

# MANAGING UNDERSTANDING IN INTERCULTURAL TALK: AN EMPIRICAL APPROACH TO MISCOMMUNICATION<sup>1</sup>

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Research on miscommunication has not ceased to grow since the early 1980s, especially in connection with the analysis of cross-cultural communication. Yet, this interest has not stimulated a critical debate on the theoretical models underpinning most miscommunication research. This study aims at encouraging scientific discussion by advocating an empirical treatment of communicative conflict, that is one which is grounded in the detailed examination of linguistic data. Through the fine-grained analysis of participants' sense-making processes in a corpus of real-life intercultural data, we seek to unveil the linguistic and conversational strategies that speakers put to work in the handling of miscommunication. Our empirical analysis of understanding difficulties, based exclusively on *observable* trouble in talk, suggests that analysts can legitimately focus only on those stretches of talk which are experienced as problematic by speakers themselves. It also shows that miscommunication cannot be attributed to an individual speaker, but that it is jointly constructed by interactants through the ways in which they assess and respond to each other's conversational contributions.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to characterise the linguistic and conversational strategies whereby speakers manage to achieve *intersubjective understanding* (Heritage 1984) in intercultural communication. Participants' local interpretive processes are investigated through the detailed, fine-grained examination of the way in which they handle comprehension troubles in situated talk. Rather than a disturbing factor, miscommunication is viewed here as a resource, a 'rich point' in communication (Agar 1993, 1994 quoted in Hinnenkamp 1999).

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Over the last two decades the analysis of miscommunication phenomena has aroused a great deal of interest among social interaction researchers (Schegloff 1987). In fact, as Hinnenkamp claims (1999: 2), the investigation of misunderstandings has become the *raison d'être* of much intercultural communication research.<sup>2</sup> This scientific interest, however, has not stimulated a critical debate on the theoretical models and research methods used in the field (Dascal 1999). Hinnenkamp (1999: 2), for example, argues that the very notion of 'misunderstanding', borrowed from ordinary talk, is still in need of a formal, scientific definition "independent of lay concerns".

A large number of studies on miscommunication have adopted a sender-receiver model of communication (Wagner 1996, 1998) equating the achievement of a successful communicative exchange with the correct transmission of information. This theoretical positioning has determined the analytical treatment comprehension troubles have received in the literature. For instance, the distinction between *non-understandings* and *misunderstandings* drawn by Gass and Varonis (1991) is based on researchers' external analyses of what they perceive as communication difficulties. One consequence of this has been the *objectification* of misunderstandings (Hinnenkamp 1999), that is their treatment as 'self-contained wholes' which can be both isolated from the interactional contexts in which they occur and dissociated from the speakers that construe them.

This study seeks to explore miscommunication from an empirical and a participants' perspective. The theoretical framework adopted is conversation analysis (CA). The study is based on the fine-grained examination of 31 tape-recorded exchanges, 5 of which are presented here. They come from a corpus of authentic service interactions gathered by the researcher at the main Tourist Information Centre (TIC) in Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain, between November 1997 and March 1998.

This paper is structured as follows. Firstly, we provide a definition of the notion of miscommunication as it is understood here. Secondly, we outline some of the working assumptions of existing research in this area. In Section 4 we briefly explain our empirical approach to miscommunication and we provide specific examples to illustrate the theoretical points made. Finally, we examine the interactional construction of miscommunication by looking at two extended extracts from our corpus. The main findings of the study are summarised in the conclusion.

## 2. MISCOMMUNICATION: A LOCALLY-ASSESSED MATTER

Following Gass and Varonis (1991), the term *miscommunication* is used in this study as an umbrella term, meant to refer to all instances of *observable*

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<sup>2</sup> This does not imply miscommunication is more frequent in *intercultural* than in *intracultural* communication. As Dascal (1999) claims, misunderstanding is 'ubiquitous' in conversation. What is true, however, is that participants' lack of linguistic competence may add complexity to the process of signalling and repairing trouble in intercultural discourse (Bremer *et al.* 1996).

communication difficulties in interaction.<sup>3</sup> The use of the word 'observable' underscores a fundamental aspect of our approach to comprehension trouble, i.e. its locally and interactionally defined character (Hinnenkamp 1991, 1999; Banks *et al.* 1991). Miscommunication, as it is understood here, does not exist independently of conversationalists' linguistic work in interaction. Rather, a specific stretch of talk is considered an instance of miscommunication only when participants show their orientation to it, that is only when they make communicative trouble 'visible' in the interaction. As Hinnenkamp claims "identifications and localizations [of repair] are intersubjective achievements and do not exist per se" (1991: 102).

### 3. THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS IN MISCOMMUNICATION RESEARCH

A large number of miscommunication studies have assumed what Wagner (1996) calls 'an information transfer model of communication'. This approach, which draws upon Saussure's language processing model, views successful communication as the correct and complete exchange of information between speaker and hearer (see e.g. Bazzanella and Damiano 1999; Gass and Varonis 1991; Varonis and Gass 1985). Communication is successful only if the message encoded by the sender and the message decoded the receiver are "symmetrical" (Gass and Varonis 1991: 127). In all these works meaning is equated with *speaker meaning*, that is with the message intended by the speaker. Constructionist approaches to social interaction, among which CA, have long demonstrated that meaning is not something one individual speaker can compose for himself/herself (Duranti 1988, quoted in Firth 1990). Indeed, meaning is not something that exists in a social and interactional vacuum but rather something that is negotiated, dynamically produced and jointly constructed by speakers in situated interaction.

Underlying information-transfer approaches to communication is the belief that complete intersubjective understanding can not only be achieved but also objectively identified.<sup>4</sup> Such a view has been fiercely contested, among others, by the so-called communication 'relativists', who claim that "language use and communication are intrinsically flawed, partial and problematic" (Coupland *et al.* 1991: 3).

