The risks of misunderstandings in family discourse

Home as a special space of interaction

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Based on a large dataset of Russian material, the paper presents these general features of the home: a place to spend leisure time containing a long-established group of different ages and sexes free to move about in their environment These factors lead to tension between communicants and a diversity of topics of conversation. Inadequate recipient design is an overarching trigger for misunderstanding caused by the speaker. It derives from poor concentration on interaction and the common ground fallacy, and leads to the frequent use of indirect and elliptical expressions. Inadequate concentration causes the recipient to non-listen and overguess. Finally, misunderstandings occur because of mishearings, misinterpretations and misreferences. Misinterpretation may concern the content, intention or mode of the message.

Keywords: family discourse, miscommunication, common ground fallacy, overguessing, recipient design

1. Introduction

Let us start with a definition of family discourse (FD): "FD consists of informal private conversations between people who live together and are blood relatives or have otherwise joined the family" (Baikulova 2014, 13). Other notions are also used in this context: "family talk", "family communication", and "family language". We prefer the term "family discourse", because it covers the aspects we are dealing with: the overall context of communication, the intensions and goals of interaction, and the concrete realisation of dialogues.

The definition needs clarification, as it does not specify the makeup of families. Contemporary societies contain an increasing number of families which differ

https://doi.org/10.1075/ld.00074.mus
Language and Dialogue 10:3 (2020), pp. 340–368. issn 2210-4119 | e-issn 2210-4127

from the traditional "father + mother + children" model: singles, families with two fathers or two mothers, and blended families. However, the nuclear family still prevails in most countries, for example, it comprises on average 71% of non-single families in capital regions within EU countries (EUROSTAT 2018). The peculiarities of the linguistic landscapes of these types of families have been studied (Speer et al. 2013; Baker 2019; Côté and Lavoie 2019, and many others). However, our material collected in Russia consists of families of the traditional type: a father, a mother and one or more children. In some cases grandparents live in these families as well.

Another feature of this material is that all the speakers are native speakers of one language, in our case, Russian. Here again, this is not the only possible communication setting. On the contrary, there are more and more families in which the parents have different native languages and speak with each other in one of them or a lingua franca, mostly English. Many studies describe the language policy, everyday practices and communication challenges in such families (see e.g. Klötzl 2014; Pietikäinen 2016, 2017). Outside Russia, a great number of multilingual families use Russian and/or English for everyday communication at home (see e.g. Ritter 2017; Salavirta 2019; Ringblom and Karpava 2020). Within Russia the situation is different because of the prevailing role of Russian. In most multilingual families, Russian is the most convenient option for choosing a joint tool of interaction.

The material naturally includes the speech of both men and women. Gender issues in interaction have been much studied. Despite this intensive research, (possible) gender differences in language use is a viable topic, but we will not touch on this question in this study.

As a final clarification, the home is a space where people sometimes speak to unconventional recipients which are not able to react to speech in a normal way. Such pseudo-dialogues occur when family members speak to dogs, cats, other pets, plants, computers, gadgets and other technical devices, as well as persons who are not able to answer. The group of people who belong to this category is diverse, including young babies, seriously ill invalids and persons outside the physical space (behind a window or a TV screen; see in more detail: Mustajoki et al. 2018). Despite the significance of this kind of conversation, we will not consider it in this paper, because the notion of misunderstanding has another meaning in these communicative settings than in a standard interaction between people.

FD is a rather new field of communication studies, but it has rapidly intensified over the last 20–30 years (see for overviews: Segrin and Flora 2005; Braithwaite and Baxter 2006). Primarily, attention has been placed on the role of communication as a criterion of the classification of families and as an indicator of their longevity and success (see e.g. Huang 1999; Koerner and Fitzpatrick 2002, 2006; Hesse et al. 2017). Much attention has been paid to family conflicts (see e.g.

Koerner 2014, 428–432; Canary and Canary 2014). The Communication Accommodation Theory (see e.g. Giles 2016; Dragojevic et al. 2016), which aims to identify features relevant to successful interaction, has also been applied to FD (see e.g. Soliz et. al. 2009; Soliz et al. 2018).

One might guess that misunderstandings are less common in FD than in other communicative activity types, because there is less space for communication failures caused by differences in the mental worlds and values of the communicants than in other types of communication. In fact, the situation seems to be quite the opposite. Russian linguists Ermakova and Zemskaia (1993) argue, based on extensive authentic material, that communication failures are more frequent in communication at home than in conversations with foreigners. Some explanations have been explored for this paradoxical claim (Mustajoki 2011, 2017b). The aim of this paper is to identify in more detail the risks and forms of misunderstanding in FD.

Most communication and discourse research is theory driven and/or method driven in the sense that the object is approached in the context of a certain scientific orientation which determines the tools applied in research.We prefer a more holistic approach to human interaction (cf. Weigand 2004, 2011). For our observations, we apply a general framework, a Multidimensional Model of Interaction (MMI) (Mustajoki 2012). However, this framework is not a method or theory but a platform for presenting various aspects of the process of interaction and identifying on that basis different forms of misunderstandings. In fact, such an approach can be regarded as phenomenon driven rather than theory driven or method driven (Mustajoki 2017a, 246–247). At a general level, it resembles the socio-cognitive approach (Kecskes 2010) and cognitive pragmatics (Schmid 2012). Such a wide perspective on the research object makes it possible to gain a more extensive picture of FD and to concretise the triggers and causes of misunderstandings.

