Troubles with mutualities: towards a dialogical theory of misunderstanding and miscommunication

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INTRODUCTION
This chapter will provide an overview of some conceptual preliminaries for a theory of misunderstanding and miscommunication in discourse, with particular reference to spoken interaction. The overarching theoretical framework is dialogical or dialogistic (Marková and Foppa, 1990; 1991), as opposed to a more traditional ‘monological’ approach based upon information processing models of cognition and conduit (or transfer) models of interpersonal communication (for some discussion, see Marková, 1990). Empirical data drawn from dialogue-interpreted institutional encounters will be used to illustrate the microgenesis of miscommunication events and the varying degrees of (and sometimes lacking) mutualities among participants.

‘Misunderstanding’ and ‘miscommunication’ are often used together with, as substitutes for or themselves being substituted by, other terms such as: problematic talk, communicative non-success, conversation failure, comprehension problems (or failures), communicative breakdown, repair(able)s, conflict talk. Some of these will be discussed more comprehensively later on, and here I will just attempt a first approximation.

Aronsson (1991) defines ‘problematic talk’ (approximately) as talk leaving discrepancies between parties in the interpretation/understanding of what is said and done. Aronsson notes that such discrepancies can be both deliberate and non-deliberate. The former category includes acts (more or less deliberate on the part of speakers) like lies, cheating, deliberate equivocation, deliberately misleading questions (and responses), rhetoric or persuasive devices with a weak substantial grounding, exaggerations and understatements, evasiveness and strategic silence etc. For my purposes, I will, following Aronsson, exclude such cases and limit the category of ‘miscommunication’ to talk non-

deliberately generating or mobilizing and sometimes leaving discrepancies between parties in the interpretation or understanding of what is said or done in the dialogue. This would cover cases like non-deliberate unclarity of expression, misrepresentations, mishearings, misunderstandings, misconstruals of others’ utterances, misquotes, misattributions (of intentions to interlocutors), talk at cross-purposes, mismatches of interactional and topical coordination etc.

Miscommunication sequences often involve conflicting views and claims about things talked about. Hence, we come close to what may be called ‘conflict talk’ (Grimshaw, 1990). In addition to cognitive disensus, such talk often involves social or emotional conflicts (e.g. emotional or personal hostility, competition, non-cooperative attitudes). If, as most contributors to Grimshaw’s (1990) volume do, one stresses the aspect of social conflict in defining ‘conflict talk’, then it implies a slightly different focus than the one on ‘miscommunication’ to be adopted in this paper.

UNDERSTANDING IN DIALOGUE: SOME CONCEPTUAL PRELIMINARIES
It is hardly feasible to discuss miscommunication and misunderstanding without first adumbrating a general conceptual framework for understanding in dialogue (or some similar area, such as understanding in real-time, or face-to-face, interaction). However, this is a comprehensive undertaking, and it will not be possible to do more than briefly state some basic points. Some corollaries for misunderstanding will be noted under some points, but the topic of miscommunication will be taken up systematically later on.

(a) What the speaker (A) says in discourse is directed both to (what A says about) ‘the world’ and to A as a speaking subject (what he or she says and means, feels or does). It follows from this claim that understanding is (at least) a four-term relation between the utterance, the one (B) who is to understand the utterance and the two directions of inferring from the utterance, i.e. ‘the world’ and ‘the speaker’. Sometimes, focus is only on B’s understanding of something in ‘the world’. For example, we can argue that a given person ‘does not understand’ the field of biochemistry or the concept of democracy. It might be better to talk about this in terms of partial (lack of) knowledge or biased knowledge of ‘the world’. Understanding and misunderstanding (in discourse) concern degrees of intersubjectivity and are therefore pertinent to mutualities in dialogue.
(b) Understanding an utterance is not a matter of decoding signs (finding out their allegedly inherent linguistic meanings) but implies connecting something (the utterance that has to be understood) with a context, i.e. an outside, which, by definition, goes beyond the utterance itself. Utterance understanding is intrinsically related to understanding the context(s) in which the utterance is embedded (Graumann and Wintermantel, 1984), and these contexts include aspects of concrete settings, as well as co-text, knowledge structures, frames and premises for communication (Goodwin and Duranti, 1992; Linell, 1995). Such contexts are either attended to, known or assumed in advance or are generated as support for interpretations being made. Understanding involves active inferencing, using utterances-in-contexts as cues or evidence in the search for a relevant interpretation (Gumperz, chapter 5).

It would be wrong to think of contexts as existing prior to utterances, or as being causally linked to them. Rather, utterances, their interpretations or understandings, and the contexts are intrinsically linked; nothing is entirely prior to the rest. Thus, understanding and context are in many ways developed in parallel, as aspects of the same communicative process (Linell, 1995). Discourse and contexts together occasion expectations of how the present should be understood and anticipations of what is going to come later in the interaction. Chances for successful understanding are enhanced, if the relevant expectations are accurately cued (cf. Gumperz, 1982, on contextualization cues).

(c) Understanding is related to responding. According to one type of analysis, the activity of interpretation or understanding can be analytically divided up into perception (attending to and identifying stimuli), (linguistic) apprehension (apprehending (some) aspects of meaning potentials in the expressions used), integration/evaluation (integrating message with prior knowledge, taking a stand with respect to it), and responding (or at least preparing for or selecting a response to be displayed). These levels are basically analytic, although some communicative problems can be located primarily at particular levels (see examples below).

Central to a dialogical analysis, however, is that preparing for responding is pervasive throughout the understanding processes. Vološinov (1973, p. 102) argues that ‘any genuine kind of understanding will be active and will constitute the germ of a response’. In dialogue, B usually displays (some of) his or her understanding of A’s prior contribution by contributing another utterance, a response, to the discourse. This will then be evaluated, interpreted and responded to by A. At the same time, every conversational contribution is built in order to invite the other to understand, i.e. to respond by internal and/or external reactions, i.e. thinking and reciprocated utterances, respectively. Thus, understanding and responding are intimately tied together.

(d) Since understanding in communication involves understanding each other and each other’s contributions to the communicative exchange, we must analyse it in terms of shared and mutual understanding. Accordingly, Gumperz (chapter 5), emphasizing that understanding involves active inferencing, talks about shared inferencing. Sharedness (or commonality), mutuality and reciprocity are related though distinct concepts (Graumann, chapter 1). ‘Shared knowledge’ and ‘shared understanding’ simply refer to the amounts of knowledge that are or become common to interlocutors, partly as a result of the communicative process itself. ‘Mutuality’ is most often used about relevant assumptions, background knowledge and premises for communication which are taken to be mutually known. This involves circularity and multiple embedded beliefs; each communicating individual assumes that he or she shares knowledge (‘common ground’) with the other(s) and that the other(s) know(s), or assume(s), that each communicator makes this first-mentioned assumption of common ground (Clark and Marshall, 1981).

‘Reciprocity’, finally, would be more directly tied to the dialogical activity itself, referring to the circumstance that, in the copresence of others, any act by one actor is an act with respect to the other; more precisely, any act is done with the purpose or expectation that the other will do something in return, i.e. respond, or as we could also say, reciprocate the action (Linell and Luckmann, 1994). ‘Reciprocity’ and ‘mutuality’ in dialogue would thus concern premises and presuppositions for the goal of achieving sharedness; at the same time, of course, they are constituted by and inferred from the communicative activities themselves.

