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# Lack of Understanding, Misunderstanding and Language Acquisition

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## 1. Purpose and method

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that lack of understanding and mis-understanding are the main difficulties that anyone encounters who must communicate in a language, while at the same time learning it. In this paper we investigate what types of comprehension difficulties occur in this situation and what the mechanisms are that lead to the difficulties arising. Further, we want to initiate a discussion of the effects that lack of understanding and mis-understanding could have on linguistic interaction and on language acquisition.

The empirical basis for the paper consists in audio and video recordings of 1 male and 4 female adult Spanish speaking Latin Americans who are learning Swedish. The informants all have a low educational background. The examples, we draw on in the paper, come from a total of 10 recordings and span a period of roughly 1,5 years, from the first to the last recording. The recordings have contained the following types of activities: free conversation (2), describing one's own apartment (2), describing acted miniscenes (5), roleplay (changing a sweater without a receipt and sending a parcel by post) (4), purchasing in the central market of Göteborg (2) and interviews based on audio or video tapes which have been recorded earlier (2). The recordings have an average length of 0,5 - 1 hours and have subsequently been transcribed and analyzed. The material is not sufficient to draw any quantitatively representative conclusions, so all conclusions and proposals we present are to be regarded as being of an explorative nature.

## 2. Understanding, lack of understanding and misunderstanding

As a point of departure we start by discussing the concepts understanding, lack of understanding and misunderstanding. What is called understanding is perhaps the most important part of the processes that take place in receiving linguistic information. These processes are relatively complex and can vary with regard to degree of consciousness and control. Certain types of information are received with a high degree of consciousness and control, others more automatically without consciousness and control. What we mean by understanding consists of the processes that connect received information with already stored information and thereby place the incoming information in a meaningful context. Cf Allwood 1976.

The information is parallelly connected on a factual, normative and emotive level. Simultaneously with understanding factually, the individual also understands emotionally, i e he activates a more emotional attitude to the phenomenon the information concerns. These emotional attitudes, in turn, are often connected with

the needs and goals of the individual. Complex connections between goals, needs, emotional and factual understanding are then stored in memory, thereby affecting the motivation (i.e. needs and goals determining the behavior) of the individual.

Storage in memory also enables an individual, as a sender, to reproduce what he, as a receiver, has perceived and possibly understood. A misunderstanding, therefore, does not only affect an individual as a receiver but can potentially also influence him in the sender role and thereby have consequences for those whom he is communicating with.

Turning to lack of understanding and misunderstanding, we can perhaps characterize these phenomena in the following way. Lack of understanding occurs when a receiver cannot connect incoming information with stored information. There seems to be, at least, two ways in which this situation can arise:

(i) Relevant information is missing (e.g. one does not know what a Swedish May pole is since one has never encountered any such thing); (ii) A relevant strategy for connecting incoming with stored information is missing (e.g. one knows what a bed is but one has no strategy for connecting the Swedish word *säng* (bed) with this information. As will be discussed below, this problem can be made worse by such things as sociolectal or dialectal variation in pronunciation, or by differences between the spoken and the written representation of a word. A language learner may well know a word in writing without being able to recognize its standard spoken form or vice versa. Further, lack of understanding is a gradual phenomenon which can vary from a total lack to a more or less complete understanding. In fact, learning of vocabulary without access to a dictionary can probably, in many cases, be described as a process where one successively deepens one's understanding of words. Cf. Vygotski 1962 for a similar idea applied to children's acquisition of vocabulary.

Misunderstandings, on the other hand, occur when a receiver actually connects incoming information with stored information but where the resulting meaningful connection must be viewed as inadequate or incorrect. Like understanding in general, misunderstanding includes processes which pertain to both factual and emotive information. Misunderstandings can therefore easily have consequences for an individual's motivation and goals. Lack of understanding and misunderstanding are, of course, not unrelated. The factors behind lack of understanding, namely missing relevant information and/or missing strategies for relevant connection, are also behind misunderstanding. The difference is that misunderstanding besides lack of understanding also involves an incorrect attempt at interpretation. Briefly, one can say that lack of understanding can lead to misunderstanding, if the lack of understanding is combined with one or more of the following states in an individual (cf. also p. 20 below):

- (i) the individual has strong expectations about the content of what is being said or done,
- (ii) the individual is not conscious of his lack of understanding or
- (iii) the individual is strongly motivated to interpret and understand.

### **3. What is misunderstood?**

A first question in investigating misunderstandings is the question of what is being misunderstood. We have tried to answer this question by investigating, on the one hand, what features of communicative behavior are misunderstood and, on the other hand, what types of content are misunderstood.

