COMMUNICATIVE BREAKDOWN IN CONVERSATION: ARGUMENTS FOR A CORPUS-BASED ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Scholars from various different disciplines have argued that the study of communicative breakdown in everyday verbal exchange provides valuable evidence of how human interactive endeavour is accomplished, since the nature of such accomplishment is not amenable to direct investigation. However, to our knowledge, there has been no systematic programme of research to consider the nature of this evidence nor indeed any attempt, other than on an ad hoc basis, to identify the structural criteria and types of interaction that can occur because of some failure to communicate successfully. By discussing what such a programme might involve with reference to the study of one particular type of breakdown, namely 'misunderstanding', this paper aims to illustrate the potentially rich contribution that a study of this kind can make in developing an appropriately evidenced analysis of communicative events in general.[1]

1. Introduction

Since scholars in various different disciplines have increasingly responded to Firth's (1957:35) suggestion that we study 'conversation' as a means of facilitating our understanding of 'what language really is and how it works', the question of what it is to achieve communicative success in everyday talk has become the subject of considerable, and often cross-disciplinary, fascination. However, whatever the disciplinary motivation of the individual concerned or the particular nature of his/her interest, the would be analyst of the communicative process is faced with a difficulty as perplexing in kind as Labov's ubiquitous 'Observer's Paradox.' The difficulty is essentially 'interpretive' in nature and is neatly summarized by Goffman (1976:278) who notes, 'How individuals arrive at an effective interpretation on all those occasions when the stream of experience makes this easy and instantaneous is not much explored, this exploration being rather difficult to undertake from a sitting position.' But if not from a 'sitting position' where else can the analyst start? How can we

begin to access the dynamism of interactional processes that are simply not amenable to direct investigation?

Widdowson (1979:70-71) suggests that there are essentially two ways of broaching these questions:

> One can on the one hand, deal with instances of discourse from the point of view of the third person analyst, that is to say; one can treat discourse in detachment from its instantiation, after the event, as a product. On the other hand, one can deal with the discourse from the point of view of the participants caught, as it were, in the act; that is to say, one can treat discourse as a process.

Although we shall consider the kinds of contribution that may be made by both these approaches, our primary concern on this occasion will be to discuss the possibilities offered by developing a 'process' type analysis of the kind presented in Humphreys-Jones (1986a; 1986b; 1986c; 1987).

Whatever approach one chooses, however, it should be remembered that <u>any</u> analysis of what speakers have achieved or are perceived to be 'doing' through talk is, in participant terms, 'always an EMERGENT phenomenon, explicitly specifiable only in retrospect (and then by way of simplifying procedures that may well distort their experience)' (Dore and McDermott 1982:386). Consequently, the very best we can achieve as analysts of 'what has gone on' is to provide EVIDENCE for our claims. What evidence, then, can we provide for establishing that something has gone wrong in the course of some particular conversational exchange and what can this contribute to our understanding of the nature of everyday communicative activity?

2. <u>The Study of Communicative Breakdown</u>

Communicative breakdown has been investigated by scholars from various different disciplinary backgrounds who make very similar kinds of claim about what such research has to offer. Compare, for example, the research orientation of Gumperz and Tannen (1979:329) who explain that 'by studying what has gone wrong when communication breaks down, we seek to understand a process that goes unnoticed when it is successful', with that of Stubbs (1983:241) who argues that, 'By looking at what happens when people fail to get the message across, at why this happens and at what speakers do in order to reinstate the normal smooth flow of interaction,

one can gain insight into the routine structures of behaviour' (Stubbs 1983:241). There is thus a strong belief that the study of communicative breakdown can offer insight into the process of communication itself.

How then might one proceed to analyse instances of communicative breakdown? What kinds of structure can be identified? And what kinds of problem does the analyst have to face in the process? These questions are best considered in the light of current attempts to investigate discourse that is perceived to have caused interactional difficulties for its participants.

Primarily sociolinguistic in orientation, these studies have variously focussed on repair sequencing in conversation; how particular understandings, including misunderstanding, have been reached; interpretive procedures and participant roles in discourse contexts that have resulted in misunderstandings; and inter-ethnic and inter-dialectal misunderstandings. The nature of this work is worth considering in some detail and consequently we shall review the contribution of selected studies from each area of focus in turn.

