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Misunderstandings in communicative language use

Abstract

The present paper aims to analyze how the different causes underlying misunderstandings can be predicted by relevance theory. Misunderstandings are defined as those types of unsuccessful communicative acts that primarily pertain to the unfulfillment of the informative intention of the speaker. After briefly reviewing the theoretical background for the investigation of ostensive-inferential communication and the previous research on communicative failures the paper provides a theoretically determined and empirically supported typology of misunderstandings in verbal communication.

Keywords: ostensive-inferential communication, misunderstanding, intentions

1 Introduction

In communication one often comes across misunderstandings despite the cooperative behavior of the communicative partners and their best efforts to ensure mutual understanding and effective information exchange.

The present paper has three main aims. First, I will outline the theoretical background for the investigation of misunderstandings, that is, unsuccessful communicative acts that primarily pertain to the unfulfillment of the informative intention of the speaker. The second aim is to present a typology of misunderstandings in communication that is theoretically determined by Sperber & Wilson's (1995 [1986]) relevance theory and the previous research on communicative failures

by Ivaskó & Németh T. (2002). The third goal of the paper is to examine particular cases of misunderstandings. Based on detailed analyses of these examples, I demonstrate how the different causes underlying misunderstandings can be predicted by relevance theory.

The paper is thus organized as follows. Section 2 provides a brief overview of the notions of language use and communication so that we can differentiate between them, and also define the place of ostensive-inferential verbal communication within these notions. Section 3 characterizes the conditions under which the different verbal interactional forms of language use are considered to be successful, as well as the distinction between misunderstandings and other types of failures in social language use. Section 4 proposes a theoretically determined and empirically supported typology of misunderstandings in verbal communication. This section relies on the analyses of Hungarian spoken language examples taken from a TV show that features 30 minute conversations between a psychologist and individual patients filmed with hidden cameras. Finally, Section 5 summarizes the results.

2 On the notions of language use and communication

In order to investigate unsuccessful language use, one has to be able to use the term *language use* in a reflective way. As the main focus of pragmatics lies on the study of verbal communication, it is necessary to note that communication – even when performed with verbal coding – does not equal language use (Németh T. 2008: 154-156). First of all, communication itself can be performed with non-verbal codes as well. Smoke signals or color codes using flags are, for instance, early examples of long-distance communication. Not to mention that communication can also be achieved without using any established code system. Let us take an example:

- (1) The mother enters the room of her teenage son, ostensibly starts sniffing the air and picking up smelly clothes and pieces of leftover food from the floor.

In this case it is quite obvious that the mother is in a way communicating with her son, as her behavior would not make any sense if it was not intended to make her son realize how displeased she is. The mother's ostensive behavior is not an element of a code. It is only in

this particular situation that sniffing the air and picking up different items is a means of communicating the meaning “I am displeased with the chaos that reigns in your room, you should do something about it”. Nevertheless, if the son notices the mother’s intention to inform him about something and is also capable of inferring the intended information, then this instance of situation bound behavior without any code use is just as successful as its verbal counterpart could be. What these examples make clear is that communication as a form of human social behavior relies on ostensive behavior. Ostensive behavior is performed in order to make the initiator’s intention to make any kind of information manifest – or more manifest – to the partner, manifest to both parties (Sperber & Wilson 1995 [1986]: 49).¹ In order to achieve this goal, first of all, the initiator has to overtly claim the partner’s attention so that the partner focuses on his/her communicative intention and, as a second step, the partner is able to recover those pieces of information which confirm the presumption of relevance (Sperber & Wilson 1995 [1986]: 155). According to this characterization of communication, there are two distinct kinds of intentions that underlie this type of ostensive behavior: an informative intention and a communicative one, the first being prior to the latter from both a logical and an evolutionary viewpoint (Németh T. 2008: 163). The intended information can be recovered by relying on the combination of decoding and various types of inferences (Sperber & Wilson 1995 [1986]: 9-15). To study further aspects of communication,

¹ The term ‘manifest’ makes a claim about the participants’ cognitive environment, in other words, about the set of assumptions which the individual is capable of mentally representing and accepting as true, or probably true. The term manifest does not make a claim about mental states or processes. In consequence, a fact that is manifest to both initiator and partner at a given time is not necessarily mutually known by them, since the initiator and the partner do not have to make the same assumptions, they just have to be capable of doing so (Sperber & Wilson 1995 [1986]: 38-46).

The term ‘intention’ is used in a broad sense here to refer to speakers’ intentions both in informative and in communicative language use. The informative intention that is made manifest in informative language use, includes a set of assumptions {I} – if there is a second intention to make this first layer of ostensive behavior overt, then it is called a communicative intention. As we will argue in the following, manipulative intentions that are present in manipulative language use, should not become mutually manifest. If the manipulative intention is recognized by the partner, manipulation is unsuccessful. Consequently, manipulative language use is not an ostensive behavior, but it is performed through forms of ostensive behavior (Németh T. 2015: 59).

let us adopt the precise definition of communication that is formulated within relevance theory as developed by Sperber & Wilson (1995 [1986]):

- (2) Ostensive-inferential communication: “the communicator produces a stimulus which makes it mutually manifest to communicator and audience that the communicator intends, by means of this stimulus, to make manifest or more manifest a set of assumptions {I}” (Sperber & Wilson 1995 [1986]: 63).

Now that we have established that there are forms of communication which do not rely on a verbal code or on any code in general, let us take a look at the discrepancy between verbal communication and language use.² To give an illustration of non-communicative forms of language use, consider the following examples:

- (3) In the hope of memorizing a homework task, student X repeats the information out loud.
- (4) While repeating a homework task out loud, student X utters the sentence “I’m so tired of studying all afternoon” loudly enough for his mother to hear it in the kitchen, as well.
- (5) While repeating a homework task out loud, student X utters the sentence “I’m so tired of studying all afternoon, I’m thirsty and exhausted” loudly enough for his mother to hear it in the kitchen, as well.

Example (3) is an illustration of cases where language is not used within social situations as, for example, when language is used to think, memorize, play etc. Consequently, we cannot categorize these forms of individual language use as communication. Example (4)

² The above definition of ostensive-inferential communication will be applied in explaining verbal communication. The stimulus which makes it mutually manifest to the communicator and the audience that the communicator intends by means of this stimulus, to make manifest or more manifest a set of assumptions {I}, is first and foremost a linguistic stimulus consisting of elements of a natural language that can be accompanied by stimuli in other modalities.

It is important to note that this definition of communication is meant to be an empirical generalization about the behavior of the language user and not a prescription that must be followed by the communicator (Sperber & Wilson 1995 [1986]: 162).

shows a scene where the student is not communicating with his mother, yet there is another form of verbal interaction, namely information transmission without a communicative intention, as has been argued by Németh T. 2008. The student merely wants to let the mother know that he is feeling exhausted without making this intention of his mutually manifest. Therefore, informative language use is inherently one-sided (Németh T. 2008: 171). On the one hand, there are no means to address the partner by using linguistic indicators, such as “Mom”, thereby requesting his/her attention, and on the other hand, there is no way for the speaker to check the success of the information transmission by using linguistic devices such as tag questions, speech acts of correction, or self-correction along with different discourse markers (Németh T. 2015: 60). Besides its one-sided nature, we should point out the difference between having an informative intention, namely an intention to make a set of assumptions {I} manifest or more manifest to the audience, and the mere intention not to prevent the audience from being informed (Ivaskó 1997). In the former case the initiator, even though he/she has no intention to make the audience believe that he/she wants to inform the audience about {I}, explicitly intends the audience to infer the set of assumptions the initiator wants to transfer. Ideally the hearer would process the information in the way the speaker expected it to be processed and think that the utterance was not addressed to the hearer; for example he/she could only hear it accidentally. In the latter case, however, the speaker has no explicit intention to make manifest or more manifest a set of assumptions {I} to the hearer, yet he/she has no explicit intention to hold back the information from the hearer, either. Consider the modified version of the situation in (4).