The position adopted within CA has been to treat the achievement of mutual, intersubjective understanding as an 'interactional accomplishment' of the parties at talk (Taylor and Cameron 1987: 104). It is through the *turn-taking mechanism*

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<sup>3</sup> The goal of this study is the analysis of miscommunication phenomena from a theoretical and an interactional perspective. Understanding troubles may be caused by different factors (Tzanne 2000). Since the data examined here comes from an intercultural context, at least one of the interlocutors is a non-native speaker of the medium of communication. As a result, many of the communication difficulties presented are motivated by problems having to do with the linguistic code. These cases are of course much less frequent (although not totally absent) in intracultural communication. Having said that, we believe that the theoretical reflexions made in this paper apply both to intercultural and to intracultural miscommunication.

<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, miscommunication is seen as a deviant phenomenon, i.e. negatively evaluated, by scholars working within this paradigm.

(Sacks *et al.* 1974) that speakers display for each other their understanding of the previous talk, which is then open to confirmation or disconfirmation by their conversational partners. A shared *conversational world*, that is one which is identical for the 'practical' purposes of the ongoing interaction (Gafaranga 1998), is then achieved. As a result a different perception emerges of what communicative success is. As Kasper claims, successful communication can only be assessed on the basis of interlocutors' interactional moves:

Success is understood as a *mutually acceptable outcome* rather than the total match of participants' speaker meanings and listener interpretations (were this ever possible) at all time. (Kasper 1997: 348, my emphasis).

The sender-receiver view of communication described earlier has strongly influenced the way in which understandings and non-understandings have been examined in the literature. A fairly popular way of approaching communication difficulties has been by drawing a line between *non-understandings* or *incomplete understandings* and *misunderstandings* (Gass and Varonis 1991). Whereas the term *non-understandings* is used to refer to those communication difficulties which are overtly identified and signalled by speakers in conversation, the term *misunderstandings* is employed to describe those troubles with comprehension which are not manifested interactionally. That is the case for example when speaker and addressee interpret a given utterance differently but they remain unaware of it. In the former case, attempts at remedying the trouble are made; in the latter case, repair does not take place.

There are a number of problems with this classification. Firstly, the two phenomena are seen as categorical. As Bremer *et al.* (1996) point out, the distinction between the two is not so clear-cut (see for instance Example 2). Secondly, implicit in the definition is the conflation of two different phenomena, i.e. noticing a comprehension difficulty and making it manifest. It is assumed that speakers, when confronted with an understanding trouble, will always and under all circumstances attempt to remedy it. However, as we will see later, this is not always the case (see Example 3). In fact, as Wagner (1996) rightly points out, participants make their own local assessments of the interactional environment before contributing to the ongoing talk. This includes, of course, attempting repair.

The assumption behind the above classification is that trouble exists independent of whether or not it is made relevant in the interaction. A problem immediately arises, i.e. that of imposing external categories on the talk. How do we know as analysts that what we consider a misunderstanding is perceived as such by speakers? And, even if it is but there is a deliberate attempt on their part not to make it relevant, why should we insist on calling it a misunderstanding? And from the perspective of the analysis of social interaction, is not the fact that participants do not orient to a particular conversational difficulty more significant than the difficulty itself?

#### 4. AN EMPIRICAL APPROACH TO MISCOMMUNICATION: SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Researchers working from a CA perspective have adopted a more empirical approach to the analysis of miscommunication, i.e. one which takes into account only what is *observable* in the details of the talk. If we depart from the assumption that understanding is a public activity in interaction (Bremer *et al.* 1996) which is open to scrutiny by participants and analysts alike, then it follows that any problems with understanding must also be public activities. Put in other words, for any instance of communication to be classified as problematic, it must transpire in the interaction (Hinnenkamp 1999), i.e. it must be oriented to by the parties at talk:

CA is able to analyse cases of non-comprehension, which can be regarded as instances of trouble to which participants orient through the details of their talk. (Seedhouse 1998: 94)

To illustrate this point I will present an extract from the data which contains an instance of what researchers working within the information-transfer paradigm would classify as 'problematic communication' but which from our methodological perspective to miscommunication should be excluded from consideration. More specifically, Extract 1 contains an instance of what could be regarded as a "misunderstanding", that is an illusion of understanding between speakers (Bremer *et al.* 1996)<sup>5</sup>. We shall see below how the approach we put forward deals with such cases.

Example 1: Final excerpt from a service interaction between ENQ (the enquirer) and AS1 (the TIC employee). AS1 is a non-native speaker of English; ENQ is a native speaker of this language:

01 \*ENQ: **eh also <just this one more> [>].**  
 02 \*AS1: **<ah the libraries> [<] !**  
 03 □ \*ENQ: **yes library # just one around <here> [>].**  
 04 \*AS1: **<around> [<] here <yes> [>].**  
 05 \*ENQ: **<mhmm> [<].**  
 06 □ \*AS1: **when you exit for this door in front in front of you in the corner of the department store # in <this side of the square> [>].**  
 07 \*ENQ: **<El Corte Inglés> [<].**  
 08 \*AS1: **yes El <Corte> [>] Inglés.**  
 09 \*ENQ: **<yes> [<].**  
 10 \*AS1: **in they are a street mh ↑ # and at right.**  
 11 \*ENQ: **is it Gran Via?**  
 12 \*AS1: **no no no in in the corner of the Corte Inglés they are a street at right.**  
 13 \*ENQ: **mhmhm.**  
 14 □ \*AS1: **mhmhm and they are a big library the name it's Catalonia.**  
 15 %com: same pronunciation of the word "library" as above.  
 16 \*ENQ: **mhmhm.**

<sup>5</sup> Hinnenkamp (1999: 4) refers to this type of phenomena as 'latent misunderstandings'. In keeping with our line of argument here, he suggests that they are to be excluded from any *empirical* analyses of miscommunication since there is no evidence in the interaction that participants perceive them as such.

