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Evidence and presumptions for analyzing and detecting misunderstandings

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The detection and analysis of misunderstandings are crucial aspects of discourse analysis, and presuppose a twofold investigation of their structure. First, misunderstandings need to be identified and, more importantly, justified. For this reason, a classification of the types and force of evidence of a misunderstanding is needed. Second, misunderstandings reveal differences in the interlocutors' interpretations of an utterance, which can be examined by considering the presumptions that they use in their interpretation. This paper proposes a functional approach to misunderstandings grounded on presumptive reasoning and types of presumptions, in which incompatible interpretations or interpretative failures are examined as defaults of the underlying interpretative reasoning, caused by overlooked evidence or conflicting presumptions. Moreover, it advances a classification of the types and the probative weights of the evidence that can be used to detect misunderstandings. The proposed methodology and its implications are illustrated through the analysis of doctor–patient communication in diabetes care.

Keywords: misunderstanding, interpretation, pragmatics, presumption, intercultural communication, intra-cultural communication, interpretative reasoning

1. Introduction

Misunderstanding is a crucial issue for any discipline focusing on the analysis of discourse or conversation (Tzanne 2000). On the one hand, it presupposes a framework for representing the mismatching interpretations of an utterance (Weigand 1999, Yus 1999, Moeschler 2007, Kecskes 2013: 59–60). On the other hand, the notion of misunderstanding is commonly used but hardly inquired into either in pragmatics (Verdonik 2010: 1364) or in cross-cultural studies, including intercultural

communication and pragmatics (Moeschler 2004, Moeschler 2007, Kaur 2011), and intra-cultural communication among different communities (Macagno & Bigi 2017a). This twofold dimension corresponds to the interrelated problems of identifying a misunderstanding and analyzing its causes, unveiling the possible differences or similarities between the interlocutors' backgrounds.

The goal of this paper is to propose an analysis of misunderstandings that facilitates an explanation of why a turn in a conversation can reveal the occurrence of a misunderstanding, and at the same time identifying the possible cause(s) thereof. More precisely, this paper will focus on the types of evidence that can support the conclusion that a participant in a dialogue has reached an interpretation of the interlocutor's utterance which is different from the intended meaning. This evidence can be stronger or weaker, depending on its nature and whether it is isolated or corroborated by other evidence. The detection of a misunderstanding leads to its analysis, namely, the investigation of why it occurred. To this purpose, this paper will propose a functional (argumentative or justificatory) approach to misunderstandings, based on the interpretive reasoning and the underlying presumptions involved in the interpretation of an utterance.

The paper begins by defining the area of study, narrowing the field of the broad notion of misunderstanding as defined in the existing literature to a specific phenomenon, which will be referred to as a mismatch between different or incompatible interpretations. The cause of this mismatch will be explained by considering the reasoning involved in the justification of the interpretation of an utterance. This account will lead to a further level of analysis, consisting of the classification of the premises used in the interpretative reasoning, referred to as "presumptions" (Macagno 2017). By classifying such premises, it is possible to bring to light the differences between the interlocutors' 'common' grounds, and, more precisely, the information that is taken as common but in fact may or may not be shared. Finally, the detection of misunderstandings will be investigated by proposing a classification based on the types of available evidence that can justify the occurrence of a misunderstanding. The application of this approach will then be illustrated through the analysis of specific cases taken from a corpus of doctor–patient communication.

2. Defining misunderstanding

Misunderstanding is a controversial notion, as it is essentially related to the problem of defining what counts as understanding (Weigand 1999: 768). Understanding can be broadly defined, using the terminology adopted by Dascal and Berenstein (1987: 140), as the successful retrieval of the pragmatic interpretation of the speaker's utterance:

Normally, speech is used to convey one pragmatic interpretation, and success in communication is measured by the addressee's ability to reach that interpretation. This is what is usually subsumed by the term 'understanding'. Notice that understanding is always pragmatic understanding. It is not a matter only of understanding the speaker's words (determining the 'sentence meaning') nor of understanding these words in their specific reference to the context of utterance (determining the 'utterance meaning'), but always a matter of getting to the speaker's intention in uttering those words in that context (determining the 'speaker's meaning').

The *speaker's meaning*, or rather the interpretation of the utterance that the speaker intends to convey to and be retrieved by the hearer, is not merely the decoding of the *propositional meaning* (Thomas 1983). Instead, the retrieval of the intended interpretation depends on different factors, including the reason for the speaker's utterance, the illocutionary force of the utterance, the degree of commitment of the speaker to what s/he said, and the indirect messages that the utterance may or may not convey (intentionally) (Dascal 2003: 304).

From a pragmatic perspective, misunderstanding can be defined as a "mismatch between the speaker's intended meaning and the hearer's understanding of this meaning in the particular context of interaction" (Tzanne 2000: 34). This definition focuses on one specific phenomenon, referred to in the literature as "alternative understanding" (Weigand 1999, Yus 1999) or coexistence of "alternate interpretations" (Gumperz & Tannen 1979: 310). It draws two crucial distinctions. On the one hand, it separates the cognitive dimension of misunderstanding (*comprehension*) (Weigand 1999: 769) from other perceptual phenomena such as *mishearing*, *non-hearing*, *misperception*, etc. (Zaeferrer 1977, Grimshaw 1980). On the other hand, according to this definition, misunderstandings are differentiated from their effects. In this view, misunderstandings can be considered as the (possible) **cause** of communicative breakdowns, namely, interruptions in communication that can result from the disparity between the speaker's and the hearer's interpretation (Milroy 1984: 15).

Misunderstanding needs to be thus distinguished from (a) the phenomena that prevent understanding (i.e. lead to *nonunderstanding*) and (b) their effects. Nonunderstanding is the lack of an interpretative hypothesis, which can result from both non-cognitive problems (more specifically, problems in speech perception or reception) and language comprehension problems. The non-cognitive phenomena are factors preventing the message from reaching (optimally) the addressee, which include, for example, problems with the channel of communication (for instance, the speaker's bad pronunciation or strong accent). *Language comprehension problems* can be considered to be in between misunderstanding and nonunderstanding. When a poor command of the language or the specialized language (*jargon*) prevents a possible, even incomplete, interpretation, it leads to nonunderstanding (Yus

1999: 502), in the sense that it results in total incomprehension (Vendler 1994: 20). This case needs to be distinguished from the case in which the hearer does not master the language or the jargon perfectly, or does not know some of the terms used by the speaker, but can still reach an interpretative hypothesis (Allwood & Abelar 1984). This interpretation can in fact be a misunderstanding that results from a partial lack of understanding.

Misunderstandings also need to be distinguished by their effects, which include both the problems that they cause and the ones that they could cause on communication. Misunderstandings, and, more specifically, misunderstandings that have not been clarified, can result in communication failures, breakdowns, and communicative problems. Moreover, misunderstandings may have a direct effect on the hearer, who reaches an interpretation that contradicts the background assumptions s/he can access. This effect is called *puzzled understanding* (Yus 1999: 504), and can lead to possible requests for clarification or breakdowns.

The aforementioned definition and the above differentiations draw some possible boundaries to the problematic concept of misunderstanding. An incompatibility between the communicated and the inferred meaning (or rather the speaker’s and the hearer’s interpretation of an utterance) can be due to different reasons (Vendler 1994: 21). The causes include (1) failure to understand enriched, specific semantic representation of an utterance, and (2) failure to draw the intended implicit meaning of an utterance (Grimshaw 1980), or to reconstruct its “point” or “force” (*pragmatic failures*) (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1986) or “conversational demand” (Dascal 2003: 306). In the following Figure 1 (see also Tzanne 2000: 37), the aforementioned distinctions are summarized graphically:

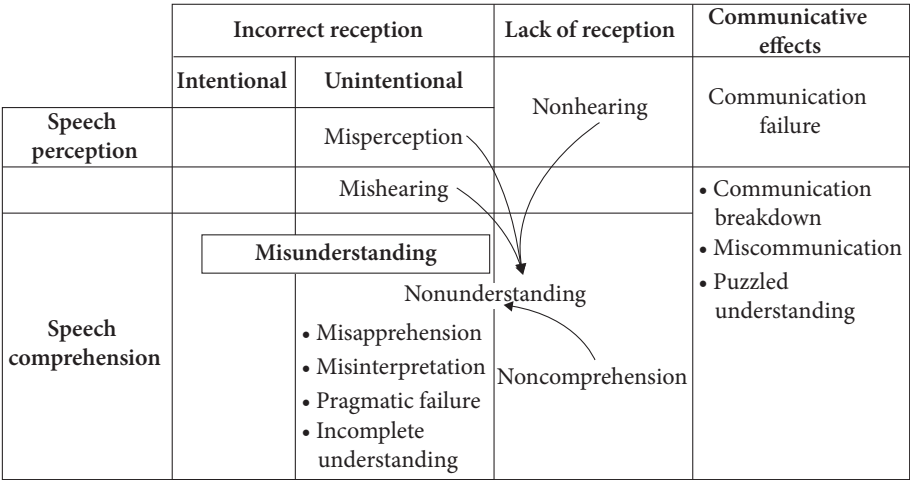


Figure 1. Misunderstanding, nonunderstanding, and communicative effects

This picture of the field of misunderstandings can be the starting point for investigating the problem of detecting and explaining misunderstandings.