There are commonalities, mutualities and reciprocities of different kinds and degrees in talk among people (Graumann, chapter 1). For example, one may talk about a hierarchy of levels from shared (or joint) references, via shared topics to shared perspectives on topics (on perspectives, see Graumann, 1990). Basically the first level is focused in communication with, for example, severely handicapped people, when a lot of energy must be invested in trying to secure common references (Collins and Marková, chapter 10), and very little of topical substance gets said about the referents (cf. also (h) below on asymmetrical demands for understanding). On the other hand, the hierarchy above
is misleading in that perspectives are present at all levels; there can be no references or topics without a perspective (Rommelteit, 1990). Convergence of attention (joint reference) implies a shared point-of-view. Likewise, whenever you speak about a certain topic (or set of topics), you do it under a certain aspect or perspective; that is, when something is topicalized, it must be topicalized in a certain way. Yet, sometimes it may be useful to talk about the ‘same’ topic (topical substance) being treated by different speakers under different perspectives (e.g. policemen and suspects talking about the same unlawful acts within different framings, cf. Linell and Jönsson, 1991, or, similarly, the counsel and the witness in Gumperz’ (chapter 5) rape trial example; see also Graumann, 1990, on divergence of perspectives).

(c) Understanding is a goal for both listener (B) and speaker (A). It is arguable that A’s primary goal in uttering something (U) is to try to have B realize something (x), feel something (y), and/or (prepare him/her to) do something (z), i.e. to bring about cognitive, emotive and/or conative reactions in B. However, A may also use U to develop his/her own understanding and attitudes in these dimensions. Besides, the speaker A is hardly acting as a solitary individual in uttering U. B is ‘present’ in A’s mind in that A, in designing U, takes (more or less) into consideration assumptions about his/her social relation to B and about B’s cognitive, emotive and conative state (cf. the notion of ‘other-orientation’ or ‘recipient design’; Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974). Furthermore, B often influences A’s verbalization by contributing listener reactions (feedback, back-channelling) and sometimes even filling in substantial parts of A’s utterances (cf. ‘co-authoring’). These listener activities will ‘help’ A understand what s/he tries to communicate. In addition, we must keep in mind that in a conversation, the current listener is nearly always potentially the next speaker.

Speaker and listener collaborate on constructing shared understanding. But the distribution of communicative labour and epistemic responsibility (Rommelteit, 1991; Farr and Rommelteit, chapter 11) is nevertheless asymmetrical. The speaker is assigned the status of interpretive authority when it comes to the meaning of his/her own utterances. But this holds most unambiguously for reference, not necessarily for descriptive (or other) aspects of meaning. In other words, the speaker knows what the intended referents are, but s/he may be mistaken in her/his choice of words for describing them. Thus, when A says something and B does not share or come to share A’s understanding of the matter, we are not always justified in saying simply that B misunderstands. There is an inextricable relationship between ‘misrepresentation’ (misleading expression) and ‘misunderstanding’.

(f) There is no such thing as ‘the correct and complete understanding’ of a dialogue contribution or utterance. In a world of multiple social realities (Schutz, 1945), utterances can always be understood in different ways, and understanding is necessarily partial and fragmentary (Rommelteit, e.g. 1985). Utterances are in themselves essentially allusive and incomplete (Spurling, 1977, p. 51, with reference to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Marková, 1989) and have to be interpreted in context (b) above). At the same time, speakers leave utterances indeterminate on many points, since they can not and do not wish to commit themselves to complete specification. The dialogue is a web of partial mutualities in which, to paraphrase Bilmes (1992, p. 80), conversationalists manipulate each other’s understandings of each other’s utterances (cf. (c) above). This of course does not mean that communication is always hopelessly incomplete and ambiguous. Although actions, utterances, discourses and texts are open to multiple understandings and interpretations, there are, in most cases, routines (e.g. the so-called everyday principle; Garfinkel, 1967), mutual checking procedures, contextual features and mutual trust, which lead to reasonable and sufficient degrees of intersubjectivity. Using discourse supported by contexts, communicators can often accomplish an intersubjective ‘understanding-for-all-practical-purposes’. As Clark and Schaefer (1987) put it, actors are content with understanding each other ‘well enough for current purposes’. In communicative practices, ‘the criterion of understanding is not a demonstrable identity in meaning assignments but it is the extent to which a reached understanding enables further activity’ (Streeck, 1980, p. 146). Sufficient understanding (and acceptance) of a prior contribution is normally presupposed, when one of the interlocutors continues with a new contribution to discourse (Clark and Schaefer, 1987, p. 36).

(g) All understanding is situated and activity-specific, which means that it is subject to premises, purposes and rationalities tied to social activities and situations. Human cognition and communication is perspectivized (Graumann and Wintermantel, 1984; Rommelteit, 1990). Even so-called decontextualized meanings are dependent on contexts and particular genres (Wertsch, 1991; Linell, 1992); there is no such thing as the basic (‘literal’) way of understanding an utterance entirely out of contexts.
We noted that understanding is responsive in character. Listeners, however, can relate to utterances in different activity-specific ways, depending on what kind of responding is called for. For example, a listener who need not prepare him- or herself for immediate responding can sometimes adopt a more reflective attitude (e.g. when listening to a lecture, or watching a TV programme), while the premises of listening are quite different if he or she must be prepared to respond immediately on an utterance-to-utterance basis (as when he or she is directly involved in a conversation). A rather special predicament is at hand for the dialogue interpreter, who, ideally, should understand in order to translate rather than to contribute a new utterance to the discourse (see below).

(h) It follows from the preceding points that demands for understanding vary in depth and extension between situations. Situations vary not only in terms of the nature of shared understanding actually achieved, but also in the depth of intended understanding (Naess, 1966, on depth of intention: Allwood, 1976, on depth of understanding). An informal chit-chat is quite different from, say, an academic seminar or a diplomatic negotiation. Furthermore, demands vary not only across situations, but also among parties within situations. Many situations are asymmetrical with respect to knowledge and participation (Linell and Luckmann, 1991). Not all dialogues are designed to make interlocutors build up identical knowledge structures, but instead there may be limited ambitions regarding sharedness; interlocutors have complementary roles or different claims and expectations with regard to understanding. Consider, for example, expert-novice communication, or, to mention a few more extreme cases, interaction involving infants, people with severe aphasia, or with foreigners with limited or no knowledge in one’s own language. Such persons sometimes face global, i.e. all-embracing, comprehension problems (Bremer et al., 1988, pp. 129ff), and it is often difficult enough to establish common reference (Collins and Marková, chapter 10).

Goals of establishing shared and mutual understanding are not universally upheld. In addition to the cases just mentioned, there are those in which actors, unilaterally or bilaterally, try to conceal their intentions or levels of understandings, keep secrets, or use the joint discourse in manipulatory or devious ways (cases which have been excluded from further analysis here, see above). However, one should note that such activities too presuppose some reciprocities and mutualities, e.g. in the coordination of turns and in the consideration of the other’s cognitive background assumptions (Aronsson, 1987).

(i) Understanding in dialogue has to be sufficiently intersubjective (shared, mutual) (d) above), even though the requirements of 'sufficiency' vary between actors and across activities (g.h) above), and it is part of a continuous, collective process, where interactors mutually check understandings. What is said and understood gets continuously updated on a turn-by-turn basis; each contribution to a dialogue displays (or can display) some understanding or reaction to the prior contribution and is in itself a resource for the understanding to be constituted through and be partially externalized in the next contribution. At the same time, the effort for intersubjectivity calls for some degree of meta-level management of interaction and understanding: not all contributions will be entirely directed towards topical substance (e.g. Ringle and Bruce, 1982, p. 206), but we will also have feedback seeking and giving, metacommunicative comments, repairs, reformulations, and extended negotiations of meaning etc. (Allwood et al., 1990). These devices can also be regarded as means for detecting impending or incipient misunderstandings and for preventing their further development.

