

SOME REFLECTIONS ON MISUNDERSTANDING

It is a common grievance that the speaker is being misunderstood by her/his audience. Causes for communicational gap in respect of clarity, distinctness and precision have been studied from different angles by Sociologists, Psychiatrists and also by some Philosophers. I am not going into the intentional aspect of the problem of communication as has been taken up by existential psychiatrists such as Sartre himself and Laing. The focus of this paper will be an analysis of the linguistic structure and its role in understanding and / or misunderstanding. The characteristics that will be taken up here are peculiar to ordinary language. In the course of this discussion I would also like to show that these barriers are not insurmountable.

Every instance of understanding or even misunderstanding involves two parties, the originator of the message or *the coder* and the interpreter of the message or *the decoder*.

As philosophers we must be very careful of the multi-dimensional use of the word "misunderstanding". This word often implies emotional or apologetic applications. There are spurious and genuine cases of misunderstanding. As for example a coder may say "Dont misunderstand me" when he realizes full well that the coded message is inadequate and uses misunderstanding as an apology. Such instances are frequent in spoken language but inadmissible in written language. That which passes as a slip and may be overlooked in speech is usually condemned as an error in writing. Such various standards upheld by spoken and written language do not affect the understanding of a sentence. It is no doubt easier to understand a spoken sentence with a slip in speech because the decoder may take the help of many extralinguistic aids into account, such as gestures, tonal qualities, proxemics, etc., we shall, however, be concerned only with those aspects which are common to both speech and writing.

In a genuine case of misunderstanding one wonders where actually the first lapse takes place. It is indeed amazing to note the extent to which decoder interprets correctly, inspite of ambiguities, slips or errors on the part of the coder. The more the decoder is able to bridge the gaps or understand the 'areas of fuzziness'

the greater the possibilities for better communication or understanding. By saying that an 'area of fuzziness' in a sentence can be understood, some sort of mystic or telepathic communication is not being implied. Though language is a rule-guided-phenomenon all rules are not equally basic or necessary. Some rules are basic and some are non-basic. When the basic rules pertaining to syntactic rules, semantic rules and phonetic rules are violated then a total language collapse takes place. An absent non-basic rule can be replaced by the decoder. This supplementation must however be guided by the ad-hoc conventions. Thus we find all language is rule-guided. But the presence of rules cannot entirely prevent false moves in language.

A coder does not always follow strict linguistic conventions like those laid down by Wittgenstein when he says that "One dare say cold when he means it is hot,"² nor does the coder take the liberty of Humpty Dumpty³ and holds that a word means what one wants it to mean. There are certain restrictions that a coder has to follow while encoding a message and there are also certain liberties allowed to him. The coder expects the decoder to take account of these restrictions and liberties at the time of decoding, a given message. Of the many rules that a coder has to follow there is one which is universally applicable. Every coder is bound by the linguistic restriction that every sentence must abide by: the subject-predicate dichotomy. That is to say, every speaker must pick out a subject which he refers to and say something about it. In a very simple and unambiguous sentence like "The table is brown", the term 'table' which is in the subject position is that which is being *referred to* and 'brown' is a predicate of this subject. While encoding any sentence the coder will have to decide what the subject will be and then say something about it. The decoder however, in this respect is granted more freedom. He may first begin with the subject or he may begin with that *which is said about it* and later find *what it applies to*. One of the prerequisites of understanding is that at least the subject or the predicate of a sentence be correctly coded. In cases where both the subject and the predicate are wrongly expressed the decoder has no way of solving the problem. Such an instance is not one of misunderstanding but of a total language collapse. In the case of either the subject or the predicate being wrong the decoder has to rectify

this slip and / or error in order to get the correct import of the message. Take for example the sentence : " Indira Gandhi declared war with China "; determining the subject and that which is said about it is no problem for the decoder. But to understand the message in the correct historical context the decoder will have to replace ' Indira Gandhi ' by ' Nehru '. This intervention is often expected of the decoder and it is also expected that he will treat it as a slip and not an error. This is brought out very well in a concrete situation; if such an error is pointed out to the coder he does not think it necessary to rectify it, on the contrary he brushes it aside by saying : " Well you know what I mean ". If the decoder is not competent to make the required intervention there is a snap in communication. This snap may not always be traced to the same source. This is why the coder is heard complaining of being misunderstood on various grounds such as : " That is not what I am *referring to* ", " That is not what I am *talking about* " or " That is not what I *mean* ". On the face of it these complaints seem to be synonymous but a closer examination proves otherwise. Reference, meaning and aboutness of a message are not identical though they are no doubt closely related.

In the above sentence, " Indira Gandhi declared war with China ", the sentence is *about* ' Indira Gandhi ' though the intended reference is ' Nehru '. This disparity between the linguistic expression and the ' topic ' (cf. Chomsky) the coder has in mind may be due to various causes. Sometimes a coder intentionally wants to mislead his audience as in a special *code* or game.

Similarly, the coder may know the limitations of his audience and accordingly use a wrong expression to convey his point. For instance if the audience knows an individual by a wrong description the coder may perpetuate this mistake by using the same wrong description, just to proceed with his discussion. The complaint of misunderstanding does not arise in any of these circumstances. Here the wrong expressions convey the right message without rectification. When a coder's message is taken literally and understood in its literal sense that is what the message is *about*. The protest " That is not what I am talking about " only holds weight when the given linguistic expression of a message is misunderstood.

