

Understanding 'Misunderstanding'

Abstract

The paper poses the general question 'to what extent must I understand another in order to adequately converse with him or her?' Using a dramatic example it is suggested that communicating, in the sense of understanding one another, and conversing may be separable activities. As an interpretative method to explore the question further, a single instance of misunderstanding is analysed in detail, amplified by additional illustrative data. Using the results of this analysis certain tentative conclusions are arrived at concerning the relationships between understanding problems and the social structure of conversation.

Introduction

We could be anthropologically naïve about conversation by proposing that it is a social activity in which people take turns at making noises. As such, it seems to be almost a compulsion among humans. Of all their social activities this one seems to be their favourite. They do it everywhere, under all sorts of conditions, for enormous amounts of time at a stretch, and, more often than not, without immediate practical purpose or result. Those in the know would explain that what people are doing when they converse is 'communicating' with each other. This, presumably, is the characteristic of verbal interaction that makes it worthy of the enormous time and energy devoted to it. But the idea behind this justification is that understanding is somehow basic to the activity of conversing. It is the point of doing it; it is needed in large amounts in order to do it; it is the very thing being done. Linking communication

with conversing is, in many ways, an insider's observation. For in an important sense, they are separate and separable. In what sense? I will try to indicate in what sense by a particularly suggestive example.

A Case of Deaf-Normal Interaction

There is a situation that often develops between someone who is not accustomed to deaf speech or allowing his lips to be read and someone who is congenitally deaf and has been taught to speak.¹ When they interact each soon discovers that the other's remarks are chronically unintelligible. Their reaction to this can produce an interaction characterised by one overriding technical problem: hiding lack of understanding. It is virtually a habit of many of the deaf to hide their lack of understanding of others. Conversely, ordinary speaker-hearers soon catch on to the embarrassment to be had in an exchange dominated by constant requests for the repetition and clarification of remarks. As the interaction proceeds each discovers that the other has taken the same tact as himself; each finds that the other is hiding his own difficulties in comprehension. The result is a very peculiar and energy-draining experience. The source of anxiety seems to be that both parties are determined to collaboratively produce an ordinary conversation while lacking some of the usual resources to do so. The fact that members can 'tool up' for this situation so fast and successfully

¹ This phenomenon was pointed out to me by Kay Meadows, University of California at San Francisco.

carry it through is a testimonial to their improvisational abilities. Intuitively, they can have their ordinary conversation notwithstanding the fact that they understand very little of what each other says, and *know* that they understand very little.²

Such extraordinary 'ordinary' conversations point to an important fact. In one sense, lack of understanding does not seem to present much of a technical problem for conversation. If we so much as misplace a comma our computer will be unable to talk to us further. Yet every conceivable kind of acoustic, linguistic, interpretative, and emotional distortion can occur within a conversation and we just go right on talking, seemingly with no trouble at all. When I speak of 'distortions' I am not just referring to categories imposed from the outside by linguists, group therapists, and computer science majors. I am referring to things which, on some occasions, members themselves treat as communicative troubles and mishaps. Sometimes a phrase someone does not hear or a word whose referent is not known becomes a matter that must be talked about and dealt with before conversationalists will proceed further. Other times, roughly the same sorts of occurrences never even get mentioned. Thus it can be asked, 'under what circumstances does an understanding problem become a technical problem for an ongoing conversation?' To learn how to ask this question better we will examine one kind of understanding problem in detail, a case of 'misunderstanding.' Instead of a failure

² The sense of 'ordinary' used here is slippery. Minimally I refer to two people attempting to display and show that they understand each other in the 'ordinary' ways, while privately knowing that they do not.

it will be regarded as a success. Only after years of training will two people possess the skills to successfully misunderstand each other.

Misunderstanding

Al: Did you hear what's happening with the mail strike?

Bob: No, what?

Al: No, I'm asking you.

In the above sequence a misunderstanding becomes visible.³ By 'misunderstanding' I mean an interpretative error that is discovered by its maker at least two utterances after it is made. The sequence can be diagrammed thusly:

A: utterance (in this case, a question)

B: reply (in this case, an answer)

A: correction (A corrects B's understanding of A's first utterance)

A first speaker says something to a second speaker. The second person misunderstands the first. But *while* he is not understanding he does not know that he is not understanding. This he finds out later. In fact both speakers discover the mistake retrospectively, after it has been made. They discover it in a certain order. The first speaker discovers it as he listens to the reply of the second. The second speaker discovers it because the first speaker discovers it and, therefore, after the first speaker. He discovers it when his reply is corrected.

