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MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND UNOFFICIAL KNOWLEDGE IN INSTITUTIONAL DISCOURSE[1]

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1. Introduction

Communication is a complex human activity that is successful most of the time. This, however, does not mean that understanding is granted or that it is always the case. Misunderstanding is a regular non-extraordinary feature of human interaction, whether communicative interaction is cross-cultural or not (Dascal 1985; Brown 1995).

Despite its non-extraordinary character, misunderstandings, and the repair sequences that may follow them, constitute complex phenomena which require invoking diverse theories and perspectives to achieve comprehensive explanations (House 2000). This paper aims to show that we must approach the study of ordinary misunderstandings from an eclectic or transdisciplinary perspective if we want to fully grasp what is at stake during the (in)comprehension process in discourse.

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The starting premise, then, is that only if we tackle the study of misunderstandings from different angles can we gain insights into what is happening in interaction: what the trouble source or trigger of the misunderstanding is, the type of reasoning processes and interpretation mechanisms of the parties involved in misunderstandings, the effect of emotions and politeness in filtering reactions to misunderstood talk, the social assessment of speech events, the instantiation of mental schemata across conversational sequences and the type of sequential organization of the interactional structure of misunderstood and (un)repaired speech.

My aim in this paper is to bring different strands of research together and apply them to the analysis of a sequence of misunderstanding and repair from institutional dialogue; special attention will be paid to the unofficial knowledge about the social situation, and how this explains the misunderstanding and the resulting power structures in discourse.

2. Triggers of misunderstanding

Different researchers point at different causes and sources of misunderstanding (see Bazzanella & Damiano 1999; Ross 1994; Brown 1995; Levinson 1992; House 2000; Yus 1990, among others). In this sections I present a summary of different triggers of misunderstanding in communication.

Triggers of misunderstanding can arise for different reasons: external or participant-related. Participant-related triggers of misunderstanding can, in turn, be divided into those involving the speaker and those involving the hearer. Among the **external** causes for misunderstanding we can identify disturbing background noise and/or troubles related to the use of a foreign language. Interacting in a different language/culture may increase the likelihood of misunderstanding. **Participant-related** triggers of misunderstanding can be associated with the speaker's benevolence and capacity. As regards the former, the **speaker** may suppress information that the addressee needs in order to make sense of what is being said or make use of ambiguous

forms. As regards capacity, ambiguity may still be a cause and the speaker may also miscalculate the ability of the listener to interpret meaning on the cues provided.

Sources of misunderstanding may also be related to the **listener**. The listener may not have heard or may not have been listening. Even when listening, the addressee may not be able to interpret a current utterance because s/he is still processing a previous utterance or does not realize that there has been a change of activity type (Levinson 1992). Also, the addressee may not understand or recognize part of the utterance, the meaning of some words, or have difficulty with other linguistic levels such as the interpretation of intonational contours. Another possibility is for the addressee to understand the linguistic meaning of an utterance without being able to make sense of it in the current context (Thomas 1995). Finally, an addressee may understand the meaning of the utterance but may reach some sort of deficient, partial understanding due to lack of the cultural knowledge needed for a richer interpretation.

These summarize the different triggers of misunderstanding and partial understanding that may occur in interaction. Brown (1995) makes another important point related to understanding, the extent of understanding, and participants' needs and willingness to cooperate in interaction. The author argues that, while ensuring cooperation, speaker and hearer may have different needs and goals. Understanding is unproblematic as far as the hearer understands enough for his/her needs and goals at a given moment in a given interaction. Brown (1995) argues strongly that the idea of a 'correct' interpretation is untenable given speaker's and hearer's different goals. The notion of correct interpretation, therefore, should be replaced with a weaker notion of adequate interpretation, adequate, of course, from the point of view of the hearer and his/her needs and goals. This weaker notion is crucial in dealing with cases of partial understanding and misunderstanding.

3. Understanding (mis)understanding

3.1. Understanding is not warranted in communication

Whatever the trigger of a misunderstanding or the extent of our understanding, misunderstandings constitute an ordinary feature of human communication. This amounts to relying on a model of communication in which understanding is not granted. And this is one of the main claims of the ostensive-inferential model of communication posed by Sperber & Wilson (1986/1995). When we communicate, we wish to share our thoughts, ideas, emotions, etc. with others. However, for these authors, communication is not a matter of replication or duplication of thoughts but rather, it entails a creative model of transformation and interpretation. This interpretive view of communication implies that your understanding of what I am writing is not a reproduction in your mind of what I am thinking. Rather, you are constructing thoughts of your own which are more or less closely related to mine (Sperber 1996).

