MISCOMMUNICATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE INTERACTION: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

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1 Introduction

This paper seeks to characterise the conversational procedures whereby speakers manage to achieve intersubjective understanding in foreign language interaction (FLI). Participants’ local interpretive processes are investigated here by focusing on the detailed, fine-grained examination of the ways in which comprehension troubles are interactionally handled. Rather than a disturbing factor, miscommunication is viewed in this study as a resource, a ‘rich point’ in communication (Agar 1993, 1994 quoted in Hinnenkamp 1999).

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

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1 Following Wagner (1996, 1998), the term foreign language interaction (FLI) is used in this paper to refer to conversations involving at least one non-native speaker of the language of communication.
the *raison d’être* of much intercultural communication research\(^2\). This scientific interest, however, has not stimulated a critical debate on the theoretical models and research methodologies 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’.

As regards the theoretical underpinnings of most miscommunication research, a large number of studies 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 had great impact on the analytical treatment comprehension troubles have received. The classic distinction between *non-understandings* and *misunderstandings* (Gass and Varonis 1991), for instance, is based on researchers’ external analyses of what they perceive as communication difficulties. One consequence of this has been the *objectification* of misunderstandings, that is their treatment as phenomena that can be, on the one hand, isolated from the contexts where they occur, and, on the other, dissociated from the speakers that construed them (Hinnenkamp 1999).

This paper 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 from a corpus of authentic service interactions gathered by the researcher at the main Tourist Information

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\(^2\) This does not imply miscommunication is more frequent in *intercultural* than in *intra* cultural 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 FL discourse.
Centre (TIC) in Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain, between November 1997 and March 1998.

This paper is organised as follows. First, a definition is provided of the notion of miscommunication as it is used in this paper. Second, an overview is presented of background research on miscommunication in FLI. In Section 4, an empirical approach to miscommunication is put forward. Specific examples are provided which illustrate the theoretical points made. Finally, the interactional construction of miscommunication is explored by examining two extended extracts from the corpus. The main findings of the study are summarised in the conclusion.

2 The notion of miscommunication

Following Gass and Varonis (1991), miscommunication is employed in this study as an umbrella term. It is meant to cover all instances of observable trouble in interaction. The use of the word “observable” underscores a fundamental aspect of our approach to comprehension difficulties, i.e. their locally and interactionally defined character (Hinnenkamp 1991, 1999; Banks et al. 1991). Miscommunication, as it is understood here, does not exist independently of conversationalists’ interactional work. Rather, a specific stretch of talk is considered an instance of miscommunication only when participants show their orientation to it, that is only when trouble is made interactionally relevant. As Hinnenkamp claims ‘identifications and localizations [of repair] are intersubjective achievements and do not exist per se’ (1991:102).

(Bremer et al. 1996).
3 Background research on miscommunication in FLI

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 communication as the correct and complete exchange of information between speaker and hearer (Bazzanella and Damiano 1999; Gass and Varonis 1991; Varonis and Gass 1985). Communication is successful if the message encoded by the sender and the message decoded the receiver are ‘symmetrical’ (Gass and Varonis 1991:127). Meaning is, thus, equated with speaker meaning. 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). Meaning is not something that exists in a social and interactional vacuum but rather something that is negotiated and jointly constructed by speakers in local and situated ways.

Underlying information-transfer approaches to communication is the belief that complete intersubjective understanding can not only be achieved but also objectively identified. 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 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, i.e. one which is ‘identical for all practical purposes’ is then achieved. As a result, a different perception of what communicative success means emerges:

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 interactively. In the former case, attempts at remedying the trouble are made; in the latter case, they are not.

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 Example 2). Secondly, implicit in the definition is the conflation of two different phenomena, i.e. that of noticing a communication difficulty and that of making it manifest. It is assumed that speakers, when confronted with a comprehension

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3 Accordingly, miscommunication is seen as a deviant phenomenon by scholars working within this paradigm.
difficulty, will always and under all circumstances attempt to repair 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. 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? Is not the fact that participants do not orient to such 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 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)
The following extract (1) contains an example of what would commonly be referred to as a ‘misunderstanding’, that is an illusion of understanding between speakers (Bremer et al. 1996), even though it is not made interactionally relevant4.

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:  
02 *AS1:  
03 → *ENQ:  
04 *AS1:  
05 *ENQ:  
06 → *AS1:  
07  
08 *ENQ:  
09 *AS1:  
10 *ENQ:  
11 *AS1:  
12 *ENQ:  
13 *AS1:  
14 *ENQ:  
15 → *AS1:  
16 *ENQ:  
17 *AS1:  
18 *ENQ:  
19 *AS1:  

4 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.
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 librería/llibreria, 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’ 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 perception 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 FLI. 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 communication troubles. 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 trains that go to south Spain ↑ # could you tell me about flooding ↑ # Seville?

02 → *AS1:  yes you &k you:: must to catch from here.

03 → *ENQ:  +^ <is it> [/] is it possible to go there ↑ # I was told there were [-] <is much flooding> [=] slower # and trains do not run.
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 talk⁵) 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 TCU (Sacks et al. 1974) an opportunity is provided, in the form of a pause, for the interlocutor to take the floor and produce a reply to the service request. However, AS1 does not take

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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. 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*, and also in her use of the present simple instead of the present continuous in *trains do not run*. Notice as well her use of the noncontracted 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 i 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*. 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 skilful. With whatever pieces of information she has been able to gather, she has produced a response which is broad enough to be 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

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6 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 *floods*.