3. Explaining misunderstandings

As mentioned above, misunderstandings are related to the comprehension of an utterance, either different from the intended one, or partial or incomplete. The analysis of misunderstandings thus presupposes an approach to utterance comprehension. For analytical purposes, a fundamental aspect of comprehension is an explanation of why a specific interpretation has been chosen, and of the reasons why it should be preferred or excluded. To this purpose, in this paper the occurrence of misunderstandings will be analyzed at the level of their justification, namely, at the level of the reasons that can be provided for explaining why an utterance was misunderstood (and, from a practical perspective, for showing how to avoid this type of misunderstanding in the future). This justificatory level will also be referred to as “functional” or “argumentative” (Macagno 2017).

The explanation of a misunderstanding can be regarded from a functional (argumentative) perspective as the reasons that can be provided in favor of two conflicting interpretations of an utterance. In this meta-dialogical process, the factors that can contribute to comprehending an utterance and that the speaker needs to take into account in accommodating his/her speech to the recipient (“recipient design”), and that are responsible for miscommunication (Mustajoki 2008, Mustajoki 2012: 230) are translated into reasons that can justify it. According to Hamblin (1970: 290–291, Macagno 2011), discourse can be seen as grounded in various types of presumptions concerning the interlocutors’ expectations (Hamblin 1970: 294–295). Such expectations can concern meaning consistency – relative to a group of speakers or a previous discourse – or other elements contributing to comprehension. For instance, an interpretation can be explained based on a general presumption such as “*Speakers usually use their words in compliance with their common use*”, or a more specific one such as “*Speakers usually utter (lexical item, phrase, or sentence) p to achieve the communicative goal G*” (Kecskes 2013: 141, italics added).

Building on this approach, both the cognitive mechanisms that can be responsible for comprehension and recipient design, and the “egocentric behavior of the speaker” (Mustajoki 2012, Kecskes 2010a) underlying many cases of misunderstanding can be conceived and assessed in terms of inferences and presumptive premises on which an interpretative conclusion is based. The expectations about compliance with language and text or discourse organization conventions, about the discourse participants and their goals (van Dijk & Kintsch 1983: 373), the

situation, or the schemata (Schmid 2003: 5) (commonly referred to as *knowledge*, Sayer 2013) are regarded as presumptions, namely, defeasible premises that can lead to tentative interpretative conclusions when combined with textual or contextual evidence. Rescher (2006: 33) represented the structure of this type of inference as follows (Table 1), which will be referred to as *presumptive reasoning*:

Table 1. Presumptive reasoning

Premise 1	<i>P</i> (the proposition representing the presumption) obtains whenever the condition <i>C</i> obtains unless and until the standard default proviso <i>D</i> (to the effect that countervailing evidence is at hand) obtains (Rule).
Premise 2	Condition <i>C</i> obtains (Fact).
Premise 3	Proviso <i>D</i> does not obtain (Exception).
Conclusion	<i>P</i> obtains.

The different types of presumptive premises can be divided into four categories according to their content. The first type (Level 0 – *pragmatic presumptions*) refers to the presumptions of use, namely, the common associations between the use of lexical items, phrases, or utterances and a communicative purpose (Kecskes 2008, Kecskes & Zhang 2009, Kissine 2012), or between the dialogical situation and the expected contribution. This broad category includes both socially (culturally) shared uses (*Can you pass me the salt?* is normally used to gently request the salt) and individual (prior) uses or expected dialogical goals pursued by a specific interlocutor in a specific setting (Sayer 2013: 745).

The second type (Level 1 – *linguistic*) includes presumptions related to the use of linguistic (or rather semantic-ontological) items and structures (called *semantic presumptions*). For instance, dictionary or shared meanings of lexical items are presumed to be known and chosen first by the speakers of a language for want of other contradicting information (usually *soldier* means ‘a member of the army’). These presumptions represent the presumptive meaning of linguistic elements (Hamblin 1970: 287, Macagno 2011), which, however, are subject to default in case the context requires a different interpretation (Giora et al. 2017). The third level of presumptions (Level 2 – *factual, encyclopedic*) concern encyclopedic knowledge, such as the shared knowledge of facts, common connection between events, or behaviors and habits. Finally, the last kind of presumptions (Level 3 – *values and interests*) includes presumptions about the interlocutor’s possible hierarchies of values and criteria of evaluation and choice in a given context (Dewey 1938: 167–168).

These types of presumptions can have different levels of specificity, namely, they can be more general or more specific (Schank & Abelson 1977: 37). They include the expectations about the interlocutor that result from the fact that s/he is a human being, or a member of a broader community (such as a linguistic community), or of a specific culture or sub-culture (Kecskes 2015) (for example, ‘recommendation

letters usually mention only the outstanding qualities of a candidate'), or the interlocutor as a specific individual (for instance, 'this professor usually writes very few and short recommendation letters'). The specificity of a presumption is a crucial factor for assessing the presumptive reasoning underlying an interpretation. More specific presumptions are the ones more related to the communicative context, and thus less defeasible by contrary evidence or presumptions (Clark & Brennan 1991, Clark 1996: Chapter 4). However, an incorrect assessment of the interlocutor's belonging to a specific group or community can result in a defaulted presumption, and thus potential misunderstanding. The levels of presumptions can be represented as in Figure 2 below (Macagno 2017):

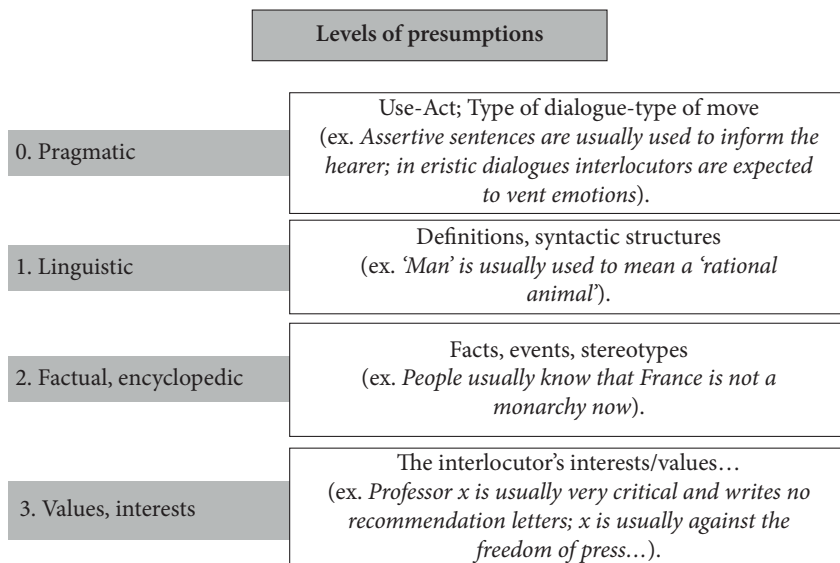


Figure 2. Levels of presumptions

An interpretation can be reached presumptively or through a more systematic type of reasoning, consisting of the assessment of the available evidence and related presumptions (Chaiken & Trope 1999, Uleman 1999, Uleman, Saribay & Gonzalez 2008, Evans 2003), which Atlas and Levinson (1981) described as reasoning from the best interpretation. When a presumptive interpretation is challenged, or when the presumptive interpretation cannot be maintained in consideration of conflicting evidence, the interpreter can reach (and justify) his/her interpretative conclusion by taking into account the most likely interpretations and excluding the weakest ones (Walton 2002, Wyner & Bench-Capon 2007, Bench-Capon & Prakken 2010, Macagno 2011, Weinstock, Goodenough & Klein 2013). This type of interpretative reasoning can be represented according to the following scheme (Table 2) (adapted from Walton et al. 2008: 329):

Table 2. Reasoning from best interpretation

Premise 1	<i>U</i> (an utterance) is an observed communicative act.
Premise 2	<i>I</i> (Interpretation 1) is a satisfactory description of the meaning of <i>U</i> .
Premise 3	No alternative meaning description <i>I'</i> (such as interpretation 2) given so far is as satisfactory as <i>I</i> .
Conclusion	Therefore, <i>I</i> is a plausible hypothesis, based on what is known so far.