- (6) While repeating a homework task out loud, student X utters the sentence “I’m so tired of studying all afternoon” loud enough for his mother, who is preparing dinner in the kitchen with his father, to hear it.

In this condition, just as in the original example the student has an informative intention towards his mother and wants his informative intention to be fulfilled without necessarily being recognized. By contrast, the student does not explicitly want to inform the father about the fact that he is exhausted. Then again, he does not manifestly intend to prevent him from being informed either. Both kinds of language use are common in everyday multi-participant conversations.

There the particular speaker addresses the information in each turn to (a) particular participant(s), thereby communicating with (a) particular addressee(s), but at the same time, other participants, who the speaker is aware of and who he/she might or might not want to inform, also listen to the speaker's utterance. The speaker performs a communicative act and, at the same time with one and the same utterance he/she performs further types of language use as well. Namely, the speaker can have the intention of informing other participants about the same set of assumptions {I} he/she is communicating to the addressee(s) without wanting to make this intention mutually manifest (Németh T. 2008: 160-162; Németh T. 2015: 58; Árvay 2003). In this sense, the speaker's verbal act towards these other people can be understood as a manifestation of informative language use. Towards those participants who the speaker is aware of but has no intention to inform about a set of assumptions {I}, he/she simply has the intention not to prevent them from being informed. It follows that there is no genuine informative intention on the speaker's part. Therefore, we cannot speak here of ostensive language use. A third conceivable scenario would be that the speaker is not fully aware of the potential circle of listeners, perhaps because they are not manifest to him/her, hence the speaker does not have any sort of intention towards that part of the audience. Obviously, there is no ostensive language use in this case either.

Now let us turn to example (5), which is quite similar to (4) in the sense that the student has the intention of making manifest, or more manifest, to the mother how he feels, but does not have an intention of making his informative intention mutually manifest. Therefore, in the absence of the communicative intention we cannot classify this instance of verbal behavior as communication. Having said this, examples (4) and (5) do differ in terms of the intentions the speaker has. In the latter, besides his informative intention the student also has a "hidden" manipulative intention. Not only does he have the intention of influencing his mother to bring him some refreshing drink but on top of this intention he also has the intention not to make his influencing intention explicit. Whether a particular case of verbal information transmission can also be considered as manipulative or not does not depend solely on the existence of an influencing intention, but whether the speaker wants this intention to be recognized or not (Németh T. 2015: 61). Let us compare the following indirect request in (7) and the explicit impression of a wish in (8) with example (5):

- (7) Could you bring me some refreshment, Mom?
- (8) Mom, please bring me some refreshment!

Besides the fact that in (7) and (8) we see communicative acts, another difference is that in these cases the student does not try to hide his influencing intention. Influencing alone does not count as manipulation as long as the influencing intention is overt. Even if the mother brings a refreshing drink to her son after hearing (5), it cannot be seen as successful manipulation, if she recognizes that she is being influenced. Manipulation as a non-ostensive behavior has to work unconsciously on the partner (Németh T. 2015: 61). The success of manipulation does not, therefore, solely depend on the extent to which the speaker was able to influence the other person, but also on whether the manipulative intention remains hidden, or is recognized by the addressee.

Another interesting question to consider is whether information transmission without a communicative intention as illustrated in (4) is inevitably manipulative in nature or not. This question may arise from the fact that by using forms of informative language the speaker has a genuine informative intention, yet in most cases this remains unrecognized by the partner. The intention to make the informative intention manifest, i.e. the communicative intention, is missing. The speaker intends the partner to have the impression that the information he/she has become aware of was not addressed to them. The partner is intended to believe either that they have heard the speaker's utterance only accidentally, or that the speaker only intends not to prevent them from being informed, and even though they are entitled to hear the utterance by virtue of being a member of the audience, they are nevertheless not the addressee. Let us consider the following example:

- (9) At a party student X learns that one of his friends is undecided as to whether to accept a one-year scholarship abroad. Student X face to face, but he wants him to know about his thoughts on the topic. Therefore, he starts talking to another person, knowing that his friend can hear the conversation as well, about his good experiences abroad.³

³ For the original example, see Árvay (2004).

Only if the speaker has an explicit intention to hide his informative act and make it seem unexpected, will this count as an example of information transmission with a manipulative intention. If so, the hearer must have the impression that he/she only heard the utterance by chance. By contrast, if student X does not care whether his informative intention becomes obvious or not and just wants his friend to hear about the positive aspects of living abroad, so that he will decide to experience it himself, then we cannot analyze it as manipulation. In this condition, the friend should ideally believe that he is not the addressee, yet the only important concern is that he processes the content of the set of assumptions {I} which student X wants him to know.

Another key point to consider is the content of the set of assumptions {I} the speaker intends to make manifest, or more manifest. In other words, we should define what is communicated or transmitted. Consider (10):

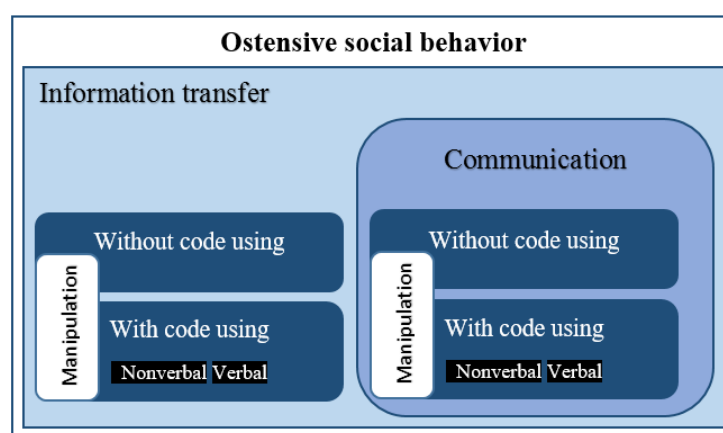
- (10) Student X and his friend take part in a contest. According to the rules, everyone is assigned a partner by the committee. After seeing who has been assigned to student X, his friend utters: “She is not that smart, but at least she is pretty. Enjoy that!”

The common core meaning of this sentence shared by every utterance of it would be that the female partner of student X is not smart and that she is pretty. It also presupposes that the speaker knows the girl to some degree, since he believes that he can judge her intelligence accurately. These assumptions are conceptual representations, i.e. thoughts, treated by the individual as representations of the actual world – in contrast, for example, to fiction or desire (Sperber & Wilson 1995 [1986]: 1-2). Nevertheless, what is actually communicated is more than this semantic representation, it includes the communicator’s various intentions, his attitude towards the topic and all the intended inferences. Based on his friend’s ostensive behavior and what relevance it could have, as well as on the properties of the context student X chooses afterwards, there are several possible interpretations of this utterance.⁴ Student X could perceive (10) as an intention

⁴ By context, Sperber and Wilson mean a psychological construct. It is the subset of the hearer’s assumptions about the world used in interpreting an utterance that

to influence him so that he flirts with the girl, or he could see it as a manifestation of jealousy/celebration on his friend's part, or he could infer the implicature that his friend thinks that in his everyday life he is not surrounded by pretty girls. With this in mind, we see that if the context envisaged by the speaker does not match the context used by the hearer, failures in language use are bound to happen.

Lastly, the different social forms of language use are summarized in the following figure:



3 On the notion of success

Now that we can clearly differentiate – at least in theory – between the different cases of language use and communication, we should also discuss the conditions under which the different social forms of language use are considered to be successful. Afterwards we will establish the differences between the various types of failures in social language use and misunderstandings.