Early work on communicative breakdown was to emerge as a consequence of ethnomethodological interest in sequential patterning in the organization of conversation. Jefferson (1972), for example, dealt with the issue of whether or not participants resolve misunderstandings when something is perceived to have gone wrong and investigated the procedures by which participants then went on to repair any breakdown so that the conversation might continue. Jefferson argued that the repair sequences which she isolated are rule-governed. One of the 'side sequences' which she details (1972:304) is a 'misapprehension sequence' in which 'there is a statement of sorts, a misapprehension of sorts and a clarification of sorts: (s) - (m) - (c).' The option to clarify is the clarifier's when it is he/she who shows the (m) has occurred, the (m) being open to other interpretations, and is the (m) - speaker's when the (m) - speaker shows that (s) needs to be clarified, thus obliging the (s) - speaker to clarify his/her utterance. These two options refer to different conversational problems for the participants: the first of these is a misunderstanding in the sense it will be used in this paper, that is, a failure to understand correctly; the second is a request for clarification or a signal that something in (s) is not correct or cannot be interpreted, which effectively enables the interlocutors to avoid a potential misunderstanding.

Adjacency between the three utterances (s) - (m) - (c), is implied and indeed if they were not adjacent the notion of 'side sequence' would be lost because the metatopic it constitutes would

be integrated with the overall topic. However, the hearer' response which manifests his/her misunderstanding of the speaker's utterance could occur several utterances and/or speaker turns after the original misunderstood utterance; clarification could follow at an indeterminate number of utterances and speaker turns later. This clarification could be undertaken by more than one participant and could extend through more than one utterance and/or turn. The extent of a misunderstanding could thus be potentially greater and more complex than (s) - (m) - (c). Jefferson does not intend the three parts of her 'misapprehension sequence' to be definitive and she names them 'for convenience,' the names providing 'a way to handle them readily' (1972:304). This approach is unfortunate because by not defining 'misapprehension', Jefferson risks talking about different, though related, phenomena as one phenomenon; 'misunderstanding,' 'misapprehension' and 'no comprehension' are used inter-changeably. Thus experiencing difficulty in understanding an utterance differs from incorrectly understanding an utterance which also differs from not having any understanding of an utterance. Yet all of these possibilities concern communicative problems which participants have the capacity to resolve and all may well involve sequences within the conversation.

Schwartz (1977) is similarly concerned with the sequencing of misunderstanding and also with the ways in which misunderstandings are detected and resolved. His 'interpretive method' yields an elaborate commentary on the three utterances which constitute his example of a misunderstanding. The commentary is supported by additional data but is specific to the example given so that the cause of that misunderstanding, the roles of the interlocutors and the content of the utterances are detailed.

Schwartz's definition of misunderstanding, 'By "misunderstanding" I mean an interpretive error that is discovered by its maker at least two utterances after it has been made' (1977, in 1978:3) raises a number of questions which we would suggest warrant further examination. Is the 'maker' of a misunderstanding the one whose utterance is misunderstood or the one who misunderstands it? In what way is a misunderstanding 'discovered' - is it the realization that it has occurred or is it the admission of its occurrence in the conversation? What, in the turn sequence, constitutes 'two utterances after it has been made'? When, indeed, is a misunderstanding made - after the utterance has been expressed or simultaneously on hearing it? Why should 'two utterances' be significant? '

As a result of limiting himself to one datum, Schwartz can claim that 'utterance,' 'reply' and 'correction' follow successively and that a misunderstanding is discovered in a certain order, namely, by the speaker first and then by the hearer when the speaker corrects

him/her. This order need not necessarily be the only one: it is quite possible that a hearer realizes that he/she has misunderstood an utterance before the speaker of that utterance realizes the misunderstanding has occurred, or indeed the hearer may have realized that a misunderstanding has occurred in the light of utterances subsequent to the one misunderstood, in which case the sequence of utterance, reply and correction is broken by other utterances.

However, Schwartz makes the interesting observation that there is a communicative skill in dealing with a misunderstanding as a misunderstanding. He points out that failure to share an interpretation of an utterance is not necessarily a misunderstanding:

> A hearer interpreting a remark's meaning differently than its producer, and the hearer showing the producer this, doth not, by itself, a misunderstanding make. Conversationalists may not treat this as a technical or linguistic difficulty, but as a political, moral, or psychological one. Treating something as a misunderstanding, then, is as much an interpretive accomplishment of speaker-hearer as treating something as a joke or story.