Our observations are based on recorded dialogues in ten Russian families. The material has been collected by Alla Baikulova and her students in 2000 to 2020 in Saratov. Saratov with its population of 800,000 is located in the European part of Russia on the river Volga. The material has been partly recorded and partly written down by hand by an observer.

Before going into the findings based on this material, we will present a multilayered pattern of analysis which can be applied to any kind of discourse. It starts with (1) a description of general features of the context where a type of discourse is used. The next step is (2) a demonstration of how they are reflected in interaction. Then, these characteristics result in certain sets of (3) triggers for miscommunication and (4) species of miscommunication. As to FD, the connections between these levels of analysis can be illustrated by the following example: (1) a general

feature of FD is that communicants knowing each other very well live and spend their leisure time in the same place, which is their home. (2) This general feature is reflected in poor concentration on interaction. (3) This results, among others, in unclear articulation, which is a trigger for (4) one species of miscommunication, namely misperception.

2. General features of FD

Interaction takes place between two or more **participants** in a certain physical or virtual **space**. Let us consider how these characteristics emerge in FD.

We start with the social role of FD. Being at home represents people's **leisure time**. In the contemporary world, people usually work outside their homes, in factories, offices, schools, studios, hospitals. In their working places, they have various roles, which entail wearing social masks in order to maintain a professional face. At home people certainly also have roles, those of parents and children, but these roles permit them to take off their official masks and to be more themselves. Leisure time also allows speaking without caring about the norms of formal language. Although in Russian, like many other languages, a colloquial manner of speaking has pushed its way into official and semi-official genres (Klushina et al. 2019; Mustajoki 2020), nevertheless the difference is still quite significant. At home, people allow themselves to speak in their own language, which, in fact, is their real mother tongue.

Physical communicative conditions at home differ from those in other places in many respects. For the family environment, a constant **change in interactional settings** is characteristic. Stable face-to-face situations where communicants concentrate on the conversation are possible, but rare. Mealtimes collect family members around a table, where more structured and argumentative conversations are possible (see e.g., Bova 2019). However, family members typically speak when doing something else at the same time. They cook, watch TV, do their homework and use a computer or smartphone. The connection between the speaker and recipients may become troublesome because of these circumstances. The supposed recipient may have moved from one room to another without the speaker noticing.

Family members may interact also outside the home, for example, when driving a car, doing something in the garden or playing with children in the yard. In these conditions, the interaction may also be problematic due to large distances between interlocutors or the sounds produced by physical activities. The existence of various sources of sound, such as a vacuum cleaner and other domestic appliances, music or the TV, is a frequent disturbing factor in interactional settings

inside as well. The communicants may realise the presence of the noise but underestimate its effect in a situation where they have something important to say.

The family is the only social unit with **systematic and long-established intergenerational and intersexual relationships**. Most workplaces include both male and female workers, but not children. Sometimes people have closer and more intimate relationships with their friends than with their family members, but these outside relationships differ from family ties in nature. Apart from love affairs, people tend to choose friends among fellow human beings belonging to the same gender and age group. Interactional settings are especially homogenous among schoolchildren, who spend most of their time outside the home with mates of the same birth year. Thus, having representatives of different generations and sexes makes FD an exceptional type of interaction.

Summing up, the most significant general features of the environment in which FD takes place are that (1) it is a place where the participants spend their leisure time, (2) the physical place of interaction is prone to unexpected changes and is seldom ideal for a concentrated conversation, and (3) it involves a long-established group of interlocutors of different age groups and sexes. As a whole, FD represents the most natural variety of language. It cannot be studied adequately if one is suffering from ideal language syndrome (Van Brakel 2006). Grice's maxims, definitely, do not work at home (Sarangi and Slembrouck 1992; Gu 1994).

3. Reflections of the general features in interaction

The familiar, comfortable and safe environment encourages family members to **take risks** in their behaviour (Baikulova 2016). This has a substantial influence on the mode of interaction they apply in comparison to official and/or institutional communicative settings. At home people do not pay any special attention to the way they speak. Therefore, the speech is very **spontaneous**. From this it can be inferred that dialogues at home are "notoriously disfluent" (Brennan and Schober 2001, 274).

Another feature of the risky speech mode used at home is that instead of speaking politely and smoothly, family members may use **direct and straightforward language**. They do have not to behave politically correctly, and sometimes, they unintentionally reveal prejudices and stereotypical thinking. Stereotypes can also concern family members' behaviour. A man can speak of 'female logic', an expression he would never use at work. She may comment on his manner of speaking and acting as 'a typical man's one-track mind'. Stereotypes may also concern grandparents. Younger people tend to have a rather negative impression of the language command of elderly people (Kemper 1994; Hummert 2019).

A further mark of risk-taking is an almost **endless choice of possible topics of discussion**. Topics include the organisation of everyday life, the rearing of children, intense feelings, global and local politics, sport, the lives of relatives and acquaintances, the behaviour of public figures and the neighbour's children – and anything else. Parents may have a need to share something about their working life. In addition to that, the **motivation to speak changes** rapidly from the transfer of information and storytelling to requests, persuasion and the expression of emotions. The level of gravity may change quickly as well. Soon after the parents have discussed what to eat tomorrow, one of them may ask, "Do you still love me?" or say, "I am afraid Ann is using drugs." Due to these characteristics, FD is to a high degree **unpredictable**, which is challenging for the recipient.