The main processes in human communication are ostension and inference. If a communicator wishes to communicate a representation, all she has to do is provide evidence of her thoughts (and this constitutes ostensive behaviour), enough evidence so that the audience will attend to the evidence and will infer her thoughts from the evidence she has given him (Sperber 1995). "Ostensive-inferential communication consists in making manifest to an audience one's intention to make manifest a basic layer of information" (Sperber & Wilson 1995: 54). According to this model of communication, understanding is not warranted because it takes into account that the evidence provided by the communicator needs to be combined with internal information that the audience selects in order to make sense of the initial evidence. The reasoning process that starts with the linguistic evidence and reaches some conclusions about the speaker's meaning is the inferential process which occupies a central place in cognitive pragmatic accounts of communication.

The relevance-theoretic view of communication is compatible with researchers that view communication in terms of the interaction of bottom-up (language-related, decoding) processes and top-down (schema-based, inferential) processes in discourse (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain 2000). However, relevance theorists take a step further in proposing a comprehension procedure.

3.2. Relevance theory and verbal understanding

As Wilson (1993) states, understanding an utterance amounts to seeing its intended relevance. The relevance of information in a context is defined in terms of cognitive effects and processing effort in such a way that:

(a) the greater the cognitive effects, the greater the relevance; and

(b) the smaller the processing effort, the greater the relevance.

Cognitive effects can be derived by strengthening or contradicting assumptions the audience already has or by deriving contextual implications. Processing effort is affected by the form of incoming information and by the size and accessibility of context. The relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure, then, indicates that hearers spontaneously follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects.

Relevance Theory argues that what distinguishes verbal communication from other types of communication is that speakers actively help the listeners understand messages. However, the linguistically encoded form of the utterance is only a starting point to infer speaker's meaning. The processes in comprehension are:

(i) decoding of the linguistically encoded meaning to obtain a logical form;, which is usually fragmentary and incomplete;

(ii) recovering explicit meanings or explicatures, through inferential processes of disambiguation, sense and reference assignment and enrichment of the logical form;

(iii) recovering implicit meanings or implicatures;

(iv) throughout the process of comprehension hearers select appropriate contextual assumptions with which to process the new information to achieve relevance, that is, they activate adequate cultural schemata (Anderson 1978) which function as inferential frameworks within which to make sense of ostensive behaviour.

The level of linguistic decoding is related to bottom-up processing and cannot work on its own; it needs the selection of appropriate contextual assumptions (schema-

based, top-down processing), that assist the inferential process of recovering explicit and implicit meanings. Schema theorists argue that our internal knowledge is stored in our memories in an organised way, forming cultural schemata. Schemata contain content and formal knowledge and also knowledge of the genre which includes information about social adequacy, purpose of the interaction and participant relationship framework. As Anderson (1978: 68) says: "to comprehend a message is to place a construction upon it that gives a coherent formulation of its contents".

3.3. Interpretive strategies

Sperber (1994) identifies three interpretation strategies that hearers may adopt in approaching the task of verbal comprehension. Their use depends on whether hearers consider their interlocutors – the communicators – benevolent and competent; benevolent but not competent and neither benevolent nor competent. The strategies are: (i) naïve optimism; (ii) cautious optimism, and (iii) sophisticated understanding . Each interpretive strategy requires an extra layer of metarepresentation, and allows a hearer to deal with more complex interpretive possibilities.

Naïve optimists trust their speakers and consider them benevolent and competent, so they believe that the information provided by the speaker is worth attending to and that the search for relevance will not cause unnecessary effort. This strategy yields adequate comprehension only when the speaker is both benevolent and competent.

A *cautious optimist* is considered a more competent hearer because s/he assumes that the speaker is benevolent but not necessarily competent. Therefore, in the hearer's search for relevance, the cautious optimist does not stop at the first relevant enough interpretation but "at the first interpretation that the speaker might have thought would be relevant enough to him" (Sperber 1994: 12).