We can usefully contrast Schwartz's definition of misunderstanding with that cited by Zaefferer (1977) who focusses on the cause of misunderstanding from a theoretical pragmatic point of view.

Zaefferer (1977) gives a formal definition of misunderstanding and discusses a constructed datum. His definition incorporates context, in terms of the environment in which the utterance is situated:

> A person I has misunderstood or has an incorrect understanding (with respect to language L) of some sound event SE in context C if and only if there are states of affairs SA', C' such that

(1) SE has occurred
(2) C holds
(3) SA holds because SE counts in C as bringing about SA (according to L),
(4) I believes (i) that (1), (ii) that C' holds (iii) that SA' holds because SE counts in C' as bringing about SA' (according to L) and
(5) SA is not the same as SA' (Zaefferer 1977:331-2).

According to this definition a misunderstanding occurs when a hearer, ('I'), has an incorrect belief about the context in which an utterance is expressed. A particular state of affairs automatically holds if it is brought about by a sound event in a particular context. A hearer could not therefore misunderstand a sound event if he/she believed the context to be the one which actually obtained at the time of the sound event. Zaefferer does not explain what is meant by 'context,' although the burden of his definition rests on it. One has to assume that it refers to constraints which restrict an utterance to a particular meaning in a particular spatio-temporal location. It seems possible that a hearer can correctly believe what context holds but nevertheless misunderstand an utterance.

Zaefferer's constructed datum (1977:338) is used to illustrate the use of decision analysis to explain and predict a particular reading choice, that is, explain and predict why a particular understanding is reached. His datum is reproduced here to illustrate the different interpretations which different analysts may make of a datum.

(1) A: There are even fishes that nurse their young.
(2) B: You're kidding me!
(3) A: No.
(4) : Why?
(5) B: Fishes aren't mammals.
(6) A: But of course, dolphins for instance.

According to Zaefferer, 'we can state that the outcome of B's interpretation of A's utterance of (1) is a reading which implies that by uttering (1) A was kidding B, while the correct reading implies that A was not' (1977:339). In other words A intended to make a serious statement but B understood (1) to be a joke or a tease. It seems to us, however, that the misunderstanding is not about the seriousness of (1) but is about what 'fishes' refer to. B misunderstands 'fishes' to refer to the biological notion of 'fish,' viz, a vertebrate with cold blood which breathes through gills. B therefore responds to (1) as a joke because he cannot reconcile this incorrect understanding with his knowledge of the real world.

The task of analysing a misunderstanding of this kind is problematic because it depends on the analyst's interpretation of the datum. Zaefferer's datum highlights the difficulty: the datum is constructed and therefore one would not expect it to be open to interpretations other than those which Zaefferer intends it to illustrate, yet other interpretations remain possible. This possibility leads us to consider the role of the analyst in

undertaking interpretive work on selected episodes of discourse where misunderstanding is involved.

We consider in this respect the difficulties faced by Grimshaw (1982) who was a participant in the exchange sequence he presents for analysis. In the course of trying to explain the nature of a misunderstanding which occurred during the exchange, Grimshaw notes 'As a participant, I did not, apparently, know "what was going on." As an analyst I believe <u>something</u> was going on - I still don't know exactly <u>what</u> is was' (1982:37).

Grimshaw uses the term 'mishearing' for failing to understand correctly; it is this failure that we have reserved for the term 'misunderstanding.' The term 'misunderstanding' is used by Grimshaw to refer to anti-understanding which, he explains in a previous paper (Grimshaw 1980:36), occurs when having understood an utterance correctly, one chooses to respond as though it had not been understood correctly, or in where the misunderstanding has been intentional. Grimshaw discusses a taxonomy of outcomes of communicative events which provides the following outcomes: nonhearing, understood as intended, non (or partial or ambiguous) understanding, mishearing and misunderstanding (that is, intentional misunderstanding).

The criteria which distinguish mishearing (that is, misunderstanding) from the others are (a) that the hearer is confident of having correctly heard and interpreted the speaker's utterance and (b) that the hearer has the linguistic capacity to understand the utterance correctly, that is, should know the meaning of the constituents and so on. Despite these criteria, Grimshaw has difficulty in determining the outcomes for some of his data: 'Five and six represent cases of partial understanding ... that shade off into mishearing. Both could also be read as Misunderstanding' (1980:49). 'Five' and 'six' are in fact constructed data and therefore lack a context which might have helped in the analysis. Consequently, in a later paper, Grimshaw was to investigate an episode of naturally occurring conversation in which details of context could be recovered since he was a participant in the exchange.

