

## Some sources of misunderstanding in talk-in-interaction\*

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### *Abstract*

*Efforts to understand 'misunderstanding' in talk-in-interaction should be able to specify how interactionally exogenous factors such as cultural/linguistic/social differences induce trouble in interactionally endogenous terms. As a byproduct of a systematic study of repair in conversation, a number of systematic sources of misunderstanding can be explicated in terms of categories endogenous to the organization of talk-in-interaction. Two classes of trouble are examined — problematic reference and problematic sequential implicativeness. Four sources of the latter type of trouble are discussed — the serious/nonserious distinction, favored action interpretations, the constructive/composite distinction in the understanding of utterances, and the practice of 'joke first'. Although germane to an understanding of the mechanisms of 'misunderstanding', the substantial independence of the organization of repair from the sources of trouble has the import that these mechanisms have at most an indirect bearing on repair itself.*

I. Among the most favored themes in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis during the last decade and a half has been that of misunderstanding. The misunderstanding which has been the focus has not been that between individuals, although individual participants are, of course, always involved. The analytic framework(s) informing this theme have rather been animated by misunderstandings whose sources of trouble transcended the individual and were rooted in groups or allegiances which confer on the individual some specific social or cultural identity, and/or armed or saddled the individual with related resources for speaking, hearing, understanding, and interacting which contribute to misunderstanding in defined contexts.<sup>1</sup>

The transindividual attributes and identities have varied but are relatively few in number. Among the most prominent of these have been

social, cultural, and/or linguistic affiliation, sometimes aggregated in the notion of speech community; social class, or ethnic or racial subculture or community; gender; age, in particular in studies of socialization, language acquisition, and formal educational settings; and social role — most commonly professional/bureaucratic vis-à-vis client. Often, several of these affiliations overlap, as when studies of classrooms focus on the troubles that can arise when young 'lower-class' black/chicano students have to cope with anglo-middle-class middle-aged teachers. As this example suggests, the contexts of special interest are those in which persons with differing affiliations, and accordingly different social, cultural, and linguistic resources, interact with each other.

Another element in this focus adds a note of urgency and commitment to this line (or these lines) of inquiry, and that is that these encounters across group boundaries are seen to work to the disadvantage — the unfair and unjust disadvantage — of one of the participants on whatever dimensions are involved. It is not, then, just that one person is misunderstood by another, but that the child is misunderstood by the teacher, the woman by the man, the black by the white, the Indian by the Briton, the welfare recipient or juvenile delinquent by the social worker — in each case one with lesser (or virtually no) power by one with more or much power, the latter able to enforce his (a pronoun used self-consciously here) view on the other, regularly to the latter's disadvantage, regularly without even being aware that some misunderstanding has occurred, but believing instead that he has just witnessed another confirmation of what he has 'known' all along about people of that sort — that they are slow, witless, truculent, lazy, overly sensitive, uncaring, unmotivated, not capable, happy with their circumstances, etc. This social circumstance, reduplicated in many contemporary environments and between many different social groupings, places a certain urgent claim on social science and must certainly be deeply related to the resonance such studies have found among many social scientists from several different disciplines, a resonance which has helped recruit new workers to take up work along these lines.

However important these thematic concerns are, we should not lose sight of the fact that misunderstanding in talk-in-interaction has more sources than these bases of social, cultural, and linguistic differentiation. In spite of the recurrence of forced and voluntary migration and conquest in world history and the consequent interaction between members of different communities as a commonplace of human history, it seems appropriate to take as the basic situation of talk one in which members of same communities are involved. Insofar as talk in interaction is built for understanding, and on the whole effortless understanding, it presumes

co-membership. And, although there are certainly exceptions, it is likely that persons interact more with co-category members (same class, same culture, same speech community, etc.) than with others — that is in part what we are noting in recognizing these as social entities, whether they are groups, communities, etc., and the misunderstandings that arise between them are then not derived from intercategory differences.