At the same time, we note that not all aspects of dialogue contributions can be checked and controlled; too many meta-comments and remedial side-sequences threaten to disrupt smooth communication on topical substances. Moreover, there are, presumably in all cultures, rules of etiquette and politeness which serve to mitigate or even inhibit attempts at thematizing and/or repairing some kinds of possible misunderstandings. Utterances are produced not only ‘with respect to’ the other but also ‘in respect for’ the other (and oneself) (Goffman, 1955). Instead of searching for maximal explicitness, human communication builds upon a considerable element of mutual trust. This means that, even though the empirical reality exhibits a lot of variation, communication is based on an implicit contract (Rommetveit, 1974) that the speaker is, through his or her utterance, supposed to offer something new to what is already given in the discourse, or taken-as-given in the framing of the situation, and the listener is committed to making sense of what is said in the given contexts. Or, as Rommetveit (1985, p. 189) has put this in other words, 'intersubjectivity must in some sense be taken for granted in order to be attained'.

(j) The points so far adduced show that processes of understanding and misunderstanding are multi-layered and multi-faceted. Something can go wrong at different levels of the understanding process. Insufficient mutualities may be located at different levels, e.g. those of (joint) attention, topics
or perspectives on topics ([d] above). Several taxonomies of misunderstandings build upon this insight. One is due to Grimshaw (1980), who distinguishes the following types of misapprehension: nonhearing (B is unable to perceive a structure in the incoming signal due, e.g., to inaudibility, noise, hearing loss, or speaker's use of an unknown language), spurious nonhearing (B pretends not to have heard), mishearing or misperception (B reinterprets words into A's utterance that A has not spoken), non-understanding (B hears and identifies the words but is unable to relate the utterance to any type of context), partial understanding (B understands something 'on the surface' but does not grasp implied or deeper meanings), misunderstanding (in a narrow sense) (B does develop a specific interpretation, but this does not match what A has intended, e.g. due to different frames, interests or perspectives), and deliberate misunderstanding (B does understand but acts as if he or she did not).

If we shift perspectives a little and speak of different levels of misrepresentation, e.g. cases in which (a) there is no expression, of the expression is unidentifiable (as is sometimes the case with infant communication or aphasic speech), (b) there is an expression but reference and/or meaning (sense) are unclear, and (c) the reference is clear but the imputed meaning is unclear or disputable. These levels of misrepresentation will generate their own characteristic understanding problems (Clark and Schaefer, 1987, pp. 22–3).

It was noted before that the levels of understanding are basically analytic in character. Understanding is normally oriented directly to finding a situated meaning and an appropriate response. So, for example, there is no context-free perception occurring before apprehension. Studies of 'simple' mishearings (Grimshaw’s third level; (c) of above) have shown that they are nearly always locally relevant and contextually reasonable; they too are cognitively penetrated misunderstandings (Linell, 1983).

COMMUNICATION AND MISCOMMUNICATION

Obviously, 'miscommunication' is not essentially different from 'communication'. Communication is a matter of degree, understanding is partial and fragmentary, there is no single correct understanding of an utterance. This means that miscommunication cohabits with communication in dialogue. Without communication, and hence some level of mutual understanding, we cannot notice and do something about lacking mutualities and apparent miscommunication. Indeed, salient (and perhaps fruitful) misunderstandings occur, because parties try to understand each other, and hence such episodes may increase the depth of understanding in ways that, without them, would be difficult to come by.

Moreover, the processes of utterance understanding are largely automatic, and the listener cannot misunderstand intentionally-in-action; what he or she tries to do there and then is simply to understand on the premises accessible to her or him. She or he can detect the misunderstandings (the lack of fit with some other understanding, troubles with mutualities) only retrospectively, perhaps with the active help of the interlocutor. In dialogue, miscommunication episodes are approached by the same mechanisms that are operative in 'normal' communicative activities (repair, meta-talk, reciprocated role-taking etc.). In some contexts it may therefore be wise to drop the prefix 'mis-' altogether. In any case, we must adopt a relativist conceptualization of communication 'failures' or 'inadequacies' (Coupland, Wiemann and Giles, 1991, p. 8). Furthermore, misunderstanding and miscommunication in dialogue (and in communication in general, e.g., Nystr"{o}nd, 1992) is dialogically constituted and collectively generated. This 'dialogical theory of miscommunication' will be further substantiated below.

First, however, some terminological and methodological issues must be confronted.

This chapter will deal with misunderstandings in (specific kinds of) dialogues. In the analysis, it is probably necessary to work, at least partly, with everyday terms such as 'misunderstanding'. However, this term easily conjures up 'monologic' ideas about communication (Marková, 1990), as if a 'misunderstanding' would be entirely referable to a recipient's insufficient apprehension of a message expressed by a speaker. Similarly, other terms are often routinely assigned monologic interpretations. For example, 'misrepresentation' seems to refer to a speaker's misleading expression of some pre-established meaning, e.g. along the lines of Searle's monologic speech-act theory, according to which there is one optimal, appropriate expression for each and every communicative intention ('the principle of expressibility', Searle, 1969, pp. 87–8). We cannot do without some of the conventional terms, but I will attempt here to provide a dialogical account of the phenomena involved. A 'misunderstanding' must be seen as interactionally constituted, and a matter of collective miscommunication. Conversely, miscommunication involves both misrepresentation (misleading expression) and misunderstanding. Thus, one's
non-deliberate misrepresentation must be due to some kind of misunderstanding or lack of knowledge, and a displayed misunderstanding of the other’s utterance involves a misconstrual of his or her intended content as displayed in one’s own expressed interpretation.

Occasionally, I will prefer using the term ‘miscommunication’, principally for two reasons. One is the fact that both misrepresentations and misunderstandings are heavily intertwined as collective achievements. The other is that ‘miscommunication’ is a somewhat broader term, including also procedural problems such as mismatches in interactional coordination, and it is often fruitful to treat these along with biased or non-mutual understandings of discoursal content.\(^6\)

**MISCOMMUNICATION EVENTS: SOME ANALYTICAL DIMENSIONS**

Instances of misunderstanding and miscommunication are not easy to identify or categorize. One reason is that communication in general involves frequent mishaps and mismatches (perhaps causing repairs), negotiation of meaning as a strategy for developing topics, or of exploring conflicting views and disagreements etc., and that, therefore, it is difficult to distinguish miscommunication proper from the more or less normal process.

At the same time, we noted earlier that understanding is necessarily partial, and we are in fact often content with understanding the other in a fairly rough manner; many potential misunderstandings are left without attention, or at least they are not exploited in actual communication. There are cases where parties seem to mutually understand each other but still disagree, as opposed to cases where they do not understand each other’s positions (and hence disagree).\(^7\) Such cases may be hard to distinguish empirically. Another category which is hard to identify in empirical analyses includes situations where parties act as if they understand each other and maybe believe that they do, although they do not (cf. Naess, 1966, on pseudo-agreements). Apart from all this, there are of course all sorts of inequalities of knowledge and absences of mutual understanding between people which never play any role in communication, simply because people do not raise these issues in actual discourse. It is therefore important that misunderstandings and miscommunications, whether overt, partially covert or only (in some sense) latent, must relate to particular communicative events (processes, activities, situations), otherwise we would not recognize them as such.

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In this chapter I shall analyse a few cases of such misunderstanding or miscommunication events (for short: MEs). These events or episodes must be identified in their dialogue embeddings, and appropriate analytical concepts must be developed on that kind of empirical basis. I shall now proceed to sketch some analytical dimensions.

**(a) Diagnosis**

MEs can be diagnosed (with more or less awareness) either by the actors in dialogue (and observers) or only by analysts and other observers. The latter category of recognition is, according to many scholars, suspect, since it opens up for all sorts of prejudiced interpretations by observers (Linell and Luckmann, 1991). Related to this dichotomy is a categorization\(^8\) of MEs into:

(i) **latent MEs**, with no traces or symptoms in the interactional data. (Naturally, the assumption of a latent ME presupposes that there is a factual or perceived discrepancy in understanding between actors.);

(ii) **covert MEs**, with traces or indirect reflections (re)interpretable in the interactional data;

(iii) **overt MEs**, with clear reflections and manifest properties in the interactional data.