To put it simply, the success of language use is guaranteed if and only if the speaker's intentions are fulfilled (Németh T. 2015: 55). As we have previously argued, the speaker may have several intentions with one and the same utterance (Németh T. 2015: 71). For now, we will concentrate on the two that are involved in the definition of ostensive-inferential communication, namely, the informative and the

does not have to coincide with the actual state of the world (Sperber & Wilson 1995 [1986]: 15).

communicative intentions. Communication is truly successful when both the informative and the communicative intentions are achieved. In other words, if the speaker can produce an utterance that is both the most relevant stimulus capable of fulfilling his/her intentions and a stimulus that for the hearer appears to be worth processing, and if the hearer is then capable of inferring a representation which is to a large extent similar to the representation the speaker wanted him/her to construct, then communication is successful. In other cases, when one or both intentions of the communicator are not fulfilled, for example if the partner is not paying attention, is not identifying himself/herself as the addressee or failing in some way in the inferential procedures, communicative language use is, at least to some degree, unsuccessful. In order for information transmission without communicative intention to be truly successful the hearer must process the linguistic stimulus and recover all explicit and implicit information meant by the speaker, as well as the speaker's attitude, perspective and other intentions. Even if the hearer assumes a communicative intention on the part of the speaker and therefore does not have exactly the same representation the speaker wanted him/her to construct, information transmission is still successful as long as the set of assumptions {I} intended by the speaker are processed by the person in question (Németh T. 2015: 73).⁵ Unlike communication in information transmission, because of its one-sided nature, the speaker has no way to make sure that the partner is able to process the intended information entirely, neither does he have a chance to make self-corrections and elaborations (Németh T. 2015: 60). Moreover, since there is no intention to make the informative intention mutually manifest, the speaker, by definition, cannot behave in a way that overtly attracts the hearer's attention, and so the hearer has no special help in recognizing the speaker's informative intention and so cannot make use of the presumption of relevance to guide his/her interpretation process in the same way he/she would in the case of communication. As a result of these characteristics of information transmission it should be a

⁵ However, if there was a specific intention on the speaker's part regarding the manifestness of the informative intention, namely that it should remain unrecognized by the partner, then assuming that the speaker has a communicative intention would make this instance of information transmission unsuccessful. What this means is that the only exception is information transmission with a manipulative intention where not assuming an informative intention and consequently, holding the belief that the hearer heard the utterance accidentally, is a condition for success (Németh T. 2015: 74).

less reliable and effective form of information exchange than communication (Németh T. 2008: 163).⁶

From this characterization of communication in particular, and other forms of language use in general, it follows that these processes are ultimately asymmetrical. By asymmetrical coordination, Sperber and Wilson mean that it is left to the speaker to make correct assumptions about the codes and contextual information the hearer has at hand (Sperber & Wilson 1995 [1986]: 43). On the one hand, the speaker has to evaluate what assumptions are, or will be, manifest to the hearer at a given time and situation. In cases where the context envisaged by the speaker does not match the context used by the partner, the informative intention of the speaker cannot be fulfilled. If, however, the speaker develops a correct intuition about the partner's cognitive environment, then he/she is more likely to choose both the most relevant stimulus capable of fulfilling his/her intention(s) and a stimulus that for the hearer appears to be worth processing. Accordingly, the presumption of relevance that comes with each utterance will run a smaller risk of being falsified by the partner (Sperber & Wilson 1995 [1986]: 164). On the other hand, the speaker also has to guess what assumptions the hearer will actually make. Considering that even if the cognitive environment is to a great extent mutually shared, and the partner uses the context that was expected by the speaker, there is no guarantee that at the end of the interpretation process the informative intention of the speaker will be fulfilled. The hearer could easily arrive at contextual implications that were not intended by the speaker. As a result of the asymmetrical coordination in all forms of language use, the success of both informative and communicative attempts will depend to a large extent on the speaker. Nevertheless, failures in reception do also occur.

In order to resolve the differences between failures in language use in general and misunderstandings in particular, we first have to summarize the various types of failures that are predicted by relevance theory and that we have considered so far:

⁶ Nevertheless, successful instances of information transmission can achieve a very desirable effect. Namely, due to the fact that in information transmission the hearer does not attribute intentionality to the speaker, and therefore does not think that he/she is being influenced in some way, informative acts of language use do come across as more reliable sources of information (Németh T. 2015: 74).

Form of language use	Intentions of speaker	Intentions fulfilled	Success
Communication	Communicative Informative	Communicative and informative	Full Success
		Communicative	Partial Success
		Informative	Partial Success
		None	Complete or partial failure
Information transmission	Informative	Informative	Full Success
		None	Complete or partial failure

Generally speaking, misunderstandings are those types of failures in language use that include a partial or complete failure in achieving the informative intention of the speaker. Let us consider the modified version of example (6) and a new example, both of which illustrate this distinction:

- (11) Student X utters the sentence “I’m so tired of studying all afternoon, I’m thirsty and exhausted. Somebody please bring me a refreshment!” loudly enough for his parents, who are preparing dinner in the kitchen, to hear it.
- (12) The following dialog takes place between a psychologist and his patient:
 Psychologist:
 – *Jókedélyűnek tűnik. Most ez valóság vagy álcázás?*
 – You seem cheerful. You really are, or is it just a façade?
 Patient:
 – *Nekem mindenki azt mondta, hogy ilyen kis mosolygós vagyok.*
 – Everyone tells me that I always have a pleasant smile on my face.
 Psychologist:
 – *Ez engem nem érdekel.*
 – This is not what I wanted to know.

Patient:

- *Magamban nagyon sokat vívódom és örlődöm, nem tudom, kifele biztos, hogy ez van. [...] Tehát azért még mosolygok, és mindenki azt mondja, hogy nem látszik rajta, hogy bármi problémám lenne.*
- I am full of self-doubt on the inside, I don't know. It's certain that that's the case on the outside. [...] So I do still smile, and everybody tells me that it doesn't look like I have any problems.

Psychologist:

- *Az baj.*
- That's an issue.

In example (11) the student's communicative attempt may fail, since he does not assign the role of the addressee explicitly and so the interpersonal function of this utterance is not clear (Ivaskó & Németh T. 2002: 35-36). Both mother and father could decode its linguistic meaning and so understand that it is a request, but if nobody takes the role of the addressee, and, consequently, nobody carries out the request, then the speaker's communicative intention is not fulfilled. If this should be the case, communication is unsuccessful, yet according to our definition there is no misunderstanding.⁷ Example (12) is, however, an illustration of the way the informative intention of the speaker is unfulfilled. Here the patient, aware of her role as the addressee, is paying attention to the speaker and by processing the stimulus she finds the first relevant interpretation that is enough for her to confirm the presumption of relevance. This interpretation is, though, not the same as the one the communicator intended her to arrive at. Thus it appears that with this communicative attempt, it is only the informative intention that is not fulfilled.⁸ This misunder-

⁷ Only if we decide to treat the fact that the utterance was addressed to the parents as part of the informative intention is (11) a misunderstanding.

⁸ At this point, the addressee is not aware of the fact that she has not been able to fully process the set of assumptions {I} the communicator intended to convey. Even if the speaker also does not recognize this failure after the hearer's reaction, and thus it is left unresolved, is it still a misunderstanding according to our definition.