The two patterns of reasoning, together with the distinct types and levels of presumptions, constitute possible means for representing the justification of an interpretation, and the interlocutors' reasoning intended to bridge the gap between their individual (and cultural) knowledge. By pointing out the presumptions the speaker relies on and the misunderstandings resulting from his/her utterance, it is possible to assess in terms of problematic reasoning the speaker's (or hearer's) efforts to adapt communication to the interlocutor's possible knowledge and expectations. This approach can explain from a logical perspective how the participants in a dialogue can advance an educated guess about the other's mind, and why and how the "recipient design" can go wrong (Mustajoki 2012: 228). By providing a structure for justifying an interpretation, presumptions can be used for representing mental and interpretative processing at a justificatory level.

4. Misunderstandings as problematic presumptive reasoning

As mentioned above, a misunderstanding can be analyzed as a conflict of presumptions that can occur at different levels of an interpretative reasoning. Misunderstandings can be explained in terms of presumptive reasoning: the speaker and the hearer interpret the same utterance based on different presumptions or on presumptions weighted and assessed differently based on the available evidence. For this reason, the mismatch is at the level of the interpretative presumptive reasoning. On the one hand, the speaker may incorrectly presume that the hearer can reach an interpretation, or that the intended interpretation is the most likely in the given context. On the other hand, the hearer may incorrectly assess the presumptions based on the available evidence. Determining the conflicts of presumptions or the contextual or linguistic evidence that has not been considered in making an utterance, or interpreting it, can help determine why a misunderstanding occurred, and how it can be avoided. More specifically, presumptions allow for analysis of misunderstandings at the level of the possible evidence that has been disregarded or that should have been provided.

4.1 Defaulting presumptions

A first type of misunderstanding results from *defaulted presumptions*. As described above, presumptions can be subject to default because the proviso on which they are based obtains. The clearest case of defaulted presumptions in interpretation concern *linguistic presumptions*, namely, rules and conventions of use that are presumed to be shared by interlocutors belonging to the same speech community. An example is the following exchange between a native speaker of English and a foreign student (Romero-Trillo & Lenn 2011: 236):

- (1) A: And we were able to talk about Christmas Carols and Caroling and vocabulary and –
 B: And who?
 A: Caroling – it's the verb, for Christmas Carol... you can make a verb, like singing, but singing carols. It's called Caroling.

This misunderstanding is due to the partial lack of understanding of the semantic representation of the utterance (Schlesinger & Hurvitz 2008: 580–581). *B* does not know the term *caroling* and takes it for a proper name. In this case, the hearer's decoding of the utterance (Recanati 2002) is problematic because of a partial lack of linguistic competence, which is presumed by *A*. *B* can reach a semantic representation of the utterance, but it is incomplete and unspecific, as s/he cannot assign the referent to the linguistic item that s/he decodes as a proper name. This misunderstanding (also called *linguistic misunderstanding*, Humphreys-Jones 1986: 27) does not result in alternative interpretations at other levels, as *B* cannot provide a specific semantic representation. *A* fails to take into account the likelihood of the proviso underlying the use of *caroling*, namely, that the meaning of uncommon, infrequently used or non-ordinary words is not commonly shared by non-native speakers.

A potential misunderstanding can be also the result of the choice of a defaulted presumption by the hearer. We consider the following example (Dascal 2003: 308), in which the presumptive interpretation of *A*'s utterance is refused by *B*:

- (2) A: Can you pass the salt?
 B: Yes, I can. (*No action performed*)

A's utterance is normally interpreted as a polite request, as “the link between the ‘Can you___?’ construction and the directive interpretation is highly conventionalised and largely automatic” (Kissine 2012: 180; for a discussion of a similar case in intercultural communication, see Kecskes 2013: 117). However, *B* intentionally refuses this interpretation, opting for the ordinary interpretative matching between

force and sentence type (interrogative sentence – question). This alternative interpretation is also presumptive, but subject to default in the specific context in which *B*'s ability to pass the salt is not controversial. The refusal of the only acceptable presumptive interpretation (*gentle request*) leads to an interpretative process aimed at explaining the purpose of *B*'s intended alternative interpretation (*B* wants to communicate his/her refusal to perform the action, or a protest against *A*'s requests, or a joke, etc.).

4.2 Conflicting presumptions and lack of evidence

A distinct type of misunderstanding is the result of conflicting presumptions, both acceptable in a given context. A clear example is the one below (Thomas 1983: 93):

- (3) A: (to fellow passenger on a long-distance coach) Ask the driver what time we get to Birmingham.
 B: (to driver) Could you tell me when we get to Birmingham, please?
 Driver: Don't worry, love, it's a big place – I don't think it's possible to miss it!

In this case, the interlocutors obtain different semantic representations of the utterance based on two alternative patterns of presumptive reasoning, both acceptable. The driver reasons from the premise that the phrase *when* <*the bus gets*> is commonly used to refer to the moment in which the bus arrives at a place, while the passenger grounds his/her interpretation on the presumption that '*when we get to* is commonly used for indicating the time of arrival'. The problem with the passenger's request is that s/he does not take into consideration the other presumptive interpretation available in the specific context, and fails to provide enough evidence for determining the intended meaning. The choice of an interpretation of *when* is also affected by distinct pragmatic presumptions concerning the conversational demand (Dascal 2003: 306) of *B*'s utterance ('Tell us at what time we get to Birmingham' vs. 'Alert us just after we get to Birmingham'). The driver interprets the utterance based on the presumption that usually passengers request the driver to alert them of the wanted stop, while the passenger interprets it based on the presumptive association between syntactical form and purpose (information-seeking request).

The mismatching enrichments or specifications of the semantic representation of an utterance (or, within the Relevance Theory framework, the *explicatures*, Sperber & Wilson 1995: 179–180) can be the result of presumptions that are assessed differently by the interlocutors in a given context. For instance, we consider the following case (Bazzanella & Damiano 1999: 825):

- (4) A. Good morning. I need a book on English for the first course of the *American school*.
 A. The leaflet they gave me. They say there's a 4 discount of as much as ten per cent?
 B. If you have your enrollment yes.
 A. Yes yes, I'm already enrolled.
 B. Yes no, but if you have the enrollment coupon with you.
 A. Oh, I understand. [laughs]

In this conversation, the misunderstanding is caused by the disambiguation of the term *enrollment*. The student intends it in a broader sense ('to be enrolled in a course'), while the bookseller in a narrow sense ('enrollment coupon'). The first interpretation is drawn by relying on the specification of the meaning of the term in a stereotypical context, the second from the additional presumption, resulting from the specific context of selling academic books (Kecskes 2008, Kecskes & Zhang 2009, Kecskes 2013: 129, 131), that evidence (in this case of enrollment) needs to be provided in order to get a discount. The bookseller, unlike the student, takes into account this latter presumption and disambiguates *enrollment* as 'enrollment coupon'. The student, unfamiliar with the practice of discounts, fails to consider this aspect of contextual evidence and the related presumption, and reaches a distinct interpretation.

Conflicts of equally acceptable presumptions can result in misunderstandings at the level of the interpretation of communicative purpose of the utterance (its force or its implicatures). A clear example is the following (quoted in Kissine 2012: 169), in which the two interlocutors act based on incompatible presumptive interpretations of A's utterance force:

- (5) *A gleam pushed through the sleepiness in his grey eyes, and he sat up a little in his chair, asking:*
 A: Leggett's been up to something?
 B: Why did you say that?
 A: I didn't say it. I asked it.