The last category is most probably diagnosed by the actors themselves, while covert MEs perhaps correspond to what Erickson and Shultz (1982) have termed ‘uncomfortable moments’. Such ‘moments’ are often not thematized in the discourse itself, but are often commented upon when actors in post-discourse self-confrontation sessions are interviewed about their communicative exchanges. Latent and covert MEs often occur when interactants seem to share language and topics and yet inadvertently communicate on different premises, due to e.g. different sociocultural traditions. When such interlocutors ‘assume that they understand each other, they are less likely to question interpretations’ (Gumperz and Tannen, 1979, p. 315).

**(b) Indications (in dialogue and interaction)**

Here we are concerned only with such MEs, for which there are indications that they are sensed, identified and dealt with (or at least
reacted to) by interactors (although they are not necessarily consciously aware of the nature of the MEs). Such indications would include:

- repairs, or at least repair initiations, such as clarification requests;
- (meta-)comments relating to understanding problems;
- negotiations of meaning, incongruent threads of discourse; non-interlocking utterances, incoherences and hitches in dialogue, salient silences within topics, i.e. lack of uptake;
- vocal or non-vocal signs of uncertainty, irritation, uncomfortable-ness.

Indications are related to diagnosis ((a) above) in that they are the means by which observers and actors diagnose MEs. Bremer et al. (1988, p. 566) term (approximately) the first two types (repairs, meta-comments) ‘indicators’, and the latter two ‘symptoms’.

(c) Objects/matters

What I have in mind here is sometimes called ‘trouble sources’ (e.g. Schegloff, 1987), or simply ‘the matter’ (as in the question ‘What is the matter?’). If MEs involve discrepancies in interpretation between interlocutors (see above), then these discrepancies may concern:

- (identity of) words spoken vs. apprehended (cf. mishearings);
- references and referential perspectives;
- meaning specifications (aspects of semantic potentials activated);
- cognitive, emotive or conative attitudes towards things talked about;
- levels of intentionality (e.g. seriousness vs. joking);
- frames, perspectives adopted in interpretation.

Schegloff (1987) pays particular attention to two kinds of ‘trouble sources’, problematic reference and problematic sequential implicativeness (e.g. misunderstandings as regards joking vs. seriousness). One special type is misunderstanding (i.e. not understanding) of an interlocutor’s intentional (mock) misunderstanding, i.e. B only pretends to misunderstand A’s utterance, but A treats this as a case of genuine misunderstanding in need of repair.

(d) Genesis (origins/problem antecedents)

The same discoursal and contextual factors which are resources for expressing and achieving understanding, can also be sources of communicative problems. Thus, most MEs can be analysed as more or less complex interactions between discoursal contributions, events or incidents (further analysed below as precursors, core utterances, repairs etc.), and contextual factors, i.e. non-shared or conflicting background knowledge, discrepant purposes, perspectives and frames (e.g. prototypical discrepancies in framings or perspectives between professional and layman, parent and child etc.), and aspects of concrete settings. Among contextual factors we also find discrepancies in linguistic codes, as, for example, in many interactions between native and non-native speakers (Gass and Varonis, 1991). Basically the dichotomy between discourse-internal and contextual factors was exploited by Ringle and Bruce (1982, p. 208), whose ‘input failures’ and ‘model failures’ correspond to miscommunication due to ‘signal inadequacies’ vs. miscommunication due to deviant assumptions about (or premises for) the communicative events.

Some MEs would be more onesidedly referable to discoursal events, but as we noted earlier, even mishearings typically depend upon contexts. MEs characteristically exhibit multiple causality; the various sources combine in somewhat different ways in e.g. simple repairs, local miscommunication sequences, perspective conflicts etc. (see below).

(e) Treatment in dialogue (resolution, consequents)

MEs can also be categorized into the following:

- non-identified and unrecognized (such MEs can still be there, covert or latent, though analysts, too, often face problems diagnosing them);
- identified (explicitly/overtly or merely indirectly) in dialogue but not further dealt with;
- treated without being resolved (or only via pseudo-solution); resolved by interactants.

There are also mixed cases, such as MEs which first pass unrecognized but get identified later on in discourse (when more inferencing has been carried out) and then perhaps also dealt with (delayed recognition) (Gass and Varonis, 1991, pp. 139ff.)

Actors’ attempts at resolving MEs can be of different kinds. One common family of treatments are repairs of various sorts (Schegloff et al., 1977; Levelt, 1983; Seling 1987a,b). The topic of repair formats will not be discussed specifically in this paper. We note, however, that the presence of repairs need not presuppose genuine MEs, and, of course, that many genuine MEs do not generate repair sequences. Further-
more, Schegloff (1987) claims that there is no systematic relationship between types of ‘trouble sources’ and the form taken by the repairs addressed to them (except that, e.g., word searches take another form from misarticulation replacements), while others (e.g. Selting, 1987a; Clark and Schaefer, 1987) have argued for more systematicity in these relationships.

\( (f) \) Extension and progression

Under this heading we consider again the whole sequential organization of the ME including its genesis, development and possible resolution. Sequences may vary in length and salience. MEs may be local, i.e. originate, develop and be closed over a more or less limited sequence, as is the case when a simple mishearing is detected and repaired, the discourse then resuming its main course, or it can be global, i.e. be characteristic of a whole social encounter or a phase of its discourse. Usually, local MEs are also focused, i.e. it is possible to find one (or a few) core utterance(s) that is (are) crucially involved as a discoursal source in generating the interpersonal misunderstanding. Conversely, global MEs are normally unfocused, i.e. they lack salient core utterances.

Identifying a core utterance in a local, focused ME amounts to singling out this contribution as involving a crucial complication. In other words, we thereby assume an asymmetric distribution of epistemic and interactional responsibility; the party contributing the core utterance is assigned (by the analyst or the retrospectively reflecting actor) a special burden. But it would be a mistake to analyse the ME as inherent in a singular conversational contribution, i.e. in the core utterance. On the contrary, every ME has a sequential structure, in which both communicating parties are engaged. Like other communicative exchanges, such ME sequences involve asymmetries (cf. Marková and Foppa, 1991). More exactly, the structure of a local, focused miscommunication sequence is this:

0. precursors;
1. core utterance;
2. reaction;
3. attempted repair;
4. reaction to repair;
5. exit.

Normally, \( (0-1) \) belong to the main line of discourse, while \( (2-4) \) usually involve meta-comments and tend to form a side-sequence, a repair sequence starting with the allusion to or formulation of an understanding problem and continuing with the execution of some remedial action, often jointly performed. \( (5) \) amounts to resuming the main line of discourse. \( (3, 4) \) may sometimes develop into an extended negotiation; for example, as Bilmes (1992) shows, while \( (9) \) can involve a claim that \( (2) \) is a misunderstanding of \( (1) \), and then itself get a response in \( (4) \), the speaker of \( (1) \) and \( (3) \) can come back in yet a new utterance claiming that \( (4) \) is in fact a misunderstanding of \( (3) \), and so on. The sequence as a whole has an entrance-complication-solution-exit structure (examples are given below).

Note that utterances are precursors, or even core utterances, of MEs, only if they, together with other factors, give rise to such episodes, i.e. MEs. To use a biological metaphor, seeds of misunderstanding have to grow, or else we cannot identify them as such (but cf. below).

