The interactional handling of misunderstanding in everyday conversations[☆]

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Abstract

In this paper, we will deal with the handling – within the conversational interaction – of linguistic misunderstanding, on the basis of an Italian corpus. The following aspects of this process will be analyzed: the author of the repair, the phases of negotiation (i.e. “the negotiation cycle of misunderstanding”), the collocation of the repair (third and fourth turn repairs are the most common patterns), linguistic and non-linguistic misunderstanding.

A general distinction will be drawn between *coming to understanding*, *understanding* and *misunderstanding* on the one hand, and *non-understanding* on the other. In conclusion, misunderstanding, as a ‘form of understanding’ internal to the process of comprehension, which has to be monitored and negotiated interactionally, should not be seen as a polar process (absence/presence of comprehension) but, rather, as a *continuum*. © 1999 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

“[...] the very things which are most obvious
may become the hardest of all to understand.”
Wittgenstein (1980: 17)

1. Introduction

Besides comprehension in general,¹ misunderstanding involves a number of different phenomena, such as: reference identification, mutual knowledge, misconception (cf. Pollack, 1991), intercultural communication (cf. among others Banks et al.,

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¹ “Do others understand what we say or write? Do we understand them? These are questions not often addressed in language theory. Those professionals who work in language theory – literary theorists, linguists, philosophers of language, communication theorists, semioticians, theorists of rhetoric, discourse analysts, etc. – are more interested in the problem of specifying *what* it is to understand and *how* we understand than in asking *whether* we understand. Apparently, the fact that communicators ordinarily understand each other is a pre-theoretical given, the *sine qua non* of academic discourse on language, meaning, and interpretation” (Taylor, 1992: 3).

1991; Gass and Varonis, 1991), contextual cues, conversational inference (to quote only a few in a random order).

The characteristic features of face-to-face interaction (common sources of external noises, the balance between politeness and explicitness, the 'micro-planning' of spoken language, the cognitive load), the difficulty in evaluating the interlocutors' beliefs and knowledge, the various ambiguities of the language system, the interlocutor's inferential effort (cf. Levinson, 1987), as well as idiosyncratic problems of the speaker or interlocutor make it "awfully difficult to prevent misunderstanding" (Vendler, 1994: 19). After a misunderstanding has occurred, several paths of handling are possible, leading to different outcomes.

Elsewhere (cf. Bazzanella and Damiano, 1997) we have drawn up a taxonomy of 'levels' and 'triggers' of linguistic misunderstanding in everyday conversations, according to the findings from a *corpus* of spoken Italian.² With regard to the levels,³ we have proposed five levels at which misunderstanding can arise:⁴ phonic, lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic (cf. Table 1). As can be seen from Fig. 1, the semantic level⁵ is by far the most 'productive' with regard to misunderstanding.

Besides considering at what level each instance of misunderstanding is located, we also considered the factors that can facilitate its occurrence. We labeled these factors *triggers*, rather than causes, to underline the non-deterministic role they play in predisposing communication to a negative outcome: although ambiguity seems to play a major role in generating misunderstanding,⁶ one should not concentrate on a single element as the only cause (cf. note 3). One or more of these factors can appear at a certain moment in an interaction, making the process of understanding more difficult, but not necessarily resulting in a misunderstanding. Furthermore, while the

² The *corpus* includes 63 instances of misunderstanding (61 in Italian and 2 in English), partly extracted from existing *corpora*, partly collected for the specific purpose. The existing *corpora* consist of two published *corpora* and two smaller unpublished *corpora*. In the first group, De Mauro, Mancini, Vedovelli and Voghera (1993) is a collection of excerpts taken from both telephone and face-to-face conversations, in different contexts that range from formality to informality, while Gavioli and Mansfield (1990) consists of transcriptions of complete book-shop encounters. The two unpublished *corpora* were collected by C. Ferrus and O. Fornara for their theses in the Philosophy of Language (1994, University of Turin, Italy).

Transcription conventions are maintained, according to the different *corpora*.

³ The need for a distinction between the different levels that a misunderstanding can involve has already been pointed out by other scholars: cf., among others, Dascal (1985), Schegloff (1992), and Zaefferer (1977).

⁴ We are aware, of course, of the fact that this classification is simplified, since – for the sake of presentation – it does not take into account the multiplicity of levels that might be involved in every instance of misunderstanding.