- 17 \*AS1: **it's i:t's near to the sports bar.**  
 18 \*ENQ: mhmh okay I'll have a look □ which street is it?  
 19 \*AS1: *eh: Sant Pere # Ronda Sant Pere.*  
 %com: name of a street  
 20 \*ENQ: *Sant Pere.*  
 21 \*AS1: **yes.**  
 22 \*ENQ: mhm.  
 23 \*ENQ: mhm okay gracias.  
 %tra: okay thank you.  
 24 \*AS1: **yes.**  
 25 \*ENQ: adiós.  
 %tra: bye.  
 26 \*AS1: adiós gracias.  
 %tra: bye thank you.

This is the last service request formulated by ENQ in this encounter. She is interested in getting the address of a library in the vicinity of the TIC (line 03). In line 06, AS1 sets out to give her directions about how to get to the presumed library. However, to anyone familiar with the sociocultural context in which the interaction took place it becomes evident in line 15 that where ENQ is being directed to is not a library but a bookshop. Indeed, *Catalonia* is the name of a well-established bookshop in Barcelona. The misunderstanding is motivated by the fact that *library* and *libreria/libreria*, the words for 'bookshop' in Spanish/Catalan, are false friends. The service seeker, unfamiliar as she probably is with bookshops in Barcelona, does not react to AS1's misinterpretation of her request. As a result, a misunderstanding is created. Participants believe they have understood each other, but in fact they have not. This is but one of the possible ways of interpreting what went on in the above encounter. And, indeed, one which requires a great deal of interpretation based on the analyst's knowledge of the sociocultural environment where the exchange occurred.

An alternative explanation of Example 1, and the one which will be argued for in this study, takes into account only participants' orientation to trouble in talk. Indeed, as we have defined them here, misunderstandings do not exist in an interactional vacuum but they are locally constructed as such by the parties at talk (Hinnenkamp 1991, 1999; Banks *et al.* 1991). There is nothing in the interaction examined which leads us to think that participants are experiencing it as problematic in any way. At the time and place where it occurred, the encounter was considered "good enough" (Kasper 1997: 348) for the purposes of interaction. The question arises then of what the validity is *in members' worlds* (Gafaranga 1998) of considering the above encounter an example of miscommunication. If we are trying to describe how social actors make sense of each other's talk in interaction, there is nothing in the above example which indicates that the process of sense making was in any way disrupted.

One of the major tenets of CA is the *sequentiality* of social actions. All social actions occur in specific sequential environments. Since actions are context-shaped (Heritage 1984) they must be made sense of in the sequential and interactional environments in which they occur. But, while being context-shaped, social actions

are also context-renewing, that is they themselves reflect back on prior actions and work to confirm, adjust or alter the prevailing sense of context. Talk, as a vehicle for social action, is likewise sequentially ordered. The goal of CA is to describe the local resources employed by participants to produce and interpret talk-in-interaction. As Psathas (1995) points out, even though analysts may be aware of future courses of action, they must restrict themselves to whatever information is available to speakers as they ongoingly produce their talk. Going back to Example 1, it seems clear that the analytical problem we are faced with is one of *sequentiality*. The encounter probably turned out to be problematic once the enquirer went to the specified address and found out she had been directed to a bookshop. This new course of action presumably worked back on the previously established context, according to which the interaction had been 'successful', and cast it as troublesome. However, the interaction itself remained 'untouched' by this discovery (Hinnenkamp 1999: 10). In fact, this new assessment of the interactional encounter happened later, in a sequential environment different from the one we are dealing with here.

I do not want to claim miscommunication does not occur in intercultural talk. It does occur, and not infrequently, as we shall see later. However, in my view it is necessary for researchers to define their theoretical stances before they set out to analyse miscommunication phenomena. As we have seen, this may entail having to exclude from their studies examples which would intuitively fit the category 'problematic communication'.

So far our analysis has focused on an example of what could be considered (but was not) an instance of a *misunderstanding*. The extract below (2) contains an instance of a possible *partial or incomplete understanding* (Gass and Varonis 1991). We shall see how the theoretical and methodological considerations outlined for Example 1 also apply to 2.

Example 2: Excerpt from a service interaction between AS1 (the TIC employee) and ENQ (the service seeker). This extract contains the last information request formulated by ENQ in this encounter. AS1 is a non-native speaker of English; ENQ is a native speaker of this language:

01 □ \*ENQ: **uhm also # can you tell me # where I can # uhm #0\_4 can [-] are there**  
 02 **trains that go to south Spain ↑ # could you tell me about flooding ↑ # Seville?**  
 03 □ \*AS1: **yes you &k you:: must to catch from here.**  
 04 □ \*ENQ: +^ <is it> [/] **is it possible to go there ↑ # I was told there were [-] <is**  
 05 **much flooding> [!= slower] # and trains do not run.**  
 06 \*XXX: #0\_1.  
 07 □ \*AS1: **uh: I'm not sure of the trains # for eh: exactly information about trains you**  
 08 **must to go to # Sants Estació.**  
 09 \*ENQ: **okay.**  
 10 \*AS1: **mh?**  
 11 \*ENQ: **thank you very much.**  
 12 \*AS1: you are welcome.