Recent research has shown that the human brain, despite its huge capacity, has its limitations. The fact that people have to save their cognitive efforts (Bargh and Chartrand 1999; Dijksterhuis 2004) has a substantial influence on people's behaviour in interaction (Shintel and Keysar 2009; Mustajoki 2012, 228; 2013, 9; 2017b). This is especially true when people are relaxing during their leisure time. The best way to save cognitive energy during an interaction is to **minimise concentration**. The recipient may pretend to listen and understand while thinking of something else at the same time. The speaker can avoid using too much cognitive energy by always speaking in the same manner, that is, by frequently using her/his favourite words and expressions and by switching off the recipient design mode (Kecskes 2017a).

Speaking spontaneously without thinking too much about what to say and how to say it, while saving cognitive effort, is fertile ground for misunderstanding caused by different interpretations of the sent messages. In relaxed situations, the speaker often blurts out the first thing that comes to mind, which means that the phrase used by her/him is just accidental, with no special importance. S/he could have said nothing or chosen an alternative way of saying the same thing, whereas for the recipient the phrase s/he heard is the only thing that counts in that situation. The opposite is also possible in a situation with poor concentration: the speaker has planned for a long time to state something serious, and when s/he says it, the recipient does not realise the importance of that message. Therefore, **misbalance in the interpretation of the significance** of words is a risk for misunderstanding, especially in FD.

Another natural feature of the human brain is **egocentrism**. Evolution has developed our brain to consider first what is best for ourselves. In communicative settings outside the home we use our cognitive energy to try to see the world through the eyes of other communicants, but people often fail in this (Keysar and Henly 2002; Kruger et al. 2005; Keysar 2007; Epley 2008; Kecskes and Zhang 2009; Todd et al. 2011; Mustajoki 2012). At home the situation is in this respect

even worse because people think that they know the other communicants well enough so that there is no need to pay attention to the differences in mental worlds. This leaves room for more egocentric behaviour in interaction than in official communication settings.

Living in an intergenerational and intersexual environment leads inevitably to **tensions between family members**. Sharing one's everyday life with other people means negotiating both big and small issues with them: what to do together and when, what kind of behaviour is preferable and allowed, what the rights and obligations are of each family member. Quarrels and fights are everyday in many families, which can eventually become a long-lasting feud between some of the family members. In such a case, certain family members tend to gain a certain stigma in the eyes of others. This leads to an unwillingness to try to understand each other. When an occasional action is annoying, people often say something like this: "You always lie / leave clothes on the floor / forget important dates / let the pot spill over." In fact, *always* in such phrases means "more often than others do" – or the expression is just a sign of the speaker's frustration with everyday life. If the relationship between two family members is totally broken, one of them will disagree with the other even before that person has managed to say anything. At work people try to hide their personal feelings about other people, while at home they do not want to pretend. Therefore, they easily apply a divergent speech mode instead of being convergent (cf. Ylänne-McEwen and Coupland 2000; Dragojevic and Giles 2014).

In general, people hardly ever reveal all their feelings and emotions. In this respect, conversation at home, besides that with close friends, is a rare opportunity to be able to open one's heart to others. Of course, certain families have their own conventions as to the openness of conversation culture, and there are always certain rules regarding intimacy and trust: what can be told and shown, and to whom in the family. In any case, home is a place where people **show their emotions**. From the perspective of a smooth flow of conversation, this creates a risk because during an outburst, the speaker is totally egocentric and forgets to think about whether her/his speech is understandable, whereas an emotionally loaded recipient loses her/his interest in the conversation and capability of listening to others (Weigand 2004; Beukeboom and Jong 2008; Peräkylä and Sorjonen 2012; Todd et al. 2015).

The need to show one's emotions increases the role of **non-verbal and paralinguistic tools of communication**. Tone of voice and facial expressions are the most effective tools for expressing inner feelings. Family members learn to read each other's non-verbal cues in interaction. This is actually the communication skill a baby acquires first. In a relaxed atmosphere, people give more space to natural behaviour, and therefore mimicry is more genuine. Because it is more difficult

to fake non-verbal and paralinguistic expressions, people tend to trust them more than words. However, they can also be interpreted in the wrong way (Falkner 1997, 151–157). Most of these non-verbal expressions are automatic in a relaxed atmosphere. The skill of reading these messages properly is an important constituent of the pragmatic competence of a recipient.

Interaction is possible only if the communicants share a sufficient degree of common ground and a shared knowledge of the world and beliefs (Stalnaker 1978; Clark and Brennan 1991; Clark 1996), or using our terminology: their mental worlds are sufficiently similar (Mustajoki 2012, 223–226). In this respect, a family is a rather controversial space of living and interacting. On the other hand, family members have a **long joint history**. Therefore, FD is strongly intertextual (Gordon 2009). Referring to common memories and flashbacks is one of the clues in understanding the built family identity. For newcomers, such as a fiancée, such speech may appear cryptic. Ties between family members are also strengthened by the creation of a certain familylect, which is a phenomenon often linked to multilingual families (Carling et al. 2014; Van Mensel 2018). As shown in several Russian studies, monolingualism does not hinder the creation of a familylect, which may emerge in exotic nicknames and names for certain objects and other plays on words (Anokhina 2008; Zanadvorova 2001; Baikulova 2012, 2014; Anokhina and Kravtchenko 2017). In this case, the mental worlds of family members resemble each other in many respects, but on the other hand, each of the family members living together also has her/his own life outside the home. That life does not necessary influence the person's way of speaking, but certainly has a substantial reflection in the contents of their mental worlds: they know different people and things, their interests and priorities vary, they come into contact with different objects. This combination of having much in common but also many differences brings a treacherous risk for mutual misunderstandings.

