activities. Instead, it is in activities such as requests, excuses, and explanations, where there are issues of exercising one’s will and projecting one’s vision of the world, that these misunderstandings occur, suggesting that contestations of power are at issue, not cultural habits.¹

This “domination” explanation of misunderstanding can account for the very same data – asynchronous, stilted interactions – that are explained by linguistic and cultural differences. Awkward interactional sequences, in which divergent discourse patterns are used by members of different groups, are seen as symbolic struggles related to differences in power. Language is our primary symbolic system for organizing and constituting the social world and it is a primary locus for conflict and struggle over how the world is and how it should be represented (Gal 1989).

More specifically, language practices are a primary means of marking and maintaining group social identity. Ways of speaking are commonly associated with group identities and may be experienced by both members and non-members as extensions of those identities. Maintenance of distinctive ways of speaking in inter-group interaction can be seen as attesting to the validity and value of the associated identities. In contrast, accommodation to ways of speaking associated with other groups can be seen as a relative devaluing of one’s own ways of speaking and relative valorization of the other’s (Ferguson and Gumperz 1960; Labov 1972).

Speech accommodation theorists such as Howard Giles have shown that speakers can actively accommodate linguistic aspects of their speech to each other (“convergence”) or that they can actively accentuate differences in linguistic features (“divergence”). They argue that such accommodation or divergence depends on the social goals, rather than the socialized patterns, of interlocutors:

Central to this [speech accommodation theory] framework is the notion that during social interaction, participants are motivated to adjust (or to accommodate) their speech styles as a means of gaining one or more of the following goals: evoking listeners’ social approval, attaining communicational efficiency between interactants and maintaining speakers’ positive social identities. (Thakerar, Giles, and Cheshire 1982: 207)
An implicit assumption of much work in the linguistic/cultural difference tradition is that “communicational efficiency” and “evoking listeners’ social approval” are high priorities for speakers, but this is not necessarily the case. When individuals who see themselves as having disparate economic or political interests encounter each other, there is often more at stake than achieving symmetrical, synchronous interactions. In such inter-group interactions, speakers may even select group-specific linguistic markers of social identity at a greater rate than in intra-group interaction (Morgan 1994: 132). Thus, interactions in which participants are unable to coordinate activities may not represent “misunderstanding” at all, but rather effective communication of difference: difference in experience, beliefs, perspectives, and power.

Even when there are not explicit differences in political interests between individuals or groups, misunderstandings are a way for humans to negotiate and constitute sociocultural worlds. Ochs (1991), for example, argues that apparent breakdowns in communication are part of language socialization. In analyzing misunderstandings between adults and children, she finds that: “misunderstandings are not loci in which social life breaks down. Rather, to the contrary misunderstandings structure social life. Each misunderstanding is an opportunity space for instantiating local epistemology and for structuring social identities of interactants” (Ochs 1991: 60). Misunderstandings between adults and children are a way for children to be socialized into a local epistemology, rather than a failure of social interaction.

Language socialization – as an omnipresent and life-long process – provides a perspective from which to view misunderstandings as a form of social negotiations. At the center of language socialization are indexical relationships among social identities, situations, social/linguistic acts, and affective and epistemic stances (Ochs 1996: 410, 431). These indexical relations must be negotiated, whether in adult–child, intra-group, or inter-group interaction. Fundamental social questions are thus addressed through seeming misunderstandings: What indexical meanings, conventions, and identities will hold in interaction? Whose vision of how the world is – and should be – will be validated through talk?

5 Conclusion

Misunderstandings, as a contingent outcome of any interaction, encourage us to analyze the practices that afford a degree of intersubjective understanding. In our subjectively constituted world, “understanding” is not a state in which minds share the same content, but is rather a dimension of coordinated social interaction itself. The turn-by-turn structure of everyday talk helps make this coordination possible, enabling us to display, confirm, and make problematic our incremental, ongoing understandings of the very activities in which we are engaged. Paradoxically, those interactions in which apparent misunderstandings are explicitly addressed and repaired most clearly highlight our ability to achieve a degree of intersubjective understanding.

As analytical focus moves from propositional meanings to the multiple levels of activity and indexical meanings in everyday talk, misunderstandings increasingly link social and linguistic worlds. Coordination of conversational activities involves notions
of social identities, situation, conventional conversational sequences and activities, and cultural beliefs about the interrelationships among these elements and linguistic forms. Understanding, then, includes understanding not only utterances, but also sociocultural worlds. Researchers have repeatedly documented patterns of relatively awkward, disjointed interaction in conversations across boundaries of apparent social difference, such as gender or ethnicity. These patterns – like other forms of language use – can be seen as resulting from social differences, but simultaneously as contributing to the constitution of such difference.

As a linguistically marked form, misunderstanding suggests the failure of a process that is natural, but misunderstandings can be viewed more profitably as normal instances of the negotiations of social and linguistic lives. Our interactions – and misunderstandings – take place in cultural and sociohistorical contexts that are never neutral or natural, and they reflect and reproduce a world that includes conflict, ambiguity, and uncertainty.

NOTE

1 Other research suggests that the patterns addressed here are neither cross-cultural nor as monolithic as has been implied in some of the debate on “difference” or “dominance” in inter-gender interaction. Elinor (Ochs) Keenan (1974) found that Malagasy-speaking women in a Madagascar village used a relatively direct style of speaking even though they were socially subservient to men, who used a more indirect style, so directness cannot always be linked with power. A number of researchers (e.g. Tannen 1993; Gal 1995; Cameron 1998; Kulick 2000) have argued that there are not entirely discrete male and female ways of speaking, but rather semiotic resources to which both males and females have access.

REFERENCES