The relevant part in this example is the turn contained in lines 07 and 08. The excerpt begins with ENQ's formulation of her third information request in this encounter. She asks for information about the state of the railways in southern Spain,

basically around the Seville area, after news of major flooding has spread (lines 01 and 02). It must be noted here that both her two previous requests posed comprehension difficulties for her interlocutor (AS1). In this new request the enquirer seems to be orienting to that perceived lack of linguistic competence, as she hesitates, pauses and self-repairs several times during the production of her turn. In addition, we can observe how she uses the ungrammatical prepositional phrase *to south Spain* instead of the grammatical *southern Spain* or *the south of Spain*. It seems as if she was somehow simplifying her language (using what has been referred to as *foreigner talk*: see Ferguson 1971, 1975) to make it more understandable to her non-native interlocutor. We will come back to this issue in more detail later. The result is a rather complex turn, made up of three different utterances with final upward intonation, each of which adds some information to the content of the previous one. After each *turn-construction unit* (Sacks *et al.* 1974) an opportunity is provided, in the form of a pause, for the interlocutor to produce a reply to the service request. However, AS1 does not take up the opportunities provided and waits until ENQ finishes her turn to respond to it. AS1's turn in line 03 seems to indicate that she has understood ENQ's request as a demand for information about how to get to Seville by train. Consequently, she replies by pointing out the appropriate train station on a map.

A comment is in place here about the categorical distinction between *misunderstandings* and *non-understandings* made by Gass and Varonis (1991). It becomes evident by looking at this example that such categorical distinction is not accurate. Consider for instance the turn we have just referred to (line 03). There is no way of knowing whether it is caused by AS1's misunderstanding of the previous speaker turn or the result of a process of hypothesis formation due to an incomplete understanding of that previous turn. In both cases, what surfaces is the same resulting phenomenon, and this is what CA is really interested in: the observable details of the talk, whatever the motivations may have been for it.

ENQ's next move in lines 04 and 05 indicates that she has perceived AS1's turn in line 03 as problematic, since she essentially paraphrases the content of her initial request (lines 01 and 02). What is very significant here is the way in which ENQ decides to cope with this new communication difficulty. She seems to use a number of resources to make the content of her utterance more accessible to AS1. As far as prosodic features are concerned, she slows down her tempo significantly when uttering the phrase *much flooding* and she also pauses after it.<sup>6</sup> As regards the turn's linguistic features, to the native ear it sounds like some type of *foreigner talk* (Ferguson 1971, 1975). To the oddity of the phrase *much flooding*, we must add her simplification of verbal tenses in, for instance, her substitution of past *were* for present *is*,<sup>7</sup> and also in her use of the present simple instead of the present

<sup>6</sup> As was rightly pointed out to me by one of the reviewers the speaker seems to be using these prosodic devices to stress that *flooding* is the discursive topic of her turn. Her interlocutor, however, is unable to pick up on such interpretation cues.

<sup>7</sup> Her substitution of the plural for the singular form of the verb is also significant. It is probably to do with her process of self-editing in relation to lexical choices, i.e. using the word *flooding* instead of

continuous in *trains do not run*. Notice as well her use of the non-contracted form *do not*, quite unusual in spoken language. In any case, her choice of register shows that she is experiencing the encounter as troublesome. In addition, it makes AS1's status as a non-native speaker interactionally relevant (see Codó Olsina 1999 for additional examples on this issue).

After a one-second pause, AS1 provides her response to the new question. Her turn is constructed in such a general way that the analyst is left wondering whether mutual comprehension has actually been achieved. In AS1's turn (lines 07 and 08) there is no overt indication of understanding in the form of, for instance, an uptake of the word *flooding* preceded by the adverb *yes*.<sup>8</sup> This seems to point to the fact that AS1's understanding of the previous utterance has been incomplete. If it has, AS1 has been very skillful. With whatever pieces of information she has been able to gather, she has produced a response which is broad enough to be 'minimally relevant' in the sequential context under analysis. She has drawn on the ambiguity of talk in order to come up with a pertinent response. However, these are all mere speculations. If we go back to the talk, we see that ENQ acknowledges the relevance of AS1's reply (*okay*) and that the encounter comes to an end. ENQ has not received the specific piece of information she has been asking for, that is whether it is possible to travel to Seville by train. However, she has been told where to get that information and she is satisfied with it. Whether she thinks that she has been totally understood by the assistant or not does not transpire in the interaction. What transpires is that for the purposes of interacting she is satisfied with the information she has been supplied, that is that the encounter has been 'good enough' for her. Faced with these observable facts, the only option available to the analyst is to claim that a mutually acceptable outcome has been achieved in this encounter (Kasper 1997).

Communication is inherently ambiguous, and speakers know it. Sometimes, as we have seen, they draw on that ambiguity to accomplish their social goals. At all times, they assess the ambiguity potential of each other's talk and decide whether it constitutes a hindrance for the achievement of their own interactional goals.

#### 4.1. The relevance of repair work: A locally assessed matter

We argued in section 3 that noticing a communication problem and making it interactionally manifest were two different social activities. Additionally, we claimed that the absence of repair work in interaction ought not to be equated with the fact that trouble had not been noticed. This is due to members' continuous assessments of the ongoing interactional context, which become particularly manifest through the way in which they handle communication difficulties (Tzanne

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*floods*.

<sup>8</sup> This seems to be a common feature of AS1's interactional behaviour (see Example 4, line 26). In fact, in the encounter under analysis, AS1 had used that same routine previously to confirm her understanding of a troublesome turn (*ah [!] a list of museums?*).

2000). The separateness of these two activities is illustrated by the following excerpt:

Example 3: Final part of a service interaction between two British male service seekers (EN1 and EN2) and AS1 (the service provider). EN1 and EN2 are native speakers of English; AS1 is not a native speaker of this language.