To summarise the main content of this section, we have identified three factors which characterise the essence of FD: risk-taking, tension and polyglossia. **Risk-taking** means the possibility to be more or less honest and direct in speaking and revealing feelings and emotions. An exceptional amount of **tension** between communicants derives from the high degree of interconnectivity: they share a physical place, financial resources and most joys and worries with each other. **Polyglossia** emphasises the diversity of voices, topics of conversation, tools of communication (both verbal and non-verbal) and the motivations to interact within a family.

4. Triggers for miscommunication

Problems in interaction have been identified and listed by a number of researchers (e.g. Dascal 1999; Weigand 1999; Tzanne 2000; House et al. 2003; Verdonik 2010; Mustajoki 2012; Bazzanella 2019; Honghui and Dongchun 2019). Different causes, triggers and forms of miscommunication are hierarchically interlinked and therefore difficult to differentiate. Nevertheless, in order to better understand problems in the speech production and comprehension processes, we will attempt to find a certain cause-and-effect relationship between various factors influencing those processes. We regard a **trigger** as a communication problem which is somehow produced by communicants, while a **species** of misunderstanding is a concrete identification of the phase of interaction where the problem occurs. When talking about triggers, the question is **what the communicants did wrong**, while when speaking of species of misunderstanding, we ask **what went wrong**.

As this is not an evident or straightforward distinction, an example may help to illustrate the difference. Non-listening is a trigger which may lead to misunderstanding, but mishearing is a species of misunderstanding. It can be said that the recipient could not understand what the speaker said from not listening. An explanation for mishearing is more complex (Linell 2015). Perhaps there was a loud noise, and the speaker did not realise that the recipient did not hear her/him well enough. Thus, triggers are communicant-driven causes of miscommunication. Species of misunderstanding determine the phase of interaction where a communication failure is identified, and in this example it was in the perception of the message.

When talking about triggers, it is reasonable to differentiate between the triggers caused by the speaker and those caused by the recipient. The overall trigger for misunderstanding caused by the speaker is **inappropriate recipient design** (Newman-Norlund et al. 2009; Blokpoel et al. 2012; Mustajoki 2012, 2013, 2017b; Deppermann 2015; Kecskes 2016; 2017b; Kecskes and Kirner-Ludwig 2019). The ability to conduct recipient design, or *communication accommodation competence* (Pitts and Harwood 2015; Zhang and Pitts 2019), is a part of people's pragmatic competence. An important part of recipient design is **monitoring** the behaviour and reactions of other participants in the conversation (Ferreira et al. 2005).

A general rule in the adjustment of speech for the recipient is: the more difference that can be noticed between the communicants, the more probably the speaker tries to accommodate her/his speech. In speaking to children, practically everyone is able to use baby talk, and in speaking to adult speakers of other languages, people, as a rule, realise that a special type of foreigner talk is needed. When communicants' language commands and mental worlds are more similar, the speaker may rely on that and not make any effort to accommodate her/his

speech. Due to the great similarities between how people think and speak, this strategy works well in most cases. Therefore, people often understand semantically or structurally ambiguous constructions without any difficulties.

However, despite the large amount of common ground between the communicants, FD is propitious to misunderstandings, which seem to be even more frequent than in many other settings, as was mentioned above. One background factor here is the avoidance of using too much cognitive energy during leisure time, and another important source of miscommunication is a false confidence in the similarity of their mental worlds. In other words, they fall into the trap of the **common ground fallacy** (Mustajoki 2012, 2017b). People living together do not realise how different their mental worlds are in some areas and how differently they may understand certain words and phrases. A teenager may speak of *Green Day* as if the parents understood that it is not a day when people think of ecology, but a rock group. When speaking to a teenager, a parent may use the word *resilience*, which belongs to the normal vocabulary of workplaces, but is definitely not used in the speech of youth. Similar things happen in using indirect speech and elliptical and ambiguous expressions (Yus 1999; Vepreva 2005). In the quick tempo of everyday speech, family members do not realise that their own imagination and expectations do not necessarily coincide with those of others. Improper recipient design can also be caused by unclear articulation.

As to the triggers caused by the recipient, one of them is obvious: **non-listening**. The environment at home is much more open to this than, say, conversation at work. Changing communicative settings and a relaxed atmosphere make it more likely that the recipient will not listen than in a face-to-face situation where concentration is expected. Non-listening means the non-perceiving of a message, which makes understanding impossible.

Another frequent trigger of misunderstanding in FD is **overguessing**, which takes place when the recipient is listening "with one ear open" and adds the rest just on the basis of her/his own imagination (Mustajoki 2012, 222–232; Pickering and Gambi 2018). Sometimes overguessing creates unexpected scenes in real life situations, such as mixing up tomatoes for potatoes (Mustajoki 2017b, 67).

A further frequent trigger of misunderstanding at home is **purposeful mislistening or misinterpretation** of a message. It is used as a communicative strategy also outside the home, for example, in politics and trade negotiations, but the family environment is a fertile soil for applying it as well. Frequent use of indirect speech, a common feature of FD, gives good opportunities for ignoring such implications in interaction. If X hints about buying an electric car by saying "John and Mary bought an electric car", Y probably understands what X means but deliberately takes the phrase literally.

We have identified inadequate recipient design as an overarching trigger for misunderstanding caused by the speaker. The misunderstanding derives from poor concentration on interaction and the common ground fallacy and leads to the usage of words and expressions unknown to the recipient and an excessive use of indirect and elliptical expressions. Triggers connected with the role of the recipient come from not doing what should be done (non-listening, intentional non-understanding) or doing something which should not be done (overguessing).

