

Cooperation and Negotiating Meaning in Communication

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Abstract:

In communication, meaning is not inherent to words alone, but is affected by a multitude of factors pertaining to the linguistic and situational context. Furthermore, as J.L. Austin suggests in his Theory of Speech Acts, or as Paul Grice argues with his Cooperative Principle and his Theory of Conversational Implicature, in the act of communication there is often a gap between what the speaker (S) says and what the speaker means. Austin demonstrates that the speaker's meaning is not carried by their words, but by their communicative intention. In his turn, Grice focuses on the way the hearer (H) manages to interpret S's message correctly despite all the indirectness that characterizes ordinary communicative exchanges. And yet, there are numerous cases when H does not manage to decode S's intended meaning successfully. The paper analyzes such instances, focusing on the causes that generate misunderstanding and on ways to solve them by negotiation.

Keywords: missing links, illocutionary force (SA), cooperation, implying/implicature, explicature, making inferences

1. Speech Acts and Illocutionary Force

The gap between *what the speaker says* and *what the speaker means*¹ has preoccupied many linguists. Foremost among them is **J. L. Austin**, who explains the gap between the conceptual load of S's words and their intended meaning by focusing on the *action* S performs with the help of their utterance.

In other words, Austin argues that S uses the language not only to *say* things but also to *do* things, i.e. to perform Speech Acts or language functions. Thus, the gap between S's utterance (or locution) and their intended meaning is covered by the Speech Act (or *illocutionary force*) S gives to their utterance (what S does with the language).

According to the Speech Acts theory, the same utterance may acquire various illocutionary forces and perform various speech acts, for example:

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¹ Basing their analysis on oral communication, linguists referred to the speaker (S) and the hearer (H), but the phenomena analyzed are also valid for written communication, in which case the interlocutors are the sender (S) and the receiver (R).

What the speaker says (locution)	What the speaker means (intended meaning)	What the speaker does (Speech Act)
The door is open	Close the door, please	A request
	You may go, if you wish	A permission
	Someone may overhear us	A warning

Conversely, S can perform the same Speech Act by way of various utterances, as in:

In conclusion, what S *says* is not really important; what matters is S's *communicative intention*, which is carried, more or less indirectly, by the illocutionary force they endow their utterance with.

What the speaker says	What the speaker does (Speech Act)	Language/ Speech function	Indirectness
Close the window	Asks the receiver to close the window.	An order	Straightforward
Can/Could/Will/Would you (please) close the window?		A polite requests	More and more indirect
It's quite cold in here, don't you think?		An indirect request	Altogether indirect
I think you want me to turn into an icicle.		An indirect request, by way of irony	S <i>says</i> the very opposite of what they <i>mean</i>

a. Levels of meaning

The theoretical presentation above suggests that we must analyze S's meaning along 3 levels:

- a. lexical meaning, i.e. what S says (their locution)
- b. contextual meaning, i.e. what S's utterance means in that specific context of utterance
- c. the force S gives to their utterance, i.e. the action S performs with the help of their utterance and the intended meaning

Consider the following example:

- a. locution: *I have no knife*
- b. context, e.g. to police, at night, dark alley
- contextual meaning: *I'm not armed*
- c. illocutionary force: a request; asking police not to shoot.

b. Misunderstandings and negotiating meaning

The gap between what S says and what they mean often triggers misunderstandings, as in the following examples:

Model analysis 1. Classroom interaction (oral)

Teacher (to student being late): Nice to see you.
Student: You, too, teacher.
Teacher: I was being sarcastic.
Student: Oh!!!

S (the teacher) says: <i>Nice to see you.</i>	GAP	S means: <i>You are late again.</i>
S's illocutionary force (SA): criticizing, scolding		H (the student) interprets S's locution at face value (thinks it is a greeting) - does not get S's <i>illocutionary force</i>
S must reformulate, be specific, explain S says: <i>I was being sarcastic</i>	NO GAP	S means: <i>I was being sarcastic</i> H finally understands S's real meaning

Cause of misunderstanding: H does not interpret S's illocutionary force correctly

Model analysis 2. An SMS exchange

ME: Send 37 pgs.
SON: Sent. 27.
ME: Typical exaggeration.
SON: Mum. I said 27 + annexes. 30. Put down the sword.
ME: For God's sake, man. I was talking about me. That I exaggerate.
Son: Sorry.