- 01 □ \*EN1: **and what uhm do you have to sort of uh be dressed smart to go**  
 02 **into the discos or?**  
 03 □ \*AS1: **no I don't have [=! minimal laughter].**  
 04 □ \*EN2: **jeans and then xxx jeans and trainers?**  
 05 □ \*AS1: [=! minimal laughter].  
 06 □ \*EN1: **alright thank you very much.**  
 07 \*EN2: **cheers.**  
 08 \*EN1: **can we have the map ,, yes?**  
 09 \*AS1: **yes.**  
 10 \*EN1: **thank you.**

These turns occur at the end of a service interaction which proves to be fairly difficult in terms of participants' achieved intersubjective understandings.<sup>9</sup> The excerpt starts off with EN1's formulation of an information request (line 01). Syntactically, the turn is fairly complex, as it contains a false start and a number of hesitations. In line 03 AS1 provides her response to it. EN2's next turn reveals that AS1's response has not been considered 'good enough' by her interlocutors. Our claim is based on the fact that EN2's turn seeks to obtain essentially the same information as EN1's turn in line 01. The interlocutors' aim is to find out how one is supposed to dress to be allowed into a nightclub in Barcelona. The two turns, however, differ in the way the request is formulated. Whereas EN1 uses a rather general way of phrasing his query, employing the construction *be dressed smart*, EN2 deploys a more direct, hands-on approach to it (*jeans and trainers?*). In principle, the processing load of EN2's turn should be lower than that of EN1 and therefore easier to comprehend. Yet, the facilitating value of the turn in terms of intersubjective understanding is questionable. Because of the 'minimalised' way in which EN2's turn is constructed, it does not stand as independent from the previous, non-understood turn. If AS1 has failed to comprehend the first information request, life is indeed not made easier for her with this second turn. The lack of another reference to the word *discos* in line 04 leaves AS1 with no clues as to what the enquirers are talking about.

So far we have concentrated on the way AS1's perceived lack of understanding is handled by her interlocutors. Let us now examine the ways in which AS1 deals with her own comprehension difficulties. We have stated that the fact that the enquirers make a second attempt to obtain a specific piece of information establishes the previous response as inadequate. The content of AS1's turn gives us an insight

<sup>9</sup> A detailed analysis of the communication difficulties that emerge during this interaction is provided in section 5.1.

into what she is doing interactionally. There seems to be enough evidence in AS1's turn that her understanding of the previous information request has been incomplete. However, instead of making repair relevant and bringing non-understanding to the conversational foreground, the assistant prefers to use a high inferencing approach (Bremer *et al.* 1996).<sup>10</sup> With whatever information she has been able to gather from the previous turn, she tries to produce a relevant response to it. However, it seems that her understanding has been too defective.<sup>11</sup> The minimal laughter AS1 produces at the end of her turn conveys a mixture of embarrassment and apology. It sounds like the type of apologetic laughter employed by some service people when they are unable to offer the service requested of them. Here the sense of apology conveyed by AS1's turn, however, appears to be double. On the one hand, she seems to resort to the conventional use of minimal laughter in apologetic behaviour, but on the other, she seems to be exploiting that sense of apology in a wider sense. That is, the *metamessage* (Bateson 1972) AS1's turn is sending is one in which she tries to create some bond of solidarity between herself and her interlocutors. She seems to be apologising for her lack of understanding while at the same time asking her interlocutors to bear with her and call the conversation to an end. Jefferson *et al.* (1987) claim that laughter is systematically used upon the production of interactional breaches, which they refer to as 'improper talk', to construct a sense of intimacy with one's interlocutor. We could argue that in this extract AS1's interactional breach is her failure to produce a relevant next turn in line 03 due to the understanding difficulties she is experiencing.

In order to account for AS1's interactional behaviour, however, we must look at the wider interactional context. As we mentioned earlier, the service interaction in which the sequence analysed is embedded proves to be particularly problematic in terms of understanding. It takes the interlocutors up to 17 turns to clarify an instance of miscommunication. As Bremer *et al.* claim, "working through understanding problems disrupts any interaction of any type —and not only interethnic encounters" (1996: 69).

Comprehension difficulties are a constant threat to participants' *face* (Brown and Levinson 1987). They question the legitimacy of the non-native participant as a competent interlocutor. It is no surprise, then, that AS1 reacts in the way she does in line 02. She seems determined to get out of that troublesome interactional sequence as soon as possible. This is confirmed by her response to the enquirers' new attempt at obtaining the information they are after (line 04). Here again she uses the same strategy as earlier on, i.e. the use of minimal laughter. It seems clear to all participants that communication has gone astray. It is not the case, as Wagner (1996:

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<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that AS1 seems to be using in this example the same conversational strategy for dealing with comprehension difficulties, i.e. hypothesis formation, as in Example 2. This is probably an idiosyncratic feature of AS1's interactional behaviour, which may nonetheless have to do with her perception of the face threatening potential of non-understanding acknowledgements.

<sup>11</sup> It seems that AS1's comprehension of the previous turn is limited to the verb *have*, which she takes as indicating possession. The meaning of obligation conveyed by the verbal phrase *have to + infinitive* is not captured by the assistant.

232) argues, that "participants do not understand what is going on". On the contrary, I would claim that both the assistant and the enquirers are fully aware of what is happening interactionally. We have stated that, by means of her reactions in lines 02 and 04, the assistant is trying to create a sense of solidarity with the enquirers whereby her lack of understanding is interactionally 'tolerated'. The enquirers seem to grasp that metamessage and in line 05 they decide to move towards closing the interactional episode. As we have seen, the need for repair work is locally assessed by participants in the sequential and interactional contexts in which specific instances of talk occur.

## 5. THE CONVERSATIONAL CONSTRUCTION OF COMMUNICATION DIFFICULTIES

In the previous sections we have sought to illustrate with specific examples that trying to provide a definition of *miscommunication* is a complex endeavour. It depends on the theoretical stances adopted by researchers on such fundamental issues as the way in which meaning is created in social interaction, how the achievement of intersubjective understanding can objectively be identified, and in a broad sense, the nature of human communication. We have put forward an empirical approach to miscommunication analysis which takes into account only what is 'visible' in the detailed examination of linguistic data. We have shown that such a perspective often involves excluding from studies of miscommunication conversations where the analyst, from an outsider's perspective, knows that mutual understanding has not been achieved. We further argued that an empirical analysis of miscommunication requires the detailed examination of participants' orientation to trouble in conversation.

