Triggers of Deliberate Misinterpretation from the Pragmatic Perspective

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Abstract. Based on the data collected from the conversations in three American TV plays, this paper analyzes the triggers of deliberate misinterpretation in English daily conversations. Two major categories of triggers are explored in the present study, namely indeterminacy of contextual meaning and indeterminacy of force in Speaker One’s (S1’s) utterance. Specifically, homophones, homonyms, deictic expressions, minimal information, structural ambiguity and conversational implicatures are the factors that trigger DMI. Those triggers provide potential alternative interpretations which make it possible for Speaker Two (S2) to deliberately choose an interpretation diverging from the one intended by S1. This is the first study carried out specifically on the linguistic phenomenon of DMI in English daily conversations in terms of its triggers. And it is hoped that the present study may shed light on English teaching and learning.

Introduction

In human verbal communication, misunderstanding occurs when the hearer’s understanding of the speaker’s utterances is not identical with the speaker’s intended meaning. However, in some cases, the hearer may deliberately choose the interpretation diverging from the speaker’s intended meaning in order to achieve certain communicative effects. This kind of linguistic phenomenon is defined as deliberate misinterpretation by He & Shen in the article Pragmatic Analysis of Deliberate Misinterpretation in 2004[1]. Deliberate misinterpretation is quite a phenomenon in daily conversations, but very few studies have specifically explored this phenomenon so far, and no study has been carried out on this phenomenon in English language. So the present study is trying to explore the nature of deliberate misinterpretation in English daily conversations in terms of its triggers and discuss the implications for English teaching.

Methodology and Data Description

So far as methodology is concerned, the present study relies on the qualitative analysis of the data. The object of the present study is the linguistic phenomenon of deliberate misinterpretation in English daily conversations; therefore, examples from the real daily conversations among English speakers would be the best source for data. But since the writer has limited access to real conversations among English speakers, examples of daily conversations from three American TV plays are chosen instead as the data. So this research is based on second-hand materials. TV plays do not just serve to keep people informed and entertained, but also reflect and affect people’s language use. It should be noted that the conversations are not a one hundred percent faithful imitation of naturally occurring talk, which is the case of all opera conversations, but they are designed to resemble “real” talks as close as possible in that the conversations contain typical features of spontaneous casual talks. The TV plays chosen are:

A. Seinfeld (which is about the daily lives of four friends who live close together in New York)
B. Desperate Housewives (which is about the daily lives of four housewives and their families and neighbors in an American suburb)

C. Friends (which is about the daily lives of six friends who live close together in New York)

The reason why the three TV plays are chosen here is that they are about the daily lives of some native English speakers and they contain a great number of daily conversations, which take place in various places and on different occasions where daily communication may occur, such as home, schools, shops, restaurants, leisure places and so on. Also, different topics appear in the communication, referring to friendship, love, family, jobs, social issues, children etc. Therefore, to a great extent, the data drawn from the three TV plays can represent the linguistic phenomenon of deliberate misinterpretation in real daily conversations.

The reason why this study focuses on deliberate misinterpretation in daily conversations instead of that in discourses concerning specific fields, such as academics, politics, business, or literature, is that deliberate misinterpretation in daily conversations displays more contextual factors in interactions and it can provide a more comprehensive picture for the study of the whole process of language comprehension and production in deliberate misinterpretation.

The writer watches all the episodes and reads all the scripts thoroughly. Conversations of DMI in the four TV plays are then chosen in analyzing the triggers of DMI.

**Triggers of DMI**

The term “trigger” originates from the study of misunderstandings by Bazzanella & Damiano, 1999, where it’s used to refer to the factors that facilitate the occurrence of misunderstanding[2]. It is later adopted by He & Shen (2004) to refer to the factors in S1’s utterance that make it possible for S2 to choose an interpretation diverging from S1’s intended meaning. If triggers in S1’s utterance can be treated as one of the causes of DMI, they are the external causes, the internal causes being the S2’s intention to satisfy certain communicative needs.

The analysis of the data collected for this study suggests that the triggers in S1’s utterance fall under two categories: the indeterminacy of contextual meaning and indeterminacy of force.