Of course, not all misunderstandings that arise between persons from different groupings — different cultures, for example — are necessarily traceable to their cultural or linguistic differences either. And indeed, when differences between groups, cultures, or languages contribute to misunderstanding, it remains to specify what in the structure of interaction those differences impinge on. It is often because a speaker is understood to have done an action he did not 'intend to do' that trouble arises. The element of interaction that is affected then is 'mistaking one action for another'; the cultural/linguistic differences have a bearing by inducing that problem. But the category of problem may well be a more general contingency for interaction, even when there are no cultural, social, linguistic, or other differences between the parties to induce it. What then are those categories? In this paper, I will report on a number of such apparent sources of misunderstanding in conversation which emerged as a byproduct of an ongoing research project on repair.

**II.** In characterizing the systematically available opportunities for dealing with trouble in speaking, hearing, and understanding the talk in conversation, it has seemed pertinent to focus on the initiation of 'repair' in the same turn as contains the source of the trouble, in the next turn, or in the turn after that (Schegloff et al. 1977). If one focuses attention on the last of these positions for the initiation of repair, one recurrent phenomenon which turns up may be termed 'third-position repair'. Briefly, third-position repairs occur in the following circumstance. One participant produces a turn at talk. An interlocutor produces a sequentially appropriate response in next turn, based on (and displaying) the understanding they have of the preceding utterance. The response, however, reveals to the initial speaker a troublesome understanding of the initial turn. Then in the turn following the response, the initial speaker may (but need not) undertake repair of the apparent, or claimed, misunderstanding by performing some operation on the target, or trouble-source, turn. A common form such a repair takes is, 'No, I don't mean X, I mean Y.' (A more detailed and expansive account of this and other forms of repair after next turn is in preparation; Schegloff n.d.)

As a byproduct of assembling a collection of fragments of conversation

in which third-position repairs occur, a collection of trouble sources for misunderstanding is also collected. The following discussion offers a brief account of several such trouble sources, some of them especially common, others of interest because they call attention to interesting features and practices of talk-in-interaction.<sup>2</sup> This is neither an exhaustive nor a systematically representative display of such trouble sources.

One especially attractive feature of these occurrences is that the claim that they represent misunderstandings is not just that of professional analysts; the parties themselves address the talk as revealing a misunderstanding in need of repair, and this repair is validated by its recipient, who generally modifies the response after the repair. The repairs thus anchor the analysis as misunderstandings and, in most cases, show what the participants treat as the sources of the misunderstanding as well.

**III.** For convenience, the sources of misunderstanding may be grouped under two rubrics — problematic reference and problematic sequential implicativeness. The former is relatively straightforward; the latter subsumes an interesting variety of trouble sources.

Problematic references are addressed when a recipient's response to an utterance displays a to-its-speaker-acceptable understanding of what that prior utterance was doing (requesting, assessing, complaining, etc.) but reveals a 'misunderstanding' of some reference in that turn. In (1), recorded in a civil defense headquarters in the immediate aftermath of a hurricane, the public relations officer is requesting information from the chief engineer for distribution through the mass media:

(1) (CDHQ, I, 52)

A: Which one::s are closed, an' which ones are open.

Z: ((pointing to map)) Most of 'em. This, this,  
 [ this, this

A: [ I don't mean on the shelters, I mean on the roads.

Z: Oh!

Z's treatment of A's first turn as a request for information seems unproblematic, but the understanding he shows himself to have of the referent of 'ones' is rejected as incorrect.

Similarly, in (2), B has called in a report to a fire department.

(2) A: Now what was that house number you said [ you were—  
 B: [ No phone. No.  
 A: Sir?  
 B: No phone at all.

- A: No I mean the uh house number, [ Y—  
 B: [ Thirty eight oh one?  
 A: Thirty eight oh one.

Here again, it is the reference of 'number' that is the trouble source, in spite of the apparently clear term 'house number' in the initial request.

A somewhat different sort of trouble is involved in (3), but still one of reference. B is visiting in A's city, after not having seen her once-close friend for many years. They are arranging to get together, later in a day on which B will be seeing another old friend.

(3) (DA, 2)

- A: Well I'd like tuh see you very much.  
 B: Yes. [ Uh  
 A: [ I really would. We c'd have a bite,  
 en [ (ta::lk),  
 B: [ Yeh.  
 B: Weh— No! No, don't prepare any [ thing.  
 A: [ And uh— I'm not going  
 to prepare, we'll juz whatever it'll [ be, we'll  
 B: [ No!  
 I don't mean that. I min— because uh, she en I'll  
 prob'ly uh be spending the day togethuh, so uh:: we'll  
 go out tuh lunch or something like that. ·hh So I  
 mean if you:: uh have a cuppa coffee or something, I  
 mean [ that uh that'll be fine. But [ uh  
 A: [ Yeah [ Fine.