In this section we intend to carry out an in-depth analysis of two long stretches of talk in order to determine the extent to which participants' interactional behaviour plays a role in the local emergence of communication difficulties and their eventual resolution.

### 5.1. The joint creation of miscommunication

Understanding is viewed in this study as a dynamic, public, and co-operative activity which cannot be dissociated from the process of being conversationally involved. Understanding is, thus, jointly constructed by participants in interaction (Bremer *et al.* 1996). By the same token, misunderstanding must also be seen as a joint endeavour. The following extract (4) illustrates the emergence, enhancement and, eventual resolution of an understanding difficulty.

Example 4: AS1 is the information provider. She is a non-native speaker of English. EN1 and EN2 are the enquirers. They are native speakers of English. This is the beginning of their service transaction:

01     \*AS1: **next one!**  
 02     \*XXX: #0\_3.  
 03     \*EN1: **hello.**

04 \*AS1: <hello> [>].  
 05 \*EN1: <you speak> [<| English # <yeah> [>]?  
 06 \*AS1: <yes> [<|.]  
 07 □ \*EN1: **uhm is there somewhere we can go near this place xxx like**  
 08 **dancing around here?**  
 09 □ \*AS1: **sorry?**  
 10 □ \*EN1: **is there somewhere we can go dancing [!] locally round here?**  
 11 □ \*AS1: mhmhm.  
 12 \*EN2: +^ **night <clubs> [>] yeah?**  
 13 □ \*AS1: <mhm> [<|.]  
 14 □ \*AS1: mhmhm.  
 %act: unfolds a city map  
 15 □ \*AS1: **for to:: # buy clothes and?**  
 %com: marked Spanish pronunciation of the word 'clothes'.  
 16 \*EN1: **now we're staying sort of uhm.**  
 17 \*AS1: +^ **yes you <are here> [>].**  
 %act: points at places on the map  
 18 \*EN1: <we we yes> [<| we were staying just here on the Rambla.  
 19 \*AS1: mhmhm.  
 20 \*ENQ: <we're just> [/| we're just about here.  
 21 \*AS1: mhmhm.  
 22 □ \*AS1: **and er you want er?**  
 23 \*EN1: **discos or something like that ,, yes?**  
 24 \*AS1: **discos?**  
 25 \*EN2: **discotheques.**  
 26 □ \*AS1: **ah yes [!] # in the: 0\_2# in the Ra [-] mm plaza Real mh?**  
 %com: plaza Real is the name of a square.  
 27 \*EN1: **yes.**  
 28 \*AS1: **here they are a lot of discotheques and here # here # uhm**  
 29 **#0\_2.5 and # tstst in this area.**  
 %com: points at places on a map.  
 30 \*XXX: #0\_2.  
 31 \*EN2: **in that area okay that'd probably be the nearest one.**

Participants in this encounter experience communication difficulties right from the beginning of their interaction. After greetings have been exchanged and a common *language of interaction* (Auer 1984) has been established, enquirers embark in the formulation of their service request. AS1's response, which takes the form of what Drew (1997) calls an 'open' form of repair initiation, establishes the previous turn as problematic. EN1 takes her problem to be one of faulty hearing, as is evidenced by the fact that his second turn is almost identical to the previous one. Service seekers are not orienting to the non-nativeness of their interlocutor and therefore fail to recognise that her repair initiation was an indication of non-understanding rather than deficient hearing.

Their new attempt at achieving meaningful communication is responded to by what Bremer *et al.* (1996) call a *minimal feedback* response (*mhmhm*), which they argue can function as both an indication of understanding and of non-understanding. In the latter cases, speakers would be following the 'wait and see' strategy, that is keeping the conversation going in the hope that the ensuing talk helps them understand some previous non-understood turn. The feeling of interactional uncertainty that these responses create is demonstrated by EN2's reduced

reformulation of EN1's request in line 12. It must be noted at this point that there has been a significant change in the service seekers' approach to communication trouble. Unlike EN1 previously, EN2 seems now to be aware of AS1's understanding difficulties. Thus, he decides to simplify EN1's initial request to make it more accessible to the service provider.<sup>12</sup> The assistant responds by uttering two more minimal feedback responses. At this point the enquirers have probably been led to think that good enough understanding has been achieved. However, as she is about to comply with the service request, AS1 produces a comprehension check in line 15 which indicates that she has in fact misunderstood the enquirers' initial request. Her comprehension check, which includes a non-standard use of two prepositions together and a marked Spanish pronunciation of the word *clothes*, is disregarded by the enquirers. It is difficult to venture why this is so but the immediately preceding context in which no need for repair was made relevant may have contributed to it.

So, we can see how both interlocutors seem to be jointly constructing and enhancing the communication difficulty which emerged in line 09. By failing to make repair relevant after EN1's turn in line 11 and adopting a guessing strategy, AS1 contributes to make matters worse. But the enquirers also do their share. By failing to attend to what AS1's turn was doing in line 15, they are contributing to enhancing the problem. In line 16 it becomes evident that conversationalists are on two different interactional tracks. The enquirers provide further details about where they are staying. However, the assistant is lost. She acknowledges understanding in the hope that eventually the enquirers will paraphrase their request and confirm or disconfirm her confirmation check. However, because the enquirers have failed to see what the assistant's turn was doing, they fail to provide it. AS1 is forced to make her lack of understanding explicit in line 22. At that point, the enquirers decide to simplify their request to key content words (*discos or something like that yes?*). Understanding is eventually achieved (line 26)<sup>13</sup> and the conversation proceeds. It seems evident from this example that it is impossible to attribute communication difficulties in intercultural communication to one single cause or speaker.<sup>14</sup> As we have seen, many instances of miscommunication are jointly constructed by participants through the way in which initial difficulties are handled.