A's utterance force can be ambiguous, as it can normally be interpreted both as an assertion and as a question. A relies on the presumptive association between sentence type and force, B on the presumptive interpretation of the type of the syntactic construction.

4.3 Conflicting presumptions and overlooked evidence

A misunderstanding can occur because of conflicting but not equivalent presumptions in a given context. In this case, one of the two mismatching interpretations is weaker because it is defaulted by evidence that *can* be available, or weakened by other conflicting presumptions. An example of the first circumstance is provided by Thomas (1983: 93):

- (6) A: Is this coffee sugared? (*after tasting it*)
B: I don't think so. Does it taste as if it is?

In this conversation, *B* (the husband) brought the coffee to the wife (*A*), who tastes it. *A*'s utterance can be interpreted presumptively as aimed at requesting information; however, this interpretation can be subject to default if the contextual evidence (presumably available also to *B*) that *A* has tasted the coffee is taken into account. In this case, it is possible to notice different types of interpretative reasoning involved in the conflicting interpretations. The wife's interpretation is grounded on a complex interpretative reasoning in which several presumptions are involved ('asking whether the coffee is sugared is pointless if it is possible to taste it'; 'normally *B* brings non-sugared coffee'; then *A* probably knows that the coffee is not sugared and intends to remind *B* of his failure to complete his tasks, i.e. to complain about it). The husband, however, overlooks the evidence and opts for the presumptive association between syntactic structure and illocutionary force.

An interpretation can be weakened by a conflicting presumption. An example is the following (Dascal 2003: 49):

- (7) (*Priest, visiting a convicted burglar in jail*)
A: Why did you rob the bank, my son?
B: 'cause there is where the real dough is

This case is characterized by a misunderstanding at the level of the semantic representation, concerning the topic-focus structure (namely, on whether the focus is on *the bank* or on the whole sentence). However, in addition to this level of misunderstanding, we can detect a different interpretation of the purpose of the utterance. Even though the interlocutors interpret it as the same generic illocutionary act of requesting, they draw different inferences concerning its conversational goal, namely, the effect it is intended to have on the conversation. The priest's interpretation is based on the presumption that a priest visiting a convict is not seeking information on the details of the crime, but rather on the moral motivations behind it. The burglar overlooks the specific characteristics of this activity and interprets the utterance as an ordinary information-seeking request.

Another case of misunderstanding that can be reconstructed in terms of overlooking weakening presumptions is the following (Gumperz 1982: 135):

- (8) *A mother is talking to her eleven-year-old son, who is about to go out in the rain:*

Mother: Where are your boots?

Son: In the closet.

Mother: I want you to put them on right now (*told with an upset tone of voice*)

The son interprets his mother's utterance as a request for information based on the pragmatic presumption linking interrogative sentences with requests for information. However, the mother takes this presumption as excluded by a conflicting presumption (she is presumed to know where her son's boots are), thus leaving a more complex inference as the only acceptable one (an order inferred from: 1. The mother is presumed to know where the son's boots are; 2. Whoever goes out in the rain usually wears boots; 3. The son has no boots; 4. The mother usually tells the son how to dress).

4.4 Conflicting and equivalent presumptions

A conflict of interpretations can be the result of conflicting presumptions that, in the given context, are equivalent. For this reason, the misunderstanding can be considered as caused by the speaker's overlooking of other conflicting presumptions, and his/her failure to exclude them by providing additional evidence. An example is the following (Dascal 2003: 310):

- (9) *At the swimming pool, lunch is served; A and B have just met for the first time*

A: Doesn't this grapefruit taste stale? I bet you it's canned.

B: Grapefruits grow all around us. Why should they use canned juice when fresh fruit is available?

A: Oh, well, I guess I just don't care for juice today.

A's utterance cannot be presumptively taken as a genuine request for an opinion concerning the taste of the grapefruit, as it provides an explanation for its poor flavor. For this reason, it can be interpreted as a complaint about the quality of the food (or the fruit, or the service in general), as an invitation to have a conversation, etc. A probably intended the utterance as a complaint, but B drew different inferences and took into account the relationship between canned food and taste, concluding that the utterance was a complaint about serving canned fruit. Both interpretations are possible and equivalent, as both are not contradicted or weakened by other presumptions or contextual evidence.

5. Presumptions and intercultural communication

As mentioned in the section above, the acceptability of different interpretations of the same utterance can vary according to the strength and acceptability of the presumptions they rely on. An interpretation that takes into account all the evidence provided by the context will be less defeasible than a more generic presumption, and for this reason preferable (Macagno & Walton 2017: Chapter 3). However, presumptions can vary depending on the speech, culture, community, or activity of the interlocutors (Kecskes 2010b: 2895). The belonging of the interlocutor to a specific speech community or his/her engaging in a specific culturally defined activity (an activity type, see Levinson 1992, Gumperz & Tannen 1979) is a ground for presuming that specific contexts (or default interpretations) are shared (Clark 1996: 96, Brennan & Clark 1996: 1484). For this reason, differences in interpretation are affected by differences in considering specific presumptive interpretations as shared and accessible by the interlocutor (Giora et al. 2017). Misunderstandings can occur because, depending on the interlocutors' cultures or communities, different presumptions are available.

The first cause of mismatch between two presumptive interpretations can be the difference between cultures. For instance, we consider the following case (Gumperz 1982: 135):

- (10) *Husband:* Do you know where today's paper is?
Wife: I'll get it for you.
Husband: That's O.K. Just tell me where it is. I'll get it.
Wife: No, I'LL get it.

Here the conversational purpose of the husband's utterance is interpreted by the wife as a request for action, while the husband intended it as a request for information. Both interpretations are conventionalized, as Gumperz points out, in two distinct cultures (the American – the husband – and the British – the wife). The existence of different cultural presumptive interpretations (and thus possible misunderstandings) can be used to check the interlocutor's belonging to a specific community, as Gumperz (1982: 133) notices.

The second type of conflict between two presumptive interpretations results from intra-cultural differences. A clear example is the following (Gumperz 1982: 133):

- (11) *(The graduate student has been sent to interview a black housewife in a low income, inner-city neighborhood. The contact has been made over the phone by someone in the office. The student arrives, rings the bell, and is met by the husband, who opens the door, smiles, and steps towards him)*

Husband: So y're gonna check out ma ol lady, hah?

Interviewer: Ah, no. I only came to get some information. They called from the office.

(Husband, dropping his smile, disappears without a word and calls his wife)

In the black community, the husband's utterance is presumptively interpreted (as Gumperz underscores) as aimed at building or checking the rapport between the interlocutors. However, this specific presumption of use, shared within the black community, is not available to the interviewer, who interprets the utterance considering a different presumption ('A question on what the interlocutor intends to do is usually aimed at requesting information').

This type of conflict between prior contexts can be also more complex, involving a misunderstanding both at the level of the semantic representation and the purpose of the utterance. An example is given by Gumperz (1982: 196):

- (12) *The sermon was recorded from a radio broadcast of a service held in a San Francisco Bay Area church and is typical of a type of sermon that can be heard on public radio stations on Sundays. The main speaker is the assistant pastor of the church, and the congregation whose responses are also recorded is black. The political address was made during the late 1960s at a San Francisco public meeting, called to protest against United States policies during the Vietnam war. The speaker was a well-known, but highly controversial black community leader. In the course of his talk, which dealt with the American president's treatment of ethnic minorities at home and of nonwhite populations abroad, the speaker used the expression: "We will kill Richard Nixon".*

The utterance was made in a specific context – a protest against ethnic policies – and led to two distinct interpretations of its meaning and force. The black community regarded it as a complaint, a hyperbolic expression of annoyance against the president (interpreting it as 'we are going to fight against him' or 'we are going to stop him'). The white audience, however, criticized it as a threat (interpreting it as 'we are going to assassinate him'), and the pastor was indicted for this. As Gumperz (1982: 197) highlights, the utterance was interpreted according to two distinct presumptions. For the black community, *to kill* is usually used to mean hyperbolically 'to stop' or 'to finish'. For the generic white community, it is presumptively interpreted as 'to cause the death of'. The misunderstanding is not only at the level of disambiguation, but also at the level of the purpose of the utterance. The white audience interpreted it presumptively as a threat. The alternative interpretation (a complaint and an expression of distress) can be reached considering the activity type characterizing the utterance. The utterance was made within a sermon, and more specifically a sermon given against the American policies against

ethnic minorities. In this context, the presumptive interpretation reached by the white audience could be defaulted by the evidence of the presumptively peaceful goal of the sermon.