### 3.1 Expressive behavior

Potentially all aspects of linguistic communicative behavior, which have a systematic connection with definite types or features of content, could be misunderstood. That is to say, grammar, vocabulary, phonology and body communication can all be misunderstood. The misunderstandings we have actually found mostly concern vocabulary and phonology. This could perhaps be explained by hypotheses about acquisition order. It could also, at least with regard to the low number of examples of misunderstandings concerning body communication, be an artefact of the fact that our analysis partly is based on merely audio recorded material. Another possible explanation is that the body communication which has occurred has been of such a universal nature that no problems of comprehension have arisen. A third explanation is that the informants in many cases have felt insecure in many of the recorded situations and therefore have inhibited their bodily movements.

An interesting question is whether misunderstanding and lack of understanding can ever concern rules. Can one view lack of generalizations or incorrect generalizations as cases of misunderstanding or lack of understanding? Perhaps, one here wants to answer yes if the rule concerns a systematic connection between content and expression (the *term expression* is here used in the general sense of Hjelmslev 1943) or between content, expression and context, but *no* if the rule is a purely phonological one.

In any event, we have in the present investigation assumed that mis-understandings involve, at least, a relationship between content and expression. Below, we present the expression features we have, so far, observed giving rise to misunderstandings, in the sense that incorrect conclusions have been drawn about what content they represent. All examples presented are excerpts from transcriptions of actual recordings. The informant names which are given, are pseudonyms. Besides traditional linguistic symbols we have used the following extra symbols in the examples presented: + for pause, ++ for long pause, < > to enclose comment about preceding sequence, .: to denote that irrelevant utterances have been excluded, (...) to denote that a sequence has been too audibly unclear to be transcribed, and ... to denote that an irrelevant part of an utterance has been left out.

#### A. Phonology:

(i) From a recorded shopping trip in the Göteborg indoor market.

Interviewer: (Swedish) vad ska vi ta: ++ en grevé + en  
(English translation) what should we take: ++ a (kind + a of cheese)

bit grevé

piece of grevé

Luisa: en /vit/ grevé <questioning>

a white grevé

.

. Luisa: a a + en / bit/ grevé < b indeterminate>

piece of

a a + a grevé

white

Market dealer: a a

yes

(ii) From roleplay about changing a sweater in a shop without a receipt.

Salesclerk: vi kan *byta* tröjan

we can *change* the sweater

Nora: nej nej + jag vill ha en ny vit tröja

no no + I want a new *white* sweater

(iii) From an interview where the informant is describing his apartment.

Interviewer: ytterdörren ++

the exit door ++

Leandro: ut <questioning>

out

Interviewer: dörren

the door

Leandro: a

yeah

Interviewer: ytterdörren ja

the *exit* door yes

Leandro: (...) + a liten utdörren e här a

(...) + eh little *out* door is here eh

In the first two examples there is a confusion of the Swedish phonemes /b/ and /v/ and in the second example also of /i/ and /y/. In the third example probably /y/ is confused with /i/. Since the phonological system of Spanish does not have the distinctions /b/ - /v/ and /i/ - /y/ - / /, at least, a partial explanation of the misunderstandings is that Luisa and Nora guided by the phonology of Spanish incorrectly perceive what has been expressed in Swedish.

## B. Bodily-communication

The only example we have observed here, so far, is the following:

(iv) The interviewer says something that Leandro does not hear. Leandro then tilts his head up and backwards and lifts his eye brows (for him a signal that he has not heard). The interviewer interprets this as a signal for surprise and continues what he has to say with greater emphasis.

## C. Words and morphemes

Already the phonological examples which have been given above involve misinterpretations of words. In fact, all misinterpretations of words we have found presuppose some form of phonetic misinterpretation and vice versa. This is a consequence of the fact that we have not included incorrect generalizations of purely phonological or syntactic rules as misunderstandings.

(v) From an interview where the informant is describing her apartment.

Interviewer: du har två bord *intill* sängen

you have two tables next to the bed

Nora: (Who later reports that she understood *intill* (next to) as

*inte* (not)): jag har sängen jag kan inte sova

I have the bed I can not sleep

på golvet

on the floor

(vi) From a free conversation with Nora about her sick children.

Interviewer: ++ *hoppas det går bra då* ++

I hope it goes well then

*hoppas det går bra med flickorna*

I hope it goes well with the girls

Nora: n inte bra min flicka inte bra

n not well my girl not well

Interviewer: okej <laughs> *hoppas hon blir bra*

OK I hope she gets well

Spanish speaking interviewer: *él te decía que esperaba que mejorara*

he told you that he hoped that she gets

better

Nora: aha <surprised> *hoppas pero hoppas no es mono*

aha hope but *hope* is not monkey

(vii) From a roleplay where the informant is asked to think of something to send by post to South America. The Swedish speaking interviewer asks the informant to call for assistance from the Spanish speaking interviewer.