A disparity between the *literal message* conveyed by a sentence and the *intended message* is the cause of frequent misunderstanding. This indicates that the proper analysis of the 'linear structure' of a sentence does not always guarantee perfect communication. An analysis of the 'linguistic markers' of a given sentence are no doubt the starting point of an adequate interpretation but this device by itself is often not sufficient. This inadequacy hints at a structured level behind the expressed surface structure. This structured level behind the surface structure is what linguists like Chomsky and other transformational grammarians call the *deep structure*. A sentence, to be fully understood, must be taken in its structural totality, that is, its surface as well as deep structure. The deep structure of a sentence is a level which embodies the ideal form of the sentence which is the 'kernel sentence'. It is necessary that a native speaker knows this 'kernel sentence' though he may not express it accurately in the surface structure. A possible difference between the deep structure and the surface structure results in a possible disparity in *reference* and *aboutness*. The distinction brought out here between *reference* and *aboutness* is similar to that drawn by Chomsky between *topic* and *subject* in the deep structure⁴. However, a parity of form between the 'kernel sentence' of the deep level with the 'expressed sentence' of the surface level is a paradigm of sentence construction.

From our discussion so far it may seem that the easiest thing for a decoder is to grasp what a sentence is *about*, provided he is oriented in the same language tradition as the coder. There are no doubt some genuine cases of ambiguity where it is difficult to understand what the message is *about*. For instance in the sentence: "When a woman loses her husband, she pines for a second", the context may help understand whether 'second' is meant to be about a number or whether it is a fraction of a minute. Where the words or phrases used in the sentence themselves are ambiguous only an ad hoc method of disambiguation can be advocated, though context goes a long way in making the understanding simpler.

In order to understand the reference of a sentence one must understand the subject of a sentence. From the above examples: "The table is brown" and "Indira Gandhi declared war against

China ", it may be thought that once the grammatical subject of a sentence is understood locationally the reference can thereby be understood. Quine suggested a similar technique for understanding the reference of a sentence. To quote Quine : " We have hit upon a convenient trick of so phrasing our statements of propositional attitude as to keep selected positions referential and others not ".⁵ Unfortunately, however, all sentences do not reserve a referential position. Such sentences provide a further scope for misunderstanding. Let us examine the following example : " What worries me is being ignored by everyone ". The decoder here has to begin by analysing the immediate constituents of the sentence. They may be analysed in two ways (i) ' I am worried by being ignored by everyone ' (ii) ' Everyone is ignoring that which is worrying me '. The crucial point is whether *being ignored* is part of the subject constituent *being ignored by everyone* or whether it is part of the predicate constituent *is being ignored by everyone*⁶. To ascertain which of these is the correct interpretation the decoder will have to undertake a deep structural analysis to find the ' kernel sentence '. A ' kernel sentence ' is never ambiguous. Structural ambiguity is a superimposition on the inherently perspicuous deep structure. The point to be noted, however, is that the subject position and reference may not be identical in the surface structure as they are in the ' kernel sentence ' or the deep structure. This phenomenon can be due to either a false start or transformations. Quine appears to overlook this locational difference of the subject at different levels, often caused by a process which may lead to a deletion of certain sentential elements. It is due to this deletion that many sentences do not seem to abide by the subject-predicate dichotomy though it is to be found at the deep level. A deleted element is always recoverable.⁷ A subject need not be a simple category, it might even be a complex one such as phrases.⁸

A structural analysis of a sentence helps explain what the sentence *refers to* and what the sentence is *about*. But this analysis alone does not explain the *meaning* of a sentence. By merely understanding the reference of a sentence one does not understand the meaning.

To quote professor R. H. Robins : The meaning relation should not be thought of as a dyadic one between a word and its referent,

but as a *multidimensional* and *functional* set of relations between the word in its sentence and the context of its occurrence. (emphasis mine)⁹. It may be said that misunderstanding is by and large caused by the intended 'topic' not being clearly expressed in the surface structure though it is always clear in the deep structure.

For a deep structure analysis the decoder has to apply generative rules. Along with the application of rules a constant intervention must be made by the decoder on the basis of the situational context, speech context and socio-linguistic conventions. Such interventions help understand those portions of a message that are not fully rule-guided, these are the types of considerations that Professor Hymes has in mind when he writes :

There is much to be learned just from a study of syntactic relations. At the same time, analysis must go beyond purely linguistic markers. Much of the coherence of texts depends upon abstract rules independent of specific linguistic form, indeed of speech.¹⁰

It is therefore both with the help of linguistic and extra linguistic aids that a decoder can accurately interpret a given message.

Extra-linguistic aids then again should be taken cautiously and not as a purely arbitrary streak in communication. The intelligent intervention of a decoder with the extra-linguistic aids do not indicate *absolute freedom* on the part of the decoder. In linguistic communication there is no absolute freedom. Any talk of freedom of creativity is essentially rule guided. It is a freedom within rules.

Freedom, when misused in language gives rise to ambiguity and error. Such ambiguity and/or error is to be overcome by the decoder's fruitful intervention. Hence we find communication is a mutual process in which both the coder and the decoder have active intervening roles to play. The coder's intervention consists of re-modelling language to make it appropriate for communication and the decoder intervenes by patching up the message where necessary. This is where the human decoder differs from the computer. A computer merely gives a mechanical analysis of the message that is fed into it and does not have the capacity to intervene when needed. As a consequence we hear of computers

translating the sentence "Out of sight out of mind" as "invisible idiot". In actuality one must understand what a message is *about*, then find the *reference* which may or may not tally with what the sentence is about. It is only after fulfilling these two requirements that the further step of meaning analysis should be taken. These are the three closely related steps involved in interpreting a message.

That the aboutness, reference and meaning be correctly understood is a highly defining and demanding expectation which a decoder is to comply with. When such a demand is not entirely fulfilled communication is frustrated and one hears the complaint "You misunderstand me"

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Notes

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