6. Evidence of misunderstandings

From a functional, justificatory approach, misunderstandings are analyzed in terms of problematic interpretative reasoning based on presumptions that are subjected to default, outweighed by other available stronger presumptions, or that are not corroborated enough to overcome other possible presumptions. In this view, misunderstandings include not only conflicting interpretations *strictu sensu*, but also the conflict between an interpretation of an utterance that the speaker presumes to be inferable by the hearer and the interlocutor's failure to reach it. At this analytical level, the examination of the causes of misunderstandings presupposes that misunderstandings have been detected, and in the case of discourse analysis, that misunderstandings can be identified and justified. For this reason, the detection and the explanation of misunderstandings are two strictly interrelated problems to be addressed from the same perspective. In order to analyze how misunderstandings can be detected, it is thus necessary to identify and differentiate between the types of evidence that can be provided to justify that a misunderstanding has occurred (the *manifestation* according to the terminology adopted by Humphreys-Jones 1986: 91). To this purpose, in this section the possible types of evidence of misunderstanding that can be found in written (or transcribed) conversations or interactions will be distinguished and classified.

The first crucial aspect of the evidence that can be found or provided for justifying a misunderstanding is its nature. As Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974: 729) noticed, "it is the parties' understandings of prior turns' talk that is relevant to their construction of next turns". For this reason, in order to analyze whether a turn was understood or misunderstood, the more accessible evidence can be found in the subsequent turns. However, while the interlocutors usually try to repair misunderstandings in the so-called *repair-initiation opportunity space* (three turns from (i.e. including) the trouble-source turn; Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks 1977: 375, Schegloff 1987: 203), sometimes their detection can be more problematic, and the repair can occur in much later turns.

The evidence of misunderstandings has the dialogical nature of a turn, which can be dialogical or meta-dialogical. In the first case, the speaker engages in the dialogue by continuing it (either relevantly or irrelevantly). In the second case, the speaker suspends or interrupts the dialogue (Gumperz & Tannen 1979: 317) in order to start a dialogue on the interpretation of an utterance, either his own

or the interlocutor's. The two types of turns provide different types of evidence of misunderstanding.

Meta-dialogical evidence of misunderstanding provides explicit and **direct** evidence that one of the interlocutors cannot reach a full interpretation of the utterance, or has detected a different interpretation thereof (Clark & Brennan 1991: 223–225). This evidence can be of different kinds, namely, either (1) a declaration of lack of understanding, or (2) a declaration of a different interpretation or the mismatch between the speaker's and the hearer's interpretation. The expression of a misunderstanding can be more or less specific, indicating the source of the misunderstanding – namely, mismatching interpretations at the level of the specific semantic representation or the purpose of the utterance. Evidence of this type can include the following (Tzanne 2000: 20):

- a. Correction of the specific, enriched semantic representation of the utterance provided by either the speaker her/himself ('I don't mean X, I mean Y') or the hearer ('Oh, you mean Y!').
- b. Clarification of the intended purpose of the utterance ('I didn't mean to offend you, I only asked...'; 'it was just a request, not...')

At a *meta-dialogical level*, **indirect** evidence of misunderstandings can be provided by (3) a request for clarification (see the related notion in Humphreys-Jones 1986: 97) or (4) a confirmation check. The strength of the evidence of clarification requests is weaker than evidence of type 1 or 2, as a request can be made for different reasons (to be sure to have correctly understood the utterance, for example). However, it is a strong sign that the utterance can be or is problematic and its understanding cannot be taken for granted. The confirmation check ('Have you understood?') is also an anticipation of a misunderstanding, but as a question it is only weak and indirect evidence of the expression of misunderstanding by the hearer (the speaker can ask it for different reasons). A positive reply to confirmation checks does not exclude misunderstandings (the hearer can reply positively only for continuing the conversation). A negative reply, in contrast, would fall under category 1 or 2.

A distinct type of evidence is *dialogical indirect evidence* (Mauranen 2006: 132–135), namely, dialogical signs that the hearer is acting based on an interpretation of the speaker's utterance which is different from his/her own. More precisely, the hearer is not meeting the *conversational demand* advanced by the speaker with his/her utterance (Dascal 2003: 306). Indirect evidence (Clark & Brennan 1991: 223–225; see the related notion of *pragmatic inappropriacy* in Humphreys-Jones 1986: 100) can result from either (5) irrelevance or (6) lack of uptake. Irrelevance refers to a turn that is incoherent either pragmatically (for example, a request for

information followed by an acknowledgment, or the repetition of the speaker's previous utterance after the hearer's turn) or topically (change of subject) (Schegloff 1987, Walton & Macagno 2016, Macagno 2018). Depending on the type of dialogue and the activity type, the evidential strength of such indirect signs can be higher or lower (change of topic or dialogue are common in medical interviews, but less common in cross-examinations). Similarly, repetitions can be due to problems with the channel, or other disturbances. The sixth type of evidence is lack of uptake, which includes, for instance, failure to reply to a question or continue the dialogue. The strength of this type of evidence is lower than the previous one, and it also depends on the expectations characterizing both the activity type (ordinary conversation vs. legal dialogues) and the type of communicative purpose pursued (a request for information vs. a comment).

These types of evidence can be summarized in the following Figure 3, which distinguishes the types of evidence (direct vs. indirect; dialogical vs. meta-dialogical) and its strength (dark grey boxes for stronger evidence; grey boxes with dotted pattern for acceptable evidence; light grey boxes with dotted line for weak evidence).

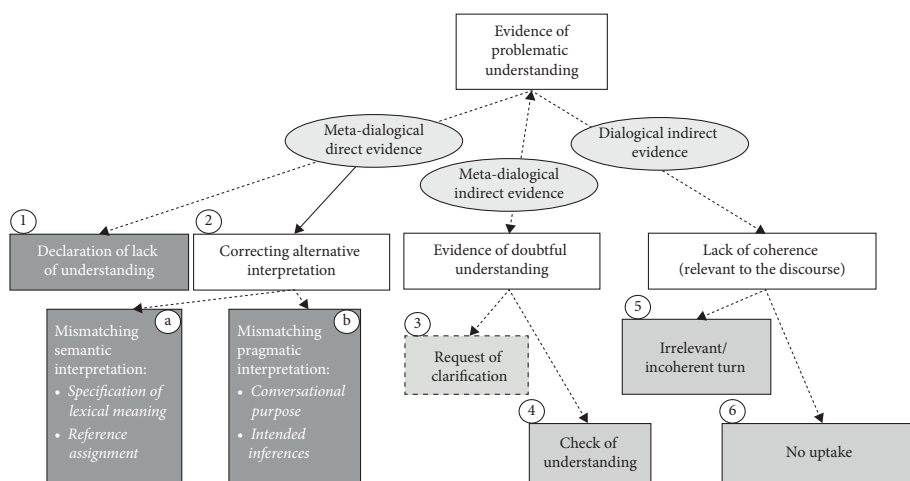


Figure 3. Classification of the evidence of misunderstanding

This distinction allows the analyst to distinguish between actual and possible misunderstandings (Tzanne 2000: 35). In the first case, the evidence is strong and hardly defeasible. In the second case, it can be stronger or weaker, and the specific circumstances need to be assessed in order to determine whether a misunderstanding has occurred. Clearly, evidence can combine and result in higher probative weight (Walton & Reed 2008). For example, irrelevance (5) (such as a turn incoherent with the pragmatic purpose of the previous turn) can be followed by a request for clarification (3), or a repetition of the previous turn (5). The combined

pieces of evidence support more strongly the conclusion that a misunderstanding has occurred than the individually considered evidence does.

The evidence of misunderstanding needs to be distinguished from evidence of *non-presumability of an interpretation*, namely, the clarification of an utterance provided directly by the speaker. In this case, the clarification shows that the utterance cannot be taken for granted as (univocally) understandable by the hearer, as a specification of its meaning is provided in advance. This anticipation of a misunderstanding can be considered only as a sign that the speaker considers his/her utterance as potentially problematic. A clear example is the following one, in which a doctor (D) is telling the patient what type of fruit she can carry with her.