Interviewer: *nää + ha + äh + /ru ru:pa/*

*noo + ha + eh + call*

Nora: */rupa/ (... ) /ropa/ /ropa/*

Nora interprets Swedish */ru:pa/* (call) as Spanish */ropa/* (clothes).

(viii) From a conversation in a café where Nora wants to order Coca Cola for herself and coffee for the interviewer.

Nora: *en /koka/ å en kaffe*

a */koka/* and a coffee

Waitress: *e: två kaffe <wondering>*

*e: two coffees*

Nora: *nej en /koka/ en kaffe*

no a */koka/* a coffee

Waitress: *kaka <wondering> vi har mazariner bara*

cake we have (a type of cake) only

Nora: *bara <wondering>*

only

Auditively one can describe what happens in examples (v) and (vi) as a reduction of a certain speech segment to something one is acquainted with, *intill* (next to) becomes *inte* (not) and *hoppas* (hope) becomes *apa* (monkey).

Examples (vii) and (viii) also involve auditive similarity but in this case the similarity is cross-linguistic, */ru:pa/* becomes */ropa/* and */koka/* becomes */kaka/*.

#### D. Phrases

On the phrasal level we have only found one example. Also this example depends on a misinterpretation of phonological information - in this case stress.

(ix) From a discussion about the informant's apartment and the bedroom of the children.

Interviewer: *dom bor i dom bor i ett rum <ett stressed>*

they live in they live in *one* room

Nora: *dom bor i rum*

hey live in a room

Nora explains to us, in a later interview about the recording, that she has understood what the interviewer says as a question about whether the children live in a room at all. She has not noticed the focal stress on the word *ett* (one).

### **E. Rules**

So far, in our data, we have not found any evidence to suggest that informants systematically and regularly misunderstand any linguistic feature. This is so, in spite of the fact, that they, in production, show phonological and syntactic regularities which are clearly deviant from the target language norm. Thus, there does not seem to be any direct link between regular deviance in production and regular deviance in comprehension.

### **3.2 Content**

It is not as easy to state what potentially could be misunderstood with regard to content. Human attitudes, beliefs and concepts cannot be classified in any obvious way. We will, however, mention some types of content that could be misunderstood in the type of intercultural communication that initial language learners are engaged in, when they try to communicate with target language speakers in the target language.

Potentially, all differences in background information can give rise to misunderstandings. For example, information about art, music, literature, history, geography, economic and political systems. As a matter of fact, differences, that in our data turn out to give rise to misunderstandings, relate to information that relatively directly concerns the life situation of the informants in Sweden. We have found misunderstandings within the following domains of content: food, clothing, habitation, health, activity, attitudes and values. The domains are not independent. On the contrary, one can say that all misunderstandings we have found concern attitudes and values but within different spheres of life.

More concretely, we have found the following types of misunderstandings. We include examples we have already discussed since all of them, besides being misunderstandings of expression features, also are misunderstandings of content.

#### **A Expectations-concerning health, food, clothes and habitation**

A majority of the examples discussed above concern this type of expectations.

Health: example (vi)

Food: examples (i) and (viii)

Clothes: examples (ii) and (vii)

Habitation: examples (iii), (v), (ix) and (x) below.

(x) From a discussion of the informant's apartment.

Nora: ja: ++ den titta i min bokhylla + de:n är lite ++

yes: ++ it look in my bookcase + it is little ++

m ++ ja har: ja har tre blommor å jättefin blommor: ++

m ++ I have I have three flowers and very fine flowers ++

Interviewer: du har blommor i bokhyllan

you have flowers in the bookshelf

Nora: jaa ++ å mm blommor me me: ö boken <laughs>

yeah ++ and mm flowers also also eh the book

## B. Activities

(xi) From a roleplay where the informant is given the task of sending something to South America by post.

Postal clerk: vill du försäkra du får pengar tillbaka om

do you want to insure you get money back if

Leandro: nej nej jag betalar här

no no I pay here

The informant's expectations about sending things by mail include a procedure whereby the addressee pays all costs. However, they do not seem to include the idea of an insurance. When Leandro hears that he is getting money back, he therefore thinks that the postal clerk is asking if he wants the addressee to pay, which he does not.

## C. Attitudes and values

The following examples illustrates interpretation differences which in an interactive situation could give rise to misunderstandings. The informants' responses have been recorded separately but are here presented together.

(xii) The informants are asked to describe an enacted sequence where a woman asks a man with a lighter in his hand for fire. The man, when asked, puts the lighter in his pocket. The interviewer is one of the actors.

Magela: (in Swedish) It can be interpreted in different ways. It can be a situation between a Swede and an immigrant.

Interviewer: (in Spanish) Who is Swedish?

Magela: (in Spanish) The one who has the lighter.