5. Species of misunderstanding

Macagno (2017, 255) gives an interesting systematisation of the connections of the different notions used in describing miscommunication. For him, miscommunication is, besides a communication breakdown, communication failure, and a puzzled understanding is one of the possible (negative) communicative effects. Then, he differentiates between two major categories of misunderstanding and non-understanding, namely incorrect reception and lack of reception, dividing them into subcategories. We have similar elements in our scheme, which aims to systematise various aspects of miscommunication, which is for us an umbrella notion, while misunderstanding (and non-understanding and puzzled understanding), communication breakdown and discomfort in interaction are its realisations. In the identification of the different species of misunderstanding, we use the Multidimensional Model of Interaction (MMI).

Before going into the details of the model, we will address its scope from the point of view of situations of interaction. The model considers a single turn in a dialogue: the speaker says something to the recipient. By concentrating on such a move, we are not closing our eyes to the cooperative nature of interaction, emphasised quite correctly by many researchers (Grice 1975; Clark 1996, among others). Indeed, during a dialogue, understanding is often created as a joint effort of the communicants. However, this is true only in favourable conditions: face-to-face dyadic dialogues where the interlocutors have good concentration and are in a cooperative mood. And even more relevantly, even a highly cooperative dialogue consists of separate steps which the speaker and the recipient take in a certain order.

The idea behind the model is to describe significant features of interaction as a part of a systematic process. The starting point of an interaction is a certain message which the speaker wishes to express. Then, the speaker has to find a verbal and/or non-verbal expression (form in the figure) which corresponds to the message which should be expressed. In selecting the most suitable expression, the speaker takes, mostly automatically, into consideration various, sometimes contradictory factors: the selected expression should (1) have a sufficiently precise

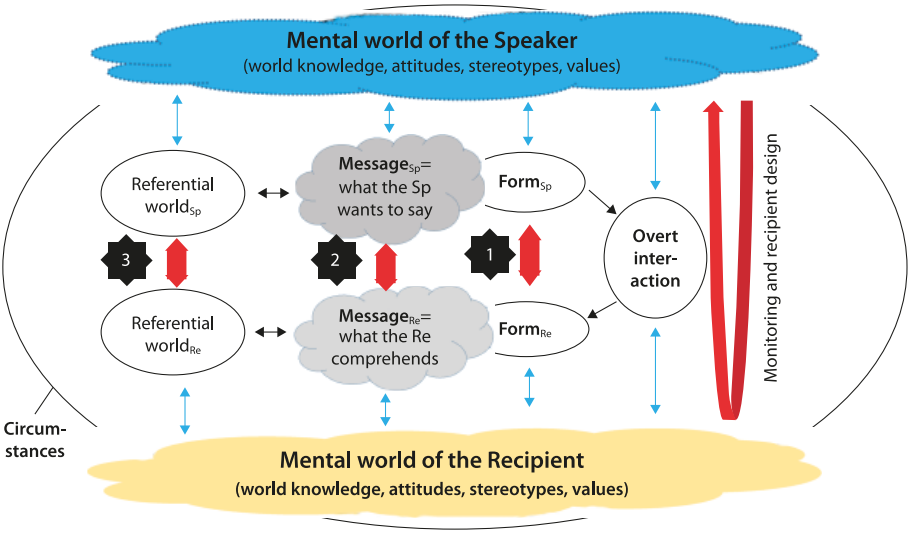

Figure 1. *Multidimensional Model of Interaction (MMI)* (for earlier versions, see Mustajoki 2012, 2013, 2017)

correspondence to the desired Message, (2) reflect well enough speaker's communicative and other goals, (3) match with the communicative context and the audience in hand, and (4) be easily found in the memory of the speaker.

Some noise or other disturbing elements in the situation may happen during the overt interaction. After that, the work of the recipient starts. Possible inconveniences and problems may have already occurred in the way s/he is receiving the message. The compatibility of the form sent by the speaker and the form perceived by the recipient (point 1 in the figure) is the first test and a requirement for understanding. Here **non-hearing** and **mishearing,** caused by poor articulation by the speaker or by non-listening, half-listening and/or overguessing by the recipient, are possible obstacles for successful understanding.

If this stage of the process goes more or less as planned, the message arrives at the most demanding stage, where the recipient tries to give an interpretation of the message which is in line with that given by the speaker (point 2 in the figure). Because complete understanding is probably not possible, a reasonable goal is sufficient understanding (see discussion on this in Gauker 1992; Taylor 1992; Bergman 2001; Gander 2018). Sufficient means for the recipient that s/he is satisfied that s/he has received enough information. From the interactional point of view, there are two levels for deciding what is sufficient. At the micro level, sufficient means that the interaction may be continued, and at the macro level it means that the relationship between the communicants remains good enough for further interactional contacts. What is sufficient in a particular communicative

situation depends on many factors: how relevant the message is for the communicants, whether the recipient has something more important in mind, if there is social pressure not to interrupt the interaction by asking for clarification, what the general mood is of the recipient, what the relationship is like between the interlocutors.

Misinterpretation or non-understanding may concern any component of the message. When living together, the mental worlds of family members either become gradually more and more homogenous or the family members at least learn which issues diverge. They have learnt what other family members mean by a holiday trip, equal duties at home, grandmother (in the Russian context babushka) or a salty soup, but nevertheless, wrong interpretations are still possible after years of living together, for example, what such simple words as *sausage, flour, bread, nail* or *string* mean to the speaker (Mustajoki 2012, 229). So, in FD, the vagueness and ambiguity of the meanings of words and sentences may cause problems due to the common ground fallacy when people do not realise the possible differences in their mental worlds.