Interestingly enough, not even the researcher is able to identify all misunderstandings, as the content of the set of assumptions {I} which is communicated by the speaker is obviously not explicitly stated. However, since the researcher has the whole conversation at hand, he/she can recover all cues that render a failure sufficiently probable and then trace back the misunderstanding.

standing is easily detected by the psychologist, because he is aware that the patient's response is, first, not accurate if she interpreted his utterance correctly, and, secondly, does not give him the information he was looking for in the patient's answer. The misunderstanding is then resolved quickly within 2 turns. First, the speaker points out that there must have been a failure somewhere in the interpreting process. Secondly, the partner takes the second interpretation that for her confirms the presumption of relevance and answers accordingly. Considering that example (12) represents a misunderstanding in communicative language use, the speaker, after detecting that his informative intention has not been fulfilled, can make use of different linguistic means to indicate the disturbance in the communicative process. Yet not all sorts of misunderstandings can be dealt with this way. Consider a modified version of example (9) to illustrate a misunderstanding in informative language use:

- (13) At a party student X learns that one of his friends is undecided as to whether to accept a one-year scholarship abroad. Student X does not want to influence his friend's decision, but he wants him to know about his thoughts on the topic. Therefore, he starts talking to another person, knowing that his friend can hear the conversation as well, and says: *I've spent the last year of my BA studies in Bielefeld, which made great sense, because I could fully concentrate on my thesis. I had the best time of my life there!*

The intended set of assumptions {I} that should be manifest to the hearer after processing these utterances contains the following thoughts:

- (13 a) Student X has spent the last academic year of his BA studies (consisting of 10 months) in Bielefeld.
 (13 b) The one year stay in Bielefeld made great sense for Student X, because he could fully concentrate on his thesis.
 (13 c) Student X had the best time of his life in Bielefeld.
 (13 d) Accepting the scholarship and living abroad would be a great opportunity for the friend, just as it was for Student X.
 (13 e) The friend should therefore accept the scholarship.

The assumptions (13 a) – (13 c) are explicatures, and so processing them and resolving their indeterminacies require different types of inferences on the partner's part than is the case with the intended implicit content in (13 d) – (13 e). In order to yield the fully propositional forms in (13 a) – (13 c) the hearer must, for example, assign reference to the pronouns and assign appropriate interpretations to approximations like “great”, “fully” or “the best” and to vague expressions like the time interval of “a year”. If this were a communicative act, the hearer would also have to resolve illocutionary indeterminacies – the utterance may be interpreted as an assertive or as a directive, e.g. a piece of advice. Assuming that the partner has successfully arrived at the intended explicatures, the comprehension procedure should not stop there. Based on the activated chunks and on the inferences made, the intended interpretation should incorporate the implicatures in (13 d) – (13 e) as well. Ideally, it is (13 c) that is the most relevant part for the hearer and the one that governs the comprehension procedure, so that the intended implicatures are the most accessible ones and they already satisfy the hearer's expectation of relevance. However, if it is (13 b) that grabs the partner's attention, we find that in this context, the degree of activation of different chunks, and therefore the order of accessibility of the related inferences, are quite different:

- (13 d') Spending a year abroad only makes sense in the final year while writing the thesis.
- (13 e') The friend is starting the first year of his BA studies.
- (13 f') Staying abroad does not make sense while in the first year of university, so in this case the friend should not accept the scholarship.

If the hearer arrives at (13 f') instead of (13 e), then the informative intention of Student X is a partial failure. Hence, it should be classified as a misunderstanding with the additional note that here the speaker has no means to investigate the success of his informative intention, nor does he have the chance to modify the unwanted interpretation (Németh T. 2015: 60).

To summarize: the fulfillment of the speaker's intentions is a good indicator of success in language use. According to the different forms of language use and the particular combination of intentions not met, various forms of unsuccessful language use can be distinguished. In

general, if there is a partial or complete failure in achieving the informative intention of the speaker, then we speak of misunderstandings. As we have seen, misunderstandings occur both in communication and in information transmission without a communicative intention. In the next section I aim to present a typology of possible forms of misunderstandings, based on the predictions that follow from a relevance theoretic view on language use.

4 Misunderstandings in communication

The present section has two main aims. The first goal is to propose a typology of misunderstandings in communication that is theoretically determined by Sperber and Wilson's (1995 [1986]) relevance theory and the previous research on communicative failures by Ivaskó and Németh T. (2002). The second goal is to examine particular misunderstandings in communicative language use. The examples that will be analyzed are selected from a corpus consisting of Hungarian spoken language examples taken from a TV show that features 30 minute conversations between a psychologist and individual patients filmed with hidden cameras.⁹

In the relevance theoretic approach of comprehension in ostensive-inferential communication, the hearer infers the speaker's intended meaning from an utterance and from the selected context, that is, a predominantly linguistically-coded piece of evidence that was produced by the speaker for this purpose (Sperber & Wilson 2002: 3). First, the hearer's attention is drawn to the communicator's informative intention by some sort of ostensive stimulus that is most appropriate when it automatically pre-empts attention, e.g. an utterance in someone's mother tongue.¹⁰ Another important feature of such ostensive stimuli is that the only relevant assumptions they make manifest are about the informative intention of the speaker (Sperber & Wilson 1995 [1986]: 151-155). In the second step, the comprehension of the utterance, as it is mainly linguistically-coded, has to involve an element of decoding. The outcome of the decoding process then serves as

⁹ For reasons of space, PT will refer from now on to the psychotherapist and P to the patients.

¹⁰ "*Ostensive stimuli* [...] must satisfy two conditions: first, they must attract the audience's attention; and second, they must focus it on the communicator's intentions" (Sperber & Wilson 1995 [1986]: 153)

the starting point for an inferential process (Sperber & Wilson 2002: 3). In the third and last part of the comprehension process, the conceptual representations, in other words the thoughts that are actually communicated, have to be inferred by the hearer. In order to bridge the gap between sentence meaning and the speaker's meaning, the indeterminacies of the explicit and of the implicit content will be resolved by a search for the greatest relevance possible (Sperber & Wilson 2002: 17-20). Both the determining of the context for the interpretation and the steps of the inferences that follow are guided by the presumption of relevance, namely the guarantee that according to the speaker's estimation, the information the hearer will gain is relevant enough to be worth the hearer's attention and processing effort.¹¹ This means, on the one hand, that on the effect side the level of effect achievable should never be less than is needed to make the utterance worth processing, and, on the other hand, that on the effort side the speaker has chosen the most relevant stimulus capable of fulfilling his/her intentions (Sperber & Wilson 1995 [1986]: 155-158).¹² Now, the hearer has to arrive at an interpretation that for him/her confirms the presumption of relevance. Finally, the first interpretation that satisfies the presumption of relevance should be accepted, otherwise the speaker has not chosen the most relevant stimulus capable of fulfilling his/her intentions and so the benefits of achieving contextual effects do not outweigh the cost of the processing effort (Sperber & Wilson 1995 [1986]: 170).

¹¹ "Someone who asks you to behave in a certain way, either physically or cognitively, suggests that he has good reason to think that it might be in your own interests, as well as his, to comply with his request. This suggestion may be ill founded or in a bad faith, but it cannot be wholly cancelled. If a request has been made at all, the requester must have assumed that the requestee would have some motive for complying with it." (Sperber & Wilson 1995 [1986]: 155)

Note that as the relevance of an interpretation is not assessed at the end of the comprehension process, but is a principle that governs the context formation and the interpretation process, the context is not uniquely determined in advance, but is open to choices and revisions throughout comprehension (Sperber & Wilson 1995 [1986]: 141-142).

¹² The utterance has no contextual effect, and therefore no relevance for the hearer if:

- the new information does not connect up with any information in the context, e.g. it yields no contextual implication;
- the assumption is already present and its strength is unaffected, e.g. it yields no dependent, independent or retroactive strengthening;
- the assumption is inconsistent with the context, but is too weak to upset it, e.g. it yields no contradictions (Sperber & Wilson 1995 [1986]: 121).