(Magela knows that none of the actors is Swedish.)

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Ana: (in Swedish) You meet and you want a match he looks and you are an immigrant.

Interviewer: (in Spanish) Have you experienced a situation like that?

Ana: (in Spanish) No, but one can read about such things in newspapers.

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Nora: (in Spanish) The Swedes force you not to smoke. She wants to smoke but he is stupid.

(xiii) The informants are asked to describe an enacted sequence where a man rudely asks a woman to leave.

Leandro: (in Swedish) The boss is throwing out an employee.

Nora: (in Swedish) A couple which is quarrelling. The man does not want to talk to the woman.

An important role among the attitudes and values, we have found, is thus taken by fear of prejudice or discrimination. We have seen fairly clear examples of such fear in (vi) and (xii) and somewhat more unclearly in (v), (ix) and (x). The content of several examples are in part a product of an expectation of being denigrated or discriminated against. Hoppas (hope) is understood as *apa* (monkey), partly because of auditive similarity (in the variant of Spanish our informants speak there is no difference between long and short vowels, /h/ is not pronounced at all, and /s/ is often not pronounced in final position), but also because the auditive similarity is combined with an expectation of possibly being called a monkey. The same expectation of denigration also plays a role in the examples concerning habitation. Nora thinks the interviewer thinks that the children have no room, that she sleeps on the floor, that she has no books in her bookshelf. In example (xii) we further see how

expectations of denigration are combined with a feeling of powerlessness. The reply that Nora gives also shows that campaigns against smoking can enter the picture.

However, other factors as well as emotions and attitudes are relevant. We have already seen how insufficient vocabulary is involved in, for example, the exchange of *bit* (piece) for *vit* (white) and of *byta* (change) for *vita* (white pl) or of how insufficient interlinguistic similarity can lead to misunderstandings, /koka/ for Coca Cola and /ropa/ for clothes. An additional dimension is given by example (xiii) which indicates differences in interpretation which could just as well be determined by intracultural as by intercultural differences.

#### 4. Why do misunderstandings arise?

As we have seen, there is no simple answer to the question as to why misunderstandings arise. It is in all cases we have observed a multicausal relationship. Misunderstandings always arise as a consequence of jointly operating factors.

The basic trait is that one always tries to interpret all utterances in a way which is meaningful for oneself. What is meaningful is determined by factually, normatively or emotionally grounded beliefs about how the world in general functions, especially with regard to what can be supposed about other people's behavior toward oneself.

As aids in this process of interpretation one has, first, information about the case at hand which, on some level of consciousness, one has been able to apprehend and recognize. One also has a more or less rationally determined ability to associate. What one manages to apprehend is, of course, highly dependent on linguistic abilities such as phonematic discrimination, acquaintance with vocabulary, intonational patterns and grammatical construction types.

A closer analysis of the examples we have already discussed shows that they can all be seen as a result of an interpretation process, where the factors we have mentioned jointly are at work.

In example (i), Luisa understands that she should buy cheese and that the cheese is qualified by a word which perhaps can be said to consist of a bilabial voiced sound followed by the syllable *it*. Among the words she is acquainted with there is such a word, namely *vit* (white). Since this word semantically is compatible with the rest of what she has understood, she interprets the word as *vit* (white), but in so doing goes wrong, since Swedish also has a word *bit* (piece), which just like *vit* meets all contextually given conditions.

Luisa, then, guided by Spanish phonology, pronounces the word as /b it/ in talking to the market dealer. He, however, drawing on context, reinterprets the word as *bit*. That Luisa really interpreted the word as *vit* (white) becomes apparent when she later in the recording describes her purchase in Spanish, saying that she has bought white (blanco) cheese. The example is interesting, not least, because it shows that even as great semantic differences as between the words *piece* and *white*, in two successive misunderstandings, in a certain context can be neutralized and the interaction successfully brought to an end which is to the satisfaction of all parties.

Thus, lack in phonetic discriminatory power becomes decisive only when linked with an insufficient vocabulary, and an insufficient vocabulary becomes decisive



only if the purpose of the interaction does not allow the participants to have as different interpretations of the words used, as *white* and *piece*. Example (iii) also illustrates how a lack in phonetic discriminatory power, /y/ and / /, can be combined with an insufficient acquaintance with morphemes, *ytter-* (external) becomes (out). But, in this case, the semantic similarity between the two interpretations is so large that Leandro when he combines the morpheme *ut-* with *dörren* (the door) can construct a correct interpretation anyway.