Why would a sequence like this occur? Why would this kind of error come out

³ These data are from Matther Speier, *How to Observe Face-to-Face Communication*. Pacific Palisades, CA: Goodyear Publishers, 1973, p

and get a hearing in open conversational court? To answer this we introduce two new, if uninspiring, sociological roles and attempt to specify their respective duties.

The Misunderstander

Luckily Bob, who misunderstood the remark, is the person to whom the remark was directed and the one who, presumably, will talk next. This gives us a fighting chance. For if the person who makes this kind of error does not act on it, it will never surface. Bob can not discover his own error. Neither can anyone else who might be in such a conversation. Only Al, the misunderstood party, is in a position to detect the error. He has a unique resource that nobody else has; he knows what he meant to say. But to use this resource, Bob (the misunderstander) needs to unknowingly display the error to Al.

Thus Bob's duties are to make the mistake in the first place, to act on it quickly and, in acting on it, to display his mistake to Al without knowing he is doing so. Finally Bob should hear, understand, and perhaps acknowledge Al's correction.

The Misunderstanding

Even if all of the above happens Al must actually notice the error that it has become possible for him to notice and, having noticed it, he must say something. He must make his recognition public by a remark(s).

It is best to take up these 'duties' by discussing the exchange utterance by utterance.

Utterance #1: Requesting Information

Al wants some information about the mail strike from another. In describing how to request such information members ask themselves a common sense question: does the person to whom you are about to ask have the information? If you think he does you might ask him directly, *i.e.*, you might simply say, 'What's happening with the mail strike?' On the other hand if Al does not know definitely whether Bob has the information an alternate phrasing is available. He can construct a compound question of the form, 'Are you aware of the answer to X?', where X is the primary question:⁴

- A: Scuse me, but do you know how much longer it'll be?
B: Oh yes, about fifteen minutes I imagine.
A: Well, my appointment was for two o'clock 'n I have a class at three so—

If the person asked has the information, a two-part question can get a two-part answer as in the above. It says, 'Yes, I have the information,' and then gives it. However if the person does not have the information two-part answers like the following are not unusual:

- A: Do you know what Nancy is doing today?
B: No, do you?
A: No.
B: Why? Do you want to do something with her today?

Notice B's reply employs a certain kind of conversational 'shorthand.'

⁴ Data from Candy West, *Conversation and Sexism*. Unpublished masters thesis, University of California at Santa Barbara, 1973.

The first part says, 'No, I don't have the information.' The second part, 'Do you?' is short for, 'Do you know what Nancy is doing today?' By repeating the first two words of A's question, B is understood as asking A his entire question back again.

Now the first two utterances of the above exchange look like the first two parts of ours in most respects:

Al: Did you hear what's happening with the mail strike?

Bob: No, what?

Al's question is of the form, 'Did you hear X?' where X is some information. 'No, what?' is a two-part reply that appears to employ the kind of shorthand just discussed. But there is a slight, but crucial, difference. Bob does not say, 'No, did you?' he says, 'No, what?' The word 'what' appears in the *middle* of Bob's previous utterance so that, 'No, what?' becomes an abbreviation for, 'No, what's happening with the mail strike?' This abbreviated reply, then, does not throw Al's entire compound question back at him, but only the second part of it.

Activity Announcements

To understand why Bob replied in the way he did we must first consider the nature of his misunderstanding. Members often use certain remarks to announce their intention to say something in the near conversational future—to tell a joke (Did you hear the one about———?), relate a story (Wait 'til you hear what happened at work), give an invitation (Are you doing anything tonight?).⁵ One method

of announcing one's intention to say something in the future is to use a question. One form that such questions take is, 'Are you aware of X?', where X describes what you intend to say, hopefully without saying it!

A: Did I tell you Dr Glick will be gone for two weeks?

B: No.

A: Well, he will.

Clearly the form of such questions is the same as that of the requests for information we have previously discussed. Thus someone who wanted to announce his intention to relate certain information might do this in the same way as someone who wanted to ask another person for this information but did not know whether the other person had the information.

