

# The Notion of Misunderstanding in Intercultural Communication

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A pause in the wrong place, an intonation misunderstood, and a whole conversation went awry.  
(E.M. Forster, *Passage to India*, 1924: 262f.)

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## Abstract

Misunderstanding (MU) is a central working category in Intercultural Communication (ICC) studies. Generally speaking, MUs have gained the role of a *raison-d'être* for studying ICC, in particular under the premise that the communication in question is between cultural others, thus transforming MU into intercultural MU. In other studies, conflicts, uncomfortable moments, and miscontextualization in terms of sociocultural knowledge become indicative for ICC. Thus making MU criterial for ICC. Both positions are somehow biased and leave MU mystically underdefined. In order to escape such uncritical allround function of MU, all MUs should be of a comparable kind - under all premises.

**Keywords:** criteria of interculturality, misunderstanding cycle, core and frame, negotiation and clarification, intercultural and “non-intecultural” misunderstanding.

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## 1. Misunderstanding as common sense category

Was it a misunderstanding? Definitely yes. Even a full-fledged one. Was it an intercultural misunderstanding – by virtue of me being the German guest and the man at the reception probably being Swedish and furthermore, us negotiating the issue in a *lingua franca*, native to neither of us? Intercultural by virtue of two individuals of different national, ethnic, cultural, linguistic or whatever background? Interculturality as a resource in interaction, one that is made relevant by participants as much as they make relevant other 'brought alongs' such as regional or social background or gender – something being interactionally brought about on the basis of what was brought along.

There's another problem to be tackled, and that is the coupling of locally brought-about interculturality with misunderstandings in situated encounters. Intercultural communication as *the locus* of studying misunderstanding and miscommunication in its purest form, as it were.

### **1.1 Misunderstanding as a category in its own right**

Rarely do we come across studies on misunderstandings as a (pragma-)linguistic phenomenon *in its own right*. Even rarer are attempts at grounding misunderstanding somehow empirically. And an absolute rarity is a real-life dialogic perspective beyond experimental and fictional settings.

What is rather needed is a perspective that is able to show that misunderstanding "is best viewed as an interactional stance, something that can be claimed and disputed or agreed upon, rather than as an objective phenomenon existing independently of participants' claims and noticings

## **2. Misunderstanding's interactional structure**

### **2.1 Seven types of misunderstanding**

There are basically seven different types of misunderstanding . Only the overt and covert ones will be of empirical interest here, for two simple reasons:

- (a) As empirical linguists, we have no access to completely covert misunderstandings because they do not show up on the linguistic surface. Only psychotherapists or the like may have access to them.
- (b) The second reason is strongly related to the first one: The majority of all misunderstandings are interactionally somehow managed, i.e, they are solved in one way or another and will only very rarely lead to complete breakdown of communication. Although the intercultural literature is full of such serious – and sometimes fatal – cases of communication breakdowns in observed and analyzed face-to-face interactions this is hardly corroborated. It is probably for this very reason that some anecdotes seem to be recycled in slightly altered versions.