Here the issue appears to be the proper understanding of the term 'prepare'. When B enjoins A not to 'prepare anything', A appears to understand that as 'preparing something special' or 'fancy', and her response, in agreeing to the injunction, displays that understanding. B then undertakes to show that this was not the intended reference of her injunction.

The three instances displayed above include a commonly recognized potential source of ambiguity (the pro-term in [1]), what appears to be a fully explicit reference, and what might be characterized as an 'interpretive error', in which a conventionally relevant instruction to a host(ess) ('Don't go to any trouble') is used as the way to understand something claimedly meant 'more literally' (although, of course, it is not meant 'literally' either, since the 'cuppa coffee' is to be prepared). I do not mean here to explore the full range of types of expression subject to such claimed misunderstandings of reference, nor do I mean here to explore

what might be involved in them getting misunderstood. Instead, the discussion will focus on another type of trouble — problematic sequential implicativeness (Schegloff and Sacks 1973: 296).

The trouble in the following instances is not the intended referent of some word or expression, but the sequential import of the utterance or turn as a whole. That is, the issue is what action is being done by/through some turn or turn component, and accordingly what type of talk/action is relevant or appropriate next. Because different analyses of prior turn implicate different types of talk in next turn, next turn can display the analysis its speaker has made of prior turn and can thereby trigger an effort by initial speaker to initiate repair if a misunderstanding is claimed. The discussion below briefly examines four types or sources of problematic sequential implicativeness.

One aspect of a turn's talk which can issue in trouble is whether it is 'serious' or 'nonserious'. Some years ago, Sacks (1972: 41–49) noted that the determination of the feature which he termed 'joke/serious' was deeply consequential for the analysis of what a speaker was doing, and what that implicated for recipient in next turn. He noted that the feature 'joke' was 'simple' and the feature 'serious' was 'complex', in the sense that if it were determined that an utterance was a joke, then whatever the vehicle for the joke was, whatever its topic or the type of talk it employed (such as insult, promise, etc.), AS A JOKE it made laughing a relevant next action — it sequentially implicated laughter. On the other hand, if an utterance was understood as serious, then what it was doing needed to be determined for each particular utterance and the appropriate response fitted to what was being done by that particular utterance — there would be distinctive sequential implicativeness for each case.

In the present context, I am somewhat expanding one of these terms (as well as the scope of the domain; Sacks was intendedly dealing with 'assertions'). I prefer to use as a term contrasting with 'serious' the term 'nonserious', to capture the fact that various other tacks can be taken in a nonserious mode than 'joking', with different sequential implicativeness as well. Accordingly, the 'nonserious' side of the alternation is no longer 'simple' in structure and consequences, although the contrast in understanding and sequential implicativeness remains.

One source of misunderstanding in conversation involves this aspect of the treatment of turns, and it works in both directions. Utterances treated as 'serious' (as revealed by the ensuing talk of their recipient[s]) may be claimed to have been produced as 'nonserious', for whatever alternative interpretation they would get as 'nonserious'. And utterances treated as nonserious can have their seriousness, and thereby what they constitute as actions if treated as serious, insisted on.

Instance (4) is of the former sort. A and B are college students who are old friends who haven't spoken with each other for a long time. B has called A, and A interrupts the exchange of 'howareyou's in the opening as follows:

(4) (TG, 7-13)

A: I wan'dah know if yih got a-uh:m whutchimicallit. A:-  
     pah(hh)king place th's mornin'.hh

B: A pa:rkɪŋ place,

A: Mm hm,

(0.4)

B: Whe:re.

A: t! Oh:just anyp(h)la(h)ce? I wz jus' kidding yuh.