Analysis:

Interlocutors: mother and son (both touchy)

Type of text: SMS exchange – “little text” (Halliday, 1994)

- no full sentences, still text (coherence & cohesion)
- no paralanguage

Linguistic context: previous discussions/exchanges

- Son talked about something that he wrote and wanted to show *me*

Non-linguistic context:

- touchy interlocutors
- previous conflicts, hurts

Linguistic analysis:

- 1: elliptical: Material Process, Goal elided (indirect object *me*),
- missing links: [the] 37 pgs [that you were telling me about]

2. elliptical, missing links: [I have already] sent [them. They are only] 27 [pgs, not 37]

3. *Typical exaggeration.*

- ambiguous: elliptical: the referent is not mentioned (Who is exaggerating?)

- illocutionary force: Mom is making fun of herself; but Son misunderstands referent

4. *Mum. I said 27 + annexes. 30.*

- full sentences: they show *irritation*

a. illocutionary force: explains/justifies himself (*I said ...*)

b. illocutionary force: asks Mom to stop attacking him (*Put down ...* - metaphor)

5. invocation of God, informal term of address, Tone

- long, full sentences, compound Tone 4 — 3: high emotional charge;

- illocution: clarifying and apologizing

6. *Sorry*: SA: accepting and apologizing; unmarked Tone 1

Cause of misunderstanding: S's ambiguity: *Typical exaggeration.*

o H misinterprets the referent of S's utterance

o H misinterprets the target of the criticism (thinks that his mother is criticizing him, not herself)

2. Language in Interaction: Cooperation and Conversational Implicature

Another great linguist who investigated the gap between what S *says* and what S *means* was Paul Grice, who approached the subject from the perspective of hearer/receiver (H/R). Trying to answer the question of how, with so much indirectness, communication is still successful (i.e. in most cases, H interprets S's intended meaning correctly), Grice formulated his *Cooperative Principle* and his theory of *Conversational Implicature*. Interlocutors are rational individuals, Grice argues, who "cooperate" in the act of communication. S often *implies/implicates* more meaning than what their words say (they leave out much of the information, i.e. missing links), or a different meaning than what their words say. In their turn, H *makes inferences* (i.e. educated guesses) regarding S's intended meaning and fills in the missing links according to their own personality, on the basis of shared background knowledge, of the situational context, etc., and thus interprets S's additional/different meaning.

Grice detailed his Cooperative Principle in four conversational Maxims, which describe the way S should behave for their message to get through unambiguously. They are:

- ✓ The maxim of **Quality**: S says things that they consider to be true
- ✓ The maxim of **Quantity**: S says no less and no more than is required
- ✓ The maxim of **Relevance**: S says something relevant (i.e. related) to the exchange going on
- ✓ The maxim of **Manner**: S says things clearly and in the order they occurred

In communication, however, S does not always *observe* the Maxims, but often *flouts* them intentionally. And yet, H still assumes that S is contributing rationally to the conversation.

Maxims	Observing the Maxim (implying more meaning)	Flouting the maxim (implying a different meaning)
Quality	A: <i>Dad, can you give me \$10?</i> B: <i>Sorry, son, I can't at the moment!</i> Implicature : I'll give you the money some other time	A: <i>Dad, can you give me \$10?</i> B: <i>Sure, I'm Bill Gates.</i> - B is obviously telling a lie (he is not Bill Gates); - he says the exact opposite of what he means i.e. S is flouting the Maxim of Quality by irony Implicature : he is not going to give the money
Quantity	A: <i>How do you like your daughter's boyfriend?</i> B: <i>A lot.</i> Implicature (missing link): [I like him]	A: <i>How do you like your daughter's boyfriend?</i> B: <i>Well, he's quite good-looking.</i> - B's utterance is more informative than necessary Implicature : B does not like him.
Relevance	A: <i>Do you know where John is?</i> B: <i>Over there.</i> Implicature (missing link): [I know where he is. He's] ...	A: <i>Do you know where Lucy is?</i> B: <i>Can you see that big hat over there?</i> Apparently, B's answer has no connection to A's question (not relevant); and yet: Implicature : Lucy is under that hat (wearing it)
Manner	<i>She got pregnant and got married.</i> Although by coordination (<i>and</i>) the 2 sentences are grammatically equal, change of order implies the order of the events. Implicature : She got married <i>because</i> she got pregnant	<i>This is quite interesting/unexpected ...</i> S is intentionally vague: they do not want to say whether they like or dislike the situation/idea ...

a. Implying more meaning: missing links

Ordinary communication (especially face-to-face conversation) is highly elliptical; this is because the interlocutors, especially those who are socially close, share a lot of background knowledge, so that they can fill in the missing information easily.