⁵ Within the semantic level, we have distinguished between propositional content and reference expressions in order to stress the predominance of misunderstanding related to the reference expressions. A further distinction, between the misunderstood identification of a referent external to the interaction and the addressee, proved to be meaningful, particularly in telephone calls (cf., among others, Drummond and Hopper, 1991).

⁶ Both in the literature (cf., among others, Zaefferer, 1977; Blum-Kulka and Weizman, 1988) and in our data (66 %) ambiguity is the major source of misunderstanding.

Table 1
Levels of misunderstanding

-
1. Phonetic
 2. Syntactic
 3. Lexical
 4. Semantic
 - 4.1 Propositional content
 - 4.2 Reference expressions
 - 4.2.1 'external'
 - 4.2.2 addressee
 5. Pragmatic
 - 5.1 Illocutionary force and indirect speech acts
 - 5.2 Non-literal uses: implicatures, irony, metaphor, etc.
 - 5.3 Relevance
 - 5.4 Topic
 - 5.5 Plans
-

Fig. 1. Percentage of misunderstandings in relation to the levels.

Fig. 2. Percentage of misunderstandings within the semantic level.

responsibility of the interlocutor and of her/his interpretation choices has been underlined in the literature,⁷ little has been said about the other constituent parts of communication.⁸ To counter this bias, we have tried (cf. Bazzanella and Damiano, 1997) to highlight various other factors which have not been fully considered previously as triggers of misunderstanding; in order to classify them, we proposed relating them to the basic components of the interaction, i.e. the structural components of communication, the role both of the speaker and the interlocutor, and the ongoing interaction itself (see Table 2).

In this paper, we will deal with the *handling* – within the conversational interaction – of linguistic misunderstanding, on the basis of our *corpus*. The following aspects of this process will be analyzed:

- the author of the repair
- the phases of negotiation
- the collocation of the repair
- linguistic and non-linguistic misunderstanding.

⁷ Cf. Dascal (1985), Blum-Kulka and Weizman (1988), Grimshaw (1980), Zaefferer (1977). With regard to 'wrong inferences', cf. also McRoy and Hirst (1995), and to the cognitive load and its effects on the interlocutor's performance, cf. Hansen et al. (1996).

⁸ Cf. Bazzanella (1995) with regard to "the speaker's side"; cf. Smith (1982), and in particular Joshi (1982) for the relevance of mutual beliefs to understanding/misunderstanding.

Table 2
Triggers of misunderstanding

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- (a) *Structural triggers*
 - (1) Disturbances along the communicative channel
 - (2) Similarities between elements of the linguistic code
 - (3) Troubles caused by the use of a foreign language
 - (4) Structural ambiguities (e.g. lexical or syntactic a.)
 - (b) *Triggers related to the speaker*
 - (1) 'Local' factors, such as speaker's slips of the tongue, misconceptions, use of ambiguous forms
 - (2) 'Global' factors concerning the structuring of information both on the pragmatic and on the syntactic level (cf., e.g., politeness, indeterminacy, and anacolutes)
 - (c) *Triggers related to the interlocutor*
 - (1) Knowledge problems, such as false beliefs, lexical incompetence, gaps in encyclopedic knowledge
 - (2) Cognitive processes, such as wrong inferences, and the cognitive load and its effects on the interlocutor's production
 - (d) *Triggers related to the interaction between the participants*
 - (1) Non-shared knowledge
 - (2) Topic organization
 - (3) Focusing problems
-

2. Interactional handling

2.1. The author of the repair to the misunderstanding

The discrepancy between the "speaker's meaning" (cf. Grice, 1989) and the interlocutor's interpretation of a given turn (which we label "source turn") can be perceived either by the speaker of that turn or by the interlocutor, usually when the distance between the two meanings is too salient to be ignored. In both cases, it is possible to identify a specific turn which reveals the misunderstanding, and usually triggers the process of repair.

Though the 'tolerance' in human dialogues is higher than in man-machine interaction (cf. Smith and Gordon, 1996), lack of coherence⁹ or inconsistency between subsequent turns forces the interlocutors to 're-interpret' the preceding exchange, by acting as a cue.¹⁰ When an utterance appears that cannot be interpreted as coherent to the past turns, a misunderstanding can be hypothesized by the participant who has noticed the lack of coherence. The unexpected and apparently irrelevant¹¹ turns

⁹ We adopt a dynamic and multi-faceted view of coherence, following Bublitz (1994), Gernsbacher and Givón (1995).