Grimshaw subjects this episode to an adaptation of Labov and Fanshel's (1977) comprehensive discourse analysis. In addition, he elicits comments from one of the two other participants/ interlocutors. In spite of the extra resources upon which he draws (his own ethnographic knowledge, his participation, commentary from another participant), Grimshaw is not able to determine exactly what the episode is 'about' and which communicative outcome ensues.

He nevertheless makes some instructive observations about the episode, namely that: (i) 'those involved appeared to be talking at cross-purposes,' (ii) that at least two of the participants were not aware that there was any problem in understanding, (iii) that the 'impasse' was not resolved and (iv) that 'even minimal "sense" could be made out of the exchange only by recourse to deeper and deeper examination of a number of contextual dimensions' (1982:20). Thus in this instance it would appear that the participants are not themselves troubled by a miscommunication which subsequently cannot be understood, even with the benefit of hindsight.

Despite undertaking a very detailed analysis of the episode, Grimshaw acknowledges that his analysis has limitations:

> The expansions in the appended text are tentative and the characterizations of interactional moves even more subject to challenge. It is not clear, in short, that an analyst can confidently claim to understand either 'what has been said' or 'what was done' in the colloquy (of the participants) (1982: 22).

The fact that the analysis cannot explain the datum is one major problem. The fact that Grimshaw is unable to place the communicative nonsuccess within his taxonomy is another:

> None of the participants in this episode has misunderstood. Neither have they, however, understood as intended, partially understood, or misheard - misread (as I use those terms) (Grimshaw 1982:23).

Grimshaw's distinctions between partial understanding, mishearing and misunderstanding seem difficult to apply. It is possible that he has tried to be too specific. By assigning indeterminate illocutionary force and different levels of knowledge to partial or nonunderstanding and problems with signals and defeasibilities such as shortcomings in capacity or attention to mishearings ('misunderstandings' in this paper), he focusses on the cause of the difficulty rather than the outcome. It might be easier to distinguish between the different types of miscommunication if one were to focus instead on whether the hearer suspects nonsuccess, knows nonsuccess is the outcome or does not know that nonsuccess is the outcome; indeed, one of the criteria for mishearing (misunderstanding) is that the hearer believes he has correctly heard and interrupted the utterance.

This erroneous belief may be in respect of an utterance of indeterminate illocutionary force which Grimshaw seems to restrict

to partial or nonunderstanding. Of course, if one is to focus on the hearer's beliefs about the outcome, one has to be able to determine what the hearer's beliefs are (for a detailed discussion of the hearer's role in misunderstanding, see Humphreys-Jones 1986b), and this leaves the analyst with the kind of interpretive problems we raised earlier.

Grimshaw's honest declarations of the difficulties encountered in analysing the episode are not simply salutory, they also provide considerable impetus for further methodological and theoretical exposition. However, whilst he cannot resolve to his own satisfaction the overall problem of 'what is going on,' Grimshaw is able to establish (i) that participants may gradually become aware of nonsuccess, (ii) that not all participants may necessarily become aware of nonsuccess and (iii) that the resolving of nonsuccess is often a complex task which may be subject to considerations such as the importance which participants attach to the conversation and so on.

Grimshaw's findings are borne out by the work on inter-ethnic and inter-dialectal misunderstandings (Gumperz 1982a; Gumperz and Tannen 1979; Milroy 1984; Milroy and McTear 1983; Varonis and Gass 1985), which is the final area of focus that we consider for our present purpose. The data in these studies are drawn from actual conversations and are subjected to detailed interpretation, some of which is corroborated by questioning the participants.

Gumperz (1982a) and Gumperz and Tannen (1979) investigate discourse strategies by using data from actual conversations in which communication is not successful. The object of their research is to determine the sociocultural knowledge which interlocutors draw on in conversation. The miscommunications which they discuss all 'involve mistaken judgements of others' conversational intent' (Gumperz and Tannen 1979:321). Those judgements tend to be attitudinal and are mostly due to inter-cultural differences between interlocutors. The fact that the judgements are mistaken is detected retrospectively by the participants and by outside observers.

