Communicative Functions of Deliberate Misinterpretation from the Pragmatic Perspective

Yi-Na WU
Xiamen University Tan Kah Kee College, Zhangzhou, Fujian, China
sandywyn@xujc.com

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Abstract. Based on the data collected from the conversations in three American TV plays, this paper analyzes the linguistic phenomenon of deliberate misinterpretation in English daily conversations in terms of its communicative functions. Deliberate misinterpretation is a pragmatic strategy chosen by Speaker Two (S2) impelled by certain communicative needs and the strategy will perform certain communicative functions. This study discusses the specific communicative functions DMI performs in interaction. Three categories of communicative functions are analyzed: improving interpersonal relationship, manipulating information, and creating special communicative effects. This is the first study carried out specifically on the linguistic phenomenon of DMI in English daily conversations in terms of its communicative functions. Light may be shed on English teaching and learning, TV talk shows, courtroom languages and debates.

Introduction

There had been no specific definition of DMI until He & Shen (2004) gave a comprehensive explanation of this language phenomenon and indicated the differences between DMI and misunderstanding. According to He & Shen, deliberate misinterpretation is a special pragmatic strategy[1]. In verbal interactions, S2 may deliberately choose the interpretation diverging from S1’s intended meaning so as to achieve certain communicative effects. In other words, deliberate misinterpretation occurs when S2 correctly understands the meaning which S1 expresses via an utterance. S2 subsequently produces another utterance which is in some way purposely employed to present the mismatch between the meaning of S1 and the interpretation of S2. By doing so, S2 achieves his own communicative goals. The term is derived from the combination of “deliberate”, which is considered to well represent the mental or cognitive aspects of S2, and “misinterpretation”, which stresses S2’s intentionality and motivation to control the development of a conversation, that is, S2 does not passively understand what S1 has said but rather makes use of it to fulfill his purposes. There are some essential differences between DMI and Misunderstanding:(1) Different nature. Misunderstanding is the externally caused trouble, whereas DMI is the internally impelled usage. (2) According to Yus, misunderstanding is regarded as the addressee’s “inability” to select the intended interpretation[2]. However, in cases of DMI, S2’s capability is emphasized. In DMI, S2 has both the linguistic competence and the knowledge structure to understand the intention of S1 and to present his ideas in certain language forms. The choice of DMI is the result of negotiation and adaptation instead of inability. He & Shen summarize three features of DMI, namely, S2’s intention, S2’s communicative strategy and mismatch between S2’s interpretation and S1’s original meaning. The writer analyzes the triggers of Deliberate misinterpretation, which are indeterminacy of contextual meaning and indeterminacy of force in Speaker One’s (S1’s) utterance[3], but so far no study has been carried out on this phenomenon in English language in terms of its communicative functions. So the present study is trying to explore the nature of deliberate misinterpretation in English daily conversations in terms of its communicative functions.
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 four 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)
D. The Big Bang Theory (which is about daily life and work of four science geeks and their pretty female neighbor)

The reason why the four 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 four 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 communicative functions of DMI.

Communicative Functions of DMI

In the case of DMI, when S2 chooses an interpretation of S1’s utterance diverging from the one intended by S1, he’s impelled by certain communicative needs, and the choice made — DMI, is expected to perform certain communicative functions. The communicative functions that each case of DMI performs can be multiple and they often take effect simultaneously, usually with an emphasis on one of them. The aim of this study is to try to find out all the possible communicative functions that DMI can perform.

Some scholars have discussed the functions of misinterpretation in their studies related to DMI. Tzanne (2000) argues people can employ misunderstandings deliberately as a face-saving strategy in interaction[4]. She discusses four categories of intentional misunderstandings used as facework: (1) teasing as a face-enhancing strategy in interaction; (2) intentional misunderstandings as hearer’s face-saving strategy, and (3) intentional misunderstandings as an attack to the speaker’s face.

This paper attempts to give a more comprehensive account of the communicative functions that DMI performs based on the analysis of the data collected from four American TV plays.
Improving Interpersonal Relationship

In communication, a communicator always tries to improve the personal relationships towards the positive direction. This need is certainly reflected in verbal communication. DMI can be chosen by S2 to improve the interpersonal relationship with others. Specifically, S2 may adopt the strategy of DMI to break the ice or resolve interpersonal conflict.