**Indeterminacy of Contextual Meaning**

Contextual meaning (also called utterance meaning) is defined as “a sentence-context pairing”, that is, contextual meaning is indeterminate without context. Thomas (1995) points out that in general, competent native speakers do not have to seek laboriously for the contextual meaning of a word, phrase or sentence[3]. But in the case of DMI, S2 takes advantage of the indeterminate contextual meaning in S1’s utterance and gives a different interpretation in his respondent utterance. The factors leading to the indeterminacy of contextual meaning includes homophones, homonyms, deictic expression, minimal information and structural ambiguity.

**Homophones**

Homophones refer to the words which sound alike but are written differently and have different meanings. When the word in S1’s utterance is a homophony with other words, it may trigger S2 to use the strategy of DMI to fulfill his communicative goal. Here is an example:

(1) (Scene: At Ross’ place, Chandler asks Ross to lend him some money. Ross hands him a check.)

   Ross (S1): Here is the check.
   Chandler (S2): Why do you call it the Czech? Why not Yugoslavia?
   (Friends)
Here the lexical form “check” is homophonic with another word “Czech” — the country. From this perspective, the lexical form “check” embodies the indeterminacy of contextual meaning. Given the context that S2 is asking S1 for money, he can easily understand that S1 is giving him “a written order to a bank to pay the amount specified from funds on deposit”, but he deliberately makes use of the indeterminacy to choose another word with the same pronunciation — “Czech”, the country and comes up with another European country Yugoslavia, thus creating a humorous effect and to some extent relieving his awkwardness for borrowing money from his friend.

Homonyms

Homonyms are words which have the same spelling and pronunciation but separate and unrelated meanings. Although, in a certain context, the word produced by S1 is determinate, S2 can still deliberately choose a meaning other than the intended one. The indeterminacy caused by homonyms may trigger DMI, as the following example illustrates:

(2) (Scene: In Jerry’s living room, George is doing a crossword in a newspaper. Jerry is watching a baseball game on TV.)
George (S1): What’s the capital of Sweden?
Jerry (S2) (thinks for a while): Uh, I guess... ‘S?’
(Seinfeld)

The word “capital” has more than one meaning including “a town or city where the government of a country, state or province is carried on”, “wealth in the form of money or property” and “a capital letter”, etc. Based on the mutual linguistic knowledge, S2 understands S1 is asking what the capital city of Sweden is, but he misinterprets it and chooses the meaning of “a capital letter”, giving a “correct” answer, thus concealing his ignorance of knowledge to this question and maintaining his face to some extent.

The following is another example:

(3)(Scene: In a hospital, Rachel’s father, who is a dentist, has a heart attack and is sent to hospital. She goes to see him in the hospital with her friend Ross, who has a doctor’s degree in paleontology. She is looking at her father lying in the hospital bed and she talks to Ross.)
Rachel (S1): It’s just so weird seeing him like that, you know? I mean he is a doctor. You don’t expect doctors to get sick!
Ross (S2): But we do!
(Friends)

The word “doctor” has two meanings — a doctor in hospital or a person who gets a doctor’s degree. In this example, with the mutual knowledge and the immediate context, S2 can certainly infer that S1 is actually talking about her father getting sick, and the “doctor” in her utterance refers to her father, but S2 intentionally chooses the second meaning and makes himself the “doctor” indicated in S1’s sentence, thus to some extent comforting S1 and making the atmosphere a little relieved.

Deictic Expressions

Deixis is a technical term for one of the most basic things we do with utterances. It means “pointing” via language. Any linguistic form used to accomplish this “pointing” is called a deictic expression. According to Wu (2001), deixis is the most important element that embodies the indeterminacy of language. Deictic expressions depend, for their interpretation, on the speaker and hearer sharing the same context (Yule, 1996). In the case of DMI, the hearer (S2) shares the same context with the speaker (S1), but deliberately misinterprets S1’s “pointing”. Look at the following three examples:
(4) (Scene: The headmaster’s expensive car has recently been the target of vandalism. The headmaster has summoned in his office some students whom he suspects of having some relation to this incident.)

Headmaster (S1): (angrily, to one of the students) That automobile is not just a possession of mine. That automobile was presented to me by the board of trustees. It is a symbol of the standard of excellence for which this school is known. And I will not have it tarnished.