A truly *sophisticated hearer*, finally, assumes that the communicator may be neither competent nor benevolent and just intends to *seem* so. Therefore, a sophisticated

hearer, in following the path of least effort in the computation of cognitive effects, should stop not at the first relevant enough interpretation, not at the first interpretation the speaker might have thought would be relevant enough to him "but at the first interpretation that the speaker might have thought would *seem* relevant enough to him" (Sperber 1994: 16).

Different interpretive strategies offer different possibilities for interpreters to deal with potential miscommunication, as we shall see in the analysis.

3.4. Interpreting as a dynamic, revisable process

To further characterize how we communicate we must stress that understanding is not a sequential process but rather a dynamic, revisable process. This implies that listeners do not just interpret incoming utterances, store understood meanings as fixed mental representations and move on to the interpretation of the next utterance (Brown 1995). In discourse interaction, interpretation is dynamic and, as information comes in, we can revise our earlier interpretations and ratify, modify, or reject them reaching new interpretations. In this sense, we can talk of different discourse processing modes: forward inferencing or prospective anticipation, retroactive inferencing or restrospective adjustment, and garden-path interpretation or re-interpretation (Rost 1994; House 2000).

3.5. Misunderstanding in interaction: repair sequences

Furthermore, in dialogical interaction the pair speaker-hearer must not be considered equivalent to the pair communicator-interpreter. Communicators primarily speak but also interpret the hearer's reactions and the interpreter primarily understands but also produces short messages that guide the communicator's contribution. Besides, in social interaction, the roles of speaker-hearer change and the listener that misunderstands an utterance or realizes that the interlocutor has misunderstood something can initiate repair sequences. Conversational analysts have dealt with the study of conversational turns that signal and aim to repair misunderstandings and the organizing structure of the resulting discourse sequence (Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks

1977; Jefferson 1975; Schegloff 1992). In the course of this paper, the conversational-analytic procedure will be invoked to explain several sequences of conversational misunderstanding.

After having highlighted the cognitive and discursive nature of understanding and of the handling of misunderstandings, we must turn to the social and emotional dimensions, since these too bear on misunderstandings. Following Wodak (1992: 495):

> Restricting the definition of understanding to small and even the smallest of samples (which would correspond to Ethnomethodology and Conversational analysis […] and to the cognitive dimension alone (thus neglecting the whole problem of context, emotions and society) […] destines such attempts to fail.

3.6. Misunderstanding and social interaction

In social interaction, participants' perceptions of contextual variables such as their relationships with interlocutors in terms of power, familiarity, or liking, and their perceptions of the interactional purpose and requirements of the event, determine the form of messages and the way interaction proceeds. Van Dijk (1997) argues that contexts are mental constructs in memory continually made relevant by and for participants in discourse. In explaining different cases of misunderstanding in this paper these contextual aspects will be invoked and assessed as to how they affect our linguistic choices in discourse. The assessment of participants' relationships and the social requirements of the genre constitute the type of knowledge that can be called 'unofficial', since it entails knowledge of unwritten social norms and expectations. Unofficial knowledge of this type, then, constrains our linguistic choices and the interactional structure of institutional discourses. In this respect, linguistic politeness theory will be of help, since it aims to explain language form in relation to the communication of interpersonal meanings in social interaction (Brown & Levinson 1987; Fraser 1990).

3.7. Interpersonal meanings and emotions

Emotional factors such as anxiety or anger also play a crucial role in interpretation. Similarly, in discourse production the speaker works under some activated schemata and has an interactional goal, a content to communicate, a social situation to assess and interpret and an *emotional filter*, all of which will tailor his/her communicative choices. For example, in her study of cross-cultural talk, House (2000) starts from the premise that emotions tend to severely interfere with discourse interpretations. She argues that in interaction, we activate a sort of emotional filter "which serves to modify, mitigate or intensify illocutionary options under the constraints of perceived social norms and conventions and in view of anticipated potentially face-threatening reactions of the interlocutor" (House 2000: 153). This filter allows speakers to modify an emotional reaction, consider politeness and finally suppress or alter an initially intuitive reaction and produce, instead, strategically adequate discourse.

In our analysis of a conversational sequence of interaction below this emotion-driven discourse framework will be invoked and related to Sperber's (1994) interpretive strategies to explain the unfolding discourse moves.