- (13) D: *Ad esempi-o un altr-o frutt-o comod-o*
 for example.M.SG an.M.SG. other.M.SG. fruit.M.SG. comfortable.M.SG.
signor-a sono le fragol-e
 madam.F.SG are the.F.PL strawberry.PL
 ‘For example, another comfortable fruit is the strawberry’
- (14) D: *perché comunque non è da [sbucci-are]*
 because anyways not is.SG to peel-INF
 ‘...because you do not need to peel it.’

Here the doctor provides a clarification of the utterance by specifying more clearly the meaning of *comfortable fruit*, which can lead to potential misunderstandings.

7. Misunderstandings in doctor–patient communication

The evidence of misunderstanding can be used for detecting and justifying the occurrence of a misunderstanding, which can then be analyzed according to the underlying presumptions. In order to illustrate the proposed approach, a few excerpts will be analyzed which have been extracted from an Italian corpus of 52 video recordings of doctor–patient encounters collected at a public diabetes outpatient clinic in northern Italy between 2012 and 2014 (Bigi 2014a). Chronic care communication is a specific activity type characterized by an epistemic difference between the doctor and the patient (Bigi 2014a, Bigi 2011). From a dialogical point of view, the doctor is presupposed to have superior knowledge concerning medical issues and the power to make a decision on behalf of the patient on specific issues, while the patient has access to his own preferences, conditions, and habits, which the physician cannot know *a priori*. One crucial goal of medical interviews is to bridge the epistemic gap between doctor and patient in order to make a sound recommendation (Macagno & Bigi 2017b), namely, not only prescribing drugs, but also agreeing on a course of action that the patient needs to comply with in order to prevent complications (Bigi 2014a, Wagner et al. 2001). The analysis of

misunderstandings can bring to light crucial aspects of the unshared ground between the interlocutors. In the following subsections, the various types of strong or acceptable types of evidence of misunderstanding will be illustrated.

7.1 Meta-dialogical direct evidence

The clearest evidence of a misunderstanding is the meta-dialogical acknowledgment that the interpretation is not correct or that it is problematic (evidence of type 1). In the following excerpt, the nurse is presuming that the patient knows the concept of GLYCATED HEMOGLOBIN, which has been previously explained to him. However, the patient does not manage to figure out what it means to *have high levels of glycated hemoglobin* and asks for a clarification:

Case 1: Lack of understanding. Linguistic presumptions

N: *Dev'ess-ere proprio:: pre-s-a quest-a decision-e,*
 shall.PRS.3SG be-INF indeed make-PTCP-F.3SG this.F.SG decision.SG
che l'aiut-erà ad abbass-are ulteriormente la:: la
 which you help-FUT.3SG to lower-INF further the.F.SG the.F.SG
glicata. Che non può ten-er-la così
 glycated_hemoglobin which not can.PRS.3SG keep-INF-it.F.SG so
alt-a, eh
 high-F.SG eh

'We need to make this decision, which is going to help you to lower the:::the level of the glycated hemoglobin even more. You cannot keep this level so high, eh.'

P: *Cos' è la glicata?*
 what be.PRS.3SG the.F.SG glycated_hemoglobin?
 'What is glycated hemoglobin?'

N: *La glicata è quel valore che*
 the.F.SG glycated_hemoglobin be.PRS.3SG the.M.SG value.SG that
mi dice che le su-e glicemi-e, tre
 me.DAT.PRS tell.3SG that the.F.PL your.F.PL glycaemia-F.PL three
mes-i prima di quest-o preliev-o [...], sono
 month-F.PL before of this-M.SG blood_sample-M.SG [...], be.PRS.3PL
stat-e un poch-in -o alt-e rispetto a
 be.PTCP-F.PL A.M.SG a bit-DIMN-M.SG high-F.PL considering
un-a norm-a.
 a-F.SG standard-SG.

'The glycated hemoglobin is the value that tells me that your glycaemia three months before taking this blood sample [...], was a bit high considering the standard.'

The patient has some knowledge of the meaning of *glycated hemoglobin* (it was explained in previous interviews with another doctor and a nurse), but he cannot decode the nurse's utterance perfectly, nor can he reach with certainty a specific semantic representation (by establishing the specific meaning of *lower*) or draw further inferences. The patient understands that a specific blood value is higher, but he is not certain that his understanding is correct, and so asks for clarification. In terms of presumption, the doctor is acting based on the linguistic presumption that the patient shares the meaning and the understanding of the relevant medical concept, based on the evidence that he has had other interviews related to his condition. This presumption is subject to default, and results in a lack of understanding.

A meta-dialogical comment or request can be caused by a *puzzled understanding*, namely, an interpretation that the hearer acknowledges to be incorrect or unreasonable. A clear case is the following, in which the nurse reaches an interpretation that is not acceptable, and points out that the phrase *to empty itself* is problematic.

Case 2: Lack of understanding. Presumptive meaning of lexical items

P: *Poi h-o not-ato che se mangi-o gli*
 then have-PRS.1SG notice.PTCP that if eat-PRS.1SG PL the-MASC PL
gnocchi, mi si svuot-a in frett-a. A me
 gnocchi me.DAT it.REFL empty-PRS.3SG in quick-F.SG to me
piacc-iono tant-issimo.
 like-PRS.3PL much.SUPER

'Then I have noticed that if I eat gnocchi, it <the glycated hemoglobin> empties itself quickly. I love gnocchi very much.'

N: *Come si svuot-a in frett-a?*
 how it.REFL empty-PRS.3SG in quick-F.SG.?
 'How does it empty itself quickly?'

P: *Eh va giù, va giù.*
 eh go.3SG.PRS down go.3SG.PRS down
 'Eh it goes down, goes down.'

The nurse provides two pieces of evidence of her puzzled understanding: she requests a clarification of the utterance (Evidence 3) and at the same time expresses her problematic understanding (Evidence 1). The nurse can decode the utterance, but the semantic representation obtained can be neither accepted nor specified, as it conflicts with her background assumption (the glycated hemoglobin cannot be filled in or emptied). From the perspective of interpretative reasoning, the patient is presuming that the meaning of the metaphorical expression ('decrease in level') is shared by the interlocutor. However, this presumption is subject to default, as the doctor interprets the utterance in a presumptive way.

The second type of meta-dialogical evidence of misunderstanding is the correction of an alternative interpretation. In the following excerpt, the doctor is talking about the glycemic controls to a patient already accustomed with this practice, consisting of random controls before and after meals. The doctor uses the phrase *in a more reasoned manner* to refer to the way the controls need to be made (coupled controls, before and after eating), namely, meaning ‘in a more reasoned <from the point of view of the modality of the control> manner’. However, the patient interprets the phrase as meaning ‘more frequently’, which leads to a correction.

Case 3: Alternative interpretation of the specific semantic representation

- D: *Però mi serv-irebbe mh::: per cap-ire anche*
 but me.DAT need.COND.3SG mh::: to understand.INF also
meglio, far-lo un poch-in-o più
 good.COMPAR make.INF-it.ACC.M.SG a.M.SG little-DIM-M.SG more
ragion-at-o.
 reason.PTCP.F.SG
 ‘But I need mh::: also to better understand, you to make it in a little more reasoned manner.’
- P: *Tutt-i i giorn-i?*
 every.M.PL the.M.PL day.PL?
 ‘Every day?’
- D: *Ma anche poss-iamo anche divid-er-lo, non*
 but also can.PRS.3PL also split.INF-it.ACC.M.SG not
far-lo tutt-o il giorn-o, però a coppi-a, nel
 do.INF-it.ACC.M.SG all-M.SG the.M.SG day.SG but to pair.F.SG in.M.SG
sens-o, io tipo dov-re-i far-li mh, prima
 sense.M.SG kind shall.COND.1SG do.INF-it.ACC.M.PL mh before
del past-o e dopo il past-o
 of.M.SG meal.SG and after the.M.SG meal.SG
 ‘But also we can also split it, you don’t need to do it all in a day, but do it in pairs, in the sense that you should do them before a meal and mh, after a meal.’