A appears to have been revivifying her relationship with B by mentioning a recurrent complaint of hers, about always having trouble finding a parking place, showing her (A's) capacity to instantly recapture the most detailed aspect of who B is. She does this by an utterance which would be a request for information if treated as a 'serious', but which is here meant as a mock request, as a way of mentioning B's recurrent problem and complaint. B, however, treats the utterance for what it would be as a 'serious', namely as a request for information, even though treating it that way leaves her with trouble in understanding what is meant. This trouble she tries to deal with through two repair initiations of her own ('a parking place', and 'where'). It is these repair initiations which display to A that B has taken her utterance 'seriously' and is trying to respond to it as a request for information, whereupon she undertakes a third position repair to address this 'misunderstanding', 'I was just kidding you.'

The misunderstanding can operate the other way as well, with an utterance treated as nonserious which its speaker then tries to have taken seriously. In (5), Jim and Bonnie are two 15-year-olds talking on the telephone around Christmas time. At one point, Jim's mother can be heard in the background, telling him to thank Bonnie for having sent a Christmas card. Then,

(5) (New Year's Invitation, 7)

J: Oh yeah, hey, than [ks a lot for the Christmas card,

B: [Yeah, I heard.

B: I hea:rd heheh, okay =

J: = Yeah, really, hey, thanks a lot for it.

B: Sure.

(0.8)

B: I didn' think it'd get there 'cause:: (·) y'know I didn' know your  
 (0.5) zip code or anything like that.

Here it appears that Bonnie, having heard the mother's instructions in the background, does not deal with Jim's thanks as a 'serious' doing of a 'thank you', but as a ('mere') compliance with a requirement. This is displayed by her response. To a doing of 'thanks' some acknowledgement is a sequentially implicated next turn — as, for example, the 'sure' which Bonnie does after Jim's insistence on the seriousness of his initial utterance. But Bonnie's response to the initial utterance is not such an acknowledgement, but a claim to have heard the instructions with which Jim is complying, a response which thereby treats Jim's utterance as compliance, whatever he is actually saying. This understanding Jim undertakes to repair with his 'yeah really' and a redoing of his 'thank you'. Note that Bonnie then provides not merely an acknowledgement, but, after a gap, some display that her treatment of his 'thank you' as serious was itself not merely *pro forma*, as she goes on to express serious worries about the delivery of the card.

Trouble can arise, then, in the analysis by recipients of a speaker's turn with respect to its seriousness. Different findings on the serious/nonserious feature entail different analyses of what action(s) the utterance is doing, and what next actions are sequentially implicated. One source of 'misunderstanding' endogenous to talk-in-interaction is in the seriousness vs. nonseriousness of the talk.

In a second set of instances, a turn produced to do one action is taken by its recipient to be doing a different action, but no single general feature such as 'seriousness' appears to be involved. Rather, it appears that certain categories of action appear to be 'favored'. One such favored analysis of action is 'complaint'. Utterances apparently produced to do other actions are treated as having been complaints. Instead, then, of 'misunderstanding' operating 'in both directions' as with seriousness, utterances apparently built to do other actions are understood as complaints, but the opposite is not the case (or is not systematically so; for an instance, see Schegloff 1984: 33–34; it may be that misunderstandings in one direction get repaired, but those in the other direction — away from complaints — do not).

In (6), two middle-aged sisters are speaking on the telephone, having failed to get together recently in spite of a number of plans to do so. Well into the conversation, and very likely as an initiation of a closing section for the conversation (see Schegloff and Sacks 1973; Button, forthcoming a, forthcoming b), B returns to that theme.

(6) (NB, )

B: Well, honey? I'll prob'ly see yuh one a' these day:s,

A: Oh::God yeah,



- B: [ Uhh huh!  
 A: [ We—  
 A: B't I c— I jis' [ couldn' git down [ there  
 B: [ Oh— [ Oh I know  
 A: I'm not askin [ yuh tuh [ come dow—  
 A: [ Jesus. [ I mean I jis' I didn' have  
 five minutes yesterday

That A understands B to have lodged, or renewed, a complaint about the failure to get together is displayed in her proffering of an excuse ('I just couldn't get down there.' 'I didn't have five minutes yesterday.'). That this display is so understood not just by us as academic analysts but was so seen also by B is displayed in her consequent denial of this understanding ('I'm not asking you ...'). A complaint is here (mis-)understood, where a closing initiation was apparently intended.

Excerpt (7) is taken from a group-therapy session with several adolescent boys and one adolescent girl. Dan is the therapist; all the others mentioned or speaking (the latter include 'Al' and 'Roger') are 'patients'.