It follows from the previous view on comprehension in relevance theory that the production process involves two essential steps in verbal communication: firstly, the speaker has to attract the attention of the audience and focus it on his/her informative intention; secondly, the speaker has to produce a linguistically-coded piece of evidence which can be accompanied by ostensive stimuli in other modalities. It follows that this has to involve an element of coding and, because of the asymmetrical coordination in language use, a consideration of possible context choices and inferences on the hearer's part. That is, the speaker has to make correct assumptions about the codes and contextual information the hearer has at hand so that he/she can produce the most relevant utterance that is capable of fulfilling his/her informative intentions (Sperber & Wilson 1995 [1986]: 43). If there is any failure, either in the production part or in the interpretation part of the communicative process, then communication is unsuccessful. Then again, not all cases of unsuccessful communication are also misunderstandings.

The table below presents the main components of ostensive-inferential communication, both on the speaker's and on the hearer's part:

	Crucial steps in the production – Ostensive part of communication	Crucial steps in the comprehension – Inferential part of communication
Ostension	Attract the audience's attention and focus it on the communicator's (informative) intention	Pay attention to the communicator
Coding – Decoding	Linguistic coding of the stimulus	Linguistic decoding of the stimulus
Inference	Consideration of possible context choices of the audience	Choice of context and inferences for maximal relevance

Accordingly, failures in communicative language use can occur with regard to ostension, coding-decoding or inference, both in production and in comprehension. As discussed in the previous section, misunderstandings in language use are generally defined as partial or complete failures in achieving the informative intention of the speaker. Failures concerning ostension, namely failures in requesting attention on the speaker's part and failures in paying attention on the hearer's part, mean that the informative intention of the speaker has not become mutually manifest. In other words, the communicative in-

tention of the speaker is not fulfilled, and verbal communication is (at least to some extent) unsuccessful. As a result, the chances are high that the informative intention of the speaker will also not be met if there is no communicative interaction established. However, since these cases primarily pertain to the unfulfillment of the communicative intention, they will not be addressed in this article.

With this in mind, let us look at the different causes that should lead to misunderstandings in the procedures of verbal communication as predicted by the relevance theoretic model of ostensive-inferential communication, and thus relying on the results of Ivaskó and Németh T. (2002): misunderstandings in communication, that is, unsuccessful communicative acts primarily pertaining to the unfulfillment of the informative intention of the speaker, may be caused by failures in production and by unsatisfied comprehension. Failures in production can occur as a result of a failure in the coding procedures or an inadequate choice of context. Failures in the decoding procedures, in choosing the right context for the interpretation and in the inferential procedures, may lead to unsuccessful comprehension.

We will now go through some concrete cases of misunderstandings in communication and discuss the reasons behind the unfulfillment of the speaker's informative intention in each case.

4.1 The informative intention is not fulfilled because of the speaker's fault

4.1.1 A failure in coding procedures occurs

Failures in the coding procedures include the violation of rules or principles at one or more linguistic levels such as the phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic level of language. Consider (14), in which the personal pronoun "they" could both refer to the girls and boys who had young mothers or to the young mothers themselves. This indeterminacy at the syntactic level makes the psychologist's utterance ambiguous. In order to decide what information the speaker intended to convey, the patient disambiguates the utterance by assigning reference to the pronoun in question. The resolution of this linguistic indeterminacy is relevance-guided and not arbitrary. The initial context of the conversation contains the information that the patient, who is a fifteen year-old girl, is pregnant with her first child. Therefore, when interpreting the psychologist's question, the girl has every reason to suppose that it is about young mothers like herself.

Unfortunately, as this is not what the speaker meant; his informative intention was not fulfilled and a misunderstanding followed. To avoid this failure the psychologist would have to make his utterance unambiguous so that it is manifest to the hearer that he is interested in adolescents whose mothers are young. After detecting the misunderstanding, this is exactly what he does.

(14)

PT: – *Találkoztam olyan lányokkal és srácokkal, akiket az anyjuk elég fiatalon szült meg. Mit gondol, kiegyensúlyozott emberek vagy nem?*

– I've met girls and boys whose mothers had them at a quite young age. What do you think, are they well-balanced people or not?

P: – *Szerintem az, hogy kinek a... szóval, most az, hogy a szüleik ilyen fiatalok...*

– I think that... so that, their parents are that young...

PT: – *Nem ők, a gyerekek. Ezek a fiatal felnőttek kiegyensúlyozottak-e vagy sem?*

– Not them, the kids. Are these young adults well-balanced individuals or not?

Let us have a look at another example, (15), in which it is an indeterminacy at the semantic level that results in a misunderstanding. The speaker is using the overgeneralization “guys” even though he is only interested in the reactions of one man, namely the husband of the patient. Similar to the previous example, the speaker quickly notices the misunderstanding and a self-corrective term follows.

(15)

P: – *A házasságom vége felé, akkor a férjemtől is ugye azért megkaptam, hogy miért nem próbálok már ezért tenni valamit.*

– At the end of my marriage, I also got criticized by my husband for not trying to do anything [in order to lose weight].

PT: – *Mit mondanak ilyenkor a pasik? Mondjon egy pár jelzőt. Meg hogy egyáltalán, hogy milyen...*

– What do guys say in a situation like that? Give me some adjectives. And like generally, like what sort of...

P: – *Hát, pasik. Hát, mostanában nagyon pasival sem találkoztam, aki úgy...*

– Well, guys. Nowadays I don't even meet up with guys who would...

PT: – *A férje. Amit a férje mond, ezt nemcsak Ön kapja meg, hanem nagyon-nagyon sok ilyen helyzetbe levő ember. Miket mondanak a pasik? Mármint az Ön férjét, vagy válófélben levő férjét illetően.*

– Your husband. What your husband says is not something that only you get to hear, but very many people who are in this situation. What do guys say? Concerning your husband, or your soon-to-be divorced husband?

Finally, consider the case in (16) where the unfulfillment of the speaker's informative intention results from syntactic as well as semantic underdetermination. The patient cannot recover the information contained in the psychologist's question because it is too fragmentary, and more than one interpretation could confirm the presumption of relevance. There are at least two resolutions that would achieve approximately the same effect with the investment of approximately the same effort. On the one hand, the question could be about whether the target of the attempted manslaughter was the patient's partner at the time, and on the other hand, whether the reason for this criminal act was a bad relationship. As the hearer is unable to resolve the indeterminacy on the basis of relevance, she has to reach out to the speaker for more information.

(16)

P: – *Emberölési kísérlet plusz rablás. Ez volt a vád. [...] Tehát nem vagyok ártatlan ember, igenis megfelelő, helyénvaló volt.*

– Attempted manslaughter and robbery. This was the charge. [...]

So, I'm not an innocent person, it was appropriate.

PT: – *Párkapcsolat?*

– A relationship?

P: – *Kérem?*

– Pardon?

PT: – *Emberölési kísérlet, ez egy párkapcsolat?*

– Attempted manslaughter, is this a relationship?

P: – *Nem, nem, hanem ez a züllött életnek, az éjszakai életnek a szövődménye.*

– No, no, it was a consequence of the loose life, the nightlife.

4.1.2 *The choice of context is not appropriate*

The unfulfillment of the informative intention can also occur if the speaker chooses an inappropriate context for the production of the utterance. This type of failure is a result of the speaker's incorrect judgment as to what context the hearer would select for the interpretation. In (17) the speaker, in producing his utterance-token, assumes that using the term "qualifications" will be precise enough for the hearer and she will interpret it in the context of higher education, not for example in the wider context of vocational training. So one cause of this misunderstanding is that the psychologist's question concerns qualifications in general and the context of higher education is just one type of qualification the patient may choose. Another reason for this communicative failure is that the cognitive environment involves the information that it is a therapeutic consultation which does not make the context of higher education degrees as prominent as would be the case in a job interview.

(17)

PT: – *És mi a végzettsége?*

– And what qualifications do you have?

P: – *Hát kezdetben ugye ügyintéző titkár, az volt egy ilyen kis tanfolyam...*

– Well, at first administrative secretary, that was a course I took...