This case of misunderstanding can also lead to mismatching interpretations of the purpose of the utterance. The doctor intended to complain about the incorrect self-management of the patient, who instead interprets the utterance as a suggestion for modifying the control frequency. At the level of type of reasoning process involved, the doctor is presuming that the specific meaning of *reasoned* is shared by the interlocutor, as if it were conventionalized in both the speaker’s and the hearer’s communities. This presumption fails, however, as the metaphor is not conventional in the patient’s community, and the patient reconstructs the metaphorical meaning of *reasoned*, checking the best possible interpretation available to him. In this sense, the doctor is not aware that the metaphor cannot be presumed to be shared

outside the specific community of practitioners and long-term patients to which she belongs.

The correction of an alternative interpretation can also be at the level of the purpose of the utterance. In the following excerpt, the doctor is complaining about the eating habits of the patient, which make it impossible for the doctor to prescribe a specific drug. The patient, however, interprets the utterance as an apology on the part of the doctor for not being able to remove a drug from his health-care program.

Case 4: Alternative interpretation of the purpose of the utterance

D: *Siccome lei ... adesso per me è difficile di-re*
 since you ... now for me be.PRS.3SG difficult say.INF
deve togli-ere le pasticch-e de-lla ser-a
 shall.2SG.IMP eliminate.INF the.F.PL pill.PL of-the.F.SG evening.SG
perché ci sono ser-e...
 because there be.PRS.3PL evening.PL...

‘Since you... now it is difficult for me to say that you should eliminate the evening pills, because there are some evenings...’

P: *No no no non me li tolg-a perché a*
 no no no not me.DAT it.ACC.M.PL eliminate.3SG.CONJCT because to
me non mi dan-no fastidi-o.
 me not me.DAT cause.PRS.3PL inconvenience.SG

‘No no no, do not eliminate them because they are not bothering me.’

D: *No ma non è per quell-o perché c'è la*
 no but not be.PRS.3SG for that.M.SG because there be.PRS.3SG the.F.SG
ser-a in cui lei mangi-a un po' di più e
 evening.SG in which you eat.PRS.3SG a.M.SG little of more and
la ser-a in cui non mangi-a nulla.
 the.F.SG evening.SG in which not eat.PRS.3SG nothing

‘No but it is not for that, because there are evenings in which you eat a bit more and evening in which you do not eat anything.’

The doctor first refuses the patient’s interpretation, and then provides additional information to further specify the purpose of his previous utterance. By adding further information on the patient’s incorrect eating habits and the effects thereof on planning treatments, the doctor tries to clarify the misunderstood communicative goal. At the level of reasoning processes, the doctor relies on the presumptive association between the expression of a difficulty due to the interlocutor’s behavior and the interpretation of the utterance as a complaint. In contrast, the patient interprets the utterance only considering the doctor’s expression of a difficulty, from which he draws the further inference that the doctor is apologizing for a decision that could be unpleasant to the patient.

7.2 Meta-dialogical indirect evidence

Another type of strong evidence of a possible misunderstanding is the *clarification request*. The interlocutor asks for a better specification of the meaning of an utterance, as the specific semantic representation of the utterance can have different interpretations. A clarification request is different from direct evidence of a misunderstanding, as it presupposes only the possibility (but it does not explicitly indicate the existence) of an alternative interpretation. A clear case is provided by the following excerpt, in which the specific meaning of *a lot of fruit* is unspecific.

Case 5: Clarification request

- W: *Frutta può mang-iar-ne? Perché ne mangi-a*
 fruit PRS.3SG can eat.INF-it.DAT because it.DAT eat.PRS.3SG
parecchi-a eh
 a lot.F.SG eh
 ‘Can he eat fruit? Because he eats a lot of fruit, eh?’
- D: *Cos’è? Cosa signific-a parecchi-a?*
 what be.PRS.3G what mean.PRS.3SG a lot.F.SG?
 ‘What is it? What does a lot mean?’
- W: *Frutta, aranci-o ...*
 fruit orange.SG ...
 ‘Fruit, orange...’
- P: *Un aranci-o dopo il past-o::: oppure un-a mel-a*
 an.M.SG orange.SG after the.M.SG meal-SG ::: or an.F.SG apple.SG
 ‘An orange after a meal – or an apple.’
- D: *Allora l’importante che si-a un solo frutt-o*
 then the.M.SG-important that.CONJCT be.3SG one.M.SG only fruit.SG
dopo il past-o.
 after the.M.SG meal.SG
 ‘Then the important thing is that it is only one fruit after the meal.’

This conversation is characterized by two distinct pieces of evidence of two distinct misunderstandings. In the second turn, the doctor asks for a clarification (Evidence 3). However, the patient’s wife provides a reply that is incoherent with the request, as she interprets the doctor’s question as concerning the meaning of *fruit*. For this reason, the doctor denies the wife’s interpretation of the semantic representation of the utterance (Evidence 2) and repeats the question by stressing the phrase for which he requests a clarification (Evidence 5). At the level of interpretative reasoning, the wife is relying on an interpretation that she considers as presumable within her own community (usually a lot of fruit means one fruit after each meal), but that cannot be considered as such within a diabetes care context (in which people have health problems also because of their eating and overeating habits).

7.3 Dialogical indirect evidence

The last category of evidence is *dialogical indirect evidence*, and more specifically an irrelevant next turn (Evidence 5). A clear case is provided by the following excerpt, in which the patient complains about the effects of the cortisone (turn 2). The nurse, however, interprets the verb (*to swell*) as ‘to increase in weight’, not ‘to dilate’, and continues to praise the patient for her positive self-management.

Case 6: Irrelevance

- N: *Però di bas-e lei dev-e st-are attento. Non si*
 however of basis.SG you shall.PRS.3SG be.INF careful not he.REFL
è alz-ato molto con il pes-o, dir-ei.
 go_up.PTCP.M.SG much with the.M.SG weight.SG say.COND.PRS.1SG.
Pens-avo peggio invece no, è
 think.IMPF.1SG.COMPAR bad instead no be.PRS.3SG
st-ato brav-o.
 be.PTCP.M.SG good.M.SG
 ‘However, basically you shall be careful. You have not gone up with your weight. I thought it was worse, but no, you have done well.’
- P: *No perché gonfi-o col cortison-e.*
 no because swell-PRS.1SG with-the.M.SG cortisone.SG
 ‘No, I swell. Using the cortisone I swell.’
- N: *Pes-o stabil-e proprio. Il pes-o stabil-e,*
 weight.SG stable.M.SG indeed the.M.SG weight.SG stable.M.SG
veramente stabil-e. Allora.
 really stable.M.SG then
 ‘Weight stable indeed. The weight is really stable. Then.’
- P: *Sono gonfi-o per que- que::- il cortison-e,*
 be.PRS.1SG swollen.M.SG because this.M.SG ... the.M.SG cortisone.SG,
quell-o che mi f-a gonfi-are.
 that.M.SG that me make.PRS.3SG swell.INF
 ‘I am swollen because of this.... The cortisone, that makes me swell.’
- N: *Esam-e del pied-e nella norm-a. quand’è*
 control.SG of-the.M.SG foot.SG in-the.F.SG standard.SG when
che ha fatto l’operazione-:::
 be.PRS.3SG that have.PRS.3.SG.PTCP the.F.SG-surgery.SG
 ‘The foot control is normal. When did you undergo the surgery?’

The misunderstanding is related to different adjustments (broadening or narrowing) of *to swell*. The nurse relies on the previous contexts in which *to swell* is used when people are weighed in order to indicate any increase in weight. The patient, in contrast, acts based on the presumptive interpretation associated with the specific

context of the effects of drugs. In this sense, the nurse is overlooking the evidence that the patient is providing (*using the cortisone*); she takes into account only the evidence resulting from weight control, backed by the presumption that the patient intends to continue the discourse in a relevant way.

This excerpt also shows a potential pragmatic misunderstanding in the last turn, evidenced by the nurse's failure to continue the dialogue. This case can be considered both as a lack of uptake (Evidence 6) (the patient underscores for the second time his expression of distress), and an irrelevant turn (Evidence 5). The nurse, instead of acknowledging the expression of a preoccupation, requests information on another issue. However, these pieces of indirect evidence can also be explained in a different way, and more specifically as a refusal to engage in the conversation any further due to time constraints (the nurse needs to continue the visit).