On-line utterance understanding is largely an automatic process, and it is only when problems of some sort have been encountered that more conscious (Schutz and Luckmann, 1974) interpretive work, manifest in e.g. repair sequences, is initiated. In at least some of these cases, it would be meaningful to talk about misunderstanding and miscommunication. Similarly, ‘mis-keyings’ (in the terminology of Goffman, 1974) are not misleadingly keyed in and of themselves but they ‘become’ so, if they ultimately have the effect of being interpreted in the wrong frame. What all this means is that precursors, core utterances and repairables are identified retrospectively. Some are identified only by analysts (who know the following discourse), some are diagnosed also by the interlocutors themselves (for some empirical examples, see below).

\( (g) \) Some methodological remarks

The difficulties in diagnosing some types of MEs raise serious methodological problems. From an orthodox ‘Conversation Analysis’ (CA) point-of-view (cf. e.g. Drew, 1991), it is mandatory to stay ‘within discourse itself’ and only deal with misunderstanding as a resource used in conversation, as a topic for (meta-)talk or repair, or as something which is consequential for the conversational interaction as the products of speakers’ orientation to it. Indeed, a number of systematic sources of misunderstanding can be explicated in terms of categories endogenous to the organization of discourse (Schegloff, 1987, p. 201). For example,
parties themselves address the talk as revealing a misunderstanding in need of repair, and this repair is validated by its recipient, who generally modifies his response after the repair. (Schegloff 1987, p. 204)

At the same time, understanding and misunderstanding are basically subjective (and intersubjective) phenomena accomplished by the actors themselves, and some researchers may be hesitant to adopt an ‘objective’ conception of these matters. Accordingly, led by somewhat different methodological persuasions, these scholars may want to examine also such (‘covert’, ‘latent’, ‘deep’, ‘hidden’, ‘silent’) MEs which can only be identified in, reinterpreted into, or ascribed to the talk through discourse-external (exogenous) means, such as post-interviews with actors or the analysis or knowledge of the omniscient observer-analyst. Though there are good methodological reasons to stay close to discourse and thus minimize unfounded interpretations by analysts (for some discussion, see Linell and Luckmann, 1991). Bremer et al. 1988, p. 54) point out that such strategies ‘inevitably underestimate the amount of misunderstanding’ that actually occurs in discourse (cf. Naess, 1966, on identifying ‘pseudo-agreements’).

EMPIRICAL DATA: DIALOGUE-INTERPRETED CONVERSATIONS

Although the dialogical theory of misunderstanding and miscommunication outlined here is meant to be generally valid, I will apply it, in this chapter, to data of a particular kind, namely dialogue-interpreted encounters between Swedish professionals and Russian-speaking lay persons in two kinds of settings, namely the immigration division of the police and health care centres (baby clinics, maternity clinics). The interpreters who appear in these audio-taped discourses are professional ‘community interpreters’.

The activities of a dialogue interpreter are of course in many ways special, not in the least with respect to mutuality and understanding: the interpreter must bring about understanding between primary parties who have no language in common and, in addition, often differ greatly in terms of culture and activity roles; the interpreter has to share understandings of the subject matter with each primary party as these understandings are expressed in primary parties’ original language contributions (what we call ‘originals’) in order to relay or replay these originals properly, i.e. with high fidelity, in the other language;

This involves activity-specific constraints on understanding: the interpreter’s understanding should not include active responding, at least not overt responding to the content of discourse. Interpreting would thus be a practice involving systematic and close ‘citations’ of other people’s discourse (though transferred to another language). However, ‘citing’ or ‘quoting’ people is an impossible task if taken as ‘verbatim reproduction’ of the originals (cf. Clark and Gerrig, 1990). Dialogue interpreting will, as we will see, display effects of responding on the part of the interpreter, intentional and unintentional ‘deviations’ from a constrained replaying mode, and these deviations are quite natural in the contexts at hand (Wadensjö, 1992).

If we compare dialogue-interpreted discourse (henceforth: DID) to ‘direct’ non-interpreted encounters, additional complexities and opportunities for miscommunication are introduced (Linell, Wadensjö and Jönsson, 1992). Nevertheless, I argue that the MEs occurring in DID are of the same basic types as elsewhere, although sometimes more salient and accentuated. In many ‘ordinary’ conversations, the smoothly coordinated flow of discourse tends to conceal the intricate cognitive processes that enable participants to comprehend the contributions of others and to formulate relevant understandable responses (cf. Krauss, Fussell and Chen, chapter 6). The ‘double discourse’ in DID consisting of primary parties’ originals and interpreter’s renditions sometimes permits a clearer identification of successive steps in the micro-genesis of MEs.

Let us now turn to some empirical examples:

Example 1:
(Tema K: G 39:1–2) Maternity Clinic: M=midwife (Swedish-speaking), W=pregnant woman (Russian-speaking), H=her husband (speaks Russian and a little Swedish), D=female dialogue interpreter. By 1:1 M brings up a new topic.

1. M: har du lämnat ditt urinprov?
did you deliver your urine sample
2. D: Вь сегодня сделали анализ мочи?
you delivered your urine sample today?
yes.
4 D: ja.
yes.
5 M: det har du gjort. har du fått svar på det också?
you have done that. did you get any result of it too?
Example 1 starts with M bringing up a new topic, referring to a urine sample in a way which suggests that she takes the specific reference ('your urine sample') to be mutually obvious. We note that she uses the perfect tense (rather than the preterite), which indicates a reference to the immediate past (although other interpretations cannot be excluded). D, in 1:2, makes the time reference specific ('today'); W thus receives a rendition which is more specified than M’s original (1:1). W then provides a confirming response, which gets relayed (1:3–4). In 1:5, M starts by confirming that she understood W’s response (note that this acknowledgement does not get translated in 1:6, cf. Linell, Wadenjo and Jönsson, 1992), and then she asks if W has been told the result of the sample (M uses ‘it’ obviously co referring to the same sample as before). After D’s (reduced) rendition (1:6), W requests a clarification, thereby indicating comprehension difficulties (1:7). After D’s rendition (1:8), W’s husband H, who has a fair command of Swedish, intervenes to support W, explaining why W could not understand 1:5; they could not have got a result, since it (i.e. the delivery of the sample) occurred just five minutes before. M replies, somewhat absent-mindedly but quite calmly (1:10), that she did not refer to today’s sample but to quite another sample which according to the clinic report should have been delivered at an earlier visit (‘in October some time’). She appears to be unaware of her original reference in 1:1 (and 1:5) being misleading. And in fact, 1:1 could be interpreted as referring to what may have been agreed on an earlier occasion. However, this interpretation was effectively removed by D’s disambiguating idag ‘today’ of 1:2. The sequence is closed by D (1:13) who knows about the previous sample and understands the problem; she both repairs the misunderstanding and steps in to answer M’s question in W’s place.

Example (i) involves a rather simple lack of mutually agreed-upon reference, but this deserves some further analysis. The ME between M, D and W evolves in contributions 1:1–5, where the interactants do not share the same reference. Yet, this misunderstanding is not visible in this sequence. Only from 1:6 on is a suspicion of miscommunication expressed, which then becomes confirmed and ultimately cleared up. The misunderstanding is retrospectively reinterpreted into the prior talk. But the parties do not exhibit, in this sequence or later on in the discourse, any awareness of how this ME came about. So how did it happen?