## 5.2. Creating trouble when none might otherwise exist: The construction of one's interlocutor as a non-competent speaker

<sup>12</sup> It is quite noticeable that EN1 and EN2 employ different strategies for coping with communication difficulties. On the whole, EN2's moves are more oriented to repair than EN1's, as the former is seen to rephrase his friend's turn formulations in lines 12 and 25. In the latter case, his repair is crucial for the achievement of a successful interactional outcome. This raises questions about the feasibility of identifying a typical native-speaker behaviour in native-nonnative interaction, as some researchers have tried to do (e.g. Long 1983a, 1983b).

<sup>13</sup> Note here that AS1 feels the need to make her understanding explicit in line 26 (*ah yes!*) in order to prevent further conversational trouble.

<sup>14</sup> This goes against the view traditionally held by a large number of *modification studies* according to which the main source of miscommunication was the non-nativeness of one of the participants (Kasper 1997).

This final section on miscommunication is intended to illustrate how a misunderstanding can actually be brought about by the native speaker's construction of his/her non-native interlocutor as a less than fully competent speaker. This is precisely what happens in the following example:

Example 5: AS1 is the service provider. She is a native speaker of Spanish and a non-native speaker of English. ENQ is her conversational partner. She is a native speaker of English and a non-native speaker of Spanish. This is the beginning of their service interaction.

01 \*AS1: hola.  
%tra: hello.

02 \*ENQ: **uhm # ok a couple of things #** estoy buscando: # la oficina de **British Airways?**  
%tra: uhm # ok a couple of things# I'm looking for the British Airways office.

03 \*AS1: **yes.**

04 \*ENQ: +^ dónde está?  
%tra: where is it?

05 \*AS1: **it's in Passeig de Gràcia.**

06 \*XXX: #0\_5.  
%act: assistant unfolds a city map

07 \*AS1: **you are here #0\_1 a:nd # it's here approximately # in the eighty five ##**  
08 **Passeig de Gràcia #0\_3 number eighty five.**  
%act: writes exact address on a piece of paper.

09 \*XXX: #0\_4.

10 □ \*ENQ: <Passeig de Gràcia> [=! reading] **eighty five okay # y: Qantas?**  
%tra: Gracia Avenue [=! reading] eighty five okay # a:nd Qantas?

11 \*XXX: #0\_1.

12 □ \*ENQ: oficina de Qantas # no tiene <en Barcelona> [>]?  
%tra: a Qantas office # don't they have one in Barcelona?

13 □ \*AS1: <una sólo> [<].  
%tra: just one.

14 \*ENQ: un una sólo?  
%tra: just just one?

15 \*ENQ: <y> [>].  
%tra: and.

16 \*AS1: <y> [<] otra en el aeropuerto.  
%tra: and another one at the airport.

17 \*XXX: #0\_2.

18 \*ENQ: dónde?  
%tra: where?

19 \*AS1: +^ en el aeropuerto **in the airport.**  
%tra: at the airport at the airport.

20 \*ENQ: **okay y: #0\_2 ah okay** tienes el número?  
%tra: okay a:nd #0\_2 ah okay do you have the number?

21 \*AS1: sí □ de teléfono ,, no?  
%tra: yes □ the telephone number ,, right?

22 \*ENQ: sí.  
%tra: yes.

23 \*AS1: **I write here or: in a &p.**

24 \*ENQ: **piece of [/] piece.**

25 \*AS1: +^ **in a piece of paper better** ,, no?

26 \*XXX: #0\_7.

27 \*ENQ: las dos ## por favor.  
%tra: both ## please.  
%com: 50 sec elapse as assistant writes telephone numbers on a piece of paper.

- 28 □ \*AS1: **British in Barcelona y British in the airport.**  
 %act: hands over a piece of paper to enquirer
- 29 \*ENQ: ah no no # Qantas.  
 %otra: oh no no # Qantas.
- 30 \*XXX: #.
- 31 \*AS1: <cuántos> [>]?  
 %otra: how many?
- 32 \*ENQ: <busco Qantas> [<].  
 %otra: I'm looking for Qantas.
- 33 □ \*ENQ: una otra airlinea [?] #0\_1 Qantas # en Barcelona.  
 %otra: one another airline [?] #0\_1 Qantas # in Barcelona.
- 34 \*XXX: #0\_1.
- 35 \*AS1: eh ## cuántas oficinas de British?  
 %otra: eh ## how many British Airways offices?
- 36 \*ENQ: no no Qantas eh: # Qantas uhm British Airwa:ys # uhm Garuda: # otro.  
 %otra: no no Qantas e:h # Qantas uhm British Airwa:ys # uhm Garuda: # another.
- 37 \*AS1: +^ **you have a lot # maybe** <yo que sé> [=! quicker].  
 %otra: you have a lot maybe I don't know  
 %act: looks up information in guidebook.
- 38 \*XXX: #0\_4.
- 39 \*ENQ: teléfono aquí.  
 %otra: phone here.
- 40 \*XXX: #0\_3.
- 41 \*AS1: **this list.**  
 %act: shows enquirer a list of airlines in Barcelona.
- 42 \*XXX: #0\_8.
- 43 \*ENQ: &ba &de questo es Barcelona?  
 %otra: &ba &of this is Barcelona?
- 44 \*AS1: **in Barcelona yes.**
- 45 \*XXX: #0\_1.5.
- 46 \*ENQ: **okay xxx Qantas hm.**
- 47 □ \*AS1: cuál buscas?  
 %otra: which one are you looking for?
- 48 \*XXX: #0\_4.
- 49 □ \*AS1: <cuál buscas> [=! louder] que hay otras que están apuntadas en <otras> [>].  
 %otra: which one are you looking for because there are some on other.
- 50 \*ENQ: <bueno> [<]
- 51 **okay** # uhm # también # uhm # necesito un caja de seguridad # para dos semanas  
 # existe o no?  
 %otra: good okay # uhm# also # uhm # I need a safe-deposit box # for two weeks #  
 does it exist or not?