Student (S2): (mischievous smile, side glance to his classmates) The automobile?

Headmaster (S1): (forces smile in acknowledgement of joke) The standard, Mr. Willis. (Seinfeld)

In this example, S2 understands well that “it” is pointing at “the standard of excellence”, but he deliberately chooses to interpret it as “the automobile” to enhance his face in the eyes of his fellow students, as it presents him as bold and brave enough to dare challenge the authority figure — the headmaster. With the gesture that follows the headmaster’s repair to the DMI, the student appears to intend to confirm the reduced social distance between himself and the headmaster.

(5)(Scene: In the hospital, Ross’ ex-wife Carol is breast-feeding her baby. Their friends Chandler and Joey find it embarrassing to look at it. But Ross tries to convince them that breast feeding is a natural thing and there’s no reason to feel awkward.)

Ross(S1): Look, would you guys grow up? That is the most natural beautiful thing in the world.

Chandler(S2): Yeah, we know, but there’s a baby sucking on it.

(Friends)

The deictic expression of “that” can be pointing at either “breast” or “breast feeding”. It’s easily understood that S1 means the latter, given the context that he doesn’t agree it’s awkward to look at breast feeding; but S2 deliberately misinterprets it as the former thus telling S1 that they see different things in the same case.

(6) (Scene: Beside two trash cans, Mrs. McCluskey is accusing her neighbor Carlos of bringing out the trash at an inappropriate time.)

Mrs. McCluskey (S1): What’s this? (pointing at the trash)

Carlos(S2): Uh... Those are trash cans.

(Desperate Housewives)

It’s a rule in the neighborhood that the trash gets picked up on Thursdays, but S2 brings out the trash on Saturday and throws it on the floor beside the trash cans. When S1 asks to have a word with him in front of his house, he’s well aware that S1 is going to talk about the trash. When S1 points at the trash and asks “What’s this?” she means “Why did you put your trash out here on Saturday night when it got picked up on Thursday? You should have brought it out earlier.” But S2 chooses to take “this” as “pointing” to one of the trash cans and tries to avoid talking about his wrong behavior.

Minimal Information

According to the Principle of Informativeness by Levinson (1987), in communication, the speaker should say as little as necessary, that is, produce the minimal linguistic information sufficient to achieve communicational ends. Then it’s the recipient’s responsibility to enrich the informational content of the speaker’s utterance [4]. Therefore, in many cases, there are gaps between the speaker’s linguistic information and the recipient’s enriched information, or at least, they may not be totally coincident with each other. In most cases, the recipient can amplify the
proper and sufficient content or amount of information in the speaker’s utterance. However, in the case of DMI, the recipient (S2) may misinterpret the speaker’s minimized information on purpose.

The following two examples will illustrate how the minimized information triggers S2 to employ DMI.

(7) (Scene: In a café, Ross is complaining to his friend Chandler about his ex-girlfriend Rachel’s moving on immediately after breaking up with him.)
Ross (S1): If she wants to kiss some guy she barely knows about, so will I!
Chandler (S2): Oh, I didn’t know you liked that guy too!
(Friends)

In S1’s utterance, he follows the maxim of minimization to give the minimal linguistic information, “So will I” is incomplete and it can be interpreted as “so will I move on with another girl” or “so will I kiss that guy”. S2, as his friend for a long time, knows S1 is not a homosexual who likes men. But he makes use of the minimized information in S1’s utterance and deliberately chooses the second interpretation to make a deliberate misinterpretation, so as to tease his friend and create a humorous effect.

(8) (Scene: At a café, Monica has been making jams to forget the pain of breaking up with her boyfriend. She’s telling her friends about a new plan to get over him.)
Monica (S1): I have a new plan — babies.
Chandler (S2): Now you’re gonna need much bigger jars.
(Everyone else laughs)
(Friends)

In this example, S1 gives the minimal linguistic information “babies” to mean that she’s going to have babies instead of making jams to get over her ex-boyfriend. But S2 deliberately enriches it as “making babies in jars like jams”, giving a humorous effect and making the other friends laugh.