4. Misunderstanding and repair sequences: An eclectic analysis

In this section, I aim to analyse a sequence of misunderstanding and repair (see below) making use of the different theoretical frameworks outlined above. In our example, taken from the film *Working Girls*, there is an initial situational misunderstanding and a sequence of verbal interaction aimed at repairing it. The general misunderstanding stems from the activation of the schema "my first day at a new job" according to previous experience but without taking into consideration an important change that crucially affects the schema, and all the knowledge that helps us predict, produce and interpret behaviour (Anderson 1978).

The main character, TM, has been working as a secretary or personal assistant in her recent past. In fact, the scene which is the object of analysis is her fourth 'first day at a new job' in less than a year. Her knowledge of the situation, therefore, is

considerable and this affects the subsequent activation of the schema as adequate to previous experience: she has ample evidence to believe that she knows how to behave in these circumstances This type of knowledge is unofficial in that it is based on prior experience and not on officially spelled out norms of behaviour. However, this time, and due to a recent successful business deal, she is not the personal assistant anymore: she is a top executive who has her own personal asisstant. The key point is that she does not realise that this is the case, and this unselected contextual assumption affects her understanding of the situation and therefore, her interpretation and verbal production throughout most of the sequence.

The scene begins when TM arrives in the typing pool. She first takes a look at (what she believes is) her new boss's office and finds a woman on the phone with her feet up on the desk. She immediately interprets that this woman – AB – is her boss (when in fact AB is TM's personal assistant) so TM waits outside, until AB finishes her phone call and meets her:

1	AB:	Ah I didn't hear you come … I'm Alice Baxter [holding out her hand]
2	TM:	Tess McGill [handshake]
3	AB:	I was just … using the phone
4	TM:	Yes well … that happens [laugh]
5	AB:	How about some coffee?
6	TM:	Sure just tell me where an-
7	AB:	No I'll I'll get it … Oh! How?
8	TM:	Milk and sugar please … [coughs] thank you
[TM sits at secretary's desk]		
9	AB:	uh … Miss McGill
10	TM:	Yes?
11	AB:	That's your desk … in there [pointing]
12	TM:	I don't think so
13	AB:	Oh yes … I sit out here
14	TM:	Sorry I thought the secretary would sit out here
15	AB:	That's right I'm the secretary … if it's ok I prefer assistant .
[slowly, she gets up and goes to her office]		

To explain the different misunderstandings in the above example, I have segmented the interaction into three sequences, each containing a misunderstanding.

1) introduction + giving excuses (turns 1 to 4)

2) offering coffee (turns 5 to 8)
3) sitting outside (turns 9 to 15)

4.1. Sequence 1 (introduction and giving excuses): interpretive strategies

TM's initial unofficial knowledge of this situation makes highly salient and accessible contextual assumptions of the following sort: (i) she is the new personal assistant of a boss; (ii) secretary's desks are in the pool, outside the boss's office. Her encyclopaedic knowledge of this situation is not contradicted by what she finds in her new workplace, so the following assumption strengthens her beliefs about this situation: (iii) bosses – and not secretaries – speak over the phone in the office with their feet on the desk.

With this discourse framework, AB comes out of TM's office, sees her and gives excuses/apologizes in turn 1: *Ah I didn't hear you come.* TM does not understand the utterance as intended, as an excuse for being inside her (TM's) office, on the phone, with her feet on the desk. So TM fails to comment on this excuse, as we can see by the pause after AB's utterance, so AB goes on and introduces herself through a self-identification move. In turn 2, TM still fails to comment on the prior excuse and identifies herself instead. TM's lack of uptake of the excuse, accepting or minimizing it, is *noticeably absent* so AB continues giving excuses for her behaviour in turn 3: *I was just ... using the phone*. Again, TM fails to understand the higher-level explicature in this turn, that is, the apologetic attitude, and also the intended weak implicatures that AB, as secretary never really uses the office phone, that it will not happen again, etc. Although the apology is misunderstood, this time a response is elicited in turn 4: *Well yes, that happens*. This polite agreement to an apparently prior irrelevant comment is misunderstood by AB as minimizing the offence after an excuse.