Milroy (1984) and Milroy and McTear (1983) are similarly concerned with the causes and consequences of breakdowns in communication. Their examples are drawn from interlocutors who have different dialectal backgrounds because the 'internal grammars' of such interlocutors are assumed to differ, thus enabling the analyst to examine the role of 'linguistic knowledge in comprehension' (Milroy 1984:7-8).

Miscommunication is specified in the following way: 'A miscommunication may be said to take place when there is a mismatch between the speaker's intention and the hearer's interpretation'

(Milroy 1984:8). The speaker's intention is not limited to any one utterance and the miscommunication can therefore presumably be in respect of a larger part of the conversation than one particular utterance or in respect of what could be called the underlying social motives rather than intended propositional content of the utterances.

Milroy (1984) makes an important distinction between 'misunderstandings,' which involve differences in speaker-hearers' semantic analysis of an utterance and which do not interrupt the conversation's flow, and 'communication breakdown,' which happens when participants are aware that 'something has gone wrong' in the conversation. Thus, Milroy's 'misunderstandings' are not separate entities within conversation whereas her 'communicative breakdowns' are.

From both an applied linguistic and sociolinguistic viewpoint, Varonis and Gass (1985) discuss miscommunication between native and non-native speakers. They argue that in addition to having different language systems, a lack of shared belief space can cause communication problems. They suggest seven ways in which participants can behave after there has been a lack of understanding and they illustrate each of these with actual data. The seven ways in which participants can behave are as follows:

1. Immediate recognition of problem but no comment.
2. Immediate recognition of problem and makes comment.
3. Later recognition of problem but no comment.
4. Later recognition of problem and makes comment.
5. Recognition after conversation but no comment.
6. Recognition after conversation and makes comment.
7. No recognition (Varonis and Gass 1985:328).

These criteria provide a valuable guide to the possible outcomes of misunderstanding but the distinction between 'immediately' and 'later' is not clearly drawn. From the examples given, 'immediate' recognition of a communication problem is made when the next speaker produces an utterance which comments on or corrects the problem and which is adjacent to the utterance which has manifested the problem. 'Later' recognition is made when the next speaker pauses before producing his comment or correction; in the example of 'later' recognition, the correcting utterance is similarly adjacent to the utterance which has manifested the problem. It is possible that within a conversation a comment or correction could occur 'later' in the sense that a number of other utterances and/or speaker turns elapse between the utterance which manifests the problem and the correction of it.

Varonis and Gass (1985) analyse an 'extended misunderstanding' between a native and a non-native speaker in a telephone service encounter. Their analysis considers the participants' beliefs about the conversation, the differences between their goals and the correlation between the confidence of each participant in his/her interpretation and the correctness/incorrectness of that interpretation. Although a 'heuristic' for explaining participants' confidence in their interpretations is offered, there is no explicit account of how the analyst assesses participants' beliefs and goals, nor of how confidence in interpretation is actually determined and corroborated. Not all the utterances in the datum are given accuracy/confidence coding; two are given the code 'NC' ('Not coded'), perhaps because they are deemed incidental to the miscommunication.

Whilst the datum is very complex, with one participant changing goals five times and the other misunderstanding eleven times, Varonis and Gass make a number of important points as a result of their analysis. These are enumerated as follows: (i) native speakers and non-native speakers have particular problems in communicating, (ii) conversing in accordance with the Co-operative Principle and turn-taking conventions does not necessarily result in understanding, (iii) participants use 'negotiation routines in which one interlocutor indicates difficulty with the interpretation of another's utterance' (1985:341) and (iv) when meaning is not negotiated between native and non-native speakers their conversation is prone to problems. Despite the insights offered by studies such as this, approaches to analysing misunderstandings remain problematic in a number of different respects and we might now try to briefly summarize these.

Firstly, the studies which we have outlined, though often highly detailed, rely to varying degrees on informal and inadequately evidenced descriptions of the data. Secondly, whilst many of the datum are drawn from actual conversations, these tend to be single instances of communicative breakdown which appear to have been selected in an ad hoc way. Thirdly, there is no agreed model or system for analysing such breakdowns. Fourthly, definitions of misunderstanding tend to be either extremely vague or ignore the interactional dynamic which is negotiated between speaker and hearer. Fifthly, the sequencing of misunderstandings can be extremely complex and evidence for explaining what has gone wrong may not always reside in the text. Finally, we raise the analytic problem of 'correct interpretation,' a problem which is evident even on occasions when, like Grimshaw, we have been participant in the episode in question.