PT: – *Iskolai végzettsége.*

– Your highest educational qualification

P: – *Érettségi.*

– High school graduation.

Let us consider another case, (18), in which unsuccessful communication is again caused by the speaker not choosing a context for the production that would successfully narrow down the possible contexts for the interpretation so that the most relevant interpretation for the hearer would be similar enough to what the speaker intended. Here the psychologist's question concerns the feeling of being content with oneself as a man. However, as the hearer himself later on points out, it is not clear what aspect of being a man the psychologist has in mind. In the hearer's first interpretation attempt he arrives at the conclusion that it is his physical capacity that is called into question. As this is not what the speaker intended to ask, his informative intention could not be fulfilled. Yet the fact that male impotence was

the most relevant interpretation for the patient, could in itself be valuable information regarding his attitude towards the meaning of 'being a man'.

(18)

P: – *38 éves vagyok, és ilyen hülyeségeket csinállok, amit általában 18-20 éves korában csinál az ember.*

– I'm 38 years old and do stupid stuff like what, what 18-20-year-olds usually do.

PT: – *Most elégedett vagy azzal, mint férfi?*

– Are you now content with that, as a man?

P: – *Te most mire gondolsz? Hogy esetleg impotens vagyok?*

– What do you mean? That maybe I'm impotent?

PT: – *Nem a férfiasságra. Hanem férfinak érzed magad?*

– Not your manhood. But do you feel like a man?

P: – *Ez jó kérdés egyébként, őszintén megmondom Neked. Férfinak érzem-e magam? Milyen szempontból kérdezed, ne haragudj.*

– It's a good question, honestly. Do I feel like a man? Sorry, but what aspect of it are you asking about?

The following two examples are of the same type as well. In (19) it is the question regarding the location of the fiancé that is taken literally by the patient instead of a metaphorical interpretation intended by the psychologist. In (20) it is a general question about possible paths the patient could choose in order to tackle her weight issue that results in a misunderstanding. Again, there are several ways to resolve such linguistic indeterminacies on the basis of contextual help. However, the speaker does not provide any cues, because he makes an incorrect judgment about what context the hearer will select to achieve the greatest relevance possible. The speaker intends the hearer to think of measures she could take to improve her mental health. Yet because when previously thinking about her weight issue the patient had accessed the chunk "diet" much more often than she had done with the chunk "mental health", it now involves less processing effort and gives roughly the same contextual effects to choose this first context for her interpretation.

(19)

PT: – *Hogy van és hol van [az a fiú, aki meghalt]?*

– Where is he and how's he doing [the ex-fiancé who had died 17 years ago]?

- P: – *Hát, temetőben van sajnós.*
 – Sadly, in the graveyard.
 PT: – *Azt gondoltam, de egyébként hol van?*
 – I know that, but where is he besides that?
 P: – *[...] tehát ezek után nem tudom azt mondani, hogy a mennyekbe van.*
 – [...] after all that, I cannot say that he is in heaven.
 PT: – *Nem, nem. Nem is erre vagyok kíváncsi, hanem, hogy ott van-e még benned vagy nincs?*
 – No, no. That's not what I had in mind, rather whether he is still with you or not?
 P: – *Bennem van. Örökké bennem lesz.*
 – He is. He always will be.
 PT: – *Ezt kérdezem.*
 – That's what I'm asking.
 P: – *Három éves korunktól ismertük egymást [...] tehát ezt elég nehéz lenne kitörölni.*
 – We knew each other since the age of three [...] so it would be hard to leave it behind.

(20)

- PT: – *De hát akkor miért nem kezdesz el valamit csinálni?*
 – But then why don't you start to do something about it?
 P: – *Milyen értelemben valamit csinálni? [...] Azt ne mondd, hogy fogyókúrázni! Ezt az egy szót ne!*
 – In what sense do you mean? [...] Don't tell me to go on a diet! Not that word!
 PT: – *Dehogy! [...] A belső elégedetlenség táplálja ezt a testet. Boldogtalanságérzés. [...] Ha elkezdenél valami olyat csinálni, amit szeretsz, és amiben jól éred magad?*
 – Certainly not! [...] The inner dissatisfaction is feeding your body. The feeling of unhappiness. [...] What if you started to do something that you like, that you are comfortable with?

4.2 *The informative intention is not fulfilled because of the hearer's fault*

4.2.1 *There is a failure in decoding procedures*

The violation of rules or principles at one or more linguistic levels such as the phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic level of language can also occur because of the hearer's fault. In (21) for example the hearer confuses the verb "to regret sth." with "to look forward to sth." due to the phonetic similarity of their Hungarian equivalent: "várja" and "bánja".

(21)

PT: – *Nagyon várja ezt a babát?*

– Do you look forward to having this baby? / Do you regret having this baby?

P: – *Várom?*

– Look forward?

PT: – *Ühüm.*

– Mhmm.

P: – *Nagyon várom.*

– I look forward to it very much.

Let us next consider (22), where the hearer semantically equates the proposition "to do everything for x" with the proposition "to not do enough for not x". Therefore, she misses the intended information of the speaker, namely that she uses none of her energy to change the situation she is in.

(22)

PT: – *Nézze asszonyom, Ön mindent megtesz azért, hogy így nézzen ki, nem?*

– Look madam, you do everything to look like this, don't you?

P: – *Hát valóban, nem eleget. Szóval ez...*

– Well actually, not enough. So this...

PT: – *Nem. Ön mindent megtesz azért, hogy így nézzen ki, ahogy kinéz.*

– No. You do everything possible to look the way you do.

4.2.2 *The choice of context is not appropriate*

Misunderstandings with respect to an inadequate choice of context can also result from a failure in the hearer's context formation in the interpretation process. In this type of unsuccessful communication, the speaker's informative intention will not be fulfilled, even though the speaker neither violates any rule or principle in the coding, nor does he/she leave open several relevant contexts that would yield interpretations as relevant as the one intended. Nevertheless, the hearer manages to create a relevant representation that has little to do with the one the speaker wants him/her to construct. In (23), for instance, the psychologist is asking about all the activities the patient can engage in with passion and joy. He makes it clear that the question concerns a wide context of interests, possibly ranging from favorite pastime activities to life goals. He intentionally does not use work-related terms, yet the patient narrows down the interpretation to the context of work.

(23)

PT: – *Mit az amiért lángolni tud? Lelkessedni. Tudja mi az, amit tüzze-vassal tud csinálni? Mi az? [...]*

– What is it that you can be passionate about? Enthuse about. Do you know what it is that you can do with heart and soul? What is it? [...]

P: – *Igazság szerint szerettem én dolgozni, szerettem, amit csináltam és most is dolgoznék. Tehát bennem van az, hogy öt évet voltam otthon...*

– To be honest, I liked to work, I liked what I did, and I would like to work now as well. After staying at home for five years...

PT: – *A munka az egy dolog.*

– Work is one thing.

The patient's fault in (24) is that she interprets the psychologist's utterance in a concrete context even though the speaker justifiably expected her to process it in a figurative sense. The figurative interpretation was supported by the initial context of the conversation, namely that they were talking about the future consequences of her current lifestyle. With this in mind, the concrete interpretation does not make much sense, since one occasion of eating a full-fat cake in the future does not count as a consequence worth thinking about. Then again, the figurative interpretation with the meaning that she will have to bear the consequences of eating too much unhealthy food

for a longer period of time, fits the flow of the conversation perfectly. The fact that her otherwise unhealthy diet does not contain full-fat cakes is therefore irrelevant.

(24)

PT: – *De ha nem teszek semmit se meg, jó kis zsíros levest fog enni.*

– But if you don't do anything, you will have your nice full-fat cake and you'll have to eat it.