¹⁰ Cf. the distinction between "clue" and "cue" in Dascal and Weizman (1987: 44): "(a) *clues*, both co-textual and contextual, which will lead him [the reader of a text] towards determination of utterance-meaning and speaker's-meaning"; (b) *cues*, which help him to distinguish between opacity and indirectness. The cue for opacity is the need for gap-filling, whereas the cue for indirectness is a mismatch between utterance-meaning and second channel information.

¹¹ The relevance or irrelevance of the turn which reveals the misunderstanding, and which usually triggers the process of repair, cannot be limited to the semantic content only, but has to be considered in relation to the "conversational demand", which is set by the propositional content, the context, and the co-text (cf. Dascal, 1977).

become a guide (a “clue” in Dascal and Weizman’s (1987) terms) which helps her/him to find out what the misunderstanding consisted of, i.e. the alternative interpretation that is the reason for the production of the irrelevant terms.

In the following example (1), taken from De Mauro et al. (1993) (C1/MA16; cf. note 2), the interlocutor C misunderstands the referent of the pronoun ‘it’, identifying its referent as ‘the cheque’, instead of ‘the account’, as intended by the speaker B. Although it is not the intended referent, ‘the cheque’ could be a possible subject of the expression “to be in someone’s name”, since both accounts and cheques can be in someone’s name. The only difference between them that helps the speaker in identifying the occurrence of an interpretation failure in turn 6, is that, while cheques can be blank, accounts must necessarily be in someone’s name.¹²

- (1) 1 B. con un assegno no <??>
 2 C. io ho il conto qua
 3 B. ha il conto qua quattro otto sei? duecento lire di commissione
 4 C. ha bisogno del numero del conto # quello già è più difficile
 [silenzio]
 5 C. ecco # il conto è nove tre due otto barra uno
 S 6 B. come è intestato?
 7 C. non è intestato
 R 8 B. no come è intestato il conto
 9 C. ah XYZ Francesca
- 1 B. by cheque, right <??>
 2 C. I have an account at this branch
 3 C. you have an account at this branch four eight six? two hundred lire
 commission
 4 C. you need the account number # ah, that’s more difficult
 [silence]
 5 C. here you are # the account is nine three two eight slash one
 6 B. whose name is it in?
 7 C. no name
 8 B. no, whose name is the account in
 9 C. oh, Francesca XYZ

The participant who realizes that a misunderstanding has occurred, irrespective of her/his role in conversation (‘speaker’ or ‘interlocutor’ with regard to the source turn of misunderstanding), usually signals this difficulty, so that s/he can act together with her/his partner to reestablish the lost common coherence: in line 8, B both disconfirms C’s preceding turn (*no*), and repeats the request with the full lexical syntagm (*whose name is the account in*), instead of the anaphoric pronoun (*it*), which

¹² The reason why this kind of failure is not always immediately recognized is that the mechanism sketched above is not absolutely safe from failures itself, since every new turn is open to a range of different interpretations, thus allowing for the misalignment to remain occasionally covert for several turns.

can refer, ambiguously, both to the account and the cheque. In line 9, C reacts positively to B's repair, and gives the expected answer, after an acknowledgment marker of the recognized misunderstanding (*oh*).

More rarely the repair is accomplished by the interlocutor who realizes a discrepancy between her/his interpretation of a given turn and the speaker's following turn (see example 6, below).

2.2. *Phases of negotiation*

Let us consider in some detail the different endings to which a misunderstanding in a conversational setting is open; what, in other words, constitutes 'the negotiation cycle of misunderstanding'.

We are not interested here in cases where misunderstanding is not detected (cf. step 1 in Fig. 3), and the interaction goes on without any changes.¹³ We are concerned with the handling of misunderstanding when it is detected, either by the speaker of the source turn of misunderstanding itself, or by the interlocutor of that turn: in fact the utterer of the source turn of misunderstanding is not necessarily the speaker who triggers the repair process. Henceforth, while talking about the repair process, when we refer to 'speaker' we mean the participant who utters the repair turn, and the 'interlocutor' corresponds to the participant to whom the repair turn is addressed. After a misunderstanding has been recognized (cf. the second step in Fig. 3), the participant who has realized it, irrespective of her/his responsibility in the misunderstanding, has to choose between two possibilities: s/he can point it out and make a repair in order to understand or to make her/himself understood¹⁴ (cf. step 2 in Fig. 3), so that a cooperation with the partner can start to remove the obstacle, or she/he can decide to disregard it.¹⁵ In the latter case, which is more common in man-machine interaction (cf., among others, Reilly, 1987), either a topic shift or a communication breakdown can follow.