(7) (GTS ?, )

- D: I was saying at the very beginning, at the very beginning, just what Louise said about Stephen and Al, or what she's saying now about Ken and Al, was true about Louise and Al. There was an alliance there. See Al tends, it seems, to pull in one or two individuals on his side (there). This is part of his power drive, see. He's gotta pull in, he can't quite do it on his own. Yet.  
 A: W'll—  
 R: Well so do I.  
 D: Yeh. [ I'm not criticizing, I mean we'll just uh look  
 R: [ Oh you wanna talk about him.  
 D: Let's just talk.  
 R: All right.

Initially, it appears, Dan is understood by his interlocutors to be producing a complaint about Al, especially at the end of his turn. There are certainly features of his turn which provide for such an analysis, for example in the formulations of failure on Al's part ('he can't quite do it on his own') and in references such as 'power drive'. That Dan has been so understood is made evident, for example, in Roger's response, which is to assert solidarity with his mate, to take on the onus of the complaint himself. That Dan sees this response by Roger as reflecting an understanding of Dan's earlier talk as complaint is, in turn, displayed in his

rejection of that understanding — ‘I’m not criticizing.’ And, indeed, even before Dan reformulates what he was talking about that was ‘misunderstood’ as complaining, Roger reunderstands Dan’s talk as a form of topic initiation.

In (7), as in (6), some noncomplaint talk is understood as a complaint, and this occasions a repair to address the misunderstanding. Specific alternative actions are involved, rather than general features of utterances, such as serious/nonserious. Whether there are other systematic pairings of action types implicated in such misunderstanding is as yet unestablished, as is the possibility that some action categories are distinctively vulnerable to being misunderstood, or are specially favored interpretations, even when mistaken.

Another source of ‘misunderstanding’ is a property which is relevant to a limited class of utterances. Some utterances are interpretable in either a ‘constructive’ or a ‘composite’ manner. These terms (which I think Sacks first used for this distinction as long ago as 1964 to avoid the controversies attached to terms like ‘literal’ vs. ‘idiomatic’) are meant to capture the difference between an understanding constructed from the sense of the parts of the utterance and one not reducible to its parts. Different modes of understanding an utterance along these lines engender different analyses of what the utterance is doing, and hence differential sequential implicativeness. Recipient’s next turn can, then, reveal differentially which action was understood to have been done, and which mode of understanding was applied to the utterance.

In (8), Mr. Greenberg is a caller to a suicide prevention center talking to a member of its staff about efforts to arrange ‘help’ for his problem.

(8) (SPC, 74)

- G: Well what did Miss Jevon say when you spoke to her.  
 S: She said she would be glad to talk to you and she would be waiting for your call.  
 G: Boy, it was some wait. Everyone else in that clinic has just been wonderful to me. Both the diabetic clinic and the psychiatric clinic. It’s just that woman.  
 S: Well, what are you going to do, Mr. Greenberg.  
 G: Well that’s true. When you are a charity patient, when you are a beggar, you just can’t do anything about it, you just have to take what’s handed out to you, and—  
 S: No, I mean about yourself. What are you going to do for yourself. You were wondering what to do for yourself, you called me and told me you were thinking about having yourself admitted to a state hospital ...

The trouble-source turn here is S's 'Well, what are you going to do, Mr. Greenberg.' Understood 'constructively', this is a request for information about recipient's plans. Understood 'compositely', it is a form of assessment or a form of stance taking — 'doing hopelessness' or doing 'coming to terms with one's circumstances'. These two actions are differentially sequentially implicative. To a request for information, such next turns are relevant as giving information, withholding information, disclaiming information, etc. To an assessment, such next turns are relevant as 'do agreement or disagreement', 'coalign with the stance or reject it', etc. (Pomerantz 1984). Accordingly, when Mr. Greenberg responds by agreeing, 'Well that's true ...', he shows himself to have understood the prior utterance compositely, as doing assessment and surrender. S then undertakes to initiate repair to address that 'misunderstanding'.

In (9), B has called a radio talk show (or 'call-in show' or 'chat show', etc.) to discuss a recently encountered problem in driving her automobile.

(9) (BC, Beige, 14)

B: ... but— hh lately? I have fears a' driving over a bridge.  
((silence))

B: A:nd uh seems I uh— I just can't uh (sit)— if I hevuh haftuh cross a bridge I jus', don't (go an' make-uh-do the) trip at all.