Breaking the Ice. Despite the fact that most people intend to build a harmonious relationship with others, sometimes it is still difficult to initiate a new relationship. Meeting new people and making new acquaintances is, for most people, a stressful experience. When meeting an unfriendly new acquaintance, speakers may resort to the DMI strategy to break the ice and at the same time create interpersonal harmony. The following example will illustrate this point.

(1) (Scene: In a restaurant, Jerry and his new girlfriend Mona are on the first date. The atmosphere is a little awkward for a while. Jerry asks Mona what she would like to order.)

Mona (S1): I don’t know. Anything is Ok

Jerry (S2): Ok. Waiter, do you have the dish of “anything” on your menu?

(Mona smiles.)

In this conversation, things are not going well in the beginning. When S2 asks S1 to order something for herself, she is either nervous or just does not have any interest in this dinner, so she says any dish would be Ok. S2 intentionally misinterprets S1’s indifferent response “anything” as the name of a dish, making the girl smile. By way of DMI, S2 successfully breaks the ice and creates a harmonious relationship between him and the girl.

(2) (Scene: a guy introduces himself to Ross and Phoebe when they just move into the building.)

Steve: Welcome to the building, I’m Steve Sarah; I’m president of the tenants-committee.

Ross: Oh, hi! Ross Geller. And this is my friend Phoebe.

Steve: Oh, hi, Phoebe.

Phoebe: Mr. President.

In this conversation, the guy named Steve greets Ross and Phoebe and introduces himself as president of the tenants committee. Although the word “president” has two different meanings: the official leader of a country or the person who has the highest position in a company or organization, the context taken into consideration, here it means the leader of the tenants committee, other than the president of the United States, but Phoebe deliberately chooses the first meaning and calls Steve "Mr. President", successfully breaking the ice and creating a harmonious relationship between her and Steve.

Resolving Interpersonal Conflicts. In communication, a communicator often confronts an act that contains elements of both cooperation and competition. Sometimes the communicator competes with the other person because he wants to protect a self-concept and maintain a self-image. In other words, the communicator desires to maintain his own interest, since it is easy to be threatened in many types of activities. It is undeniable that conflict in interpersonal communication is so common that it is normal. Individuals must create a unified relationship by working through their differences, such as different personalities, different self-concepts, and different emotions. Their interaction is bound to include some conflicts every now and then. Sometimes conflicts can be harmful to an interpersonal relationship, so when encountering interpersonal conflicts in communication, speakers try to find ways to deal with those threatening acts. In some cases, one may employ DMI to resolve interactional conflicts. By confronting the conflict, one may remove the source of the problem from the relationship and blame it on something else. In other words, without needing to find fault directly in the relationship between the speakers, one attempts to solve the problem by dealing with specific things. The effectiveness of managing conflicts depends on whether the speakers use appropriate strategies in a conflictual situation. DMI is one of the strategies to confront the conflict. Here are three examples:
(3) (Scene: In a bar, Jerry is late for his appointment with his friend Kitty. Kitty is very angry when Jerry finally shows up one hour later.)

Kitty (S1): Do you know what time it is?
Jerry (S2): Ten o’clock.

(Seinfeld)

Without knowing the immediate context, this interaction seems to be a common question-answer exchange between two people. In fact, S2 is late for an hour and he can tell from S1’s facial expression that she’s unhappy about his being late, and he can easily understand that S1 is making a complaint and showing anger by the utterance “Do you know what time it is?” . However, he deliberately misinterprets her utterance as a real question and gives a “truthful” answer. In this way, he keeps her anger from turning into a quarrel between them, thus solving a potential interpersonal conflict.

(4) (Scene: In front of Edie’s house, Susan and Edie are neighbors. Susan is furious when she finds out that Edie steals her boyfriend, Mike, after he wakes up from a coma)

Susan (S1): You lie! You cheat! You scheme! You ruin people’s relations! How do you sleep at night?
Edie (S2): Soon, with Mike on top of me.