**Structural Ambiguity**

Structural ambiguity occurs when a phrase or sentence has more than one underlying structures. Indeed, the existence of such ambiguities provides triggers for DMI. Look at the following two examples:

(9) (Scene: Elaine is making dinner for some friends at Jerry’s place. Jerry brings a dish to the table.)
Jerry (S1): Hi, everybody. Elaine’s home cooking.
George (S2): Really, so who’s the girl cooking in your kitchen?
(Seinfeld)

Without context, S1’s utterance “Elaine’s home cooking” can be interpreted as “Elaine is cooking at home” or “a home-cooking dish by Elaine”. In this conversation, since Elaine is making dinner at Jerry’s kitchen, it’s not at all ambiguous that S1 means the latter, but S2 deliberately chooses the former interpretation to create a humorous effect.

(10) (Scene: In front of a clothes store, Elaine and her boyfriend Jerry are looking at some clothes.)
Elaine (S1): Do you think I should try on that dress in the window?
Jerry (S2): Well, don’t you think it’d be better to use the dressing room?
(Seinfeld)

The utterance “try on that dress in the window” can be interpreted as either VP+ NP or VP+NP+PP, but S1 is pointing at the dress in the window, so by “in the window”, she means where
the dress is. But this conversation takes place when S2 asks S1 out for a date for the first time. He’s trying to impress her with his sense of humor, so he deliberately chooses to interpret “in the window” as where to try on the dress, thus creating a humorous effect.

**Indeterminancy of Force**

As mentioned in Chapter Three, the indeterminacy of force of an utterance lies in conversational implicatures. With regard to DMI, the speakers may exploit the indirectness of conversational implicatures as triggers. And as a matter of fact, when S1 produces an utterance that embodies conversational implicature, he intends S2 to derive from the implied meaning. In the normal cases, S2 may derive the conversational implicature from S1’s utterance on the basis of the mutuality of context. But in the case of DMI, since S1’s force is not explicitly expressed, it may leave the space for S2 to utilize the DMI as a communicative strategy, as in the following three examples:

(11) (Scene: At Chandler and Joey’s place, Chandler looks sleepy and tired in the morning. He didn’t sleep well the previous night because his roommate Joey watched TV the whole night.)

Chandler (S1): I didn’t fall asleep last night!
Joey (S2): That’s… That’s a long time.

*Friends*

Instead of complaining explicitly “You watched TV the whole night and that disturbed my sleep”, S1 chooses to express his complaint in an implicit way and expects S2 to derive his intention. But S2 takes advantage of the implicit feature in S1’s utterance and misinterprets S1’s utterance as a statement of what he did the previous night, relieving the intensity between them in this situation.

(12) (Scene: At a party, Jerry suggests some ideas on how to get away from this boring party, but Elaine finds them childish and stupid.)

Elaine (S1) (giving Jerry a disapproval look): How old are you?
Jerry (S2): Thirty-six.

*Seinfeld*

Without knowing the immediate context, this interaction seems to be a common question-answer exchange between two people. In fact, S2 suggests some ideas on how to get away from the boring party, and he can tell from S1’s facial expression that she doesn’t favor his ideas and wants him to act his age. However, S2 deliberately misinterprets her utterance as a real question and gives a “truthful” answer.

(13) (Scene: At Edie’s place, Carlos breaks up with his girlfriend Edie. Edie is angry with him and cuts a hole in his painting.)

Carlos (S1) (shocked to find his painting with a hole in it, but tries to calm down): There’s a hole in it.
Edie (S2) (shrugs her shoulders): I don’t get modern art either.

*Desperate Housewives*

Instead of complaining explicitly “You cut a hole in my painting”, S1 chooses to express his complaint in an implicit way and expects S2 to derive his intention. But S2 deliberately interpret it as sharing with her the fact that there’s a hole in his painting, telling S1 that she does not want to shoulder responsibility for it.

Figures of speech such as metaphor, hyperbole and irony also provide examples of conversational implicature because of the non-literal nature. The analysis of the data of this study suggests that two types of figures of speech most frequently trigger S2 to employ DMI. They are irony and hyperbole.