In examples (ii) and (v) interpretations are illustrated which involve a greater degree of risk taking than in examples (i) and (iii). The informant in (ii) and (v) seems to perceive neither phonetic nor syntactic structure in a complete way. Rather she seems, to a much greater degree than in (i) and (iii), to be governed by semantic expectations. She interprets what she recognizes and tries to construe this as a complete interpretation which also emotionally matches her expectations. The fact that *intill* (next to) is interpreted as *inte* (not), thus, has just as much to do with Nora's expectations concerning the interviewer's opinions about her standard of living, as with the phonetic similarity between *inte* and *intill*.

The misunderstanding in example (iv) is of a simpler type than the others we have discussed. The same gesture - a tilt of the head upwards and back combined with raised eye brows, occurs both within the Swedish speaking and the Latin American Spanish speaking language communities. But the gesture has different interpretations (surprise and non perceived speech respectively). The interviewer is simply giving the gesture the Swedish meaning. Example (vi) exhibits even more extreme risk taking than the examples discussed above. The informant thinks she can recognize one or two words and interprets the whole utterance on this basis. The words she thinks she recognizes, in this way, acquire a key position for the whole interpretation.

Actually, what we have here been calling risk taking is probably an example of a very general strategy of interpretation used by language learners which we can call the *key word strategy*. (See Voionmaa 1984 for a discussion of this principle applied to speech production.) One focuses on the parts of a sentence one thinks one recognizes and then constructs an interpretation which matches one's understanding and expectations concerning the situation. The words which are believed to be recognized can thereby have a key position in two respects:

(i) They can trigger and determine interpretations with a much wider scope than the word or words which have been recognized. Cf example (xi), especially with regard to the role played by the phrase *pengar tillbaka* (money back).

(ii) They can anchor and justify an expected interpretation. The words the language learner recognizes are often words he expects to play a key role from a conceptual or interactive point of view. To recognize an expected word is seen as a justification for bringing in an expected larger interpretation. In certain cases, one can even say that the language learner more or less forces a sound sequence, which exhibits similarity with a sequence he is expecting, to have the meaning which is required in order to anchor and justify a certain interpretation. See e g example (vi) and (xiv) below.

(xiv) From a roleplay where the informant has been asked to change a sweater without having a receipt left. The sales clerk agrees to the change and wants to give the informant a receipt to make further changes possible.  
Salesclerk: ... du får tillgodokvitto ...  
you get (type of) receipt

Leandro:... jag lämnade min kvitto på bordet + där + å

I left my receipt on the table + there + and

Leandro hears the word *receipt* and then interprets according to his expectations - the salesclerk has asked him for a receipt - he has no receipt -this must not be disclosed if he is going to be able to change the sweater.

What we have here called the key word strategy can also be seen as one of the factors which facilitate for a language learner to segment the unknown speech stream that he encounters into meaningful units. The interplay between expectations and completely or partially recognized sound sequences should therefore be added to the phenomena earlier discussed by Slobin 1971 and Ervin-Tripp 1974, as determining the language learner's initial segmentation of the speech stream.

Even though it is mostly very rational to make use of one's preunderstanding and presuppositions in learning a new language, it sometimes, as we have seen, leads to misunderstandings. Extreme cases of misunderstanding and-lack of understanding can arise when one is governed by one's presuppositions and expectations to the extent that no room is left for the reactions of the interacting partner. These reactions can be neglected or reinterpreted to fit the assumptions governing one's behavior. For language learners this situation can arise if they in advance prepare a certain type of interaction and become so absorbed in carrying out what they have planned, that they do not notice that their target language speaking partner has not understood, or has been acting on assumptions which are different from the language learner's own.

Situations of this type seem to occur fairly frequently when one must communicate something important in a language one does not master. One's attention and linguistic ability are so fully taken up by what one is trying to say, that it does not become possible to take into account what one's interlocutors are saying. We have observed and in some cases also recorded interactions of this type when informants have gone to see Swedish power wielders.

(xv) From a recording where Leandro has gone to complain to his employer that he has not received his correct salary. Leandro works as a cleaner in a cleaning company.

Leandro: ja har en problem min lön

I have a problem my salary

Employer: med din lön <questioning>  
with your salary

Leandro: aa kommer inte bra

ah comes not good

Employer: har du inte fått den + eller  
have you not got it + or

Leandro: e: ja heter: Leandro

eh my name is Leandro

Employer: ja när när fick du lönen vicken lön

yes when when did you get your salary which salary

Leandro: bara här + titta + ja arbeta alla månader två timmar

only here + look + I work all months two hours

två timmar med tjugo minuter

two hours with twenty minutes

Employer: jaa

yes

Leandro: å: + ja ++ arb

and + I ++ wo  
 Employer: va sa du ++ va sa du  
 what did you say ++ what did you say  
 5 exchanges later  
 Employer: hur många timmar gör du per dag varje dag every day  
 <English>  
 how many hours do you do per day every day every day  
 Leandro: två timmar å tjugo  
 two hours and twenty  
 Employer: två timmar  
 two hours  
 Leandro: jaa  
 yes  
 Employer: å <questioning> du jo + du jobbar då i två timmar  
 and you wo + you work then for two hours

If we read Leandro's first four utterances and neglect the employer, we get a fairly coherent story. Leandro is trying to get across what he has prepared but does not manage to do this in a way which takes the employer's reactions into account. The employer reacts with incomprehension and, after a while, starts to elicit the same information Leandro has already given, in a way which conforms to his own expectations.