Ellipsis and missing links² also reduce social distance (the text sounds friendlier), and are therefore intensely exploited by advertising: some “little texts” are so sketchy and vague that one may wonder about their very textness. And yet, they are obviously coherent, their cohesion being semantic and logical, rather than structural. Consider the following text:

Model analysis 3. Implying more meaning

Marlboro Classics. Authentic American Style. Traditional Quality Label. Maximum comfort is great to wear. For strength & endurance.

Level 1: knowledge of the dictionary

The ad has practically no grammatical structure

- it consists of five orthographic sentences (separated by periods),
- but only one (the 4th) has a predicate
- the other four are mere noun phrases,
- each graphical sentence functions as an independent unit
- there are absolutely no explicit connective devices (e.g. no

referential ties)

And yet: the receiver views them as *connected* because

- they have unity of meaning;
- the textness of this ad relies on semantic factors, e.g. on the lexical chain *Marlboro – authentic – style – etc.*

Level 2: knowledge of the world

- the graphical sentences are placed on the same sheet of paper
- they come sequentially (adjacent utterances);
- such “texts” are typical for the discourse of advertising, etc.
- in decoding such texts, we rely on:
 - our previous knowledge of *Marlboro* products (cigarettes, but also denim clothes);
 - other *Marlboro* ads we have seen (a lonely cowboy; connotations: of independence, of tradition, of rebellious casual wear; etc.)

Level 3: illocutionary force (SA)

Advertising = an urge for customers to buy those products;

² *Ellipsis* is mainly grammatical, i.e. a missing subject or auxiliary verb; conversely, *missing links* refer to pieces of information that are not spelled out.

Level 4. conversational implicature

- S leaves out much of the information, i.e. they implicate more meaning
- R fills out the missing links, i.e. they make inferences regarding the factual gaps,
 - by making educated guesses regarding what S wanted to say;
 - + according to their own personality, e.g. in interpreting connotations;
- R may get the following text:

Marlboro Classics [are] authentic[ally] American [in] style. [They are marked by a] traditional quality label. [They provide] maximum comfort [which] is great to wear. [They are made] for strength & endurance.

Obviously, the full version sounds artificial in the context of advertising, thoroughly lacking the immediacy and spontaneity the original text conveys. The language of advertising is specific, quite different from the Standard English of written texts. It is much closer to the texts produced in ordinary colloquial speech, where sentences are shorter and often elliptical.

b. Implying a different meaning. Flouting the Maxims

Model analysis 4. Implying and inferencing

Female keywords & their meanings

A: Fine.

B: This is the word women use at the end of any argument when they feel they are right but can't stand to hear you argue any longer. It means that you should shut up.
From *LaughNet*, Aug. 2004

Analysis

Situational context:

A = speaker, female

B = hearer, educated/knowledgeable in interpreting female attitudes;

- then speaker, interpreter of A's utterance

A: says (locution): *Fine!*

Paralanguage: negative (angry voice/facial expression)

SA (illocutionary force): - a refusal to continue to argue

- a request/order that her interlocutor stop

Cooperation: flouting the maxim of quality (saying the opposite of what she means: it is *not* fine)

- flouting the maxim of quantity (she is saying less than what she means)

- flouting the maxim of manner (she is being ambiguous)

Implicature: the situation is definitely not good, but ...

B: as H, makes inferences & interprets A's implicatures

- as S, makes further implicatures:

e.g. - that women are unreasonable;

- that men need to learn how to interpret their attitudes and words;

- that men should beware their bad temper

c. Implicature vs. explicature. Levels of meaning

Sperber & Wilson (2005) argue that *relevance* is by far the most important Maxim to govern communication. They argue, however, that pragmatic inference contributes not only to the *implicit* content of S's utterance, but also to truth-conditional aspects of *explicit* content. Consequently, they propose the term *explicature* (in opposition with Grice's *implicature*), i.e. information asserted *explicitly* by S, part of the *conceptual* meaning of the items.

e.g. A: *We're having a party tonight.*

B: *I'll bring a bottle.*

Implicature: A: [You are invited]

Implicature: B: * I'll come+.

Explicature: B: ... a bottle [of alcohol].