When the participant who has realized the occurrence of misunderstanding tries to make a repair, possibly by proposing a diagnosis and/or a solution, her/his partner can confirm or disconfirm it. Here we are dealing with the reaction of the interlocutor (cf. step 3 in Fig. 3), which can consist of an acceptance, if s/he decides to confirm the repair, or of a refusal, if s/he does not confirm it. The interlocutor's reactions, in turn, can vary in their degree of acceptance/refusal: as far as the acceptance is concerned, the receiver of a repair turn can accept it unconditionally, or she/he can propose more or less slight modifications, thus producing a new repair her/himself or inducing her/his partner to make a new attempt (cf. step 3a in Fig. 3). If the accep-

¹³ Let alone cases, such as intentional deceptions, where the non-coincidence between the speaker's meaning and the interlocutor's interpretation is intentionally produced. We do not refer to these as 'misunderstandings'.

¹⁴ Cf. Dascal and Berenstein's "duty to understand": "The person who performs a communicative act expects thereby to be 'understood'. She expects that, through her communicative act, the other will 'get in touch' with her mental state, namely the 'duty to understand'" (1987: 189).

¹⁵ "[...] repairing speech is always risky, a violation of 'let it pass', and in general likely to cause trouble" (Drummond and Hopper, 1991: 306).

tance is just partial and there is no explicit refusal, either the speaker of the previous repair or her/his interlocutor can make a new repair, activating another negotiation cycle.

In the following fragment the ‘persistence’ of the misunderstanding (which is not repaired after being disconfirmed, and repeated in line 4),¹⁶ and the ‘nested’ misunderstanding (cf. line 6, where B seems not to be listening and doesn’t catch the repair) is due to the different genders and social roles of the participants: a male full professor (B) and a woman research fellow (A). The situation is finally solved by A’s second repair attempt, where A’s intention is fully made explicit and she obtains the appropriate answer by B.

- (2) 1 A. Scusi, volevo discutere di altri articoli su questo argomento che lei non
 S 2 ha citato e che forse=
 3 B. =Sì, quali vuole conoscere?
 R 4 A. No, mi chiedevo se lei non ha citato gli articoli di x e y, perché [non è
 5 d’accordo
 6 B. [Io non li ho citati
 R 7 A. Sì, lo so, volevo sapere se li conosce e se [non è d’accordo
 8 B. Non [li conosco. Chi sono?
- 1 A: Excuse me, I’d like to discuss some other papers on this subject you
 2 didn’t cite and which maybe=
 3 B: =Yes, which ones do you want to know about?
 4 A: No, I was wondering if you didn’t cite x’s and y’s papers because [you
 5 B: don’t agree
 6 [I didn’t cite them
 7 A: Yes, I know, I wanted to know if you know them and if [you don’t
 agree
 8 B: I don’t [know them. Who are they?

By contrast, if the interlocutor accepts the repair turn completely (cf. step 3a in Fig. 3), we normally have a ‘fresh start’ (cf. line 9 in fragment 1, where the ‘right’ answer, preceded by the uptake marker *oh*, solves the misunderstanding and provides the conversation with the expected contribution).

In the following example, taken from C2/BOF/A-05/1, the interlocutor displays her uptake (line 8), at the end of the repair cycle, allowing the interaction to go on.

- (3) 1 Cw Buongiorno. Avrei bisogno di un libro di inglese del primo corso
 2 dell’*American school*.
 (0.3)
 3 Cw (10syll) [(01) *passi*]Il bigliettino mi avevano rilasciato. (02) Dicon che
 4 c’è lo sconto anche del dieci per cento?

¹⁶ In this case one could refer to Dascal’s rule, “Check for causal explanation” (1985: 453).

- S 5 AF +Se lei ha già l'iscrizione sì.
 6 Cw Sì sì, io sarei già iscritto.
 R 7 AF Sì no, ma se ha qui il tagliandino dell'iscrizione.
 8 Cw Ah ho: capito. [*ride*]
- 1 Cw Good morning. I need a book on English for the first course of the
 2 American school.
 (0.3)
 3 Cw (*10syll*) [(01) *steps*] The leaflet they gave me. (02) They say there's a
 4 discount of as much as ten per cent?
 5 Af +If you have your enrollment yes.
 6 Cw Yes yes, I'm already enrolled.
 7 AF Yes no, but if you have the enrollment coupon with you.
 8 Cw Oh, I understand. [*laughs*]

On the other hand (cf. step 3b in Fig. 3), the interlocutor can disagree with the repair turn, producing a refusal, which can be either total or open to further negotiation. If the latter is the case, there is room for new repair attempts. However, if the interlocutor completely refuses the repair turn, there can be a conversational breakdown or a shift in conversational topic if both the participants decide to disregard it and go on.