**The occurrence of a misunderstanding is thus located in a *vertical* order of sequentiality.**

1. Extended variant: The misunderstood segment may be reconstructed by virtue of identifying or localizing it as such and may even become specified by an explicit 'diagnosis' (i.e., realization of the features of the problem in question) or 'anamnesis' (i.e., case history) of the misunderstanding's trajectory. Such explicit diagnoses could be formulations "I think we have a misunderstanding there," or "That's not what I meant," or "I don't mean X, I mean Y" etc.. A 'case history' we find in examples where explanations or accounts are given that explain why the misunderstanding occurred: "That was metaphorically meant, not literally. You missed that point," or also interculturally: "That's the way we do it" etc.
2. There is an immediate recognition of a misunderstanding, which is indicated by a repair at the next possible opportunity, but there is no return to the *status quo ante*. The misunderstanding itself becomes a resource of continuation.
3. Extended variant: The misunderstood segment may be reconstructed by virtue of identifying or localizing it as such and may even become specified by an explicit 'diagnosis' or 'anamnesis' of the misunderstanding's trajectory. Note: the more extended the misunderstanding's trajectory, the less likely is a return to the *status quo ante*; instead, a continuation based on the misunderstanding is more likely.
4. There is a gradual recognition of a misunderstanding, which may be indicated by disturbances in the flow of the conversational course, by signs of incoherence, by detours or recyclings (repetitions, paraphrases, circumlocutions, 'talking down'-effects), by unresponded repair initiations, by suddenly or gradually developing traces of verbal, nonverbal, or paralinguistic insecurity, or, simply by the indication or registration of what Erickson and Shultz (1982) have called 'uncomfortable moments', until one interlocutor becomes aware that some kind of misunderstanding has occurred. What may follow is the further treatment as described in MU1 and MU2 (including their extensions). But note: the more distant the recognition of a misunderstanding, the more effort is necessary to repair it and the less likely there will be an easy return to the *status quo ante*. Furthermore, the more distant the recognition, the less probable is the exact localization and identification of the site of misunderstanding, particularly when the misunderstanding has built up over a whole stretch of turn-by-turn development.
5. There is a gradual recognition of a misunderstanding, which may be indicated by disturbances in the flow of the conversational course, in signs of incoherence, by

detours or recyclings (repetitions, paraphrases, circumlocutions, 'talking down'-effects), by unresponded repair initiations, by suddenly or gradually developing traces of verbal, nonverbal, or paralinguistic insecurity, or, simply by the indication or registration of 'uncomfortable moments,' until the misunderstanding is somehow recognized

6. There is no obvious recognition of a misunderstanding, although an outside observer regards it as a misunderstanding; or one of the participants may have received particular information afterwards (even long time after) that leads her to reassess the interaction (or parts of it) as a misunderstanding. The interaction in question remains, however, untouched by this discovery or reinterpretation.

7. To an outside observer there is no manifestation and no indication that a misunderstanding has occurred, yet one interlocutor (or even both interlocutors) may have the feeling that either she has or was or they have or were misunderstood. So the misunderstanding may have been noticed but remained unnegotiated.

## **2.2 Two kinds of misunderstanding: event and core**

One thing has to be reemphasized and makes the continuum character of this typology clear: The further a repair attempt of some misinterpreted item or sequence is away from its alleged source, the less explicit will be its manifestations. Eventually, there will be no manifestations at all; there will be solely stronger and weaker indications instead, of misunderstanding. This also means that with weaker manifestations and with more distance from the repairable that is the item or sequence misunderstood, reconstructions of the misunderstanding will be more difficult.

## **2.3 Misunderstanding and intercultural communication revisited**

Now another difficulty arises. Taking into account this division into core and frame event, it is quite impossible to differentiate it in cases of such covert misunderstandings. It is here that I suggest that intercultural communication could be treated as something substantially different from other forms of communication (which for reasons of contrastive simplicity we may call 'intracultural'). That is, one criterion of intercultural communication is to regard covert misunderstandings or maybe particular kinds of covert misunderstandings as indicative of mismanaging differences or discrepancies in terms of sociocultural knowledge.

## **2.4 Contextualizing misunderstandings**

I have already warned against regarding the different MU-types as in any case clearly distinguishable as to interactional structure

. As the constitution of context is done retrospectively as well as prospectively, the questioning of a context that has been seen as valid so far leads retrospectively to the identification of the immediate cause for the suspicion of context erosion or change and also anticipates the remedial action to be necessary for defending or for adaptation or for repair.