A slow rate of processing is also involved in another type of understanding difficulty we have found with some learners. Because of difficulties both in understanding and production their utterances have a delayed relevance which often is not noticed by their target language speaking partner. A question is directed at a language learner who then sets out trying to understand and answer. However, since the process is slow, the target language speaker thinking the first question has not been understood, asks new questions. When the learner eventually gives an answer to the first question, it is therefore no longer immediately locally relevant (Cf Allwood 1984) and can confuse the target language speaker. Cf also example (xvi).

(xvi) From a discussion about the informant's apartment. Nora wants to tell the interviewer about her oldest girl.

Nora: ... mi flicka: ++ heter ana hon har sänge en en:  
 ... my girl ++ is called ana she has bed a a  
 skrivbor: stol  
 desk chair  
 Interviewer: m m  
 m m  
 Nora: den e lite mattan + n  
 it is little the mat + n  
 Interviewer: var var e de rummet nänstans hon har ett  
 where where is that room ( situated) she has a  
 eget rum ++ din flicka har ett eget rum <questioning>  
 room of her own ++ your girl has her own room  
 Nora: n + n + en + hon hon min flicka e stor flickar + ja har  
 n + n + a + she she my girl is big girl + I have  
 tre flickar ana å maria den e stor rum + sovrum +  
 three girls ana and maria it is big room + bedroom +  
 hon en: matta m en en säng en alla leke alla golve  
 she a mat m a a bed a all play (toys) all floor

ligger leker mi flicka +  
lies plays (toys) my girl +

One of the most important types of preunderstanding for language learners is their earlier knowledge of language. Language learners often use their earlier linguistic knowledge to interpret components of the language they are learning. This is a completely rational strategy which can often give correct results. However, as we have seen, it does not always do so; /ropa/ cannot be used for *clothes* in Swedish and /koka/ cannot be used for *Coca Cola*. But this lack of transferability is in no way self evident. *Coca Cola* could have been called something like /koka/ perhaps /kukka/ in Swedish, and the word /ropa/ is related to the word *rob* (dress) which, even if it is archaic, still occurs in Swedish. One of the open questions in studies of adult language learning is therefore how they learn to use prior linguistic knowledge to produce and understand the new language. See also Voionmaa 1984.

Let us now briefly return to the question of how lack of understanding is turned into misunderstanding. As far as we can see the following factors are relevant:

- (i) fear of incorrect interpretations,
- (ii) needs to interpret and understand what is being said,
- (iii) expectations about the content of what has been said or done,
- (iv) adequate preunderstanding and ability - linguistic and otherwise,
- (v) occurrence of evidence for or against a certain interpretation.

Both lack of understanding and misunderstanding have their background in inadequate prior knowledge and ability. If the inadequacy is combined with a fear of making mistakes, a low need to understand or a lack of expectations about how what is said or done should be interpreted, the result will be a lack of understanding. But if the inadequacy is combined with a low fear of making mistakes, strong needs to interpret or strong expectations about interpretation, the risk increases that a misunderstanding will arise.

Another way of expressing this is the following: If there are good reasons for a certain interpretation, the learner will probably, unless he is extremely afraid of mistakes, adopt the interpretation as correct. If he has a need to interpret or expectations about the interpretation he will probably follow this pattern even when he does not have good reasons for his interpretation but only has lack of evidence against it. If he has very strong needs or expectations he might also neglect or reinterpret evidence which goes against an interpretation. A language learner who does not have such strong needs or expectations or who has a fear of mistakes will probably refrain from interpretation, unless his preunderstanding allows him to believe that there is good evidence for an interpretation. The result will be that he will exhibit lack of understanding more often than misunderstanding.

## **5. The effect of misunderstandings in interaction**

The question of what effects misunderstandings have on interaction between language learners and target language speakers is just as important as the question of why misunderstandings arise. In fact, as has been stressed in Gumperz 1982 the causes of misunderstanding are intimately connected with the interactions in which they arise and, thus, there is probably a very direct connection between the causes and effects of misunderstanding in interaction.

On a general level the effect of misunderstandings is that they always cause trouble in an interaction. The trouble can, however, be of a lesser or a greater kind. Below, we differentiate two main cases. Cases where misunderstandings are not noticed in the interaction and cases where they are.