Let us now apply some of our conceptual apparatus from above. We noted that it was D’s ‘today’ of 1:2 which specified M’s question in another way than M had intended her original (1:1). D’s 1:2 is therefore the core utterance. But D’s addition of ‘today’ is tiny and probably automatically performed; nowhere in the sequence is this mentioned as a possible source of the ME. Actually, D’s specification is a very natural one in the given context. First of all, a urine sample had in fact been delivered just before entering the midwife’s office (cf. 1:9fl), and M might have been expected to ask about just that, i.e. about what had been done just prior to the interview. Secondly, we noted M’s use of the perfect tense in 1:1, and one of its uses is precisely to refer to just completed actions. In other words, D’s 1:2 is hardly the only discoursal source of the ME; if it is the core utterance, it has been grounded for in M’s 1:1 (‘precurser’), and the ME as a whole is due to the interplay between contributions. Perhaps we can offer an alternative analysis: The sequence 1:1–4 runs smoothly, and it is only
in 1:5 that a question is put which indicates clearly that M does not have the recent sample in mind. From W’s point-of-view it is in this moment that the trouble with mutuality appears, and it would therefore be possible to offer 1:5 as a candidate for the status of core utterance. In any case, we find that precursors and core utterances can be identified as such only ex post facto. Note that there seems to be a significant difference between analysts’ and actors’ predicaments; actors discover and repair the mutual misunderstanding, but they give no evidence of being aware of how exactly it came about. The mechanisms (precursors, core utterances) are identified by the analyst. Is the ME of (i) due to its being dialogue-interpreted (DID)? After all, we attributed the core utterance to the interpreter. Also, access to the consequential addition (‘today’) is given only to the Russian-speaking interactants. Nevertheless, the sequence 1:1–1:4–1:5 would be a natural strip of discourse for speakers of the same language. I would claim that the specification which was performed by D in 1:2 is a perfectly natural part of the responsive, though not necessarily externalized, understanding that any addressee might attribute to 1:1 in the given context. Thus, the interpreter’s utterances may externalize, to the benefit of the analyst, some of the normally concealed parts of interlocutors’ comprehension.

Example (i) involved a rather simple misunderstanding of reference. We will now turn to a slightly more complicated case. Example (2) is taken from a police interrogation with an immigrant who applies for a residence permit in Sweden. He and his wife want to join his mother who already lives in Sweden. Where we come in, the police officer (P) has brought up a document, in which a ‘referee’, an uncle of the applicant, has stated that two years ago the applicant (F) had been divorced from his wife.

Example 2


1. P: denne man din morbror han skriver nämligen att du är skild [(F clears his throat)] från din fru. skild står det
   this man, your uncle, he writes, you see, that you are divorced from your wife, 
   divorced it says.

2. D: e:... и этот... человек, сказал что... вы разведены e:... с
   женой.
   ah:... and this... person, said that... you are/were divorced ah:... from your
   wife.

   we- we were divorced (lit: in divorce)

4. D: ja vi har varit skilda
   yes we have been divorced

5. F: мы были в разводе
   we were divorced (in divorce)

6. D: vi har varit skilda
   we have been divorced

7. P: har varit skilda? men numera? vilket förhållande råder just nu?
   have been divorced? but nowadays? what relation is prevailing right now?

8. D: a сейчас какие у вас отношения?
   but now what relations do you have?

9. F: с кем?
   with whom?

10. D: med vem?
    with whom?

    with your wife.

    with your wife.

    well, fine, the most normal ones.

14. D: ja de e... trevliga dom bästa förhållanden.
    well, it's... nice the best relations.

15. P: frågan är, har ni varit formellt gifta och hu- hur är det förhållandet
    just now?
    the question is, have you been formally married and ho- how is that relation
    right now?

The excerpt starts with P reviewing some of the contents of the report, and D relays this. We can note two details: P (2:1) uses the present tense (‘writes’) in Swedish, and D (2:2) the past tense (‘said’) in Russian. Furthermore, the lack of a copula in Russian (cf. the naked participle razvedeny, ‘divorced’) renders the temporal relations somewhat unclear, and 2:2 is therefore, on this point, something of a despecification (vaguation). Irrespective of whether F is aware of the difference between P’s original (2:1) and D’s rendition (2:2), he himself (2:3) underscores the past in referring to past circumstances (which may seem to imply that these are no longer the case). In 2:5 he repeats his reply. In her Swedish renditions (2:4,6), D uses the perfect tense, which specifies the interpretation a bit more than the Russian originals did; byli v razvode would be either English/Swedish preterite ‘were divorced (then)’ (possibly though not very plausibly implicating: ‘and still are’) or
English/Swedish perfect ‘have been divorced’ (implicating: ‘and are no longer’). However, the stress on kylli (‘were’) in 2:3 seems to induce the Swedish perfect in 2:4.6.13 P pays attention to the potentiality of understanding 2:4,6 as meaning that the state of divorce belongs to the past, and asks (2:7) about the present circumstances. He ends up selecting a rather abstract formulation (in rough literal translation: ‘what relation is prevailing right now?’) instead of asking, say, ‘but are you now married again?’. D in 2:8 builds upon P’s abstract formulation but shifts from the singular to the plural (‘relations’), a change which perhaps influences F’s subsequent divergent interpretation of the word ‘relation’ in the local context. Furthermore, D, in her rendition 2:8, omits those parts of P’s original which preceded his abstract formulation. F now requests a clarification (2:9); he seems to have been mystified by D’s 2:8. After a repair sequence, in which it is made clear that P’s question concerned F’s relations with his wife, he answers on a rather different level than P intended; F speaks about his social and emotional relations to his wife, not about his marital status according to civil law (2:13). P totally ignores this answer, relying back to his question about civil status (2:15).

This sequence seems to contain several troubles with mutuality. The question at the outset, the point where P does not understand F, concerns F’s marital status, and this issue is left unresolved even as we leave the excerpt. Within the sequence we find a local ME, which is suspected and indicated through F’s 2:9 and is then developed through divergent interpretations of the situated meaning of ‘relations’. The microgenesis of this ME appears, in retrospect, to be quite obvious. If any contribution is the core utterance, it is D’s 2:8; in this rendition, the first two fragmented questions of the original (2:7) ‘have been divorced? but nowadays?’ remain unrelayed. Yet these questions constituted parts of the significant context of the turn-final question ‘what relation is now prevailing?’; within 2:7 this can be regarded as a reformulation on a more abstract level of the preceding questions. When this context is eliminated in 2:8, it amounts to an ambiguity or local decontextualization. Another change in 2:8, with regard to 2:7, is the use of the plural (‘relations’), which seems to guide the interpretation towards something else than the singular question of civil status (married or not?). Note also the discrepancy between the abstract råder ‘is now prevailing’ of the Swedish original and the simple ‘have’ (or rather ‘be (with)’) of the Russian rendition.

D’s 2:8 is the core of the local ME in (2). But 2:8, in its present form, would probably not have been formulated in that way, had not P, in 2:7, moved expression and interpretation onto ‘relation(s)’, rather than staying on the more concrete level of ‘are you married now?’ (cf. P’s new attempt in 2:15). In addition, the joint efforts in – more or less unambiguously – relegating the state of divorce to the past (2:3–6) may (to F and D) have temporarily removed the issue of civil status from the agenda. Anyway, we see again a subtle interplay and a collective construction and management of an ME; 2:8 has its contextual premises in 2:7 and, to some extent, in the prior discourse.

The ME of (2) is undoubtedly a consequence of the discourse being dialogue-interpreted. The interpreter performs a local decontextualization in 2:8, thereby cutting off P’s formulation of ‘prevailing relations’ from its prior semantic context. But again, the opportunities for miscommunication are largely due to P’s introduction of a new word (or concept) into the discourse (‘relation(s)’). It would seem to be a universal phenomenon, in all kinds of conversations, that the discourse gets channelled into new paths because actors do not agree upon how to interpret newly introduced words in the given context. Such troubles with mutualities are frequently remedied through side-sequences involving local decontextualization followed by clarification. Our next example comes from the same dialogue, a few turns later, when the issue is still about the same:

Example 3
(Tema K: G 21:20–21) For contextual information, see Example 2.

1. P: ha- hu- hur går det där till rent formellt? alltså först så skiljer man sig formellt. har ni gift er igen formellt?
   all right. how is this done in purely formal terms? that is, first one gets divorced formally, did you then marry again formally?