## **3. Being on the wrong track: When a misunderstanding is (not) an intercultural one**

### **3.1 Putting threads together**

The problem of remedial attempts as part of the misunderstanding event has been alluded to by John Gumperz when he stated that "Lack of shared background knowledge leads initially to misunderstandings, but since contextualization conventions are not shared, attempts to repair these misunderstandings fail and conversational cooperation breaks

### **3.2 A full-fledged misunderstanding event with no words**

Let 's concentrate on one particular example of misunderstanding by which I will elaborate on some of these last points. I will try to show three things:

- (1) How a misunderstanding creates a fully developed corrective cycle as part of the misunderstanding event
- (2) how a misunderstanding may create a subdialogue without disrupting the main dialogue, and
- (3) how a misunderstanding event may be linked to interculturality – or how not.

### **3.3 Different interpretation, common repair**

This leads me to the very last point, also closing a kind of circle of my argumentation. The sequence described depicts a scene from a multinational group discussion. F is

German, B Turkish. So far I have concentrated on the misunderstanding process itself, leaving interactants' ethnic and/or cultural background completely out of consideration. This is mainly due to the focus on the misunderstanding event itself, i.e., its interactional structure, without referring to pragmatic or sociolinguistic or intercultural constraints which would lead to the reasons and motives for a misunderstanding, a focus I have neglected so far in favour of macrosequential structure. For a scholar of intercultural communication the misunderstanding could be easily traced back to cultural differences in terms of territorial dealings so that a neighbour's territory – at least among same sex – is regarded as more easily accessible under certain preconditions. One such precondition might have been the moral or aesthetic inadequacy of placing a plastic cup in the crotch. Another one might have been motivated by reasons of a kind of protective politeness, preventing F's spilling the juice in the plastic cup on his trousers. All these reasons, of course, as well as F's reason for putting the cup between his thighs could well be accounted for by personal preferences irrespective of cultural background. Even if we interpret the warding off of B's intrusion between F's legs as defence against an outside surprise access, we will not get any further by interpreting this as particularly culture bound.

There are some more particularities within the corrective cycle which may also be regarded as signalling interculturality. One such cultural phenomenon could be interpreted in B's 'shame-signalling reaction'; just characterizing it as such may be culturally biased, of course. An even stronger hint for interculturality may be B's multiple repairs. One could ask if B really understands F's soothing gesture as a signal for terminating the misunderstanding. Couldn't he have (mis)understood this gesture as a request to place his hands on his thighs and hence only did so in compliance to F's request? Then of course there is the light laughter that comes up among the other participants. It is not clear whether the laughter is in reaction to the plastic cup scene; it may at least be interpreted as such by B, which would give him multiple addressees for his remedial endeavours and could hence account for the third repair attempt.

The latter point alludes to another important precondition not exploited so far: the institutional one, which emphasizes the role relationship between F and B and their rights and obligations to be deduced from that. F is a teacher, B a student. What kind of light does this fact shed on the cup scene? Doesn't it make the territorial intrusion even stronger? Or does it legitimate the intrusion because a teacher's spilled cup in his genital area could be much more embarrassing than with a fellow student? What is the particular relationship of B and F?

If we consider another precondition, namely the prehistory of the scene discussed here, then we find some indications of a less formal relationship, one where slight touches including the 'light thigh slap' have occurred before. Additional information does not contradict cultural constraints because in awkward moments such as here the institutional relationship may regain dominance. Nor does it, however, support an exclusively intercultural interpretation of the scene.

A communicative exchange is not intercultural by virtue of interactants being from different cultural backgrounds. Nor is it intercultural by virtue of a misunderstanding between interactants from different cultural backgrounds. Even if territoriality or the

treatment of taboo zones or any other cultural reason is responsible for the core misunderstanding, then we still might find that a treatment of it is a *cooperative endeavour irrespective of the participants' cultural backgrounds*. The sociocultural knowledge necessary for constituting a repair context as part of the misunderstanding event or in reaction to a core misunderstanding seems to be reciprocal. Contextualization questions such as "Are we talking to each other (right now)?", "Who's talking to whom (right now)?", "What are we doing with one another (right now)?", "What are we talking about to each other (right now)?" and "What footing are we on (right now)?" (cf. Auer 1986) are all answered in the same way during the course of the misunderstanding event although their mutual validity, so to speak, had been out of force for the misunderstanding's core, i.e., for the moment of territorial conflict. Note that most of these context-defining questions were handled on the main line level of the exchange as well as on the subdialogical level, one verbally and nonverbally, the other purely nonverbally (at least for F). Finally, B's positioning of himself so that he is the same height as F – even though he is a head taller than F – is to be seen as a physical response to the question "What footing are we on (right now)?"