But I would like to pay more attention to these initial interactional moves, and more specifically to turns 3 and 4:

3	AB:	I was just … using the phone
4	TM:	Yes well … that happens ha ha

As mentioned above, Sperber (1994) identifies three interpretation strategies that hearers may adopt, depending on whether they consider their interlocutors

benevolent and competent (naïve optimism); benevolent but not competent (cautious optimism) and neither benevolent nor competent (sophisticated understanding).

In our example, the excuse in turn 3 *I was just ... using the phone* does not achieve relevance for TM, since she is unable to retrieve the intended interpretation. As she already knows that AB was on the phone, the utterance in 3 can be classified as a case of what Wilson (2000) calls *accidental* irrelevance. As her reply in turn 4 suggests, in coping with this case of accidental irrelevance she does not question AB's utterance, and therefore acts as a naïve optimist. Wilson (2000: 137) suggests that a "[n]aively optimistic hearer would restrict himself to the linguistically encoded meaning, would be unable to find an acceptable interpretation, and communication would fail". However, a cautious optimist would assume that the speaker is benevolent but not necessarily competent, so, in the search for relevance the hearer would try to find an interpretation that the speaker could believe it would be relevant for the hearer. A sophisticated hearer would go one step further and only stop at the first interpretation that the speaker could believe it would seem relevant for the hearer.

It could be argued, then, that in interpreting turn 3, TM applies the strategy of naïve optimism and is unable to deal with accidental irrelevance. As Wilson (2000: 137), states a cautious optimist can avoid misunderstandings in cases of accidental relevance and of accidental irrelevance, where a naïvely optimistic hearer would fail.

However, it can be argued that in analysing interpretive strategies in interaction, these stages of comprehension must be complemented with a study of other types of constraints on interpretation: more specifically, social and emotional constraints.Due to her unsuccessful management of this case of accidental irrelevance TM can be classed as a naïvely optimistic understander. However, her belief based on unofficial knowledge rules that she holds an inferior social position - in virtue of her being the PA and her interlocutor her boss - places her in a difficult position from which she cannot openly question the relevance of her boss's utterance. TM may have acted as a cautious optimist and may have thought about the speaker's thoughts in identifying her meaning,

that is, she may have tried to look for AB's intended interpretation; as a result, she may have even realized that AB could not intend to be relevant by giving her information she already knew. But her social position and her unofficial knowledge as regards the type of relationship appropriate to that context may act as the emotional filter on interpersonal relations discussed by House (2000) and prevent her from asking AB about the relevance of her words and questioning her boss. Instead, TM produces a trivial comment, a socially appropriate discourse move with token agreement and a humorous note. In this way, TM strategically minimizes the threat to AB's positive face posed by TM's realization that she has acted irrelevantly.

Therefore, at this stage of interpretation, emotional reactions and social considerations of politeness interact filtering the interpreter's response when she next becomes the speaker.

Going back to our example, TM's utterance in turn 4, aimed at mitigating the face threat derived from AB's faux pas (Lakoff 1973), achieves relevance for AB in a way not intended by TM. For AB, TM's *Well yes ... That happens (laugh)* may indicate strongly that TM is not going to reprimand her for using the office phone. This is a case of accidental relevance, and of naïve optimism on the part of AB who takes the first accessed, relevant enough interpretation as the intended one, as can be attested by the friendly manner in which interaction proceeds.

4.2. Offering coffee: third position repair

5	AB:	How about some coffee?
6	TM:	Sure just tell me where an-
7	AB:	No I'll I'll get it … Oh! How?
8	TM:	Milk and sugar please … [coughs] thank you

The interaction, then, and as a result of AB's new beliefs, proceeds in a friendly manner, with AB offering to make some coffee in turn 5. But this again is misunderstood and TM, under the contextual assumption that she is the secretary, which unofficially entails that it is secretaries and not superiors who prepare coffee,

interprets that she should make it. AB's offer to make some coffee is taken as a suggestion that TM should make it. This is clearly expressed in turn 6, where TM produces a preferred second part to what she believes is a request: beginning with the agreement in *sure* and followed by a request for information needed to comply with the request, related to where she should go and make the coffe. As soon as AB realizes what TM has understood she sets to repair the misunderstanding. This is what Schegloff (1992: 1301) calls a third position repair: "repair after an interlocutor's response (second position) has revealed trouble in understanding an earlier turn (the 'repairable') in first position".

