

Misunderstanding in Human Communication

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Outline

- What is Misunderstanding?
- Types of Misunderstanding
- Sources of Misunderstanding

What is misunderstanding?

- (1) failure to understand correctly.**
- (2) a disagreement or quarrel.**

Types of misunderstanding

(1) **Easy misunderstandings**

Characterized by the simplicity of their detecting and repairing.

(2) **Serious misunderstandings**

Usually occur at the relational level and are characterized by their serious consequences and persistence.

- A.(1) Where's the water tap?
- B.(2) You shouldn't drink the water here.
There's mineral water in the fridge.
- A.(3) I actually just wanted to water the plants.
- B.(4) Oh, I see. It's downstairs in the cellar.
- A.(5) Thank you.

(Kreutel & Matheson, 2002: 7)

•Gus. (*Rising; looking down at Ben*) How many times have you read that paper?

(*Ben slams the paper down and rises*)

•Ben. (*angrily*) What do you mean?

•Gus. I was just wondering how many times you'd...

•Ben. What are you doing, criticizing me?

•Gus. No, I was just...

•Ben. You'll get a swipe round your earhole if you don't watch your step.

•Gus. Now look here, Ben...

•Ben. I'm not looking anywhere!

Pinter's The Dumb Waiter (1960: 15-16)

Sources of misunderstanding

- **Self-Image:** is how you perceive yourself. It is a number of self-impressions that have built up over time.

Krech & Crutchfield (1948: 69) assert that “some of the most potent of all needs and the most effective of all goals have to do with defense of the self, i.e. with the adjustment of the field in such a way as to enhance feelings of self-esteem, self-regard, etc. or to remove threats to self-esteem and self-regard”.

Sources of misunderstanding

- **Other-Image:** is how we perceive others.
 - Lily: Am I so critical of people?
 - Mother: What people? Me?
 - Lily: Mamma, don't be self-centered.
 - Mother: Lily, don't be so critical.
 - Lily: I know it. You do think I'm critical.
Mamma, why do you always have to find something wrong with me?
- (Tannen, 2001: 6)

Sources of misunderstanding

- **Perspectives:** Failure to take the other's perspective leads to misunderstanding.

In Riyadh an American exporter once went to see a Saudi Arabian official. After entering the office he sat in a chair and crossed his legs. With the sole of his shoe exposed to the Saudi host, an insult has been delivered. Then he passed the documents to the host using his left hand, which Muslim consider unclean. Lastly he refused when offered coffee, suggesting criticism of the Saudi's hospitality.... (Schermerborn,1993: 55)

Sources of misunderstanding

- **Projection:** Projection means the imposition of one's own meanings into the other's words. That is, if we and the other are using the same words, it follows that the meanings signified should be the same (Taylor, 1992: 19; Berman, 1969: 7).

Sources of misunderstanding

- **Projection:**

Irene and David are looking over their menus in a restaurant. David says he will order a steak. Irene says, "Did you notice they also have salmon?" This question exasperates David; he protests, "Will you please stop criticizing what I eat?" Irene feels unfairly accused: "I didn't criticize. I just pointed out something on the menu I thought you might like."

(Tannen, 2001: 15)

Sources of misunderstanding

- **Certainty:** There is a tendency in people to exaggerate their knowledge of others to the extent that they believe that they know others better than those others know themselves (Sillars, 2002: 5).

Sources of misunderstanding

- **Multiple Goals:** In situations of interpersonal communication where the participants, being individuals or parties, have conflicting goals, misunderstanding is likely to occur. In such situations, the goals reflect "tangled motivations" (Sillars, 1998: 77-78).

Sources of misunderstanding

- **Selectivity:** is the quality of carefully choosing someone or something as the best or most suitable.

Selectivity is not desired in communication because the communicators focus on a part of the communicative message and base their interpretation of the message on it.

Goodwill

- **Goodwill:** is the preparedness to discard prejudgements when evidence is available.

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Thank you!