P: – *Igen, pedig nem is szoktam.*

– Yes, even though I normally don't.

PT: – *De azt eszi.*

– You do.

Let us consider another example, (25), where the hearer interrupts the speaker, because she thinks that she has already grasped what the speaker is trying to get across. The patient assumes that the question will be about her feelings about the outside world in general while being in prison. However, what the psychologist was about to ask was more specific than that. He wanted to know what the patient thought about the level of difficulty she will face after being released from prison.

(25)

PT: – *Két-három év alatt betöltött egy adott presztízst, az ottani hierarchiában. Akkor miért sírdogál itt két hónap után?*

– After two to three years you've gained a certain prestige, in that hierarchy. So then why are you crying here after two months?

P: – *Ezen még nem gondolkodtam el. Tehát én azt hittem, hogy itt egyszerűbb. Én azt gondoltam.*

– I've not thought about that yet. I just believed that it will be easier here. That's what I thought.

PT: – *Amikor két hónapja benn volt a kaptárban, akkor...*

– While you were in the prison two months ago, then...

P: – *Nem vágytam ki.*

– I wasn't eager to come out.

PT: – *Miért, akkor mire gondolt, hogy egyszerű?*

– Why, what were you thinking then? That it's easy?

P: – *Nem, nem vágytam ki.*

– No, I wasn't eager to come out.

PT: – *Az egy dolog, hogy nem vágyott ki.*

– It may be the case that you weren't eager to come out.

The next case in (26) is of the same type as well. The hearer again believes that he is one step ahead and knows what assumptions the speaker will expect him to have. Accordingly, the hearer reacts with this in his mind and states that the speaker did not understand what his previous objections were about. However, after taking the next turn the psychologist can finish his utterance and they can clarify the situation.

(26)

PT: – *Értem.*

– I understand.

P: – *Nem érted, ezt csak mondom, hogy érted.*

– No, you don't. You just say that you understand.

PT: – *Abból a szempontból, hogy ezek régi dolgok és én a jelen dolgokkal szeretnék foglalkozni...*

– With respect to the fact that these are old things and I would like to work with the present...

P: – *De bocsássál meg, de ezek mind... ne haragudjál...*

– Sorry but, these are all... I'm sorry...

PT: – *Kihat, kétségtelenül kihat a jelenre.*

– No doubt, it does all have an influence on the present.

P: – *Így van pontosan, erről van szó.*

– That's exactly it, this is what I'm talking about.

4.2.3 *There is a failure in inferential procedures*

4.2.3.1 There is a failure regarding explicatures

If the hearer makes a failure somewhere in the inferential procedures, he/she will not arrive at the intended interpretation and, consequently, the informative intention of the speaker cannot be fulfilled. The first type of failures involve cases either where the hearer already stops the comprehension procedure after the recovery of the truth-conditional meaning, even though the speaker intended to make manifest to him/her some implicit information as well, or where the hearer does not deduce the proper explicature. In (27) the reason for the misunderstanding is that the patient does not construct the intended implicature, namely that a younger boy will most probably have some ulterior motive, if he starts a relationship with an older overweight woman. The presumption of relevance that is communicated by the psychologist's question is not identified until one pro-

cesses all the intended implicit assumptions. To deduce all intended assumptions the patient should have used the encyclopedic knowledge about these types of relationships, in particular that they are unrealistic. The patient probably rejects this assumption and the new information was too weak to upset it. As a consequence, the intended implicature was not relevant enough. However, after repeating the question the patient successfully infers the intended implicature and the conversation can continue.

(27)

PT: – [...] *Gyakorlatilag van egy [...] 33 éves, körülbelül ugyanilyen testsúly csaj, egy 26-27 éves srác. Kedves Piroska, hova raktad a szemed?*

– [...] So there is, in effect [...] a 33 year-old girl with approximately the same body weight and a 26-27 year-old boy. Dear Piroska, did you decide to turn a blind eye?

P: – *Nem, ezt most igazán nem értem. Mert?*

– No, I really don't get that. Why?

PT: – *Mert egy sokkal fiatalabb, valószínűleg jól nézett ki a srác... [...] Mikor választ egy 33 éves csajt, akinek súlyfeleslegei vannak?*

– Because a much younger, probably good-looking guy [...] when will he choose a 33 year-old girl who is overweight?

[...]

P: – *Rettegtem a magánytól.*

– I was afraid of loneliness.

In (28) the hearer correctly processes the assumption that someone made an already difficult situation deliberately harder, but resolves the referential indeterminacy inaccurately. The patient constructs a wrong explicature by assuming that the psychologist refers to the patient's relatives, when what is meant is the patient herself. Again, the wrong explicature can be explained if we take into consideration that the construction of the wrong explicature involves less effort, since it is more accessible. On the one hand, the previous parts of the conversation focus on the difficult situation of her daughter and what they could do to resolve it. On the other hand, the mother is, of course, more concerned with her daughter's decisions and future life, than with her own issues.

(28)

PT: – *Egyszerűen emberként nem tudom megérteni, hogy ha nagyon nehéz helyzetben vagyok és minden energiám...*

– I simply cannot understand that if I'm in a difficult situation and all my energy...

P: – *Akkor még nehezebbet miért csinálok magamnak szándékosan?*

– Then why would I deliberately make it even harder for myself?

PT: – *Pontosan.*

– Exactly.

P: – *Igen. Ők ezt nem igazán gondolták át, szerintem.*

– Yes. I think they didn't give it much thought.

PT: – *De nem, Ön miért csinál nehezebbet magának?*

– No, why do you make it harder for yourself?

4.2.3.2 There is a failure regarding implicatures

Apart from the hearer not inferring the proper explicature and not deducing some intended implicatures, there are other types of errors that occur in the inferential procedures as well. The second type of failures involve cases at the stage of the recovery of implicatures. Misunderstandings at this point of the comprehension process include, on the one hand, cases where the hearer infers more assumptions than intended by the speaker, and, on the other hand, cases where the hearer arrives at an alternative implicature that is not what the speaker would have liked to make manifest to him/her.¹³ In (29), for example, the hearer does not stop the comprehension procedure at the recovery of the truth-conditional meaning, since that interpretation – even though it is the representation the speaker wanted her to construct – obviously does not meet her expectations of relevance. Instead of taking the question literally as was intended by the psychologist, the patient assumes an implicature in the speaker's meaning. Namely, that this question should make manifest to her that given her current circumstances she shouldn't have kept her baby if she was a responsible person. This assumed implicature seems indeed relevant if we look at the whole conversation. It is clear that the psychologist accentuates the difficulties of having a child at 16 when facing a prison sentence and having a boyfriend with low in-

¹³ Of course, there might be cases where both types occur in one and the same utterance and overlap each other.

come. Therefore, the assumed implicature that a responsible person would not keep the baby and so she should not, is new information that connects up very relevantly with the information already present in the context. Furthermore, this assumed implicature would also strengthen the already present assumption that he believes that it will be very difficult for her to handle all of this.

(29)

PT: – *Ön egy felelősségteljes ember?*

– Are you a responsible person?

P: – *Most arra gondol, hogy nem kellett volna fölvállalnom ezt a babát?*

– By that you mean that I shouldn't have kept this baby?

PT: – *Én kérdezem, hogy Ön felelősségteljes ember?*

– I'm asking: are you a responsible person?

Consider (30), in which a patient again, in interpreting the psychologist's utterance, infers an assumption that was not intended by the psychologist. In this case, however, it is not clear how the hearer by following the path of least effort arrived at this interpretation, because neither the initial context consisting of the preceding utterances, nor the observable environment, seem to prompt the assumption that he takes the money away from his family. One possible explanation is that he has heard this particular accusation in connection with his problems several times before, which has resulted in a relatively high accessibility of this assumption. The accessibility of this chunk has then created a corresponding level of accessibility for this implication.