The following example (taken from C1/NB31) illustrates the situation in which a repair is rejected by the interlocutor, who proposes a different reading of the miscommunication episode, instead of abandoning the cooperation.

- (4) 1 A: raccomandata espressa l'altroieri mattina
 2 B: quando l'ha fatta? L'altroe<ri>
 3 A: ahah
 4 B: no ma chille signò
 S 5 quando la fate solo raccomandata
 R 6 A: no no l'ha fatta espressa
 R 7 B: no_ quando
 8 la fate solo raccomandata arriva primm'
- 1 A: express registered letter the morning of the day before yesterday
 2 B: when did she send it? the day before yester<day>?
 3 A: yeh
 4 B: no, but when
 5 you send it simply as a registered letter, madam
 6 A: no no she sent it express
 7 B: no_ when
 8 you send it simply as a registered letter it arrives sooner

In this example, the repair accomplished by A (line 6), who seemingly thinks B has misunderstood her initial explanation (simple registered letter, cf. line 5, vs.

express registered letter, cf. line 1), contrasts with B's reaction, who denies having misunderstood ("no", line 7) and goes on, by completing her contribution (lines 7–8).

According to our data, which mostly refer to cooperative interactions, there is abundant evidence that the interactants in cooperative settings prefer to accept a repair which is in many cases displayed by the interlocutor by means of acknowledgment discourse markers or explicit admission of failure (cf. for instance line 7 in example 3 or line 9 in example 1). This preference seems to be in line with the preference for self-correction and self-repair argued for in conversational studies (Sacks et al., 1977; Schegloff, 1987, 1992).

2.3. *Collocation of repair*

In most cases, the interlocutor's incorrect interpretation is detected immediately afterwards by the speaker, thanks to the interlocutor's inappropriate reaction, and corrected by the speaker in her/his next turn. This case corresponds to "third turn repair" in Schegloff's (1992) terms.

- (5) 1 T: senta mi scusi allora perizia psichiatrica devo frequentarlo
 S 2 obbligatoriamente io?
 3 Q: l'esame deve darlo per forza di cose
 R 4 T: sì dico ma la frequenza è necessaria?
 5 Q: devi chiedere al professore non è obbligatoria <??>
- 1 T: listen excuse me do I have to attend psychiatric examination
 2 compulsorily?
 3 Q: you have to take the exam it's essential
 4 T: yes, but I mean, is attendance compulsory?
 5 Q: you must ask the professor it is not compulsory <??>

In this example (taken from C1/MA18/3), the wrong interpretation is displayed by the interlocutor in the second turn (see line 2), and corrected by the speaker immediately afterwards, constituting an instance of 'third turn repair'.

More rarely the interlocutor her/himself, thanks to the speaker's next contributions to the conversation, realizes she/he has misunderstood and corrects her/himself ("fourth turn repair"), as is shown in the following example:

- (6) 1 A: quando_ la ricreazione finisce c'è il suono della campanella
 S 2 che ormai tutti odiano ho scritto
 3 C: la campanella?
 (...)
 4 C: come mai odiano il suono della campanella a scuola tua?
 5 A: certo perchè devono cominciare le lezioni
 R 6 C: ah credevo fo<sse> di quella finale

Fig. 3. Negotiation cycle of misunderstanding.

- 1 A: when_the break ends there's the sound of the bell
- 2 which every one hates by now I wrote
- 3 B: the bell?
- (...)
- 4 A: why do they hate the sound of the bell at your school?
- 5 B: of course because the classes have to begin
- 6 A: oh, I thought it <was> the final one

In this example (from C1/FA2/2), the misunderstanding by A (B's mother), who probably didn't catch B's first turn properly (since it does not seem to be ambiguous), is not detected by B, who, when asked for further information, unwillingly reveals to A her own misunderstanding, displayed by A's following turn (the fourth, line 6).