How could the recipient of such a question tell which kind of a question it was? That is, someone could say the same sentence, in the same way, placed at the same spot in a conversation, and mean a question one time and a rhetorical 'activity announcement' another. Under these circumstances the main response for solving this ambiguity appears to be information about 'who knows what.' That is, does the asker know or assume that you (the one asked) have this information? If questions like these can be answered you can infer whether the questioner is asking you or wanting to tell you. Although the author's data on this issue are limited, in all his data, no misunderstandings take place in connection with a question of this kind when it is clear from context 'who knows what.' For example, the excerpt starting with, 'Scuse me, but do you

⁵ The topics of story prefaces and pre-invitations were introduced by the late Harvey Sacks of the University of California at Irvine. Although he discussed

these topics at length in his lectures, to my knowledge neither of these topics has found its way into published literature, except as a cursory reference.

know how much longer it'll be?' occurred in a student health centre. The question was asked to a nurse by a student, who was waiting to be seen by a doctor.

If Bob's dilemma is as we have painted it, then his interpretative error, if it be an error, stems from his contextual assumptions, not from the way he listens to and interprets Al's words. Indeed there is evidence that this is so. When Bob says 'No' in 'No, what?' he provides his own assessment of whether he has the information being requested of him. To make such an assessment he must know in close detail what that information is. This, in turn, requires that he will listen to Al's original question well rather than badly.

Utterance #2: Why Was the Misunderstanding Displayed?

In the last section we complimented our misunderstander on his good listening. There were clearly many things about Al's comment which Bob understood correctly. He knew it was a two-part question, he knew when it ended, he was aware of the information at issue, and so on. Why would the next thing he said reveal the one thing about Al's question that he did not understand correctly? This reduces to asking why Bob used the word 'what' A simple 'yes' or 'no' is a perfectly fine reply to Al's question, even if considered an activity announcer. For such a reply simultaneously answers the question and either allows its asker to say what he wanted to say or blocks him from doing so. Compound answers like, 'No, what?' therefore give more than is needed.

But consider the story, joke, news, or other item which the answer to an

activity announcement either will or will not allow to be told. Many sensitive issues can be involved. What are his priorities and what are yours? Do you want to hear it? How much does he want to say it? Will your knowledge of the joke or news be information to him or a disappointment? Compound answers can respond to these issues. For example, let's say someone wants to tell you a story you have already heard. You might then respond to, 'have you heard about X?' by 'lying' and saying 'no,' meaning 'Go on and tell me.' Alternately, you could answer truthfully but add additional material giving him permission to tell you anyway, 'Well yes, but I'd like to hear about it from you.'

However, none of these contingencies seem to apply to our data. Bob is simply a man who does not know about the mail strike, but is willing to be told. Why does he not reply with a simple 'no' or some version thereof? There are at least two possibilities.

Ekman has pointed out that some kinds of compounding may be done in what could be called a frivolous way.⁶ For instance, members might at one point answer 'no' by shaking their head, at another point by using the word 'no', and at a third time by doing both of these. It is unclear there are sequential or communicative differences between these three actions. Yet sometimes one action is used and sometimes another. Thus, whether someone replies with 'no' or 'No, what?' may depend on their personal style, situational aesthetics, etc.

But 'What?' does convey important additional information which is

⁶ Personal communication from Paul Ekman, Human Interaction Laboratory, University of California at San Francisco.

relevant to some of the sensitive issues that were mentioned. 'No' simply allows the asker of the question to say what he wants to say. 'No, what?' obliges him to do so. It actively asks him for the information he, presumably, wants to give; it says 'tell me.' There are good reasons why someone might want to do more than merely allow another to say something that he has announced he wants to say. One might wish to indicate he *wants* to hear it, as well. Among other things, this could be one small way in which one person 'does' showing interest in another. It is also a way of displaying emotional interest in a forthcoming topic.

Why Was the Error Detected: 'Who Knows What' Revisited

So far our discussion gives us ample reason to divide the reply, 'No, what?' into two parts, the first saying that the misunderstander does not possess the information requested of him, and the second asking the misunderstood for that very information. In particular, 'what,' is short for 'What's happening with the mail strike?' Recalling our earlier discussion, a person who thinks another has certain information may use a direct quotation to request it. This rule of thumb has its counterpart in a hearer's maxim: If someone asks you an informational question directly, he thinks you have that information. Now, 'What's happening with the mail strike?' is a direct question. The situation, then, is this: Al, the misunderstood, asks someone else for information which he does not have. That someone turns around and asks him directly for the same information. Apparently the one he asked thinks he has the information. Why would his conversational partner think he knows about the mail strike? One explanation