(30)

PT: – *A mérlegelő ember egy idő után azért átgondolja azt, amit csinál. Tehát 3 éve fokozódik az agresszivitásod, piázol, gyógyszert szedsz. Ez okés lenne, hogyha hatékonyan élnél vele.*

– A mature person considers what he does after a while. So, for three years now your level of aggression has been increasing, you drink and you take pills. This would be fine, if you were able to live effectively.

P: – *Mire gondolsz a hatékonyan élni?*

– What do you mean by living effectively?

PT: – *Hatékonyan élni: munka, megbecsülés stb. [...]*

– To live effectively: work, be appreciated, and so on [...].

P: – *Na de bocsáss meg, azért ne úgy vedd elő a dolgot. Tehát én nem a családtól viszem el otthonról a pénzt.*

– Sorry, but don't put it like that. So, I don't take the money away from my family.

PT: – *Tudom, nem is erről... önmagad. A családdal sajnos nem tudok mit kezdeni, ők nem itt ülnek.*

– I know, not that... yourself. Unfortunately, I cannot do anything about the family, they are not the ones sitting here.

The next example in (31) concerns more the illocutionary force of the psychologist's utterance, since the inferred assumption by the hearer, namely that their conversation must soon come to an end, is probably correct. Nevertheless, the patient processed the utterance as a request to leave immediately, which was certainly not what the psychologist intended to convey.

(31)

PT: – *Én egyet kívánok neked.*

– There is one thing I wish for you.

P: – *Most vége a beszélgetésnek? Ki vagyok rúgva? Mivel tartozom doktor úr?*

– Is this the end of the conversation? Have I been kicked out? How much do I owe you, Doctor?

In the last example in this section, (32), the hearer first deduces an implicature that was not intended by the speaker and in his second turn he constructs an alternative implicature, not the one that was intended by the psychologist. With his second utterance the psychologist expected the hearer to deduce the implicit meaning that whether he takes his own life or not is a decision the patient has to make. Yet the patient focuses more on the concrete formulation of the utterance and so arrives at the alternative unintended implicature that he can do it with a gun or by other means, but the main thing is that he has to do it.

(32)

PT: – *[...] Úgy érzem, hogy tudod, én nem hiszek abba... véletlenbe se, hogy leültél velem szembe és nekem a Hemingway jutott eszembe.*

– [...] I feel that... you know I don't believe in... it is not a coincidence that you sat down with me here and Hemingway has come to my mind.

- P: – *Ja, hogy öngyilkosnak kellene majd lennem?*
 – Oh, so I have to commit suicide then?
 PT: – *Nem kell! Ezt majd te eldöntöd vadászpuska, nem vadászpuska. A te ügyed.*
 – You don't have to! You will decide whether it will be a shotgun or not. It is up to you.
 P: – *Ja a módját majd én döntöm el? Már ki van osztva!*
 – So I can decide on the method? It is all set!
 PT: – *Te ügyed, ez a te ügyed.*
 – It's your business, your business.
 P: – *Köszí egyébként.*
 – Thanks anyway.

4.3 Miscommunication

In the previous examples we have to a great extent analyzed isolated cases of misunderstandings. However, in real life it is more common to have cases of miscommunication, that is, cases in which several different instances of unfulfilled informative intentions merge with one another. Singled out misunderstandings can be accounted for on the basis of the above typology. Nevertheless, a detailed analysis of how they interact and what impact they have on each other could be of interest for further research.

- (34)
 PT: – *Mivel nagyon sok mindent nem tudsz, és úgy ítélsz rólam...*
 – Since you don't know very much about me, and yet you judge me...
 P: – *Te is úgy ítélsz rólam és sok mindent nem tudsz...*
 – You judge me as well, and you don't know very much...
 PT: – *Én miben ítéltél? Mondjál egyet.*
 – When did I judge you? Give me an example.
 P: – *[...] Visszatérek erre, amit az előbb is hozzám vágtál, hogy mindenki a maga szerencséjének a kovácsa. Tehát magyarul te úgy ítéltél...*
 – [...] I will come back to the accusation you just threw at me earlier, that everyone makes their own destiny. In other words, you judge me in a way...
 PT: – *Én megkérdeztem: „mit gondolsz arról, hogy mit jelent az, hogy mindenki saját sorsának a kovácsa”?*

– I asked: “What do you think it means that everyone makes their own destiny”?

P: – *Vagy azt mondtad, hogy nekem felelősségem gondoskodnom a családomról. Tehát ezzel is ítélkeztél fölöttem.*

– Or you also said that it is my responsibility to take care of my family. So you have also judged me in that respect.

PT: – *Amikor iszol... nem!*

– When you drink... no!

P: – *Dehogynem.*

– But for sure you did.

PT: – *Akkor te nevezd ítélkezésnek, én azt gondolom, hogyha valakinek van egy családja x gyerekekkel és ő mégis a saját makacs feje után megy és iszik és lehet, hogy vannak jelzések, hogy figyelj ide, rá fogsz fázni... mert kapod a jelzéseket. [...] Te azt mondod, hogy a mai világban szükségesek a hátszelek. Én meg tudom azt, hogy nekem hátszelem nem volt.*

– Then call it judging, I think that if someone has a family with x children and despite this he continues his stubborn way of acting and goes drinking and it may be that there are signs telling you ‘Look, you will screw things up’... because you get those signs. [...] You say that in today’s world tailwinds are necessary. Yet I know that I did not have a tailwind.

P: – *Erre azt mondom, hogy hangember vagy.*

– You are an insincere man, that’s what I say about this.

PT: – *Akkor mondjad, csak tudod az a különbség, hogy a barátaim között, akik tudják, hogy honnan jöttem...*

– Then say that, but the difference is, you know, that my friends who know where I came from...

P: – *Erre nem lehet végig hivatkozni. És az én Édesanyám Bulgáriából jött. És akkor mi van?*

– You cannot refer to that the whole time. My mother came from Bulgaria, so what?

PT: – *Barátaimról beszélek.*

– I was talking about my friends.

[...]

P: – *Te most arra hivatkozol, hogy jöttél Szerbiából és akkor végül is benned is van egy nagy seb, hogy Úristen...*

– Now you’re referring to the fact that you’re from Serbia and therefore there is this big wound and, Oh my God...

PT: – *De nincsen.*

– But there is none.

[...]

PT: – *De nincsen. Igen, de nincsen bennem seb.*

– But there is none. Yes, but there is no wound in me.

5 Summary

In the present paper, I have investigated the ways in which misunderstandings occur in communicative language use. I have defined misunderstandings as those types of unsuccessful communicative acts that primarily pertain to the unfulfillment of the informative intention of the speaker. Based on the relevance theoretic approach of ostensive-inferential communication, as well as on a detailed empirical analysis, I have constructed a typology that is able to make predictions concerning the different causes underlying misunderstandings.

The typology presented in the paper grasps that misunderstandings may be caused by failures in production and/or comprehension processes. Failures in the coding and decoding procedures include the violation of rules or principles at the phonological, morphological, syntactic and/or semantic levels of language. The unfulfillment of the informative intention can also occur if either the speaker or the hearer chooses an inappropriate context for the production or the interpretation of the utterance. In many cases, this is a result of asymmetrical coordination in language use. This means that it is left to the speaker to make correct assumptions about the codes and contextual information the hearer has at hand (Sperber & Wilson 1995 [1986]: 43). The last type of failures involves cases where either the hearer does not infer the adequate explicature/implicature, or the hearer infers more/less assumptions than intended by the speaker.

Tasks for the future may include investigating the strategies that communicative partners rely on when trying to avoid misunderstandings, as well as the strategies they use when trying to solve them, and analyzing how particular instances of unfulfilled informative intentions interact with each other when causing miscommunication.

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