This third position repair in turn 7 contains two of the four likely components of this type of turn: the repair-initiator "no" and the repair proper in the form of an explanation which contrasts with the understanding of the 'repairable' in turn 5 displayed in turn 6 (the second position). For Schegloff, this type of repair is related to maintaining intersubjectivity and addresses "trouble in the socially shared grasp *of the talk and the other conduct in the interaction*" (1992: 1301, original italics).

The quick direct repair in turn 7 is followed in the same turn by a request for information about how the interlocutor would like her coffee. In turn 8, TM answers using lexical deference politeness markers such as 'please' and 'thank you'. These indicate that her operating discourse interpretation frame has not yet changed and that the assumption based on the unofficial knowledge that it is not bosses who prepare coffee for their secretaries still holds.

4.3. Sitting down at the outside desk

Finally, when TM sits at the secretary's desk, AB initiates a repair that will solve the whole situation: it is here that AB acts as a cautious optimist and, in trying to make sense of TM's behaviour, she metarepresents TB's thoughts and thinks on what grounds TM would expect her behaviour to be relevant. AB communicates explicitly that TM's desk is inside the office and therefore strongly implies that she is not the secretary but the boss. However, the contextual assumption that TM is the secretary is

so strong that she expresses disbelief towards the explicature *I don't think so* in turn 12 and misunderstands, therefore, the implication that she is in fact the boss. Further, AB's explicit reply *Oh yes ... I sit out here* still does not do away with the misunderstanding: this utterance does not achieve relevance for TM by contradicting her assumption that she is the secretary and deriving the implication that she is the boss. Instead, it achieves 'accidental relevance' in this context by contradicting her assumption that secretaries sit outside and implicating that they sit inside offices in this particular firm. It is at this point that AB, adopting the strategy of a cautious optimist who can think of a speaker's thoughts and cope, therefore, with misunderstandings, explicitly talks about her post within the firm *That's right I'm the secretary ...if it's okay I prefer assistant.* This strongly implies that TM is the boss who has the power of calling her 'secretary' or 'assistant'. After this utterance, TM finally understands she is not the secretary and, reassessing her moves, gets up and enters her new office.

Before concluding the analysis of this last sequence, I would like to comment on the negotiation of social identifies in turn 15. In outlining her analytical framework for rapport management, Spence-Oatey (2000) distinguishes between an individual's quality face and her/his identity face. While *quality face* refers to an individual's desire for others to assess us positively in terms of our personal qualities (competence, abilities, appearance, etc), *identity face* refers to an individual's desire for others to sustain our social identities and roles and it is concerned "with the value that we effectively claim for ourselves in terms of social or group roles, and is closely associated with our sense of public worth" (Spencer-Oatey 2000: 14).

In turn 15 of our example, AB negotiates her identity face. In requesting of TM that she call her assistant instead of secretary, she signals disagreement with a potential face relationship related to the notion of the word secretary. Therefore, she manages this disagreement by claiming for herself the type of identity face she desires: that related to the use of the word assistant.

5. Interactional consequences of misunderstandings: discourse and power

In the example under analysis, the non-activation of the contextual assumption that TM has a dominant role has interactional consequences throughout the sequence. It is AB, the assistant, who initiates the exchanges producing first pair parts: when they introduce each other, when she excuses her behaviour, when she suggests that they should have some coffee and finally when she tells TM where her desk is. In all these cases, the assistant – who is socially in a non-dominant position – initiates the exchanges. However, as Van Dijk (1989) argues, control of discourse is usually in the hands of dominant participants.

The misunderstanding of this situation and of the power relationship between participants based on unofficial knowledge of social norms explains not only TM's interactionally passive behaviour but also the deference with which both participants treat each other. As Scollon & Scollon (1995) indicate, a hierarchichal system of politeness is typical of interactions characterised by the asymmetrical distribution of power. In these circumstances, the dominant participant uses positive politeness or involvement strategies in addressing the non-dominant participant while the latter employs negative politeness or independence strategies in addressing the former. In fact, this is what we encounter in a previous 'first day at a new job' situation in which TM engages. In this prior case, TM is Katherine Parker's personal assistant, who addresses the former using positive politeness strategies, eg. *Hi. I'm Katherine Parker. You must be ... Tess*. However, TM uses negative politeness strategies in addressing KP. For example, in finding out that they are nearly the same age, this interaction follows:

KP: Really! Well, I'll be 30 next tuesday. We're practically twins
TM: [laughts] Except that I'm older

While KP shows exaggerated interest in TM ('really') and emphasises common ground by assuming that they share the same wants, TM tries to distance herself from

the common ground thus avoiding imposition and indicating that they hold different (hierarchical) positions.