Third and fourth turn repairs are the most common patterns, but they can be extended over several turns, so that repair can take place virtually in any of the turns that follow the misunderstood one, starting from the third one, as shown by our data, where instances of repairs can be found accomplished at the twelfth, fifteenth, and thirtieth turn, although most repairs in our *corpus* too are located at the third (cf. Fig. 4).

As Hansen et al. (1996) pointed out, in the context of a cooperative interaction between human participants, the places of repair can vary greatly, owing to several factors, such as delayed recognition, occurrence of sub-dialogues (see the following example, taken from C2/LOD/C-32) or the choice of the appropriate collocation for the repair.

- (7) 1 Cw Mm: – (could you)– could you tell me if you stock: ++ er (o1) the:
 Schroeder book,
 S 2 + “Decrees and canons in the council of Trent”?
 3 AP (01)Oh, I think you want history, don't you?
 4 Cw Erm.
 5 AP =D'you want history?
 6 Cw + Well. + I'm not sure exactly what section it would be under.
 7 AP Er: ++ “Degree: (and just ↓a”-)←
 R 8 Cw ↓↓“The← decrees and canons of the council of Trent”.

In example (7), which is set in a book-shop, the repair is delayed to the eighth turn with respect to the misunderstood turn (the second), due to the occurrence of a sub-dialogue (from line 3 to 7) started by AP, the shop assistant, in order to collect more information about the book requested by the client. Thus, the mishearing by the shop-assistant is brought out and detected only later, when he starts to repeat the title of the book and is corrected by the client (↓↓“The← decrees and canons of the council of Trent”).).

2.4. Linguistic and non-linguistic misunderstanding

Until now we have dealt only with linguistic misunderstanding, i.e. the misunderstanding which arises at a linguistic level, with regard to an uttered item/utter-

Fig. 4. Distance of repairs from source turns.

ance, which is subsequently made linguistically explicit (cf. step 2 in Fig. 3) and repaired linguistically as well (cf. step 3 in Fig. 3). Very often, however, in our everyday social intercourse (cf. the following episode), we are faced with misunderstandings which arise at a non-linguistic level, which is subsequently made linguistically and/or non-linguistically explicit and repaired, usually, linguistically.

In a market-place, early in the morning peddlers are preparing their stalls; one of them is carrying out from his truck some large covered baskets. A lady stops and asks him:

“Do you have any smaller ones?”

The seller uncovers one of them, and says:

“I sell olives.”

The lady says “Sorry”, and goes away.

Gestures, behaviors, objects, situations can act as non-linguistic triggers of misunderstanding, but often misunderstandings undergo a linguistic handling: in other words, a non-linguistic misunderstanding can be detected or made explicit and negotiated on a linguistic level. Consider, for example, the following exchange (taken from C2/BOF/F-01/b):

(8) 1 AA Dica?

R 2 Cm3 + [parzialmente sovrapposto ai due turni successivi] no ↓no si←

- 3 AA ↑ Ah, sie← ↓↓te insieme?←←
 4 Cw2 ↑(Noi si← ↑↑amo con:)←← (2syll).

- 1 AA Can I help you?
 2 Cm3 + [*partially overlapping subsequent turns*] no, ↓we ar←←
 3 AA ↑ Oh, are you ← ↓↓ together?←←
 4 Cw2 ↑(We ar← ↑↑e with:)←← (2syll).

In the example (8), a shop assistant in a library misunderstands the role of two people who are inside the shop, erroneously thinking they are clients, as the 'standard' situation might suggest. The misunderstanding is then revealed by the expression he uses to address them (see line 1), and it is immediately corrected by their reaction (see lines 2 and 3).

As is shown by this example, the schema of negotiation cycle proposed above seems to be applicable to a wider range of misunderstandings, of course only ones where an interaction is involved: misunderstandings of books or of written texts in general are not taken into account here. At the same time, the reverse process – from a linguistic misunderstanding to a non-linguistic repair – also occurs:

- (9) 1 Cw1 =E del resto: invece quello della professoressa (*Carovki*).+
 S 2 (*Carobbi*. Questo: -)
 3 AF =Quello sulla letteratura?
 4 Cw1 Sì. Esatto.
 5 AF Vediamo.
 (04)
 6 AF Questo?
 R 7 Cw1 ++ No. No no.
 8 AF Allora mi fa vedere quale ↓↓(perchè a volte)-←←
- 1 Cw1 =And about the others: the one by professor (*Carovki*).+
 2 (*Carobbi*. This one: -)
 3 AF =The one on literature?
 4 Cw1 Yes. Exactly.
 5 AF Let's see.
 (0.4)
 6 AF This one?
 7 Cw1 ++ No. No no.
 8 AF Then can you show me which one ↓↓(because sometimes)-←←