The turns I would like to focus on for my analysis are those in lines 12, 13, 28 and 33. The encounter begins with the enquirer's request for the address of the British Airways office in Barcelona. In lines 07 and 08 AS1 complies with this request. The enquirer then formulates her second service request. She asks for the address of the Australian airline Qantas in Barcelona and whether there is an office in the city. In line 13, AS1 replies that there is only one. At this point it is impossible to see that miscommunication has occurred. This is because AS1's response to ENQ's second request is perfectly relevant in this sequential context. Both participants have reached an interpretation that makes sense to them. The interaction therefore continues on the basis that a shared interactional world has been achieved. It is not until line 28 that the misunderstanding is uncovered.

We can now look back and see why the misunderstanding came about in the first place. The problem seems to be one of the assistant's not being familiar with the name of the Australian airline Qantas. Unfortunately enough, its name is homophonous with the Spanish adverb of quantity in its feminine plural form (*cuántas*). This explains why the assistant mistakes one word for the other. But there is more than that. She seems to be disregarding all sorts of grammatical clues in ENQ's turn in line 12. Lines 31 and 35 reveal that she has understood the enquirer's request as a demand for information about how many British Airways offices there are in Barcelona. However, to come up with such an interpretation, AS1 has had to clearly overlook the syntactic structure of the troublesome turn, where it says *oficina de Qantas* and not *cuántas oficinas*, which would be the syntactic ordering required for such an understanding.

Clearly, the native participant is constructing the non-native as a less than competent speaker. Anderson (1988:281) attested the same kind of behaviour in his study of native speaker/non-native speaker bookshop encounters. Following Thomas (1983) he argues that 'once alerted to the fact that (the speaker) is not fully grammatically competent, native speakers seem to have little difficulty in making allowances for it'. This kind of behaviour, he says, creates trouble when none might otherwise exist. The same phenomenon seems to be happening in our example. However, not only does the assistant disregard grammatical clues but she also takes no notice of the logical development of the interaction. Why would the enquirer ask about whether there is a British Airways office in Barcelona in line 12 when she already got its address at the beginning of the encounter? The assistant seems to be reading more into ENQ's turns than there actually is. It is true that the enquirer's resources to clear up the misunderstanding are fairly limited (see lines 29, 32, 33 and 36). As Bremer *et al.* (1996) point out, situations of communicative failure can become very stressful especially for the non-native participant. Thus, ENQ's interlanguage seems to degrade a great deal when she fails to get her message across (check lines 39 and 43). At the end of the sequence (lines 47 and 49) we can see how all sense of cooperation is lost, as the enquirer deliberately fails to provide a reply to the two questions asked by AS1. The feeling of miscommunication is more evident than ever.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In this paper we have put forward an empirical framework for the investigation of miscommunication phenomena based on the theoretical and methodological principles of conversation analysis. In our study we have called into question some of the working assumptions of previous approaches to the topic, as well as the often-referred-to distinction between *non-* and *misunderstandings*. By means of specific examples we have shown how such distinction is untenable if we undertake a detailed interactional analysis of comprehension difficulties.

In our proposal we have advocated the adoption of a *participants' perspective*, which tries to describe the strategies employed by speakers to make sense of each other's talk-in-interaction. Consequently, our analysis has focused exclusively on

*observable* instances of miscommunication, that is on those stretches of talk which are experienced as troublesome by the parties at talk. Likewise, we have argued for a view of communicative success which is not based on analysts' perceptions of whether complete intersubjective understanding has been achieved, but on participants' local assessments of the interactional outcome. Such evaluations become 'visible' only through the fine-grained examination of conversational data.

Methodologically, we have tried to argue the case for a detailed, turn-by-turn analysis of miscommunication phenomena as a way of unveiling participants' strategies at work in intercultural discourse. We have shown, for instance, that misunderstanding, like understanding, is a jointly constructed activity, in which both participants have their fair share. Thus, by failing to pay heed to each other's social actions participants frequently contribute to the enhancement of communication difficulties. Our second extended extract has illustrated a different phenomenon: it has provided evidence for how native speakers' construction of their interlocutors as non-competent speakers can bring about communication difficulties where none might, otherwise, exist.

The study presented here is only a very small-scale investigation on the nature of miscommunication. A detailed, comprehensive analysis of miscommunication phenomena in a corpus of natural linguistic data would be necessary in order to identify different speaker strategies and their effects on the emergence, development and outcome of communicative conflict.

## TRANSCRIPTION PROCEDURES

The conversations analysed in this paper have been transcribed following the procedures established in the *LIDES Coding Manual* (LIPPS Group 2000). Participants' interventions are reproduced on the main tier (lines beginning with an asterisk (\*)) and a 3-letter ID code (e.g. AS1) by means of standard orthography. A free English translation is provided on a dependent tier (%tra) located below each main tier. Other dependent tiers, used to provide additional information about the main tier, are listed below. Unlike in LIDES, distinct fonts are used to identify the different languages spoken.

<b>Bold</b>	indicates stretch in English
Plain	indicates stretch in Spanish
<i>Italics</i>	indicates stretch in Catalan
<u>Underlined</u>	indicates undecidable language

+^	latched utterance	xxx	unintelligible material
#	pause	###	longer pause (>1 sec)

#figure	paralinguistics, prosodics	length of pause (min 1 sec)	[=! text]
[>]	overlap follows	[<]	overlap precedes
[-]	false start without retracing	[/]	retracing (no correction)
< >	scope symbols	[!]	stressing
:	lengthened vowel	::	longer vowel lengthening
[?]	best guess	„	tag question
↑□	marked falling or rising intonation shifts		
*XXX:	indicates undecidable speaker; used to represent periods of non-speech.		
%act:	describes participants' actions while talk is produced		
%com:	contains researcher's comments on the main tier		

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