A: Whaddyuh afraid of.

B: I dun'kno:w, see uh

A: Well I mean waitam'n. What kind of fear is it. 'R you afraid yer gunnuh drive off the e:dge? 'R you afraid thet uh yer gunnuh get hit while yer on it? [ What.

B: [ Off the edge 'r sumthin.

The trouble-source turn here is 'Whaddyuh afraid of'. Apparently it is available to alternative hearings — constructively as a request for information, here asking for a detailing of the fear, and compositely as something between a reassurance and a jeer, as in 'There's nothing to be afraid of'. As a request for information, the utterance inquires about something persons are vernacularly responsible for knowing: that is, the content of their own consciousness. As a reassurance/jeer, the utterance 'implies' that there is nothing to fear. The response 'I don't know', then, shows its speaker to be addressed to the latter hearing of prior turn and to be doing an agreement with the stance adopted in it. In the following turn, the speaker of the trouble-source turn initiates repair to get redone what was 'meant' in the first instance.

In both these instances, recipients have adopted the composite interpretation of a prior turn which was accessible to both composite and

constructive understandings. In both cases, as well, this has promoted a hearing of the trouble-source turn which rendered it 'rejective' of some trouble or complaint the recipient had previously presented. Because we are dealing here with a highly restricted class of utterances, instances are infrequent. It is unclear at this point whether 'misunderstandings' related to the constructive/composite feature are unidirectional (composite always preferred to constructive) or bidirectional, or whether what is relevant is the 'action analysis' arrived at by interpreting the trouble-source turn one way or the other (that is, that interpretation will be adopted which renders the talk 'rejective', a kind of mechanism for paranoia). Note, however, that in both instances the repair initiated to address the trouble in understanding is couched in specifying terms; it redoes the trouble-source turn through specifying types of 'parts' of it, suggesting thereby an orientation by the speaker of the trouble source and the repair that the composite/constructive issue is involved.

The fourth source of 'misunderstanding' to be touched on here is related to a particular type of practice sometimes used by participants in talk-in-interaction — what I will call the 'joke first'. This practice ordinarily involves 'second speakers', that is, speakers talking in some sort of second position, such as recipient of a first part of an adjacency pair talking under the constraint of producing a second pair part, or speaking in a next position in an exchange or round in which comparison is relevant (such as exchange or round of stories, experiences, positions, possessions, etc.). The practice involves doing a 'joke first'; that is, before providing the serious 'next' which is sequentially relevant, the participant provides a joke first. Regularly, such 'joke first's are produced as intentional misunderstandings of the prior talk which has set the terms for the joking speaker's talk.

In (10), two janitors are discussing a recent incident in the neighborhood when one of them, in the course of opening his mail, comes across his income tax refund check.

(10) (US, 47)

J: WAIDaminnit, I gotta run ahead. Dad(gummit), this is,  
at least ·hh eh— fifty thous'n dolluh [ ( ) ]

V: de-ehh [ He got iz god

J: [ you got your thing tuhday?

J: [ En I don' a damn what (door cu:z)

V: [ I got it heah.

V: [ Did you get—

- V: Lemme [ask yih did.  
 J: [AHHH hah hah [hah— yeh— heh-heh!  
 V: [Didju getchor thing tuhday,  
 J: Wha:t.  
 V: Your thing.  
 (0.6)  
 J: Mah thing?  
 V: Yea:h=  
 J: =I keeps my thing with me aw:l [the time. =

Here, Vic asks James several times whether he got his 'thing' today, apparently intending thereby to refer to his tax refund. James, however, elaborately sets up an intentional misunderstanding (by his use of several repair initiators, 'what' and 'my thing', to display 'an understanding problem') in which he treats 'your/my thing' as a reference to the male sexual organ, which he then uses as the basis for a 'joke first' response — 'I keeps my "thing" with me all the time.'

In (11), several students are conversing in a dormitory. One of the several conversations, in which anthropology students are involved, takes the following tack.

- (11) (Front Desk, 4)  
 J: You study the Tiwi?  
 R: Tea Wee (leafs). [Tell people (fortune).  
 J: [No, the Tiwi (0.2) the Tiwi of  
 North Australia.  
 R: I've heard of them.