In the example (taken from C2/BOF/A 19/a), a potential misunderstanding of the referent intended by the speaker (i.e. a book) is detected and subsequently corrected (see line 7) thanks to the clarifying use of non-linguistic means on the part of the interlocutor (see line 6), after linguistic resources (see line 3) have failed to produce the understanding. Finally, owing to the difficulties that have arisen, the negotiation ends with a request for explicit gestural reference (see line 8).

Speakers, who are normally aware of weak spots in their former contributions, and interlocutors, who are not always sure about their interpretation, after reconstructing what has triggered the wrong interpretation, usually try to indicate the intended meaning more clearly, not only by simply hetero-correcting, as they sometimes do, but also by stressing or reinforcing the relevant features in their misunderstood turn. In doing so, the participant who carries out the repair chooses the means she/he judges more suitable to the specific situation, including non-linguistic forms of repair, depending on the factors that have triggered the misunderstanding itself.

As far as linguistic repair is concerned, in our opinion the repair pattern sketched by Schegloff (1992), which consists of four facultative, though ordered, components (i.e. "initiate-repair", "agreement-acceptance", "rejection", and "proper repair"), should be related to the speaker's intuitions about the misunderstanding that has occurred. The proper repair component, in particular, can be accomplished by a more or less literal repetition, when the speaker thinks that the interlocutor did not catch her/his utterance properly (cf. example 7, line 8), by specifying what the correct alternative was if there was an ambiguity (cf. the repair in example 3 and in example 5), by explicitly contrasting the interlocutor's interpretation, when it is easily reconstructed, with her/his intended meaning (cf. the following example).

- (10) 1 A: sì ma lei deve sapere anche
2 leggere un libro signorina nel senso che se lei c'ha questo problema
3 da affrontare e c'ha un libro in cui si parla anche di questo ma si
4 parla anche di tante altre cose lei deve cercare queste cose è una
5 lettura un po' eh
6 G: ah sì eh en passant diciamo
7 A: non en passant una lettura mirata
8 significa cioè deve deve cercare le le le informazioni che ce<rca>
- 1 A: you should also be able to
2 read a book, my dear, I mean if you are concerned with a problem and
3 there's a book that discusses it, but it also
4 discusses many other things, you have to look for these things it's a
5 reading I would call a bit
6 G: oh yes ehm let's say cursory
7 A: not cursory a selective reading
8 I mean you have to look for the the the information you're looking for

In this example taken from a tutorial meeting between a female student and a male teacher, the interpretation proposed by the interlocutor G of the explanation (lines 1–5) made by the speaker A (“a cursory reading”, line 6) is explicitly rejected by the speaker in his repair (cf. line 7) and overtly contrasted with G’s intended one (“a selective reading”), probably partly because of the asymmetry between the interactants.

The relationship between the diagnosis of a misunderstanding and its solution becomes particularly evident in man-machine interaction, where the task of recover-

ing from misunderstanding must be accomplished by an automatic system which is not endowed with the rich human intuition about understanding. So, in projecting a system that detects and corrects misunderstandings, designers must provide it with complex mechanisms for detecting a breakdown in coherence and reconstructing the wrong interpretation that constituted the reason for it (see McRoy and Hirst, 1995; Danieli, 1996).

Moreover, the presence of a pre-defined pattern (cf. above) is not only merely a formal feature of repairs, imposed by the need to include certain elements, but has the function of making them more easily recognized, and can be seen as just another interactional resource that operates in defense of mutuality and against misunderstanding. A repair turn, in fact, switches the exchange to a meta-level, which starts with the understanding obtained so far and has mutual understanding as its aim. When entering this meta-level, both participants must be aware of it, otherwise the mutuality cannot be restored.

“From this point of view, 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. Once we focus our ethnographic microscopes on misunderstandings, we can appreciate their extraordinary complexity and impact on human culture through the process of language socialization.” (Ochs, 1991: 60)

3. Some final remarks on the forms of *understanding*

In interactions, a general distinction can be drawn between *coming to understanding* (cf. Weigand, 1998), *understanding* (with different degrees, cf. Vendler, 1994), and *misunderstanding* on one hand, and *non-understanding* on the other. While *coming to understanding* and *misunderstanding* can be seen as two possible facets of the process of achieving an *understanding*, *non-understanding* conflicts with all three, since no comprehension is achieved.