This also suggests that, for a correct interpretation of S's utterance, H must consider four levels of meaning. Consider the following example:

Model analysis 5. Four levels of meaning

A: *We are going to Scotland next month.*

B: *I know some excellent B&Bs there and I have an album.*

Analysis

A's contribution

Level 1: knowledge of the dictionary

Speaker B must establish the entire range of possible meanings of A's words:

- *we* = plural, self-including reference
- *go, Scotland, next month* – unambiguous

Level 2: knowledge of the world

Speaker B establishes the **referents** of the terms:

- *we* – deictic, includes A's family or friends, according to situation; B must rely on their shared background knowledge to identify the referents
- *go* – may mean: for touristic reasons, for educational purposes, etc. (shared background)
- *next month* – deictic, so relative, e.g. June, if the exchange takes place in May

Level 3: B's inferences regarding A's implicatures

- Speaker B fills in A's missing links based on their shared background

e.g. [My wife and I] *are going to Scotland next month* [for a holiday].

Level 4: decoding the *illocutionary force* (SA) of S's utterance,

- speaker A knows that speaker B has already been to Scotland (shared background),
- therefore, A is asking for information, help, ...

B's contribution

Level 1: knowledge of the dictionary

Speaker A must establish the entire range of possible meanings of A's words

- *know, some, excellent, there ...* – unambiguous
- *B&B* – ambiguous (several meanings)
- *album* – ambiguous (what kind?)

Level 2: knowledge of the world

Speaker A

- establishes the **referent** of *I* – person deictic, B's self-reference
- disambiguates *B&B*: Bread & Breakfast, i.e. very comfortable and quite inexpensive, mostly family-owned hotels/motels (A must use their pragmatic knowledge)
- *there* – place deictic, distal; anaphoric co-reference (i.e. to Scotland, mentioned by A)

Level 3: B's implicatures/explicatures – A's inferences

- Speaker A must fill in Speaker B's missing links
- e.g. *I know some excellent Bed & Breakfast* [hotels] (explicature) *there* [I can give you their addresses] (implicature)

and I have a [tourist] album (explicature) [of Scotland] (implicature)

Level 4: decoding the *illocutionary force* of B's utterance,

- Speaker B is informing A about some excellent opportunities in Scotland


- Speaker B is offering to help A with information

d. Misunderstandings and negotiating meaning

Thus, given the great number of missing links and the huge amount of indirectness that characterizes human exchanges, interlocutors must often negotiate meaning. This means that whenever H does not know what inferences to make, or does not make the correct inferences, S must reformulate their utterance and clarify the meaning.

The reasons for the misunderstandings are varied, and the following examples illustrate some such reasons:

Model analysis 6. Accent & relevance (*Snatch*, 2000, directing and script by Guy Ritchie)

<p>Mickey: Ya Tommy? Come about the caravan? Tommy: Mr. O'Neill. Mickey: Fuck, man. Call me Mickey. Tommy: How are you? Mickey: Eh, the weather's been kind to us, but the horses, you know... (referring to Tommy's companion): Fuck me! Would you look at the size of him? How big are you? Hey kids, how big is he? Kid: Big man, that's for sure. Mickey: Hey, Mam, come and look at the size of this fella. Bet you box a little, can't you, sir? Eh, you look like a boxer. Mickey's mother: Get out of the way, Mickey...see if the fellas would like a drink. Tommy: Oh, I could murder one. Mickey's mother: Be no murdering done around here, I don't mind telling ya. Mickey: ... Cup of tea for the big fella? Come on! Mickey's mother: Don't be silly, Mickey. Offer the man a proper drink, right? (asking Tommy) Is the big fella not coming with us? Tommy: Nah, he's minding the car. Mickey's mother: What does he think we are, thieves? Tommy: Oh, no, nothing like that, Miss O'Neill. He just...likes looking after cars. Mickey: Good dags. Do you like dags? Tommy: Dags? Mickey: What? Mickey's mother: Yeah, dags. Mickey: Dags. You like dags? Tommy: Oh, dogs. Sure, I like dags. I like caravans more. (Mickey nods him in) Mickey's mother: You're very welcome.</p>	
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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ni4tEtuTccc&hd=1>

Analysis

Situational context: Gangster Tommy and boxer Gorgeous George visit the camp of Irish Travelers (gypsies, referred to as “pikeys”) to buy a caravan from them. The sellers are Mickey O’Neill (Brad Pitt) and his mother.