(Desperate Housewives)

In this conversation, S1 and S2 both know clearly about the communicative context: S2 is the evil person who steals other people’s boyfriend by cheating, which is an unacceptable behavior according to the social norms. So S1 has every right to condemn her, and by “How do you sleep at night”, she means S2 should feel guilty of her behavior. However, S2, having successfully won the boyfriend with her big scheme, doesn’t want a verbal conflict with S1 in public, so she deliberately misinterprets S1’s utterance as a real question and gives a “truthful” answer, thus avoiding a potential verbal conflict and saving her own face.

(5) (Scene: Raj fails in dating the girl his parents set him up with. Now Raj’s parents are scolding him in video chatting.)

Raj’s Dad (S1): What are we supposed to say to Lalita’s parents? I play golf with her father. I won’t be able to look at him.
Raj(S2): Maybe you should keep your eyes on the ball, papa.

(The Big Bang Theory)

Rai’s father sets him up with his friend's daughter while Raj screws it up. His father now blames Raj and says he feels ashamed to look at the girl's father when playing golf. In order to avoid conflict with his father, Raj deliberately misinterprets his father's words “look at” and says he should look at the ball when playing golf, thus easing the stormy situation between himself and his father.

In these examples, S2 uses DMI to defuse a tense or hostile situation, thus enabling him to back off from the confrontation without loss of face. In other cases, DMI is invoked as a control to restore composure and self-presentation on embarrassments when they are undermined by some sudden and perhaps unexpected event. More commonly, people are embarrassed by some events which spoil the image they wish to convey at that particular moment in time — for example, encountering a question to which they don’t know the answer. DMI can save the situation, concealing the speakers’ ignorance or inability. The speakers can respond as if they misunderstood others in order not to be left out or not to look stupid.

Manipulating Information

According to Fairclough, manipulation is the conscious use of language in a devious way to control others, where “using language in a devious way” means using it in a way which hides one’s strategies and objectives[5]. “Manipulating information” here is used to refer to speakers’ conscious use of language to control information in a devious way. In some cases, people use DMI to keep information from others, that is, withholding information. There are many ways to withhold information, among which DMI may serve as an important strategy. Here are four examples:
(6) (Scene: At Rachel’s place, Ross is about to ask Rachel to be his girlfriend, but unexpected to find that Rachel is dating an Italian guy Paolo.)
Ross (S1): Where does this guy come from?
Rachel (S2): …From Italy, I think.

(Friends)

In this example, S2 has introduced Paolo as an Italian to S1, so she knows that he is not asking for the nationality of Paolo by the utterance “Where does this guy come from?” What he really means is where S2 makes acquaintance with this guy and why she is dating him. But S2 chooses to tell a self-evident truth “From Italy”, offering superficial and unimportant information to S1, and successfully withholding the information from S1.

The following is another example.
(7) (Scene: In a bar, a stranger comes up to Jerry, a comedian who has some books published. The stranger wants to learn something about writing from Jerry.)
Stranger (S1): What is the best way of writing?
Jerry (S2): Just from left to right.

(Seinfeld)

In this example, S1 is trying to learn about the techniques of writing. But S2 is not willing to share his secret of success, and misinterprets “the way of writing” as “the specific way of writing words on paper”, thus withholding the information that he’s not willing to share.

(8) (Scene: At Lynette’s place, Lynette, who has cancer, is having coffee with her best friends. She asks them whether they would like to be her chemo buddy in the hospital. Everyone agrees except Gaby, who keeps silent.)
Lynette (S1) (holding a jar of cream): Gaby?
Gaby (S2): No cream for me, thanks.

(Desperate Housewives)

Before S1 utters “Gaby?”, she has been asking her friends whether they would be her chemo buddy in the hospital, and Gaby is the only one who doesn’t offer to be company in the process of the therapy. Actually, she doesn’t want to be S1’s chemo buddy in the hospital because of her personal reasons, which she doesn’t want to tell others. When S1 says “Gaby?” she means “What about you, Gaby? Are you going to be my chemo buddy?” Since S1 happens to be holding a jar of cream while producing the utterance, S2 makes good use of it and deliberately interprets it as “Gaby, would you like some cream?”, thus saving herself of refusing to help and explaining the reasons why.