### 5.1. Misunderstandings which are not noticed in interaction

The fact that a misunderstanding is not noticed does not mean that it has no effects on the interaction. On the contrary, the effects can be more far reaching than if it had been noticed. In our data, we have several examples of interactions where misunderstandings have been piled on top of each other, with the interactants helpless to do anything about it.

Their lack of ability to do anything about the misunderstandings are due to at least the following three reasons:

1) When two persons communicate in a language which one of them very poorly masters, often a general feeling of insecurity and an expectation of lack of comprehension develops. This has as a consequence that utterances that contain misunderstandings are not focussed but rather seen as a feature of a general lack of understanding in the interaction.

2) In the interactions we have recorded, especially the interviewers have a goal of keeping the conversation going. This, in several cases, has meant that strategies for maintaining a conversation without full comprehension have been developed.

These two factors together have the effect that conversations containing misunderstandings are continued with neither interviewer nor informant considering the possibility of a misunderstanding.

3) A misunderstanding might not have been noticed or might have been noticed by one of the parties only, without indicating it, because he wants to wait and see if things take care of themselves anyway. This strategy is also very common in conversations between linguistically fully competent speakers and has, by Cicourel 1973, been baptized the etc-principle. In order not to disturb the interaction one lets the message successively get clearer by listening to what is said. The "wait-and-see" strategy is often combined with a use of positive feedback givers. Cf Allwood 1982. This can easily lead to misunderstandings in a language learning context.

(xvii) From a roleplay about sending a parcel by post to South America.

Postal clerk: men om det går sönder

but if it breaks

Leandro: aha

aha

Even though Leandro says *aha*, he in a later interview about the recording says that he has not understood at all. He formulates the following principle for his feedback: "When I don't understand I say *aha* or *mm* in order to see if I can understand when I have heard more. When I understand, I say *yes* or *aha* and continue the conversation myself or repeat what the other person has said in new words." As an illustration of this see example (xix) below, where Leandro when he has understood says *aha* and follows up with a question.

This means that positive feedback givers like *aha* and *mm* are used by the informant in the sense of *continue I am listening*, without having an additional sense of agreement or understanding. However, this is not noticed by the interviewer who thinks that the *aha* means that Leandro has understood and therefore does not continue his explanation which, in turn, does not increase Leandro's possibilities of understanding.

In addition to the crosslinguistic differences that can exist in the use of positive feedback givers, the difference in interpretation between language learner and interviewer perhaps can be explained in the following manner. Positive feedback givers, both in Swedish and in Spanish, are used to indicate that one has apprehended, understood and allows or wants the other person to continue. In certain cases also agreement with what the other person has said is indicated. In the language learning situation the function of the positive feedback words is reduced. Because of comprehension difficulties they, more frequently than in normal conversation, only indicate that one allows or wants the speaker to continue. But since the learner does not mark that the other functions are absent, an interacting target language speaker can easily be misled.

## 5.2 Misunderstandings which are noticed in interaction

Lack of understanding and misunderstandings can also be noticed in interaction. The form this takes depends on the learners- ability in the target language and on what they think is the cause of the comprehension difficulty. From a rational point of view, at least the following four strategies ought to be possible for a language learner in order to solve comprehension problems. We are presupposing a more or less egalitarian type of interaction:

1. Activation of his own memory and cognitive processes.
2. Indication that he has not been able to apprehend and/or understand.
3. Creation of his own hypotheses to be checked with the conversational partner(s).
4. Asking the conversational partner(s) to clarify and/or change what they have said.

The strategies 2 - 4 presuppose strategy 1 and constitute alternative routes if strategy 1 does not succeed. Furthermore, 3 and 4 presuppose, at least, uncertainty about what is negatively indicated in 2, i e uncertainty about whether one has understood. In our material, we have found the following examples of the strategies:

### 1. *Activating the learner's own cognitive processes*

(xviii) From a conversation about the informant's apartment.

Interviewer: har du ett *bord*

have you a table

Leandro: /burt/ /burt/ <pensively>

(xix) From a conversation about the informant's apartment.

Interviewer: har du några /*lamper*/

have you any lamps

Leandro: *lamper* <pensively> ++

*lamps* ++

Interviewer: *lamper*

*lamps*

Leandro: *lampa* <pensively>

*lamp*

Interviewer: *som ger ljus*

which gives light  
 Leandro: aha vilken rum till exempel ++  
 aha what room for example ++  
 Interviewer: vardagsrummet  
 the living room  
 Leandro: vardagsrum ...  
 the living room ...

In both of the examples Leandro repeats a word in the interviewer's utterance. Examples of this type are common and can concern one or several words. The repetition can probably have at least the following three functions:

- (i) It leaves time for and activates mechanisms of recognition and understanding
- (ii) It activates memory storage related to auditive perception, understanding and speech production
- (iii) It indicates a need for help to interlocutors.