Given the nature of these difficulties, we suggest, in the

following section, how a systematic corpus based analysis of misunderstandings may help in beginning to tackle them.

3. A Corpus Based Analysis

The procedure for analysing misunderstandings discussed in this section is based on the detailed study presented in Humphreys-Jones (1986a). The rationale for undertaking a corpus based approach was to determine, in the first instance, the nature and range of textual evidence that could be accumulated from interactional contexts in which communicative breakdown had occurred. However, the would be analyst of such breakdown is faced with the difficulty of deciding in advance what some instance of the phenomenon in question might consist of. Whilst the nature of this decision must obviously affect the kind of corpus that is collected, subsequent additions to the corpus may be used to modify the original criteria used in the selection of examples. But how can we collect instances of misunderstandings when they involve the kind of conversational phenomenon whose occurrence cannot be predicted in advance?

One could of course collect huge amounts of data in the hope that enough instances of the phenomenon will emerge. On the other hand, such an approach could prove not only to be time consuming but also unproductive; we may fail to provide any instance of the kind we are interested in. Fortunately, a precedent for collecting chance data of the kind we have in mind has been set by researchers of speech error in verbal exchange, many of whom have adopted the 'diary method.' This method is particularly well illustrated in the work of Fromkin (1971) who provides a corpus of over six hundred speech errors collected by herself, colleagues and friends. By being on the spot, so to speak, the researcher is not only able to record the instance in which an error is produced but also has the possibility of collecting advantitious data in the form of immediately questioning the utterer of the error that has been realized. Something of a similar approach was adopted for the recording of misunderstandings which formed the corpus collected by Humphreys-Jones where these were defined as a type of communicative breakdown which 'occurs when a hearer, H, incorrectly understands a proposition expressed by a speaker, S, in an utterance in interactive conversation where S and H are native speakers' (1986:28).

Using the 'diary method' and notwithstanding its limitations (for detailed discussion of both the advantages and disadvantages of this approach to data collection, see Humphreys-Jones (1986a, Chapter II)), a corpus of some one hundred misunderstandings was collected along with whatever additional information the analyst

was able to glean, subsequent to the interactional sequence noted. Each datum was then transcribed in ordinary orthography to enable inspection and subsequent analysis of the exchange that transpired. The question that was subsequently posed in regard to this data was simply, 'what if any, kinds of evidence are available in each instance to enable the analyst to claim that a misunderstanding has occurred?'

In a large number of data in the corpus, one or more of the participants actually made overt reference to the fact that something had gone wrong and futhermore would frequently provide explanations of what had been misunderstood. For example, speakers made statements such as 'No that's not what I mean,' indicating to their interlocutors that some interpretation of what they had said was inappropriate or inaccurate. The same speakers might then continue, 'What I mean is (such and such)' as a means of further indicating what they originally intended to express. In the same way, when responding to such utterances as hearers, individuals might acknowledge the misunderstanding and apologize as a consequence, 'Oh I'm sorry, I thought you meant (such and such).' Similar evidence is provided for 'mishearing' in statements such as, 'I thought you said (such and such).' Where statements of this kind are offered, the analyst can make use of them to investigate what has happened in the discourse in question and indeed can compare such statements in various different interactional contexts.

In the absence of statements of this kind, the analyst must look for other kinds of evidence. This evidence may emerge as a result of inspecting the relationship between the utterance which is thought to have been misunderstood and the utterance which is subsequently based on or derives from that misunderstanding.

Within flexible but not infinite limits certain responses to utterances are appropriate while others are inappropriate. In the case of misunderstandings, the response by the hearer is to a different proposition than the one actually expressed by the speaker in his/her utterance and therefore the hearer's responding utterance is likely to be an inappropriate response, as is shown in the following example from the H-J corpus, in which S and H are talking about morris dancing:

(1) S: Where do you do this?
(2) H: To make the crops grow.

In response to a question concerning the location of an activity, a response detailing a place is appropriate but a response explaining the purpose of the activity is inappropriate. In this example, H has misunderstood what S was intending to express. Having misheard 'where' as 'why,' H believes that he is being asked why he morris

dances and his response in (2) is an answer to this question. In (2), therefore, H, manifests his misunderstanding of (1). The utterance by H which manifests his misunderstanding in the conversation is termed the manifestation and the definition of what counted as a misunderstanding in the H-J corpus was extended to include the presence of a manifestation. Without a manifestation there may be no evidence that the misunderstanding has occurred, should there be no reference to the misunderstanding in subsequent utterances. In addition, the requirement of the presence of a manifestation excluded data in which the hearer thought he might have misunderstood or encountered a possible problem in understanding what the speaker expressed. Rather than believing his/her understanding to be correct and basing his response on that understanding, the hearer could query the speaker's utterance or his own understanding of it and could thus avoid a potential misunderstanding.