However, this is far from being the only risk in the interpretation of the message by the recipient. In FD, indirect speech, being by definition a risk for understanding (Yus 1999), is widely used. There is a large amount of literature on the distinction between sentence (literary, direct, semantic, locative) meaning and the speaker's (indirect, pragmatic, illocutive) meaning. We will put the theoretical considerations around these questions aside here and take a concrete everyday example for illustration. Due to the diversity of speech functions in FD, the variety of different intentions is very rich (Grebenshchikova and Zachesova 2014). Let us take a situation where the speaker says "The car is dirty". The direct meaning of the phrase is not likely to produce any problem with understanding. *A dirty car* means for most people 'dirty outside', but not 'dirty inside'. There certainly are different opinions on the dirtiness of a car, or on the amount of dirt that gathers on a car before it can be characterised as dirty. However, these difference are not relevant if the phrase has – and most probably has – the implicit meaning 'Wash the car'. Such an interpretation of the phrase is reasonable if the car is "washable", that is, it is the car of the speaker and probably also that of the recipient. Another requirement for this interpretation is that the recipient is a person who is able to wash a car (not, e.g., a young child) and also responsible for car washing in that family.

However, if we look more closely at real communicative situations, it becomes clear that an interpretation of *what is meant* is not enough to understand the entire meaning of a message. For sufficient understanding of the phase *The car is dirty*, it is necessary to realise not only that the speaker is requesting that the car be washed but also that there are some other possible aspects to the meaning which are mostly unintended and unconscious. These "side-meanings" can be called modes or

modalities (Falkner 1997, 96; Mustajoki 2012, 220); one possible name could be valorisation. In the case in hand, it is relevant to know how important it is to the speaker that the recipient will wash the car. People always have many things to do, and therefore they have to prioritise them. Thus, for sufficient understanding of the phrase, the recipient should know whether it is necessary to wash the car immediately or simply in the near future at a convenient time to do so.

All in all, misinterpretation of the message or non-understanding of its real meaning may concern all of the information put into the message by the speaker, consciously or not. Some aspects of the meaning can be understood only by having sufficient experience with and knowledge of the speaker, which usually is the case in a family.

Point 3 in the figure still remains. The compatibility of the reference intended by the speaker and that understood by the recipient is a necessary requirement for understanding what the speaker means. Referential ambiguity, that is, the possibility to interpret a reference in more than one way, is always a potential cause of misunderstanding (Vendler 1994, 19; Ferreira et al. 2005, 218). As Brown (1995) argues, **misreference** is a constant risk to communication. Due to the high degree of the concreteness of interaction and the frequent use of various deictic words and expressions (pronouns and proper names, among others), FD is full of situations where misreference may occur.

The different species of misunderstandings are described in the following figure.

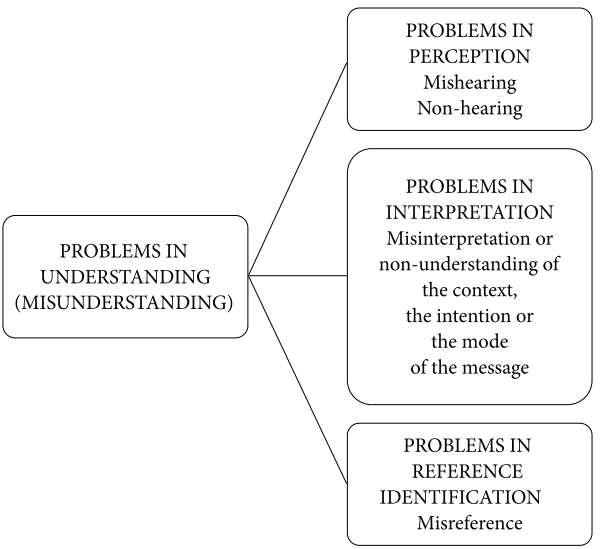

Figure 2. Species of misunderstanding

6. Analysis of the material

When analysing the excerpts from the material, we will use the above-mentioned levels. At the same time, the interplay between various factors becomes evident. Before going to the selected excepts, it is important to pay attention to the link between them and the concept of misunderstanding. It can be argued that the excerpts do not represent cases of misunderstanding because the message was comprehended after a short negotiation or on the basis of further conversation. This is true. However, there are two reasons for using these examples in research on miscommunication. The first is methodological and technical. A problem with this kind of research is that misunderstandings are often latent, using terminology proposed by Linell (1995; cf. also Hinnenkamp 2003). It means that the interlocutors do not recognise that a misunderstanding has occurred. However, as shown in Mustajoki and Sherstinova (2017), misunderstandings are also difficult for the researcher to identify. Therefore, when using authentic materials, it is almost impossible to find latent misunderstandings for analysis.

The second reason for using these examples for research on misunderstandings is the "let it pass" strategy (Firth 2009), often applied in interaction. This refers to a situation where the recipient realises that s/he did not understand what the speaker said, but does not admit this by asking for clarification. The trigger and species of understanding are in these situations essentially similar to those which we meet in cases where the recipient reveals that s/he did not hear or understand. Therefore, the excerpts comprising such turns also reflect cases in which the misunderstanding remains unnoticed by the speaker.

Excerpt 1. *(Tooth)*
The mother-in-law (M-in-L) turns to the daughter-in-law (D-in-L), who is at that moment in another room. The D-in-L had a toothache the day before.