2. D: a каким образом это произошло? вначале вы развелись официально а потом поженились ещё раз официально?
   but in what way did this happen? in the beginning you got divorced officially and then you got married once again officially?

3. F: её отец приехал к нам в гости. Он нас позорил, понимаете?
   (laughter)
   her father came to us for a visit. he brought shame upon us, do you understand?

4. D: hennes- hennes pappa kom till- och hälsas på oss och han. . . . eh:: han gjorde alt för att . . . eh:: (swallows) det blev bråk mellan oss. her- her daddy came to- and visited us and he . . . he did everything to . . . there was a row between us.

   and then we made friends. after two years.
perspectives. D’s 3:2 bridges the gap between 3:1, which at the most invites a personal story, and 3:3 which fully takes on the personal-biographical ‘everyday life’ perspective. Again, we find the interpreter bringing to the fore a process which could have occurred without her intervention. In general, professional-lay encounters exhibit discrepancies between parties as regards background knowledge, commitments and concerns, which tend to lead to different perspectives on the subjective matter of institutional discourse (e.g. Linell and Jöhnsson, 1991).

Our final example will also illustrate perspectival conflicts. It is also drawn from the same police interrogation as the preceding excerpts, and the topic is F’s attempt to acquire a German passport:

Example 4

1. P: ha och du har– du har alltså ansökt om växtystt medborgarskap? är det rätt uppfattat?
   I see, and you have– you have then applied for West German citizenship? is that correctly understood?

2. D: ja–.
   ja–.

3. F: ja–
   ja–

4. D: это правильно?
   is that correct?

5. F: ja–
   ja–

6. P: är det rätt uppfattat?
   är det rätt uppfattat?

From talk about the same topic we pass through a stage of non-shared

24. D: jag har inte eh... (.) c:(;) så är inte pass– passet inte... (Russian) you didn’t ask for a citizenship there? you wanted– löste skickligt. (.) you didn’t ask for admission in Germany. simply that I would get the German passport here. you understand?


26. D: ja och hvad så nære, om vi nu også vedhentes...


28. D: ja kan man prata om medborgarskap i... Tyskland?

P’s first contribution deals with F’s German citizenship (Sw. medborgarskap); did F actually apply for this? P’s answer (4:3–15) is a lengthy one, an account which is successively relayed by D, without any interventions from P. P emphasizes that he did not apply (to become a German citizen), but he merely requested a search for documents, which he claims exist and would help him to get the German passport. In 4:17 P asks about F’s intent, probably as regards his wish to acquire a German citizenship, and D provides an approximate rendition (4:18). P’s reply (4:19, 21) essentially states his need of a German passport, and he asks (often): ‘where can you go with a Russian passport?’ P responds (4:25) by asking if F is indeed a German citizen, having explained (4:23) that a passport is ‘a sign of one’s being a citizen in a country’. D, in her rendition (4:24), expands this explanation, adding that a citizenship relates to a state where ‘you live and work (act)’ (ge živet tam i deštvujete).
After this sequence, F responds (4:27), evidently focusing on this sense of ‘being a citizen’, with a rhetoric question (‘what kind of citizen am I?’) and a remark that he has left the Soviet Union (hence, he seems to imply, he has nowhere ‘to live and work’). P, in 4:28, shows no interest in this answer, and goes back to F’s formal citizenship.

It seems that underneath this exchange lurks a conflict in perspectives. In fact, this may be partly evidenced by the two Russian terms for ‘citizenship’ used. From his first contribution (4:5) onwards, F uses the word poddannstvo, while D translates P’s Swedish medborgarskap with građanstvo. The former word suggests a focus on formal citizenship (cf. Ru. poddannyy ‘subject’), while the latter Russian term seems to evoke feelings of ‘belonging’ and ‘feeling at home’ in a country. Note that F encounters both terms in this strip of talk, while the Swedish discourse, in which P takes part, contains only one word (medborgarskap ‘citizenship’). P speaks about being ‘a citizen in a country’ (4:23), and the semantic aspect of belongingness is then enhanced by D’s minor explanatory addition in 4:24 (‘you live there and work’). This later elicits F’s remark implying that he does not feel that he belongs anywhere (4:27). Again we are faced with a topical path shift; 4:24 is the core utterance with an obvious precursor in 4:23. The resulting ME has a complex object or focus; it is unclear to P what the facts are (the reference situation), and unclear to F what P is fishing for (at least F acts as if he does not understand P’s concerns, which was also confirmed in a post-interview with F). F is concerned about his chances to travel freely and, as it transpires, to get a Swedish citizenship (4:27). He also gives evidence of a sense of homelessness. The German ‘poddannstvo’ he treats in a pragmatic way, as a means to attain his major goals. But P treats and, it should be added, has to treat, citizenship as a formal relation to a state with obvious legal consequences.

Example (4) gives evidence of troubles with mutualities grounded in contextual factors (cf. under (d) above), primarily different professional/bureaucratic vs. lay/everyday rationalities and interests. Also, interactors seem to exploit different semantic potentials of words. But there are also, as usual, interactional subtleties involved, e.g. D’s association of ‘citizenship’ with a country where ‘you live and work’ (and, therefore, feel at home) (4:24), which deflects the discourse into another path, as discussed above. Note, however, that it is P who (in 4:23) uses the word ‘country’ (Swedish land), rather than ‘state’, while D selects precisely ‘state’ (Russian gosudarstvo). Thus, channelling discourse into new paths is a collective business.

These examples of MEs in dialogue-interpreted discourse can easily be multiplied (see Wadensjö, 1992). They have shown the multilayeredness of MEs. Some of the sources demonstrably interacting in producing MEs are unclear expressions, simple mishearings, mismatches between words in L1 and L2, subtle shifts in the topical trajectory of the dialogue as it goes from original to rendition (or over some other part of the sequence) (topical path shifts), perspectival conflicts between professions and laymen, and differences in background knowledge and local cultures.

Some of the ingredients in these MEs may arguably be specific for DID (e.g. original-to-rendition shifts). No doubt, the dialogue-interpreted interaction is an activity sui generis (Wadensjö, 1992). Yet, I would suggest that topical path shifts, i.e., shifts and glides in topics and topical aspects, such as shifts in referential aspects, disambiguation (specification) vs. ambiguity (despecification), sharpening vs. blurring (vaguitification; Hirsch, 1989, pp. 21ff.), and shifts in the level of abstractness, are ubiquitous in dialogue and are often involved in the microgenesis of other kinds of MEs. The point is rather that DID, by externalizing parts of the recipient’s (here: the interpreter’s) understanding in the renditions, makes some of these shifts surface, somewhat like in a thinking-aloud protocol.

At first sight, it might be thought that dialogue-interpreted discourse is problem-laden simply because there are these interstitial contributions, the interpreter’s renditions, which might involve misunderstandings and hence also misrepresentations of originals. However, empirical analyses show that many of the problems are not attributable to individual actions, ‘faulty translations’, but instead they are collectively generated in a subtle interplay between all parties involved. Accordingly, parties share responsibility for what has been communicated and miscommunicated. Barring what this teaches us about dialogue interpreting, it illustrates a basic point to be made about miscommunication in general. Vološinov (1973, p. 9) has insisted that reality is not ‘merely reflected’ in language, but ‘refracted’. Within dialogue, what is ‘refracted’ may be another dialogue contribution. Thus, A’s utterance, its form and meaning, is not merely reflected, but refracted, in B’s interpretation, or, as in our special case, the dialogue interpreter’s rendition of it. Over sequences, such refractions sometimes become quite radical.
CONCLUSION

Understanding and misunderstanding cohabit in discourse and interaction. Communication entails partial communication and possibly elements of miscommunication. We may think of each dialogue contribution as a new local communicative project (Luckmann, 1990), which runs the risk of becoming a 'trouble source' (cf. Nystrand 1989); in order to bring about some new understanding, the actor must introduce something not yet (individually or mutually) understood, something which may be misunderstood or misinterpreted, due to e.g. unclarity of expression, insufficient background knowledge or discrepancies in premises for communication. Note, however, that no such contribution is or becomes arguably a 'trouble source', unless it unfolds as such in the ensuing dialogue. Otherwise, the notion would be empty, since virtually every minutest communicative project would be such a trouble source. However, following Bakhtin (1981), we can look upon dialogue in terms of a continuous struggle between 'centrifugal' and 'centripetal' forces; every new initiative by A transcends what is (locally) shared knowledge, and the responsive understanding of it by B (and A him- or herself) tries to re-establish a communicative homeostasis (Nystrand, 1992).