Conflict 1: Between Mickey and Tommy

Tommy is concerned for their own and their car’s safety and wants to get out as soon as possible. But Mickey and his mother are making a business deal (negotiating for the price of the caravan), so they want to throw their interlocutor off the track; therefore, under the pretense of being polite, they intentionally digress from the subject, e.g.

- talking about the “size” of Tommy’s companion;
- even including the children around in the discussion;
- talking about dogs;
- offering him a drink; Mickey feigns British politeness and offers him tea, etc.

Cause of misunderstanding:

Tommy does not understand what Mickey and his mother are saying because

- of their strange accent, e.g. they say *dags* instead of “dogs”
- Mickey is flouting the Maxim of Relevance, i.e. the reference to dogs is totally unrelated to the subject (although it may be interpreted as metaphor for Gorgeous George watching the car).

Mickey: Good dags. Do you like dags?

Tommy: Dags?

Mickey: What?

Mickey’s mother: Yeah, dags.

Mickey: Dags. You like dags?

Conflict 2. Between Mickey’s mother and Tommy

- Mickey’s mother tells her son to offer their guests a drink
- Tommy accepts (SA) with the slangy idiom *I could murder one*.
- Tommy’s mother makes the inference that he is alluding to the violence typical among gypsy communities (cultural stereotype)
 - she takes offence and becomes defensive: *Be no murdering done around here, I don't mind telling you*.

Cause of conflict: H interprets implicature where none was intended.

Model analysis 7. Interpreting metaphor (*My Fair Lady*, 1964, directed by George Cukor, book and lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner)

Eliza: ... I know what lessons cost as well as you do and I'm ready to pay.
Higgins: How much?
Eliza: Now you're talkin'. I thought you'd come off it for a chance to get back a bit of what you chucked at me last night. You'd had a drop in, 'i't you?

Higgins: How much do you propose to pay me for these lessons?
Eliza: Oh, I know what's right. My lady friend gets French lessons for 15 pence an hour from a real French gentleman. You wouldn't have the face to ask me the same for teachin' me my own language as you would for French. I won't give more than a shillin'. Take it or leave it.

Higgins: Do you know, Pickering, if you think of a shilling not as a simple shilling, but as a percentage of this girl's income, it works out as fully equivalent of...er...60 or 70 pounds from a millionaire. By George, it's enormous. It's the biggest offer I ever had.

Eliza: Sixty pounds? What are you talkin' about? Where would I get pounds? I never offered you pounds!
Higgins: Hold your tongue!
Eliza: But I ain't got 60 pounds!

My Fair Lady (1964)

http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/m/my-fair-lady-script-transcript.html



Analysis

Situation: Eliza has come to ask Higgins to teach her good English so that she can become *a lady in a flow'r shop 'stead of sellin' at the corner of Tottenham Court Road*. She is ready to pay for the lessons and is distressed because *he treats [her] as if [she] was dirt*.

Conflict:

- different values, due to widely different social statuses of the interlocutors;
 - Eliza evaluates Higgins' financial situation by her own standards:
 - she thinks he needs to work to make money
 - she thinks he would be pleased *to get back a bit of what you chucked at [her]* the night before
 - Eliza assesses people by the standards of her own class:
 - she thinks Higgins had been drunk the night before
 - she thinks he had been *irresponsibly generous* because he had been drunk
 - Eliza's inability to differentiate between literal and metaphoric speech
- Higgins evaluates Eliza's offer correctly, in terms of

percentage of a person's income

... if you think of a shilling not as a simple shilling, but as a percentage of this girl's income, it works out as fully equivalent of or 60 or 70 pounds from a millionaire.

○ He is impressed by the sacrifice the girl is willing to make to improve her status

By George, it's enormous. It's the biggest offer I ever had.

○ Eliza interprets his words literally: she thinks Higgins is actually asking for 60 pounds

Causes of misunderstanding:

- Eliza's insufficient knowledge of the world (pragmatic knowledge)
- her inability to think by the standards of Higgins' social class (socio-linguistic competence)

Conclusion

Starting from the gap between *what S says* and *what S means*, the analyses above, based on various types of texts, survey the successive levels along which the sender (S) conveys meaning and the way the receiver (H/S) bridges this gap to interpret the speaker's meaning correctly. Illocutionary force, as explained by Austin's *Speech Act theory*, cooperation, as explained by Grice's *Cooperative Principle*, and conversational implicature warrant successful communication in most cases. And yet, given the great amount of indirectness of ordinary conversations, there are numerous instances of misunderstanding, therefore interlocutors must negotiate meaning on a case-to-case basis.

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