is that the partner misheard his remark as an activity announcement rather than a real question, *i.e.*, he thought Al wanted to tell rather than Al wanted to be told. Yet this seems like a lot of fancy reasoning to do in a second of conversational time.⁷ It is true that we have not described the recognition of misunderstanding as it might occur in the consciousness of a speaker-hearer. For that phenomenological methods are required. But we have suggested how such a recognition can occur—by reinterpreting the conversational past to explain the present. And indeed, other work has supported this idea. For example, if I tease someone and he gets unexpectedly upset, this can lead to the recognition that he must have taken me seriously. This recognition, in its turn, instantly explains what he could be so upset about.⁸

Listening for Non-Understanding

Our consideration of one initial exchange has amply illustrated (but not verified) a more general conclusion: the discovery of misunderstanding requires detailed listening and delicate interpretation. Imagine someone listening to some arbitrary comment made by another. She is just listening along with no malice or forethought. As she listens it occurs to her 'what she meant' by a specific, previous remark, and how the current speaker's idea of what she meant contrasts with

⁷ The problem we are dealing with here is how a person interprets an utterance *as* he listens to it. It seems reasonable to think of conversational analysts' references to 'reasoning,' 'listening,' or 'procedures' as metaphors or glosses for such interpretative processes. This applies to the references in this paper most especially.

⁸ Thanks to Jerry Krakowski, University of California at Los Angeles, for this observation. He has been studying teasing for quite some time.

her own. Put this way it seems like a complex discovery, one that could only be made if the right person is listening to the right remark in just the right way. This is why it is important that the comment which displays the misunderstanding be made right after, or ‘adjacent to,’ the comment that was misunderstood. In a number of ways this creates a soil within which the recognition of interpretative errors can more easily grow:

1. Adjacent utterances, compared to other pairs, are almost always inspected for relationships—the second being heard as derived from, about, or a reply to the first. Members look for such relationships between a previous utterance and a ‘next’ one, merely because of the structural positioning of the two.
2. It appears that conversationalists take a personal interest in the fate of a remark right after they produce it. In what might be called their ‘later listening’ they lose linguistic interest in that remark, as such.
3. It has been found that there is a bias in multi-party conversations for a speaker just prior to current speaker to be selected as the next speaker.⁹ When this operates, the person who has been misunderstood will have to speak right after hearing the remark which

⁹ For a description of this bias, although not a detailed one, see Harvey Sacks, Gail Jefferson and Emanuel Schegloff, ‘A Simplest Systematics for the Organisation of Turn Taking for Conversation’. *Semiotica*, 1975.

displays this misunderstanding. Insofar as one listens to an utterance differently, perhaps ‘better,’ when one expects to speak next, this should increase the chances of detecting interpretative errors.¹⁰

For all of the above reasons and more, misunderstandings in conversation tend to be noticed quickly or not at all.

Utterance #3: Recycling Sequences

At this point, however laboriously, we have arrived at how and why Al might have privately noticed another’s interpretative error. But unless he mentions this error all we have is a private recognition which does not constitute a misunderstanding in the sense previously defined. Luckily, some of the reasons why the error was noticed in the first place, if extended a bit, will also illuminate why it might be made public. For present purposes the exchange might be rediagrammed thus:

1. Al: Question directed to Bob
2. Bob: Question directed back to Al
3. Al: Correction
4. Bob: _____
—

Since the remark that displays the error is a question directed to Al (and since this is a two-party conversation) Al will get the floor immediately after he

¹⁰ There is evidence for this claim in the literature on verbal memory. For example, it apparently takes more information (as in ‘binets’) about a word to be able to hear and repeat it, than it does to hear and interpret it. For more details see Norman Donald, *Memory and Attention*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1969.

detects the error. This might be enough in itself. For, as mentioned, there is evidence that members linguistically police their utterances right after they produce them. If they see certain errors, and if they are given an opportunity to speak, they just mention the errors in that place.

But additionally, since Al will have to talk next there is the question of what he is going to say. The second question, the one directed to Al, is hardly open-ended. It is derived from the first question. So in a real sense Al is faced with producing his-reply-to-Bob's-reply-to-his-question.