Our analyses demonstrate how miscommunication events are socially and culturally embedded, i.e. dependent on specific situations and activities and furthermore, collectively generated and managed, and sequentially organized. We have also seen that MEs are multi-aspectual and multi-layered. It might be possible to position different miscommunication types on a scale from strictly local problems followed by repairs, over other more or less focused miscommunication sequences (most of the examples above are such), unfocused miscommunication sequences characterized by perspectival conflicts or mismatches between conceptual systems, to covert or latent problems of frames and perspectives. The first-mentioned MEs, the most local ones, tend to require little of reference to surrounding cultures ('exogenous factors' in the terminology of Schegloff, 1987). They also have source(s), problem identification and treatment fully salient in discourse, whereas for those at the other end of the scale none of these surface in discourse. At the same time, the latter, often protracted, confusions may lead to long-standing, though often diffuse, feelings of discomfort and 'not being well understood' (Gumperz, chapter 5).

Miscommunication and misunderstanding are difficult phenomena to identify, describe and explain. But understanding is in a sense even more problematric for the analyst to account for. It is often said that dialogue consists in the actors' reciprocated displays of their understandings of each other's contributions (e.g. Schegloff, 1984, p. 98; Heritage, 1984, p. 255 et passim). This is true, but we must not forget that one can only expose parts of one's understanding and this understanding is in a certain sense itself partial. Furthermore, while many utterances are designed to claim understanding, they do not prove or demonstrate it. So, within the 'web of partial mutualities', misunderstandings can sometimes be brought into the open, albeit on a rather modest scale, while hidden understandings must often remain in the dark.

Finally, I would like to return to some possible discrepancies between actors' and observers' views on misunderstanding and miscommunication. Analysis by repeated listening to tapes and careful scrutinizing of transcripts reveals the dialogical nature of MEs. But the actors themselves do not share the predicaments of the distanced analysts. Instead, speakers tend to relate interlocutors' displayed interpretations to their own self-perceived personal intent and, in cases of misfits, perhaps blame the others for misunderstandings. It is true that accounts like 'we misunderstand (misunderstood) each other' sometimes occur, but it seems that (though the matter should be empirically explored) such characterizations are typically given retrospectively, upon some reflection rather than in the midst of the troublesome incidents themselves (cf. above). If an actor A tends to overestimate the other's (B's) personal responsibility for his or her (B's) behaviour and (mis)understandings (and to underestimate the role of contextual factors, including the prior discourse and A's own contributions), then A would commit an attributional error of a type that Ichheiser (1949) analysed in terms of false social perceptions, i.e. illusions in our persistent (and necessarily self-centred) ways of misinterpreting social 'reality' (cf. Farr, 1987, p. 210; 1990). If this argument is correct, a couple of conclusions suggest themselves. First, there are powerful contextual determinants in dialogue which are largely invisible to the interlocutors-in-action and which can be fully revealed only by reflective analysts. Secondly, it explains why collective miscommunication events are often accounted for in terms of individual misunderstandings, by lay people as well as by psychologists and other scholars.
NOTES

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1 A reasonable analysis is that 'miscommunication' and 'conflict talk' are cross-classifying categories. Thus, there may be 'conflict talk' without any genuine miscommunication (e.g. a serious and open negotiation or debate), and there are instances of 'miscommunication' that do not involve social conflict (e.g. mishearings).

2 I will not indulge here in a definitional exercise of what it means to 'understand'. In a way, I take it for granted that we know (or understand) what it means to 'understand' (or rather what it can mean in different contexts). Furthermore, I will not here elaborate a distinction between 'understanding' (a somewhat more state- or experience-oriented notion) and 'interpretation' (an activity by which the subject tries to understand, or the product of such activities). For discussion of these issues, see e.g. Allwood (1976).

3 I will use the letter A for the interactant whose utterance is in focus at the moment (or whose utterance is the first one in the sequence in focus), and the letter B for A's interlocutor (addressee). These letters will be preferred to S and L (i.e. speaker vs. listener), since I want to stress the relative equity of interlocutors rather than adopt a speaker-oriented bias.

4 Note that there is a slight difference between understanding and misunderstanding in this regard. Understanding can be construed as a subjective relation between a cognizer and something in the 'world', while misunderstanding clearly presupposes some (lack of) intersubjectivity.

5 Yet, as a rule linguists and philosophers implicitly assume that communication, under the normal circumstances, involves the assumption of identical attributions of meaning on the part of speaker and listener. As Taylor (1992) points out, this seems to be a 'pre-theoretical given' in most theories of language.

6 At the same time, there might be connotations in the term 'miscommunication' that we want to avoid. For example, I do not aim at some kind of sender-bias, which might result from an association with 'communicator' in the sense of 'sender/speaker'.

7 See Foppa (chapter 7) for an analysis of the relations between understanding/misunderstanding and agreement/disagreement.

8 This categorization is parasitic on one suggested by Allwood (1993) but designed to deal with conflicts in interaction rather than with miscommunication.

9 For example, a simple request for clarification (repair initiation) need not presuppose a real misunderstanding.

10 Cf. similar notions like 'misapprehension sequence' (Jefferson, 1972), 'repair sequence' (Schegloff et al., 1977), and, within a rather different paradigm, 'failure sequence' (Ringle and Bruce, 1982).

11 For detailed information about data, see Wadensjö (1992).

12 Swedish and Russian originals are given here in simplified transcription. The English translations (italics) follow the originals fairly closely, sometimes word-by-word, and fully idiomatic English versions have not been attempted. The following transcription conventions have been used: **boldface** = emphatic stress, *underlining* = simultaneous speech, * + = low volume.

13 There may be at least one further cross-linguistic complication here. The Russian expression *byl v razode* might be understood as 'were applying for a divorce' (in addition to 'were divorced'). In this passage, however, this seems to be without importance, since it had been made clear earlier in the interview that the couple had indeed been divorced.

14 Here, D provides a slanted rendition of *pozor* 'insult, bring shame upon', which, however, passes unnoticed by P.

15 These are mainly associative meaning potentials of the two terms. As regards purely referential aspects, it appears that *gräddansito* is (or was) used primarily about citizenship within (what was at the time) the Soviet Union, while *poddansito* is more tied to membership within a certain nationality or population (Ru: *nastenite*), of which there are many in the whole union. Here, we encounter historically determined semantic aspects of official use, which appear partly to work against the potentials seemingly exploited in our strip of talk.

16 Some may be inclined to argue that interpreters are performing badly, when they contribute to MEs by e.g. shifting discourse into another path. However, one must appreciate that interpreters do their job in real time, i.e. under very severe constraints, and this must lead to some mischosen words and premature interpretations.

17 There are other possible correlations too. For example, it may be the case that detected and treated (often local) misunderstandings can often serve as methods for promoting understanding, whereas non-detected (covert, latent) forms of miscommunication produce effects in terms of long-term misunderstandings between actors.

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