Here R teasingly adopts/mimics a speech impediment in which 'l' is rendered as 'w', rendering 'Tiwi' as a faulted version of 'tea leaf', as the basis for an intentional misunderstanding of the prior turn as 'You study tea leaves?', which the sequel 'Tell people's fortune' then reveals.

In (12), a group-therapy session with adolescents is in progress. One of the 'patients', Ken, has just gotten a notice from school reporting his work to be unsatisfactory, and the therapist, Dan, addresses himself to the matter.

- (12) (GTS, 3:43)  
 D: Well, whaddya y'gonna do about it.  
 (0.2)  
 K: Give it to my parents and have em sign it,  
 D: No, I mean about hh  
 K: heh  
 D: Not this, [I'm not talking about this.  
 K: [heh heh  
 (0.4)  
 D: What are you gonna do about it.

Here the intentional misunderstanding focuses on the 'it' in Dan's initial inquiry. He appears to be asking what Ken is going to do about the unsatisfactoriness of his school work. Instead, Ken understands it to refer to the notice he received from school, which ordinarily must be signed by parents and returned to the school so that the authorities will know that the parents have been informed.

Note that these three instances of intentional, 'joke' misunderstanding employ what is a common source of real misunderstanding — troubles in reference interpretation. Example (12) turns on a error in pro-term interpretation as did (1) above; (11) involves a misunderstanding of what appears to be a perfectly clear reference, as in the earlier (2); and (10) turns on an ordinary vs. a specialized sense of a term available to alternative hearings (prepare vs. prepare [in (3)], thing vs. thing).

It is not these intentional misunderstandings employed as the vehicle for 'joke first's that are the point here. The point is that in each case, the recipient of the 'joke first' (who is the speaker of the utterance which has been intentionally misunderstood) fails to treat it, and seems initially at least not to understand it, as an INTENTIONAL misunderstanding. This is revealed in the response to the 'joke first'; instead of laughter which is the type of response sequentially implicated by 'joke', these responses are third-position repairs — ways of responding to displayed misunderstandings.

Thus, (10) continues as follows:

- (10) a. J: =I keeps my thing with me aw:l [the time. =  
 M: [No:, no no [(man)  
 V: [ = I'm,  
 not [talkin about dat,  
 M: [He means— he means—  
 J: [AHH hah hah hah!  
 M. He [means dat [(ti:ng.) nhinh!  
 V. [Di:dju getchor thing, t'da: [y,  
 J. [Yeh I got  
 it.  
 V: [(Well, OhWo::w )!  
 J: [Yeh I got it, I know whatchu mean I dus kiddn(hh)  
 eh eh heh! Q. Whh I got it (owright).  
 V: Okay).  
 J: A(hh)heh a'ri. I got my thi::ng,

Both Mike (another party to this conversation) and Vic undertake to repair an apparent misunderstanding on James's part, thereby revealing their own misunderstanding in not seeing that it was a 'joke'. Note that

James explodes with laughter after Mike and Vic initiate repair, but there is no trace of it earlier; James has done his 'joke first' with a 'straight face', with no anticipatory laughter showing. This appears to be part of doing 'joke first'. Note as well that after the 'success' of the joke first — here, in luring its recipients into an unsuspecting misunderstanding — James produces the 'serious' response, the serious second pair part which the joke had deferred — 'Yeah, I got it.'

In (12), the joke-first speaker has also apparently kept a straight face and thereby lured his recipient into thinking that a misunderstanding in need of repair has occurred. Then after third-position repair has been initiated, laugh tokens reveal the joke (perhaps preceded by a smile, for the first laugh token in the transcript is from Dan, not from Ken; no video is available for this data source). Thereupon, the question is 'reinstated', as it was in (10), and is addressed 'seriously'.

In (11), the sequence is aborted when a neighboring conversation supercedes the one in which this sequence has occurred.