In choosing such a reply there is an obvious consideration. He has discovered that his conversational partner thinks he knows about the mail strike and will now be telling about it. Of course he can't do that. If he simply says he does not know, or some version thereof, this will create a puzzle. He will then have to explain. Now one thing members are very good at is anticipating future sequences. In particular, they say things now which they can see they may have to say later. In this case, replying with, 'No, I'm asking you,' anticipates this problem. It uses the very place where a puzzle or problem could have been created to solve it instead. By telling his conversational partner about his misunderstanding, Al simultaneously provides him with an explanation of why Al does not have certain information and is not giving it.

It is possible to be a bit more specific about this 'problem' or 'puzzle.' When someone leads you to believe they are going to say one thing, and they say something else, this can be interpreted as a joke or sarcasm. It is this kind of 'false conversational promise' that is used in the child's word game:

A: You know what?

B: What?

A: That's what.

Thus the original misunderstood party, if he does something else with the third utterance than make a correction, is himself in danger of being misunderstood. Correcting a first misunderstanding, therefore, prevents the possible occurrence of a second misunderstanding.

However the correction, 'No I'm asking you,' is not just preventative; it performs positive sequential work. It recycles the first two utterances. That is, when someone responds in the wrong way because they did not understand you, you need not respond to their misinformed comment. There are ways of going back to what you said originally and 'starting over again.' In this connection the construction of the correction is interesting. It starts with a 'no' which seems to be generally used after someone responds in the wrong way. The 'no' apparently acts as a stand in for 'you misunderstood' or 'that's wrong.' Then comes a description of the original utterance. 'What's happening with the mail strike?' is characterised as a case of 'I'm asking you.' This characterisation is designed to show how the response to the original question was wrong. In the response, Bob asked Al; now Al corrects by saying that he is asking Bob. Bob is thus given a 'second chance' to respond to the original utterance, as originally intended. Here is another example of this kind of recycling:

A: All I want is somebody to come and help me with this work, for my husband to have a decent

- job and for people to quit bugging me.
- B: You know, there is a homemaker service in town. I don't know what their requirements are.
- A: I've called them and I haven't got any pay to give them. They all want money.
- B: No. That's not the group I meant. There's a group that provides homemakers for people who can't afford it.
- A: Well, where are they? Call them up. Do something, but don't tell me about it because they won't do anything for me. I'm too tired to go on anymore. I just can't.

All this can be summarised in a loose way: using a certain turn at talking to correct a misunderstanding solves various sequencing problems. This may be why such corrections are made. In fact there is a gross, sort of statistical, observation that can be made about understanding problems of all kinds with single utterances or their parts. They are dealt with quickly or they are not dealt with at all. This follows in part because the reason understanding problems are dealt with at all stems from their causing sequencing problems. If one successfully gets through the sequencing (the succession of turns at talk) in the immediate vicinity of the occurrence of misunderstanding, lack of hearing, and so on——— the reason for dealing with it as a problem often vanishes:

- A: Hello.
- B: Howard? Is my sister there?
- A: Are you clear on the fairgrounds?
- B: Am I what?
- A: She's in the shower.

- B: I just wanted to ask her about my parents.

The Politics of Mistakes

In speaking of mis-understanding, we presuppose that the hearer of Al's remark made some kind of innocent 'mistake.' But on the face of it, all we have is two proposed versions for what an utterance means. For one or both parties to see a mistake, additional subjective understandings must be present—understandings we neither addressed nor provided evidence for:¹¹

1. That there is something called 'what the utterance means' which is different to what it says.
2. That there is a sensible answer to 'what does the utterance mean?' which is available to the participants (in terms of memory, cognition).
3. That, of the two proposed versions of what the remark means, one of them is 'correct,' only one of them is correct, and no others are correct.
4. That the version of meaning proposed by the remark's author is the correct one, and the version proposed by the listener is incorrect.

In complex and interesting ways, these conditions are regularly not met when people actually pose alternate significances for a remark.

¹¹ By 'subjective' we literally mean pertaining-to-the-subject—things these people may be inwardly aware of that are not the same as, or necessarily evidenced by, what they say to each other.

First, the meaning of a remark is not a static, unchangeable entity. As he says it, the remark's author may or may not be cognitively aware of clear intentions or significances he 'means' by it. And there are always many different significances and meanings which can be assigned to a remark. Given this, some particular thing that Al might have meant by his question is reflexively created by Bob's misinterpretation. Every response to Al which Al can see as somehow 'wrong' can suggest to him different, describable things he 'really' meant to say:¹²

- Al: Did you hear what's happening with the mail strike?
Bob: You mean there's a song called 'what's happening with the mail strike?'
Al: No, no I mean do you know if it's over or not?