KP is in control not only of the degree of politeness that she is willing to accept but also of the discourse. She is unofficially acorded this type of power by the situation and her social role in this institutional interaction: she gives TM instructions and performs interactionally initiating moves or first pair parts. Towards the end of their first interview, in which KP has been telling TM what she expects of her, she encourages her to speak up and share her ideas. But when TM uses positive politeness strategies KP reminds her that she hasn't been given permission yet, and that she is her superior:

KP:	It's a two-way street with my team. Do I make myself clear?
TM:	Yes, Katherine
KP:	[rising and holding out her hand as signals of end of encounter] And … call me Katherine
TM:	OK
KP	So, let's get to work, shall we?

KP, then, controls the interaction and decides when the interview is over; and also decides what constitutes appropriate behaviour as regards the use of politeness strategies. After this experience – and going back to our analysis -, TM's unofficial knowledge includes the belief that appropriate behaviour for an assistant during her first day at work includes showing deference towards her new superior. She also expects the boss to initiate interactions and use involvement strategies. In turn, AB, the true assistant, also adopts defence strategies and, given TM's interactionally passive behaviour, feels obliged to initiate interactions.

The deference system found in our example characterizes the misperception of power relations and in it, coparticipants address each other employing mainly negative politeness or independence strategies (Brown & Levinson 1987). These are linguistically reflected in the exchange of apologies and excuses: AB apologises for being on the phone when TM arrives (turn 1) and TM apologises for her mistaken beliefs about where secretaries should sit (turn 14). Hedges of different sorts also

abound in this brief interactional excerpt: *just* (turns 3, 6); *well* (turn 4); *think* (turn 12); if-clause (turn 15) and other distancing mechanisms such as the use of *that* (turns 4, 11, 15) or *would* (turn 14); also, the impersonal non-assuming coffee offer in turn 5.

As we have seen, then, the non-activation of a crucial contextual assumption, then, produces misunderstandings that have interactional repercussions throughout the whole sequence. In this sense, Gómez-Morón (1997) deals with unintentional rudeness as a discourse phenomenon more ordinary among native speakers of a language than is usually thought of. This author argues that unintentional rudeness is related to speaker's ignorance and to sociopragmatic failure. In these situations, she finds that intentional rudeness on the part of the next speaker is decisive in restoring the interactional balance. In this sense, TM's ignorance as regards her new position, and the power that accrues from it, leads to a delicate socially inappropriate situation that is constantly attended to by both parties.

The sequence in which AB's polite offer to make some coffee is interpreted as a suggestion that TM make the coffee is a case in point. Interpreting the offer as a directive leads AB to think that she may have been unintentionally rude to TM. Therefore, in a direct way she repairs this misunderstanding by producing turn 7 'No I'll I'll get it'. This direct (unmitigated) order to her boss could be considered impolite. However, it is aimed at restoring conversational harmony. As Gómez-Morón (1997: 47) asserts: 'la descortesía aparece […] como comportamiento complementario de la cortesía' (impoliteness unfolds as a necessary complement to politeness).

Conclusion

Misunderstanding is an ordinary aspect of understanding and of interaction in general and to understand it we need to take a transdisciplinary approach. Communication is a complex phenomenon in which cognitive, social, discursive and emotional dimensions are involved. By applying different explanatory frameworks to the analysis of several

sequences of misunderstanding and repair we have proved that not a single perspective is enough, on its own, to explain the richness and complexity of understanding and misunderstandings in discourse. Furthermore, the role of participants' unofficial knowledge of the social requirements of the situation has proved to be central in understanding a sequence of misunderstanding and repair in institutional interaction. As House (2000) asserts:

> Given this complexity, any attempt at describing and explaining misunderstanding – let alone defining it in any straightforward manner – must adopt what Halliday (1990) has called a 'transdisciplinary' approach, i.e. one that transgresses traditional disciplinary boundaries and eventually comes up with an eclectic model comprehensive and powerful enough to handle diverse cases of misunderstandings (House 2000: 146).

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