\* \* \*

What can be most strongly deduced from this example (as well as from the other ones as well) is that a different interpretation or inference that initially led to a misunderstanding might be solved and clarified by a common repair, even if the misunderstanding may be interculturally based (which we often cannot determine). So, the discussion of "The vanishing cup" transcript will certainly not suffice as empirical evidence of the universal validity of repair-within-misunderstanding events. What I intended to show in the discussion of my examples and in particular with the "The vanishing plastic cup" example was to unfold a *methodological* reflection on the delicate issue of misunderstanding in combination with that other delicate issue called 'interculturality.' If some scholars think that they can easily combine the two, they are very likely to fall victim to a methodological shortcoming.

### Appendix: Transcription conventions

#### Legend:

(...) incomprehensible

(( )) commentary, e.g. [1.5 Sec.], [laughter]

wie- abortion of utterance

ne(?) 'semiquestions'

**eating** stressed, emphasized

DAS high volume

°da° low volume

>darüber< fast tempo  
 + pause, below 1 second  
 (+) micropause  
 (h) hesitation (e.g. he (h)comes)  
 = fast connection, latching  
 komm[en]  
 [da] overlap and point of overlap

## Notes

1. There are obvious cultural differences in its usage and its semantic loadedness, e.g. between German and English. Although the dictionary entries of "misunderstanding" and German "Missverständnis" give the impression that there is a close correspondence between the two basic semantic descriptions as "failure to understand" and (the rather more euphemistic) "disagreement," the usage as measured by recurrent collocations differs quite widely. Out of a text corpus of 30 million text words I have tried to isolate a set of stereotypical concepts that comprise the different usages of the noun "Missverständnis" as presented in collocational and functional contexts. I thus arrived at stereotypes of the kind: "One has to protect oneself from misunderstandings," "misunderstandings can be intentionally created, promoted and provoked," "misunderstandings can be dealt with, they can be revealed, cleared up and removed," but also "misunderstandings can be exploited to one's own advantage, such as by reducing one's own responsibility, euphemizing one's own faults etc." (cf. Hinnenkamp, 1998: ch. 4). A student of English at Augsburg University, Sarah K. Dietl, made a comparable analysis in English the results of which differs widely, however, in terms of frequency and relevance from the German stereotypes. Whereas in German "Missverständnis" collocates most strongly with the verb "vorbeugen" (to prevent), there is no such strong equivalence for "misunderstanding". Here stative and assertive constructions such as "there is a misunderstanding" are clearly the most prominent ones. The prevention schema on the other hand is very rare. If there is a correspondence between the naming practice and the kind of attitude towards misunderstanding then we can easily imagine the handling and managing of misunderstandings as a source of intercultural conflict (or misunderstanding?).

2. Cf. e.g. such attempts as Zaefferer 1977; Grimshaw 1980; Dascal 1985; Mudersbach 1987; Weizman and Blum-Kulka 1992.

3. Here we find case studies on lexical ambiguity between students' discussion (Loretz 1976), an experimental study on successful and failed intention attribution (Dobrick 1984), and speech act pragmatic corpus research into misunderstandings in fictional dialogues (Falkner 1997).