Further, Al's response may not always be in good faith—a mere voicing of his subjective understanding. There are many good reasons to propose someone has gotten things interpretatively wrong, whether or not you genuinely believe he has.

One of these reasons, is a fight over which of you knows what he is talking about. In this regard, we implicitly make use of a questionable assumption in deciding who was the hero and who was the villain in our exchange. The claim was that Al alone knew what he meant to say. This is, presumably, why Al's version of his remark was correct and Bob's was a 'mistake.' But this is not the general view taken by conversationalists. Different proposals of what someone means by a remark can set up highly political situations, as

any veteran of group therapy can attest to. In such situations it is by no means agreed upon, merely because someone is the person who said something, that she knows best what she meant by it:

- M: You haven't lived long enough to know what I say.
D: Oh, don't give me that, I've had a hell of a life//I know
S: You're trying to place yourself on some pedestal.
M: No.
S: You know all—the way you talk you sound like—as if—you know everything.
M: I know a few things, yes.
D: Just because of our age doesn't mean we don't know anything.
M: I didn't say that.
D: Well, you said that//
M: The statement I made is—

Exchanges like the above frequently occur in arguments. Others can use something you say as the basis for unfortunate inferences such as 'You're trying to place yourself on some pedestal.' In defending yourself you can deal with the inferences directly or employ an alternate strategy. You can redefine what you said in the first place in the light of the inferences that were made from it. Since you did not say or mean the thing they used to make their inference, the inference is incorrect. This strategy is so generally available that many arguments are literally peppered with accusations that people do not understand and have not understood.

Even when others are willing to treat you as the expert on what you mean, there are additional complications. When it turns out that they thought you meant something other than what you meant, this may not be interpreted as a technical misunderstanding. The fault

¹² A made up example, not real data. Unless otherwise indicated the data in this paper are transcriptions of naturally occurring talk.

may lie with what you said, rather than what they heard.

For example, it is often possible to anticipate how ‘most people,’ some group, or a particular person (the ‘recipient’) will interpret an utterance. People use this knowledge to set up interactional traps for a hearer (e.g., the children’s tease—You know what? What? That’s what!), exhibit his ignorance, play jokes on him, and so on a well known tactic is to embed volatile information in a remark delivered as some kind of humour. Since ‘I was only kidding’ it becomes more difficult for my target to take offence or accuse me of deliberate insult. In this regard, the perfect tease has been defined as a remark delivered so perfectly that only its author knows if he really means it or not.

These possibilities are not unknown to hearers, and they often hold a speaker responsible for what his remark ‘sounds’ like it means. If you appear to imply something negative about another, and you propose you really did not mean ‘that,’ your correction may become more of an apology or an excuse than a correction of a misunderstanding.¹³

(two people talking about a date between them)

A: Y’know where San Nicholas is over by the//a

B: (Sighs) You mean a dorm?

A: Well yeah but I’m gonna move//out when

B: Never mind what’s yer room number?

A: Why don’t I meet’cha outside?

B: Ah come on(!) huh(?) What ’a ya think I’m gonna do anyway(?)

A: Oh it’s not that uh it’s just that—that my roommate sleeps from six ta’ten. She’s gotta work nights//so

B: I see well uh I’m not noted for bein’ on time so why don’t ’cha meet me in the lobby(?) where it’s warm.

Clearly this section has opened up a whole different line of enquiry, one which we can not hope to go into here. However a brief summary of the issue can be made. A hearer interpreting a remark’s meaning differently than its producer, and the hearer showing the producer this doth not, by itself, a misunderstanding make. Conversationalists may not treat this as a technical or linguistic difficulty, but as a political, moral or psychological one. They may not even resolve the issue, or, if they do resolve it, they may do so in other ways than assigning to one person the role of someone who was ‘misunderstood’ and to another the role of someone who ‘misunderstands.’ Even when what they say to each other appears to suggest a misunderstanding, their subjective understandings and intentions may be different.

Tentative Conclusions: Conversation as a Mechanism?

Although the previous discussion has been preliminary in every conceivable sense of the word, its details are commensurate with the results of a respectable body of other work on non-understanding:

1. For a phenomenon such as ‘misunderstanding’ to become visible many sequential and social requirements have to be met. Therefore many things which ‘could’ be seen as misunderstandings will not be

¹³ Data from Candice West, *op. cit.*, 1973.

treated as such in an ongoing conversation.