1. M-in-L: *Оль / Как зуб?*
   Olja, how is the tooth?
2. D-in-L: *ЧТО?*
   WHAT?
3. M-in-L: *ЗУБ КАК?*
   TOOTH, HOW?

The excerpt demonstrates the most typical cause of miscommunication in a family environment. The interactional setting is far from being face-to-face where communicants are able to concentrate on the interaction (Mustajoki 2017b, 59). Because of the distance between the interlocutors, both of them missed part of the

conversation – the D-in-L in line 2, and the M-in-L in line 3. Perhaps this pair of interlocutors would be more sensitive to mishearings and other disturbances than in a parent–parent or parent–child conversation. Therefore, non-listening is here repaired, but in other settings it could cause miscommunication.

Excerpt 2. *(Eating)*
She (the mother) is in the kitchen and he (the father) is watching TV in the living room nearby.

4. She: Есть будешь?
   Are you going to eat?
5. He does not answer.
6. She: Есть будешь?
   Are you going to eat?
7. He does not answer.
8. She: САШ / ЕСТЬ БУДЕШЬ?
   SASHA, ARE YOU GOING TO EAT?
9. He: Да нет / не хочу.
   Oh, no. I don't want

This represents the most frequent situation at home. The recipient is concentrating on something else and does not listen to the speaker, which leads to non-hearing (lines 2 and 4). It is also quite possible that he is just pretending not to hear. In a relaxed circumstance when people are resting, the situation allows them to not fully concentrate on the interaction. From the perspective of the speaker, one could say that recipient design fails because the message does not reach the recipient's consciousness. The dialogue demonstrates a minimised language, characteristic of FD. *Да нет* in line 9 is a bizarre Russian expression which is possible only in mundane speech. It seems to consist of two opposite answers (*yes* and *no*), but in fact, *da* (yes) is here not an answer but a combined particle with the word *net* (no). The meaning is usually something like 'in fact, no' or 'after all, no'. The rest of the answer *ne khochu* (do not want) is a very straightforward rejection, which is possible only in an intimate relationship.

Excerpt 3. *(Toys)*
She (the mother) speaks to her five-year-old daughter Yana.

10. She: *Яна / убирай игрушки*
    Yana, tidy up your toys.
11. Yana does not react.
12. She: *Яна / убирай игрушки*
    Yana, tidy up your toys.

13. Yana does not react.
14. She: *ЯНА! Ты слышишь / что я тебе говорю?*
    YANA! Do you hear what I am saying to you?
15. Yana: *Почему Я?*
    Why ME?

In this excerpt the power misbalance is clear: the mother has the right and obligation to regulate Yana's behaviour. The way the mother does this is very straightforward without any softening elements – a typical feature of FD. As a whole, the use of the imperative is in Russian more frequent than in many other languages (see e.g. Bolden 2017). Yana clearly takes the tactic of non-listening, although she must know that it does not help. Tiding up is a duty children regularly do not like (cf. Penderi & Rekalidou 2016). The last line (15) is a typical sign of frustration when a child has to do something unpleasant.

Excerpt 4. *(Animated film)*
The grandson is telling his grandmother about an animated film.

16. The grandson is talking passionately about an animated film.
17. Grandma (after a while): *Ага.*
    Ahem.
18. The grandson continues talking.
19. Grandma (after a while): *Ага.*
    Ahem.
20. Grandson: *Баб / что ты всё ага да ага // Ты меня не слушаешь что ли?*
    Grandma, you are just saying ahem and ahem. Are you listening to me?

Here the roles are opposite from those in Excerpt 3. A child is speaking, and an adult, the Grandmother, is not listening. She may think that her physical presence is enough. The use of smartphones by adults has increased the risk of not paying attention to a child (Kildare and Middlemiss 2017). The strategy works for a while, but then the grandson realises that the recipient is mentally absent. He comments on that by showing his unhappiness with such behaviour and imitates his grandmother's way of speaking. In this case the grandma's misinterpretation concerns the degree of presence which is needed as a recipient.

Excerpt 5. *(Music)*
He is standing at a window, and she is further away.
21. He: *Что там шумит?*
What makes this noise.
22. She: *Мусорка.*
A bin lorry.
23. He: *Да какая музыка?*
Which kind of music?
24. She: *МУСОРКА!*
BIN LORRY.

The dialogue represents a typical situation in FD: the reason to say something is very practical and ordinary – he hears a noise and wants to know its source. Her answer is quite correct, but he does not hear it correctly. Thus, the trigger of the misunderstanding is mishearing caused by overguessing by the husband (line 23). There is both a linguistic and substantial reason for this. *Musorka*, a colloquial word for 'refuse collection vehicle', is very similar to the Russian word *muzyka* (music), and in addition, both such a car and music are possible sources of noise in this context.

Excerpt 6. *(Garden)*
He and she are speaking of Natasha's garden.
25. She: *Ну… / у Наташи много красивых кустарников*
Eh… Natasha has a lot of beautiful bushes.
26. He: *Да нет // Она там сажает в основном цветы.*
Actually no. She mainly grows flowers.
27. She: *Да нет / у неё там разных много растений.*
Actually no. She has a lot of different plants there.
28. He: *Подожди / у какой Наташи?*
Wait a minute. Which Natasha?
29. She: *У нашей / У Наташи Ивановной.*
Ours, Natasha Ivanovna.
30. He: *А… / А я думала ты про нашу Наташу.*
Ah… I thought that you are speaking of our Natasha.