The great importance of clarification sub-dialogues, repair turns, self- and other-correction in driving the participants towards mutual understanding cannot be neglected. Consider the following example, taken from C1/MB3, where we are faced with a complex process of coming to understanding which arises from a wrong collocation (“ricevimento professori” instead of “ricevimento studenti”), and involves both the speaker and the interlocutor in a joint effort of clarification:

- (11) 1 B: tu sai per caso_ di qualche lezione all’università eh
 2 no lezione ricevimento di professori? a cui tu potresti partecipare
 3 con un registratorino?
 4 D: # cosa?
 5 B: allora rispiego da capo
 6 D: meglio [RIDE] non ho mica tanto capito
 7 B: dunque # c’è lunedì o martedì un ricevimento di professori
 8 dove tu potresti andare?
 9 D: ma che tipo di ri<cevimento>?

- 10 B: eh ricevimento studenti scusa gli studenti che ricevono i
 11 i professori [RIDE]
 12 D: non ho mica capito sai comunque cos'è 'sto ricevimento
 13 professori?
 14 B: ma Anna quando un professore riceve gli studenti_
 15 D: # ah ho capito
 16 B: hai capito?
 17 D: ah
 18 B: normale ricevimento studenti
 19 D: ah
- 1 B: do you happen to know_ of some lesson at the university eh
 2 not a lesson a professors' tutorial which you could take part in
 3 with a small recorder?
 4 D: # what?
 5 B: OK I'll start all over again
 6 D: fine [she laughs] I didn't quite get that
 7 B: You'd better # on Monday or Tuesday is there a professors' tutorial
 8 where you could go?
 9 D: but what kind of tu<torial>?
 10 B: ehm students' tutorials what do you mean? students advising
 11 professors [she laughs]
 12 D: I didn't get that at all you know anyway what is this professors'
 13 tutorial?
 14 B: but Anna when a professor advises students
 15 D: # oh I see
 16 B: you see?
 17 D: oh
 18 B: a normal students' tutorial
 19 D: oh

In this example, understanding is obtained by means of several mechanisms aiming at establishing and checking it, over as many as fourteen turns. In order to make herself understood, the speaker uses repetitions¹⁷ (full repetition, line 7, or partial repetition, line 10), and paraphrase (line 14), and asks for a acknowledgment of the uptake by the interlocutor (line 16), finally correcting herself overtly when she realizes she used a wrong expression at the beginning ("professors' tutorial", line 2, instead of "students' tutorial", line 18). The interlocutor repeatedly displays her difficulties in producing an interpretation, by means of *what queries*¹⁸ (line 4), or explicit admission of not understanding (lines 6, 12), and

¹⁷ The various different functions repetition can perform are presented and discussed, among others, in Bazzanella (1996).

¹⁸ For a detailed analysis of *what queries* in relation to repair and repetition, cf. Fleisher Feldman and Kalmar (1996).

subsequent requests for clarification (lines 9, 12–13). Finally, the achievement of understanding is explicitly displayed by the interlocutor, on the speaker's demand (lines 15–16), and is underlined by discourse markers that indicate uptake (lines 17 and 19).

If the interlocutor has to make an effort to come to a correct understanding, the speaker also makes a complementary effort to ensure that her/his intention have been recognized. Preference mechanisms, such as adjacency pairs, topical coherence or different types of cohesion (cf. collocations, discourse markers, repetitions, etc.), have been indicated by researchers as examples of devices used by the speaker to achieve this aim, but, in spite of these devices, difficulties in achieving comprehension are widespread in everyday conversations, and – as we have seen – misunderstandings occur.

If we consider misunderstanding as a 'form of understanding' internal to the process of comprehension, which has to be monitored and negotiated interactionally,¹⁹ it should not be seen as a polar process (absence/presence of comprehension), but, rather, as a *continuum*. In this perspective, the problem shifts from one specific phenomenon (though multi-faceted it is) to the global interaction in which it takes place, making the analyst's work more difficult, but nearer to reality.

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¹⁹ The "causal explanation" (Dascal, 1985), and other phenomena such as lack of attention, interfere on the one hand with the propositional exchange we have in ordinary conversations (where interaction plays a central role), and on the other hand with the intentions which are ascribed to the interactants.

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