A similar case of misunderstanding at the level of the purpose of the utterance is given by the following excerpt (Macagno & Bigi 2017a: 68). In this conversation, the doctor is talking about the patient's failure to record the higher levels of glucose in the journal that diabetes patients have for self-monitoring the trend of the disease. At the end of the doctor's turn, when she ends by pointing out that the very high values that had not been transcribed in the journal have contributed to an increase in the overall glucose parameter, the patient's wife replies (at 10) by asking: *so, what can be the cause of this situation?*, thereby demonstrating that she failed to understand the pragmatic function of the doctor's previous moves.

Case 7: Irrelevance

1. D: *Allora se lei non le riport-a*
now if you not it.ACC.F.PL write_down.PRS.3SG
naturalmente f-a un dann-o a lei. Perch-è
clearly do.PRS.3SG a.M.SG damage.SG to you because
lei st-a peggio
you stay.PRS.3SG bad.COMPAR
'Now, if you don't write them down clearly you are damaging yourself.
Because you feel worse.'
2. P: *Li prov-o ma non segn-o praticamente*
it.ACC.M.SG try.PRS.1SG but not write_down.PRS.1SG practically
quell-o che effettivamente...
what that actually...
'I try them but I do not write down what actually...'

3. M: *È la prim-a person-a, è la*
 be.PRS.3SG the.F.SG first.F.SG person.SG, be.PRS.3SG the.F.SG
prima person-a lei, che si deve rend-ere
 first.f.SG person.SG you, that he.REFL shall.PRS.3SG become.INF
conto. Oh guard-a, h-o avuto delle
 aware oh look.PRS.3SG have.PRS.1SG have.PTCP some-the.F.PL
iperglicemi-e, sono arriv-ato a 300, che
 hyperglycemia.PL be.PRS.1SG arrive-.TCP.M.SG to 300 what
cos-a h-o fatto.
 thing-G have.PRS.1SG do.PTCP
 'You are the first person, you are the first person you, who should become aware. Oh look, I have had hyperglycemias, I got to 300, what I have done.'
4. P: *Cosa h-o cosa quale è il motiv-o. per*
 what have.PRS.1SG what what be.PRS.3SG the.M.SG reason.SG for
quale motiv-o?
 what.SG reason.SG?
 'What I have what what is the reason. For what reason?'
5. M: *Eh ma se lei non lo scriv-e? esatto.*
 Eh but if you not it.ACC.M.SG write_down.PRS.3SG exactly
È la prim-a person-a lei che
 be.PRS.3SG the.F.SG first.F.SG person.SG you who
dev-e f-are.
 shall.PRS.3SG do-INF.
 'Eh but if you don't write it down? Exactly. You are the first person, yourself, who shall do it.'
6. P: *Che devo controll-are.*
 who shall.PRS.1SG control.INF
 'Who shall control.'
7. M: *Poi si può controllare si può*
 Then you.PRS.3SG can control.INF you.REFL.RS.3SG can
confrontare con noi e noi siamo qui.
 discuss.INF with we.ACC and we be.PRS.1PL here
 'Then you can control, you can discuss with us and we are here.'
8. P: *A d-ar-mi spiegazion-i*
 to give-INF-me.DAT explanation.PL
 'To give me explanations.'

9. M: *Tutt-o il temp-o a su-a disposizion-e, ma io che*
 all.M.SG the.M.SG time.SG to your.F.SG disposal.SG, but I that
oggi la ved-o con un profil-o con un
 today he.ACC.F see.PRS.1SG with a.M.SG profile.SG with a.M.SG
compens-o glicemic-o di 9 con con un-a
 balance.SG glyceimic.M.SG of 9 with with a.F.SG
glicata che era a 7.3, quindi
 glycated_hemoglobin that IMPF.be.3SG to 7.3 therefore
era perfett-a per la su-a età, oggi
 be.3SG. IMPF perfect.F.SG for the.F.SG your.F.SG age, today
è 9 e dic-o, ma cosa cosa è
 be.PRS.3SG 9 and say.PRS.1SG, but what what be.PRS.3SG
successo?
 happen.M.SG.PTCP
 'Always at your disposal, but I see you today with a profile with a glycemic
 balance of 9, with a glycated hemoglobin that was of 7.3, therefore that was
 perfect for your age, today is at 9 and I say, but what, what has happened?'
10. W: *Ecco cosa da cosa può esser dipeso quell-o?*
 yes what from what can.PRS.3SG be.INF depend.PTCP that.M.SG
 'Yes what, on what can it depend?'
11. P: *Quell-o sbalz-o lì.*
 that.M.SG surge.SG there
 'That surge there.'

The misunderstanding of the communicative purpose of the doctor's utterances is evidenced by incoherent turns. At 1, the doctor is reprimanding the patient for *damaging himself* by failing to record the high values. At 3, the doctor is checking whether the patient has understood the importance of being aware of dangerous levels of glucose. However, in the following move (4) the patient is not acknowledging his fault, but rather replying with an incoherent utterance (Evidence 5), asking for information about his increased values. At 5, the doctor expresses an uptake of the patient's acknowledgment of his crucial role in self-monitoring. This turn shows a misunderstanding of the pragmatic purpose of the patient's utterance (Evidence 5), which, however, is not detected by the patient. The conversation moves on until, at turn 9, the doctor expresses her puzzlement when she discovers that the glycated hemoglobin is much worse than before, but the journal shows only good levels of glucose. The doctor's utterance (an expression of puzzlement aimed at underscoring the seriousness of the patient's behavior) is completely misunderstood by the wife and the patient (turns 10 and 11), who, instead of acknowledging the problem, ask for information (Evidence 5).

This misunderstanding can be explained considering the interpretative reasoning involved. At turn 9, the doctor grounds her interpretation on specific pragmatic presumptions. Since in the previous turns she directly expressed her complaints and disappointment with the patient's behavior, she can presume that her interrogative sentence is interpreted as an expression of her dislike of and puzzlement over the patient's values. The patient, however, fails to consider the evidence from the previous turns and interprets the utterance according to the presumptive association between syntactic structure and force as a request or desire for information.

8. Conclusion

This paper proposes an approach to misunderstandings focused on their explanation, namely, the justification of the conflicting interpretations which result in problematic communication. To this purpose, misunderstandings have been analyzed in terms of the presumptions that the speaker and the hearer can rely on in justifying their interpretation. The notion of presumption allows us to address in logical terms the problem of common knowledge, namely, the attributing of specific knowledge to the interlocutor. In the view presented in this paper, the speaker and the hearer draw tentative conclusions about the other's behavior and possible interpretations based on what is commonly the case considering the context and the available evidence. Interpretation, in this view, becomes the result of an interpretative reasoning grounded on different types and levels of presumptions and on the assessment of contextual and cotextual evidence.

From this perspective, misunderstandings can be regarded as conflicts of presumptions or assessments of presumptions, which occur for distinct reasons. Some misunderstandings are caused by presumptions which are subject to default in the given context or conversational setting, whose provisos are, however, overlooked or ignored by one of the interlocutors. Other misunderstandings result from conflicting presumptions having different strengths; also in this case, evidence corroborating or weakening an interpretation can be overlooked by one of the interlocutors. Finally, in some cases the mismatching interpretations can be considered as equally backed by their underlying presumptive reasoning. These distinctions can be useful for detecting the possible causes of misunderstandings, which can be traced back to cultural differences or overlooking of evidence.

This analysis can be possible only after the identification of misunderstandings. To this purpose, the symptoms of misunderstandings have been classified according to their probative weight. Evidence has been distinguished according to its dialogical nature (meta-dialogical vs. dialogical) and evidential weight (direct vs. indirect). In this fashion, general categories of evidence have been differentiated.

The combination of the classification of the causes and symptoms can be used for analyzing conversations and bringing to light when and why the interlocutors' interpretations mismatch. In particular, the application of this type of analysis of doctor–patient interviews in diabetes care shows the difference between direct (and stronger) and indirect evidence, which can result in differences in detecting misunderstandings. The analysis of the interpretative reasoning underlying misunderstandings highlights the different presumptions the interlocutors are relying on, and the different types of evidence – contextual, conversational, and cultural – they are taking into account (or missing) in their interpretations.

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