7 This seems to be a common feature of AS1’s interactional behaviour (c.f. 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?*).
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 she is satisfied with the information she has been supplied, 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. Speakers know that. 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. The separateness of these two activities is illustrated by the following excerpt (3).
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 into the discos or?
02
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. The excerpt starts off with EN1’s formulation of an information request (lines 01 and 02). 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 establishes AS1’s previous intervention as problematic (line 04). This claim is based on the fact that EN2’s turn pursues the same interactional goal as EN1’s turn in line 01. The aim is still to find out how one is supposed to dress to be allowed into a nightclub. 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

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8 A detailed analysis of the communication difficulties that emerge during this interaction is provided in section 5.1.
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 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). 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 little. The

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9 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.

10 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.
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 apologising behaviour. But on the other hand, 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 explicate 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 face. 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 03. 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 05). Here again she uses the same strategy as earlier on, i.e. the use of minimal laughter. It seems clear to both participants that communication has gone astray. It is not the case, as Wagner (1996:232) 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 03 and 05, 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 06 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

The aim of the previous section was to illustrate with specific examples the ways in which empirical investigations of miscommunication phenomena ought to proceed. We showed that an empirical perspective often involved excluding from studies of miscommunication conversations where the analyst, from an outsider’s perspective, knew that mutual understanding had not been achieved. We further argued that an empirical analysis of
miscommunication required the detailed examination of participants’ orientations to trouble in conversation. In this section we intend to carry out a detailed investigation 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 dancing around here?
08  
09 → *AS1: sorry?
10  
11 → *AS1: mhmhm.
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 the problem to be one of non-understanding, as evidenced by his repetition in line 10 of the troublesome turn. It is significant to note here that this turn is almost identical to the previous, problematic one. We could say that, contrary to what some SLA theorists (Long 1983) claim, the native speaker seems to be making no effort to make his output comprehensible to his interlocutor. This 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. 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 have done 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)\(^{11}\) and the conversation proceeds. It seems evident from this example that it is impossible to attribute communication difficulties in FLI to one single cause or speaker\(^{12}\). 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

This final section on miscommunication is intended to illustrate how a misunderstanding

\(^{11}\) Note here that AS1 feels the need to make her understanding explicit in line 26 (ah yes!) in order to prevent further conversational trouble.

\(^{12}\) 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).
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 (5).

**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 and # it’s here approximately # in the eighty five ## Passeig de Gràcia #0_3 number eighty five.**
  %act: writes exact address on a piece of paper.

08 *XXX: **#0_4.**

10 → *ENQ: <Passeig de Gràcia> [=! reading] **eighty five okay # y: Qantas?**
  %tra: Gracia Avenue [=! reading] eighty five okay # and 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?
24 *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 and #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.
%tra: oh no no # Qantas.

30 *XXX: #.

31 *AS1: <cuántos> [>]?
%tra: how many?

32 *ENQ: <busco Qantas> [<>].
%tra: I'm looking for Qantas.

33 → *ENQ: una otra aerolinea [?] #0_1 Qantas # en Barcelona.
%tra: one another airline [?] #0_1 Qantas # in Barcelona.

34 *XXX: #0_1.

35 *AS1: eh ## cuántas oficinas de British?
%tra: eh ## how many British Airways offices?

36 *ENQ: no no Qantas eh: # Qantas uhm British Airwa:ys # uhm Garuda: # otro.
%tra: no no Qantas e:h # Qantas uhm British Airwa:ys # uhm Garuda: # another.

37 *AS1: +^ you have a lot # maybe <yo que sé> [=! quicker].
%tra: you have a lot maybe I don't know
%act: looks up information in guidebook.

38 *XXX: #0_4.

39 *ENQ: teléfono aquí.
%tra: phone here.

40 *XXX: #0_3.

41 *AS1: this list.
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 at all 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 NN 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 advocated an empirical treatment of miscommunication phenomena. In so doing, we have called into question some of the working assumptions of previous approaches to the topic. We have postulated the adoption of a participants’ perspective which tries to describe the procedures whereby speakers themselves manage 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 oriented to 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’ own local assessments of the interactional outcome.

In analysing miscommunication we have shown that in FLI misunderstanding, like understanding, is a jointly constructed activity, in which both participants have their fair share. We have seen how, by failing to pay heed to the interlocutor’s social action, participants contribute to enhance communication difficulties. Finally, we have provided
evidence for how native speakers’ construction of his/her interlocutor as a non-competent speaker can bring about communication difficulties where none might otherwise exist. Further detailed studies of miscommunication are needed so that comparisons across settings and/or speakers can be undertaken.

**Transcription procedures**

The conversations analysed in this paper have been transcribed following the procedures established in the *LIDES Coding Manual* (LIPPS Group, forthcoming). 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.

**Bold** indicates stretch in English

**Plain** indicates stretch in Spanish

**Italics** indicates stretch in Catalan

**Underlined** indicates undecidable language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+^</td>
<td>latched utterance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td>pause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#figure</td>
<td>length of pause (min 1 sec)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[...]</td>
<td>overlap follows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[/-]</td>
<td>false start without retracing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xxx</td>
<td>unintelligible material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>###</td>
<td>longer pause (&gt;1 sec)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[=! text]</td>
<td>paralinguistics, prosodics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[&lt;]</td>
<td>overlap precedes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[/]</td>
<td>retracing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>without correction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
< > scope symbols
: lengthened vowel :: longer lengthening of vowel
[?] 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

References


Ferguson, C.A. 1971. Absence of copula and the notion of simplicity: A Study of Normal


Seedhouse, P. 1998. CA and the analysis of foreign language interaction: A reply to