In examples (10), (11), and (12), what is 'misunderstood' is an intentional misunderstanding, used as the vehicle for doing a joke in one specified type of sequential environment. Of course, this 'misunderstanding', displayed by initiating third-position repair, may itself be 'unserious', may itself be a mock misunderstanding. It can then serve as an alternative to the laugh which an appreciation of the joke as 'a joke' would make sequentially appropriate. Treating it as a misunderstanding is, then, a way of denying or ignoring its claims as a joke (an observation made by Gail Jefferson some years ago). One way or the other, the projected trajectory of the sequence is derailed. When the intentional understanding is not 'misunderstood', it is accorded a brief laugh, and its speaker then makes a transition from 'joking' to 'serious' mode, usually with a turn-initial 'no' and gives a second 'response', as in (13) below.

In (13), A and B are two college students, B in a 'continuing education program' whose classes meet in late afternoons and evenings, discussing their class schedules. B has asked about A's schedule with the remark, 'So, yer only in school late on Wednesdays then'. A then details her 'schedule':

(13) (TG, 425–442)

A: ... like Tuesdays I don't go in until two thirty,  
(0.5)

A: E [ n I'm home by fi:ve.

B: B [ mm hmm  
(0.3)

A: I have— th'class is two thirty tuh fough.  
(0.5)

...

B: Mm

A: En then, the same thing is (uh) jus' tihday is like a long day cuz  
I have a break,  
(0.7)

B: Hm:.  
(0.6)

B: ·hh— Not me:, hhuh uh-hhuh ·hhh! I go in late every day hh!

A: Eyeh hh

B: [No this'z— No I have my early class tihday et  
four thi:rdy.

With 'Not me' B comes to a projected second part of a contrast, the contrast to 'yer only ... late on ...'. Her first tack is a 'joke first'; the sense in which she 'goes in late every day' is a different sense of 'late' than pertains to her friend, for one goes to school on a daytime schedule, while the other goes on an evening schedule. This 'joke' (such as it is) gets a small laugh from A, whereupon B shifts to 'serious' mode via 'No' and produces her serious contrasting schedule. It is this little laugh which third-position repair deprives 'joke-first' speakers of.

IV. Having grouped the sources of 'misunderstanding' under examination into problems of reference and problems of sequential implicativeness respectively, we did not press for the sources of reference troubles but did examine four apparent trouble sources engendering apparent misunderstandings.

It is important to note that there do not seem to be systematic relationships between the types of trouble source and the form taken by repairs addressed to them. In noting in an earlier paper (Schegloff et al. 1977) that the occurrence of repair is not prompted only by the occurrence of error, an important step was taken in disengaging trouble (error and nonerror) from the practices employed to deal with it. That separation is important to register and exploit, if correct. In the past, workers in this area have found themselves largely caught up with error, or the more general category 'trouble'; it appeared that a theory concerned with dealing with trouble would require first a theory of the trouble to be dealt with. Not only such obvious cases as that of Freud, but also contemporary concerns with speech error, speech pathology, etc., and concerns in both cases to address these troubles have come to focus largely on theories of error/trouble production.

However, the claim of work on repair in conversational analysis has been that the organization of repair is at least to some degree autonomous in this respect, and that it can be understood without having in hand an



adequate theory of error. That would reflect a capacity on the part of participants in talk-in-interaction to deal with trouble without having to have an adequate theory of trouble. Clearly, the practices of repair can be to some degree fitted to the type of trouble being repaired. Word searches take a different form than do misarticulation replacements. But word replacements take a largely undifferentiated form, whatever the considerations that have engendered the replacement of some part of the prior talk — whether errors in word selection, changes in what the talk is being used to do, recipient-designed shifts, etc.

So also for third-position repair initiations. Although some features of such repairs are directed at particular features of misunderstanding-revealing turns, for the most part the practices of such repair do not require a typology of misunderstandings or their trouble sources, nor a theory of how such misunderstandings come about.

Nonetheless, in the course of assembling data for the study of repair, one almost necessarily gathers data relevant for the study of trouble sources as well. The effort in this paper has been to exploit that opportunity to begin to specify those aspects of the organization of talk-in-interaction per se which may be vulnerable to 'misunderstanding'. For it is through their realization in aspects of the organization of talk-in-interaction itself that cultural, social, and speech-community differences get converted into troubles in interaction.

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## Notes

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1. Perhaps most prominent here is the work of John Gumperz and his associates; see Gumperz (1982a, 1982b).
2. Thus a byproduct of this byproduct is that a number of otherwise disparate phenomena here get at least a passing introduction.

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