2. Understanding problems appear to be 'local phenomena' which become visible and get dealt with primarily as a result of speaker-hearers' taking turns at talk. They thus tend to be dealt with quickly after they occur or not at all.
3. An understanding problem can disrupt the moral order from a member's point of view and dealing with it can restore that order. A misunderstanding can be mentioned and dealt with so as to re-establish the proper turn-taking, topic at hand, etc., which has gone astray because of the presence of the misunderstanding.
4. Treating an understanding problem as a 'technical' and/or linguistic problem is, to some extent, an interpretative choice of speaker-hearers. The same phenomenon may alternately be treated as a moral, strategic or psychological event.
5. Conversing and other forms of informal discourse do not appear to be easily subject to 'single point failures.' Unlike a symphony, or a jury trial—a recognised problem in some part of the conversing process, seldom has the potential to ruin the entire conversation, or to stop conversation dead in its tracks.

More generally, we started the paper by asking whether there were failures in understanding which were somehow failures in conversing as well, analogous to making an error in a

proof. In speaking this way—indeed in much of the paper—we relied on the metaphor of conversation as a 'mechanism,' like Newton viewed the physical world.¹⁴ The Newtonian 'mechanism' is a strange mixture of two concepts—determinism and human intention or design¹⁵

Sociologists have less of a problem 'arguing from design' because their analogs to the mechanism (social facts, structures, institutions, norms) are less deterministic, and because baseball games, jury trials, and the like are, indeed, designed by humans, and intended to work in certain ways. We can therefore credibly speak of something like a misunderstanding as posing 'technical' problems for maintaining some form of discourse.

But this does not seem to be the way members treat non-understanding. Non-understanding appears often as local, regular, meaningful interpretations of communicative events which are arrived at and dealt with in much the same way as other meanings. Far from subverting discourse, our 'misunderstanding' was a small sequence whose nature and significance became reflexively available via the ongoing discourse itself.

In sum, the study of understanding troubles seems to indicate that

¹⁴ In fact, we shamelessly used some of the vernacular, if not the actual methods, of conversational analysis throughout the paper.

¹⁵ As far as we know the physical and biological worlds have no intentions, and therefore did not design these worlds to work in one way rather than another. Engineering is not physics precisely because it must work within the laws of physics to design things (like the proverbial Newtonian clock) that do what humans want (intend) them to do.

conversation, and other forms of informal discourse, are not 'mechanisms,' either in the Newtonian, Darwinian or normative senses. Certainly, participants do not set out to have a 'conversation' in the same explicit way they see themselves singing a song, conducting a jury trial or making a political speech. Yet norms about communication do act locally as realities and reference points for saying things, and understanding things that get said. But so do a variety of other factors that intermix with, and sometimes supersede these norms. Such factors include the definition of the social occasion, ongoing relationships, individual histories and people's history with each other, and unstated intentions/understandings.

Methodological Note

The format of this paper, that of the 'annotated transcript,' was used in the ancient beginnings of conversational analysis. A series of reasoned speculations and commentary are appended to a single piece of data and amplified by other data which illustrate subsidiary points.¹⁶ I vastly prefer Glaser and Strauss' term 'grounded theory,' since I used this format as an interpretative method.

Certainly, one learns more by collecting large amounts of comparable (and better) data. To deal with the considerations raised in 'The Politics of Mistakes,' these data need supplementation. Work on deception, on white lies, on intentions, compliments and criticisms deliberately withheld, indicate that

private understandings can be handled so fluently, they may not be accessible via external data records such as a video or audio tape. The most practical method for gaining access to these phenomena may be the observations and reports of trained self-observers.¹⁷

¹⁶ For more details refer to 'Conversational Analysis,' in Howard Schwartz and Jerry Jacobs, *Qualitative Sociology: A Method to the Madness* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1979, pp. 340 – 352).

¹⁷ Refer to A. Lincoln Ryave and N. Rodriquez, *Systematic Self-Observation* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, forthcoming) for a manual on self-observation and a review of their studies on 'privately held' intentions and understandings. For work on the difficulties in detecting white lies refer to Paul Ekman's work on cues to deception, e.g. *Telling Lies: Clues to Deceit in the Marketplace, Politics and Marriage* (New York: Norton, 1992).