Irony is a frequently employed form of figurative language. Naturally, in context, an ironical
expression will inferentially acquire a meaning that is different, and in most cases, opposed to what the expression would have in a “neutral” context. Speaking ironically in some situation enables the speaker to convey complex propositional and interpersonal meanings in a compact manner. At the same time, he may risk misunderstanding, because of his non-literal utterance (Gibbs & Golston, 2001). In the case of DMI, S2 deliberately takes S1’s ironical utterance at face value after inferring S1’s communicative intentions. Thus, the non-literalness of ironic language triggers S2’s use of DMI. Consider the following example.

(14) (Scene: On the street, Rachel is fined by the policeman for speeding. Ross is sitting in her car. She is complaining about it to Ross while putting something in her bag in the back seats of the car without looking at the road. The car swerves and almost hits another car.)

Ross (S1): (Sarcastically) Rachel! Oh God! I can’t believe the policeman gave you a ticket.
Rachel (S2): Thank you!

(Friends)

By saying “you are such a good driver” after what S2 did, S1 is certainly not complimenting on S2’s driving skill but mocking at her for that. With the mutual immediate context, S2 can recognize S1’s ironic manner in this specific context, but she resorts to the indeterminacy of force and deliberately misinterprets S1’s utterance as a compliment with the purpose of saving her face.

Hyperbole, one of the common figures of speech, is not limited by the objective realities. However, it expresses the speaker’s original feelings actually by the fuzzy words in artistic thinking which seem not so accurate according to the facts.

(15) (Scene: In a shoe store, Gaby and her husband Carlos are shopping in a shoe store where Gaby finds the shoes very much her taste)

Gaby (S1): I’m going to buy a million pairs of shoes!
Carlos (S2): Honey, I don’t think we have enough room for so many shoes in our house.

(Desperate Housewives)

In this interaction, S1 expresses her wish to buy as many shoes as possible in the store, and she uses a hyperbolic expression “a million” to express her favor for the shoes. S2 intentionally misinterprets the hyperbolic use of “a million” as a precise number, tactfully expressing his negative attitude towards her idea.

Pedagogical Implications

In English teaching, teachers can introduce DMI as a successful pragmatic strategy to students: impelled by certain communicative needs, S2 makes use of the indeterminacy of the contextual meaning or indeterminacy of force of S1’s utterance and chooses an interpretation diverging from the one intended by S1, which performs certain communicative functions. Actually the employment of DMI reflects language users’ high pragmatic competence.

Bachman (1990) divides language competence into linguistic competence and pragmatic competence. According to him, linguistic competence refers to knowledge of linguistic units and the rules of joining them together; pragmatic competence refers to knowledge of communicative action and how to carry it out and the ability to use language appropriately according to context. English teachers in China have always made great efforts to improve students’ linguistic competence, which is certainly a very important aspect of language competence. But equally importantly, efforts should also be made to cultivate students’ pragmatic competence in the whole process of English teaching. For example, when explaining the meaning of an utterance, teachers should not only focus on the abstract meaning, but also provide different contexts for different
contextual meanings and forces and lead students to be aware of the indeterminacy of meaning. In English language, homophones, homonyms, deictic expressions, minimal information, structural ambiguity and conversational implicature are the factors that lead to the indeterminacy of meaning, and students can be encouraged to make good use of the factors to employ DMI on certain occasions to achieve certain communicative effects.

**Conclusion**

The present study carries out a qualitative analysis on the linguistic phenomenon of DMI in English daily conversations in terms of its triggers based on the achievements of previous studies. There are some limitations owing to the inadequacy of the researcher’s personal understanding, the restrictedness of data and the limit of research time.

The most clearly observed limitation of the present study is the limited amount and sources of data examined in the analyzing process. Although much effort has been made to collect representative data for the qualitative study of this phenomenon, it still leaves much to be improved. First of all, it would be better to have all the data collected from natural conversations among native English speakers for the analysis. Also, the findings would be much more convincing if the amount of data collected was bigger.

Secondly, the triggers of deliberate misinterpretation may not be exhaustive. Since there are always new cases ahead in interpersonal communication, some usages might have been missed in the analysis.

A research is usually one-dimensional and can only cover limited problems. Hence, the observations of this study are by no means conclusive and thus more efforts for further studies on this interesting language phenomenon are necessary.

**References**