The excerpt demonstrates a plain example of misreference, which is one of the most frequent species of misunderstanding in FD because of its concreteness. The communicants know two Natashas. Interestingly, both of them are "ours". For her, Natasha (Ivanovna) is a colleague at her job (line 29), for him, a relative (line 30). It quite possible that he does not even know Natasha Ivanovna. If so, speaking of

her without any clarification from her side is a case of the common ground fallacy – a frequent trigger of misunderstanding in FD, or if we we use other terms – non-accommodation and underaccommodation (Dragojevic et al. 2016).

Excerpt 7. *(Milk)*

After visiting a grocery shop, the mother speaks with her son about various kinds of milk.

31. Mother: *Но я купила (points to milk she just brought home) потому что сдачи не было у продавщицы // Пришлось это взять.*
I bought this [milk] because the cashier didn't have any change // I had to take this.
32. Son: *В нашем магазине? Да у них вообще какая-то...*
In our shop? Yes, they have a strange [cashier]
33. Mother: *Нет / это я... на остановке взяла.*
No, I ... in the shop near the bus stop.
34. Son: *В нашем магазине как придешь // так у них все время сдачи нет*
When you come into our shop // they never have change.

To understand the plot of the dialogue, one has to know about a typical phenomenon in small Russian shops – a constant lack of small change. Sometimes this problem is solved by taking another product, as the mother explains in line 31. This fact leads the son to a misreference because this happens frequently in another shop, "our shop" (line 32). After the son realised that his mother was not speaking of this other shop, he nevertheless continues to explain why he mixed up the shops (line 34). Besides that, the excerpt is an apt manifestation of two features of FD: the dialogue is to a high degree elliptic, and the interlocutors rely very much on their common ground.

Excerpt 8. *(Sunset)*

Grandmother is watching the sunset with her two-year-old grandchild.

35. Grandmother: *Яночка / смотри / солнышко садится //*
Janotška, look, the sun is setting.
36. Grandchild: *Оно что сидя спать будет?*
It will sleep from a sitting position, won't it?

This is a story parents and grandparents like to tell: a small child understands a metaphor literally. The normal Russian expression for sunset is *sadit'sja*, which means literally 'sit down'. Here the babushka does not realise that the word is still uncommon for Jana. At that age, children are not yet asking for word meanings

to be clarified; they learn to recognise figurative language later (see e.g. Demorest et al. 1983; Mazzarella and Pouscoulous 2020). The excerpt contains a characteristic feature of Russian FD, especially when people are speaking to children: a frequent use of diminutives: *Janotška* for *Jana* and *solnyško* 'small sun' for *solnce* (sun) (Protassova and Voeikova 2007).

7. Conclusion

FD can be regarded as a metalevel **communication activity type** (a term used in Linell 2010), albeit not as a monolithic whole, but rather divided into subtypes, for example, dialogues between spouses, between siblings and between children and parents.

As a communication activity type, FD has the following general features: a specific social environment (leisure time), changing physical conditions at home and a specific set of communicants (representatives of both genders and more than one generation).

These general features of FD are reflected in the course of the interactions. For example, since people are enjoying their leisure time, and since the communicants are so familiar with each other, they can relax and not concentrate on interactions. Instead they "think" (mostly intuitively) that they can save cognitive energy by speaking freely and not actively listening.

The most important trigger for misunderstanding in the behaviour of the speaker is inadequate recipient design. It is caused by poor concentration on interaction and leads to the wrong assumption about the recipient's mental knowledge and vocabulary. In other words, the communicants fall into the common ground fallacy. This attitude emerges in an excessive employing of indirect and elliptical expressions and in raising new topics without giving sufficient background information. Triggers connected with the role of the recipient are non-listening, intentional non-understanding and overguessing.

Species of misunderstanding can be identified in different phases of interaction as a lack of correspondence between the speaker's and recipient's actions. Problems in perception occur as mishearing and non-hearing. At the next stage, misinterpretation may concern all aspects of the message: the content, intention and mode. Misreference, or the wrong interpretation of the reference of the message, is also possible.

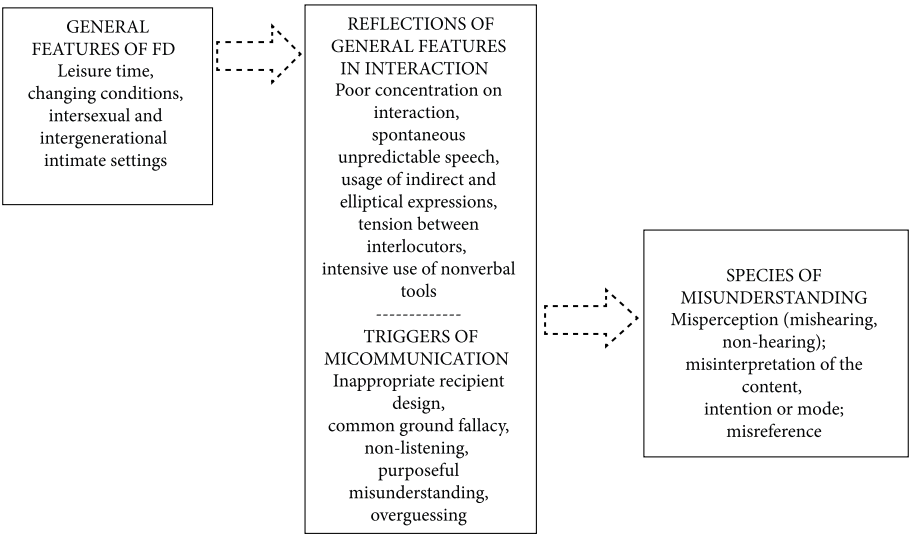

Figure 3. Levels of the features of FD

Funding

This article is an output of a research project implemented as part of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE University).

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