When the hearer's manifestation is an appropriate response, evidence for the occurrence of a misunderstanding is only provided by any other utterances which have been exchanged, as in the following example in which S and H are listening to a tape which S has made of H's record:

(1) S: I've only got one side of it.
(2) H: Why?
(3) S: Because I've got Peer Gynt on the other.
(4) H: Oh I thought you meant it was in mono.
(5) S: No I meant only one side of the album.

In (4) H explains her understanding of (1) and in (5) S refutes this understanding and explains what she intended to express. From these two utterances it is possible to determine that a misunderstanding originated in (1). It is not directly manifested in (2) because H's response, 'Why?,' is an appropriate response. The response to the manifestation elaborates what was expressed in (1) and thus makes H realize, that is, become aware that she has misunderstood (1). H's explanation of her understanding of (1) not only provides S with an indication that something has gone wrong but also enables the analyst to cite evidence for this realization.

In order to ascertain that a misunderstanding has indeed occurred, then, the analyst must not only make recourse to what has actually been said but must also scrutinize the data for contextualization cues that may indicate some response has been communicatively inappropriate or problematic in some way. However, in undertaking such analyses of the data it is clear that the analyst can only judge what has gone on in his or her own terms, that is,

by imposing an interpretation on the data. But how can the analyst validate his/her own interpretation of what has gone wrong?

An important and often neglected source of supportive evidence for undertaking interpretive work of the kind we have considered can in fact be provided by the participants themselves. If, for example, a misunderstanding is reported to a third party after it has occurred, it is obvious that the individual making the report must have realized that something had gone wrong. This realization may help to confirm the analyst's own interpretation of events in something of the manner of Bertrand Russell who suggested that 'the oftener things are found together, the more probable it becomes that they will be found together another time, and that, if they have been found together often enough, the probability will amount almost to certainty...probability is all we seek' (1912:22).

With regard to misunderstandings, it is possible to examine a corpus of collected examples with a view to identifying their probable structural characteristics. Thus in the example we have just considered, the misunderstanding originates in (1) and is manifested in (2); these utterances are termed origin and manifestation respectively and they correspond with the sequencing discussed in the majority of studies discussed in the previous section. Both Jefferson and Schwartz, for example, discuss a sequence in which the misunderstood utterance is followed by an utterance based on the misunderstanding which in turn is followed by a correction. Such adjacency is not the case in the example since the 'correction' is made by (5), the utterance in which S reputes H's understanding and explains what was intended. The 'correction' is the consequence of an utterance by H which acknowledges and explains the misunderstanding; this utterance by H follows S's elaboration of the origin utterance. The datum is considerably shorter and less complex than the examples discussed by Grimshaw and by Varonis and Gass yet, like their data it is not amenable to an analysis based on sequencing.

Isolating embedded sequences within an exchange seems to be a clumsy way of analysing the utterances involved in a misunderstanding when we can make reference not only to the origin and manifestation of the breakdown but also the utterance which resolves the misunderstanding. In the misunderstanding about the tape recording, for example, both participants realize that the misunderstanding has occurred and go on to resolve it so that it is effectively closed and thus extends no further into the exchange. In the H-J corpus, it is notable that 72% of the examples were realized in this manner, that is, the participants were aware that communication had broken down due to misunderstanding and took steps to repair or resolve the damage.

However, we also need to account for more problematic cases of misunderstanding where the breakdown may be resolved for one participant but not the other as in the following example.

(1) S: Tim and Harry were going to the Ayr races with Steven Jackson
(2) H: Where?
(3) S: Ayr
(4) H: Oh

Because S, Tim and Harry are all airport staff, H understands (1) to refer to 'air races' and wishes to find to out where they are being held. On being told 'Ayr,' a partial repetition of (1), she realizes that she has misunderstood (1) and consequently appreciates that S is talking about 'horse' as opposed to 'aeroplane' racing as the former takes place in the town of 'Ayr.' S does not realize that a misunderstanding has occurred and the sequence is unaffected for him. H, on the other hand, does realize a misunderstanding has occurred, acknowledges this fact (this acknowledgement is taken by S to be a neutral comment on the information he imparts in (1)) and closes the sequence accordingly.