4. But how can we finally know that, in face of (a)? We simply have to exclude latent misunderstandings from our consideration.
5. Original German version in which the English gloss is following in each line. The legend for the transcribing conventions follows in the appendix.
6. This pertains of course only to such an understanding of misunderstanding where the encoding of a word that was misheard, for example, is regarded as the repairable. But one might as well regard such mishearing itself as the repairable.
7. For Schegloff, misunderstanding, at least this overtly manifest type, is seen to stand in close relation to the repair device, because sequentially a misunderstanding – as we can see in the above example – can only be repaired third position onward, as "repair after an interlocutor's response (second position) has revealed trouble in understanding an earlier turn (the 'repairable' in first position)" (Schegloff 1992: 1301). Schegloff has furthermore mentioned that devices of a misunderstanding manifestation ("composition of third position repair"), the ones I see in *horizontal* sequentiality, appear in a kind of canonical order (in English, at least, and similarly in German, cf. Hinnenkamp 1998): firstly prefatory "no," secondly a less obligatory kind of acceptance token, thirdly a rejection component, and fourthly "the repair proper," which is then subcategorized into various kinds of accounts, one of them typically starting with "I mean" (Schegloff 1992: 1310).
8. The mode of transcription has been adapted to my system.
9. The studies of Gumperz and his colleagues abound with examples. Cf. e.g. Gumperz 1982a, 1982b; 1989, 1992a, 1992b, 1995; Gumperz/Roberts 1991.
10. For example, what Schegloff (1992) has named 'third position repair' as being typically indicative for a misunderstanding may also become a 'fourth or fifth position repair' etc. But the more distant the repair, the more likely manifestations will be less explicit and the more likely will there be implicit indications and the harder will be reconstructions. "Canvassing" is a good example for this.
11. Cf. Gumperz 1982a, 1989, 1992a, 1992b, 1995; Auer 1986, 1992.
12. In following conversation analysis terminology as to repair we might also call it the 'misunderstandable' – but then we have to deal with another ambiguity, that is, to make a particular item candidate to be misunderstood. Also will we face the same problems as mentioned above with the term or rather the locating of the repairable.
13. We might need a more fine-grained typology here.
14. Cf. e.g. Gumperz 1982a as well as most contributions in Gumperz 1982b or Roberts, Davies and Jupp 1993.
15. However, there are some conceptions of intercultural communication including native speaker-nonnative speaker communication as "intercultural" per se. In the "Canvassing" example, however, there is a well-justified suspicion that different rights

and obligations within the institutional frame play an important role in the emergence and development of the misunderstanding. So it was the unquestioned right of IT to continue the ratification "So you've been canvassing for work" (line 6a) with the first question "and who said they'd give you a job?" (line 6b). We cannot tell if it is noncomprehension or compliance to the authority that line 6a is not made a repairable.

16. In the non-negotiated examples Weizman and Blum-Kulka (1992) cite it is in no way obvious to observers that a misunderstanding has occurred whereas one of the participants *may have indeed noticed* a misunderstanding without, however, making it explicit. What follows from this is that actually all smoothly going interactions are potentially non-negotiated misunderstandings. Also cf. Bilmes 1992.

17. This is also what Banks, Ge and Baker obviously mean when they note "A key sense of miscommunication, however, regardless of one's theoretical orientation, is something gone awry communicatively that has social consequences for the interactants; without social consequences, the phenomenon would be of trivial interest. By social consequences, we refer generally to misattribution of motives, unwarranted actions, changes in patterns of interaction, and similar responses to encounters that might over time debilitate relationships. Consequently, for miscommunication to have impact, it is not likely to be a perturbation of smooth performance that is repaired in the current interaction" (Banks, Ge and Baker 1991: 105).

18. F's clumsy handling of the cup actually corresponds with his restarts and self-corrections. The cup obviously is a gesticulation hindrance which again interferes with the fluidity of discourse.

19. Of course B might be 'lying' here – if one can do that nonverbally at all – rationalizing, so to speak, some other motives *ex post fact*, cf. Mudersbach 1987 and Bilmes 1992.

20. I do not know of any research on this gesture; the term "light thigh slap" is mine.

21. For a detailed methodological and also empirically founded discussion see Hinnenkamp 1998.

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