Creating Special Communicative Effects

In communication, people choose DMI to satisfy their expressive needs. The analysis of data for the present study suggests two kinds of effects are frequently produced by employing DMI.

Creating Humorous Effects. DMI may often be used as a means of creating humor. Look at the following two examples:
(9) (Scene: At Rachel and Monica’s place, Chandler is watching TV on the couch while Rachel is playing a game with other friends. The phone rings and Chandler answers it. The phone call is for Rachel. She leaves the game for the phone, and says to Chandler.)
Rachel (S1): Thank you. Uh, will you take my place?
Chandler (S2): Alright. (To the phone) Yes, — this is Rachel speaking.

(Friends)

The above example is an illustration of using DMI to create humorous effect. It’s obvious that S2 intends to ask S1 to take her place in the game, since she has already left the game for the phone. However, S2 intentionally misinterprets S1’s meaning as replacing her to answer the phone instead of playing in the game as her substitute, thus creating a humorous effect, and making everyone else in the room laugh.
(10) (Scene: At Monica’s place, while Monica is making Thanksgiving dinner for her friends, she accidentally has one of her eyes hurt by some ice. Her friends suggest that she go to see her eye doctor, who happens to be her ex-boyfriend)

Monica (S1): I can’t see my eye doctor. I can’t go to him when I don’t have a boyfriend.
Chandler (S2): He’s really picky about his patients.

(Friends)

In this example, by the utterance “I can’t see my eye doctor. I can’t go to him when I don’t have a boyfriend”, she means that it’s not a good time to see her eye doctor, who is her ex-boyfriend. But S2 deliberately misinterprets it as “I’m not allowed to see my eye doctor when I don’t have a boyfriend.” giving a humorous effect and making the other friends laugh.

Creating Ironic Effects. Sometimes, DMI is used to create ironic effects. When the speaker wants to show his disagreement or discontentment in an indirect way, DMI is a common conversational device for him to frequently resort to. Look at the following four examples.

(11) (In a concert, Jerry is sitting next to a talkative lady, who keeps commenting on the performance.)

Woman (S1): Is there anything more beautiful than music!
Jerry (S2): Yes, lady. That is talking less nonsense.

(Seinfeld)

S2 responds as if he has interpreted the lady’s rhetorical question (showing her admiration for music) as a real interrogation. In this way, he mocks that the lady is too talkative and spoils the concert, thus creating a ironic effect towards the lady’s behavior.

(12) (Scene: At Monica’s place, Monica and her friends are watching an old video of her when she was young and very fat. Everyone is laughing at her obesity)

Monica (S1): The camera added 10 pounds.
Chandler (S2): So how many cameras were actually on you?

(Friends)

By the utterance “The camera added 10 pounds,” S1 is trying to tell her friends that she wasn’t as fat as she looked in the video. But S2 misinterprets the utterance as S1 was carrying a ten-pound camera on her, which made her look fat. By the response “So how many cameras were actually on you?” S2 mocks at her obesity in an ironic way.

(13) (Scene: Four friends are having lunch in the restaurant where Penny works.)

Howard (S1): What do you recommend for someone who worked up a man-sized appetite from a morning of weight training and cardio funk?
Penny(S2): A shower.

(The Big Bang Theory)

In this example, S1 wants to seek advice from S2 what to eat and explains that he has done much exercise in the morning. In this specific context, S2 is expected to suggest some dishes which are good for energy restoration. However, ignoring the specific context, S2 suggests "a shower" instead of some particular delicious dishes, showing her discontentment of S1’s boasting and creating an ironic effect.

Based on the above analysis, we find that DMI is self-serving: speakers exploit it to satisfy their own communicative needs and to achieve favorable effects for them.

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[6]. 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[3], and students can be encouraged to make good use of the factors to employ DMI on certain occasions to achieve certain communicative effects, such as improving interpersonal relationship, manipulating information, and creating special 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 communicative functions based on the achievements of previous studies.

Major contributions of the study are:

(1) This study is conducted specifically on the communicative functions of deliberate misinterpretation in English daily conversations.

(2) The analysis of communicative functions of deliberate misinterpretation in English language may shed light on English teaching and learning and other fields like TV talk shows, courtroom languages and debates.

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 communicative functions 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