Only, 12% of examples in the corpus were of this type, though there were a further 3% of cases where neither participant realized that a misunderstanding had occurred. In these instances, the participants presumably left the conversation with different understandings of what had gone on but had not perceived this to be communicatively problematic.

In the remaining 13% of examples, it was not possible to determine whether or not one or more participants realized that any problem existed. Thus, in 25% of the corpus, one could analyse different sequences for the misunderstanding according to which participant's perspective one was adopting. What is detected as a misunderstanding for one participant may not be detected as such by the other. Consequently, the different understandings which participants may have of the conversation means that the course of any misunderstanding has to be charted differently for each participant.

However, dealing with discourse from the point of view of the participants requires attention to be paid to their 'intentions' and 'understandings' as well as to their utterances and to this end a system of reference was devised to account for (i) what the speaker intended to express, (ii) what utterance the speaker produced (origin), (iii) what utterance the hearer perceived and decoded, (iv) what the hearer understood to have been expressed and (v) what utterance the hearer produced in response, based on and manifesting his misunderstanding (manifestation). These criteria

were thought to be of particular importance because a misunderstanding involves disparity between (i) and (iv) and this disparity is the consequence of problems which the hearer has with either (ii) or (iii) or both; the disparity is manifested in the conversation in (v). Many of the other utterances in each datum could be analysed in terms of their relationship with these five reference points, which avoided the lengthy descriptions that are possible in the detailing of one or two misunderstands but are not practicable in respect of a corpus of one hundred.

In addition to these factors, the points in the conversation at which each participant realized the misunderstanding had occurred were identified so that the change from one understanding to another could be delimited, wherever possible.

4. Concluding Remarks

By applying the analysis outlined above, it was possible to undertake a systematic classification of the types and structural characteristics of misunderstandings within the corpus. We would suggest that this exercise is not mere 'listing' but rather agree with the view of Carvell and Svartik (1969:29) who argue that 'a classification of a set of objects is a system of reference for the objects together with rules for referring them to it' (1969:29).

However, when the 'objects' are misunderstandings, the reference system and its rules must embrace all aspects of the communication process, or at least as many as the analyst can identify. By recognizing the need for such an approach, the work being developed by Humphreys-Jones aims to demonstrate the methodological and theoretical advantages of undertaking a 'process' type analysis as suggested by Widdowson (1979). But that is not all, since the analysis put forward is also sensitive to Widdowson's other line of approach which is to deal with discourse 'in detachment from its instantiation, after the event, as a product' (1979:70-71). To this end, commentary and corroboration of what went on in the exchanges which constitute the corpus were sought from the participants. Although only drawn on informally in Humphreys-Jones (1986a), the nature of these comments were considered as extremely important for the research, since they provided evidence and information that would otherwise not have been accessible to the analyst.

Detailed discussion of the nature of this evidence and information are outside the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, we suggest that further exploration of participant commentaries of this kind can and would help to provide an important data base for launching work on conversational inferencing such as Gumperz (1986a;

1986b) has pioneered and that McGregor (1985; 1986; forthcoming) is seeking to develop.

By focussing on the inferential skills of third person participant and non-participant judges, this work aims to model the kinds of sociolinguistic knowledge that may be utilised by individuals in situated interpretation of communicative events. It also enables us to provide a framework to account for the possibilities of multiple interpretation of conversational data such as were raised at various point in our discussion. Indeed, McGregor (1985) argues that the need to account for these differences is paramount since analysts ought to provide a framework for inferencing that goes beyond their own subjective platforms. If we take the difficulties expounded by Grimshaw (1982) as a case in point, then there is little doubt of the care that must be taken.

Whatever research path we choose to follow, it is clear that any attempt to investigate the complex processes that underpin the nature of everyday communicative activity can gain much from the kind of approach we have outlined here, not only when this activity is perceived to have broken down, as in the case of misunderstandings, but also when it is considered as successful or at the very least unproblematic by its participants.

FOOTNOTES

[1]This paper is the consequence of a long standing series of discussions and reflects the often overlapping research interests of the authors. Whilst work on the paper was equally shared, the data and findings are based on the doctoral research presented in Humphreys-Jones (1986a).

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