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When Contextualization Cues Mislead: Misunderstanding, Mutual Knowledge, and Non-Verbal Gestures

Gumperz (1995: 120) has commented that a “lack of shared background knowledge leads initially to misunderstandings”. Most discussions of linguistic indirectness (e.g. Thomas 1995) have also focussed on the role of contextual knowledge as a help rather than a hindrance to interpreting indirect utterances. In this brief note, however, I hope to demonstrate that a presence of shared background knowledge can be equally responsible for misunderstandings. I believe that this is all the more remarkable since the example in question – a personal experience of mine – actually concerns a non-verbal rather than a verbal communication act.

A couple of years ago, I had lunch in Berlin with a recent acquaintance. We chose to eat in a small bistro and were shown to a rather cramped table for two with a wall on one side. When we sat down, I noticed that the ashtray had been placed more or less in the centre of my place setting. Since the salt and pepper containers had been placed against the wall on my side of the table, I decided to move the ashtray into the same position on my acquaintance’s side of the table, where there was space for it. However, as I moved the ashtray into this position, my acquaintance said to me:

Ich habe keine Zigaretten mit.

‘I haven’t got any cigarettes with me.’

Now, my intention in moving the ashtray into this position was simply to create space for our (and especially my) food and drinks. However, my acquaintance clearly understood it to be a (non-verbal) invitation for her to smoke. We had not met in person before, but, prior to our

lunch meeting, we had exchanged several e-mails and got to know each other quite well. One thing that had emerged from our correspondence was that my acquaintance was an occasional smoker, and I had told her that she was quite welcome to smoke when we met, although I did not smoke myself. If my acquaintance had been a non-smoker, and she knew that I knew this, she would almost certainly not have interpreted my action as being an invitation to smoke: that latter interpretation relied wholly on mutual knowledge.

So what thought process led my acquaintance to misinterpret my action? We can draw mainly on Gumperz's notion of contextualization cues (Gumperz 1992). A contextualization cue has been defined as "any feature of linguistic form that contributes to the signalling of contextual presuppositions" (Gumperz 1982: 131). For instance, it might be a rising intonation signalling a need for encouragement (Gumperz 1982: 147) or the switching between T-type and V-type pronouns to signal how one wishes to be seen on the dichotomy between power and intimacy (Ostermann 2003). However, non-verbal behaviour can also function as a contextualization cue – for example, laughter signalling humour (Kotthoff 2000) – hence Levinson's (2002) definition of a contextualization cue as "an encoded or conventional reminder, like a knot in a handkerchief, where the content of the memo is inferentially determined" may be more apt. In any case, the contextualization cue serves to activate and retrieve the necessary background knowledge base so that a contextually appropriate process of inference can take place.

In my acquaintance's case, the ashtray served as a contextualization cue. The conceptual link between ashtrays and smoking caused her to retrieve from her memory our exchange of e-mails about her smoking. This then became foregrounded in her mind as the basis for interpreting what I had just done. From that point on, she used this retrieved knowledge base within the normal inferencing process: she inferred herself to be the addressee of an indirect (non-verbal)

communication act and took my action to have the illocutionary force of an invitation, against the backdrop of my much earlier general statement that she could smoke if she wished to.

We can learn a number of valuable lessons from this tiny misunderstanding. Firstly, it shows that something may be perceived as a contextualization cue by a receiver when it is not intended as such by a sender, leading to an incorrect interpretation of the sender's utterance or non-verbal act. Secondly, it serves to confirm that non-verbal communication and verbal communication should be considered as equal partners within a multimodal concept of communication, since non-verbal acts are subject to the same pragmatic principles and inference strategies as verbal utterances. Thirdly, it demonstrates that non-verbal acts of all kinds may potentially function as contextualization cues, especially if there is a primary conceptual link between an aspect of the cue and an aspect of the retrieved knowledge base. Fourthly, as is one of the main arguments of Thomas (1995), it highlights the importance of considering both intended speaker (or, better, sender) meaning *and* message understanding within a model of pragmatics: misunderstandings like this can only be comprehended fully by recourse to both parties' cognition. And finally, it may perhaps serve as an incentive to further studies in which the pragmatic theories developed primarily in relation to verbal language may also be applied to situations which are made up wholly or mainly of non-verbal acts.

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