According to Sorenson 1967 repetition is used systematically for language learning purposes, in the first two functions, by the naturally multilingual indian population of the North Western Amazon area. Sorenson's report in combination with our own observations indicate that repetition can be an effective support for both learning, recognition and understanding. However, it is at present not clear whether the observed effects are due to the repetition as such, independently of the cognitive processes which accompany it. Example (xix) is worth an additional comment since it also illustrates the difficulties that can arise when spoken and written representations of a word are different. Leandro, in a later interview about the example, says that he recognizes the word *lampor* (the standard Swedish orthography for lamps) but that he could not recognize *lamper* (a standard Swedish pronunciation of the word).

Besides repetition of words, perhaps also what we have called the "wait-and-see" strategy can be seen as a strategy for activating the learner's own cognitive processes without focussing his interlocutors- attention on what he is doing.

## **2. Creating hypotheses to be checked by the interlocutors**

In many cases a language learner arrives at a possible interpretation but is uncertain about whether it is correct or not. One of his options is then to articulate his interpretation in order to have it checked by his interaction partners. (xx) is an example of this.

(xx) From a roleplay about sending a parcel in the post.

Leandro: vänta lite vänta lite vi pratar tillessempel  
 wait a little wait a little we talk for example

Leandro (continued): jag skriver adress min ...  
 I write address my ...

Leandro's strategy here is to check his understanding by specifying and exemplifying the explanation he has been given of how he should write the address on the parcel.

Besides specification other types of paraphrasing would also be possible, e g in Swedish introduced by the phrase *menar du* (do you mean), but we have, so far, not found any such cases in our data.

### **3. Requests for change of behavior or clarification**

This heading stands for a very large number of ways in which one can enlist one's conversational partner's aid in trying to improve one's understanding. One can imagine as diverse methods as, explicitly trying to regulate the utterances of a conversational partner so that they better watch the ability of the language learner, or asking the partner for explanations or clarifications of linguistic or non-linguistic phenomena. Cf Protano-Biggs 1984 for an attempt at analyzing some of the types of requests for clarification produced by language learners.

The following are the examples we have so far found:

(xxi) Attempts at regulating the speaker's behavior:

*vänta, vänta lite, vi pratar sakta sakta, kan du prata sakta*

wait wait a little we talk slowly slowly can you talk slowly

(xxii) Requests for clarification:

*vad heter den, X heter, kan du hjälpa mig*

what is it called X is called can you help me

Repetition of words like in examples (xviii) and (xix).

### **4. Indicating failure to apprehend or understand**

If no positive strategy succeeds one can signal to the speaker that one does not apprehend or understand. By using this strategy, the language learner leaves his fate to his partner's ability to do something about the situation and thereby initiates aid that would also, at least in some cases, have been possible to elicit by a more positive strategy.

The signals used to indicate lack of understanding or apprehension can be direct or indirect. In the indirect cases something is said which implies lack of comprehension or apprehension.

(xxiii) Direct indications of lack of understanding or apprehension

*jag förstår inte (din fråga), jag vet inte,*

I don't understand (your question) I don't know

*jag vet inte va säger du, va säger du,*

I don't know what say you what do you say

*ja förstår lite, ja förstår inte (ordet X), va*

I understand little I don't understand (the word X) what

(xxiv) Indirect indications of lack of understanding or apprehension

*ja pratar lite svenska, ja pratar inte svenska*

I talk little Swedish I talk not Swedish

The strategies can occur separately or together as in the following example:

(xxv) *vänta lite jag förstår inte pratar på svenska*

wait a little I don't understand talk in Swedish

In fact, the strategies we have discussed for solving comprehension problems have great similarities with the strategies for finding words in speech production which Strömquist 1983 has discussed under the label lexical search games. Similar strategies are perhaps used in both preception and production. Finally, we want to discuss an example which shows how misunderstandings can play a role in interaction because of effects linked to the misunderstanding.



(xxvi) From a role play about changing a sweater without a receipt. (This example is connected with example xiv.) When the salesclerk notices that the receipt is missing, he does not want to change the sweater. The informant tries to hide that he through his misunderstanding has revealed his lack of a receipt and argues that while the salesclerk thought he wanted to change the sweater everything was OK, but when it turned out that he wanted money instead, suddenly a receipt is required. By morally condemning the salesclerk for inconsistency the informant wants to remove attention from the question of the lack of receipt.

The misunderstanding has had as a consequence that something has been focused in the interaction which should not have been focussed and the informant through his argumentation tries to hide this.

## **6. Effects on language development**

Problems of understanding have both direct and indirect relations to language learning. There are direct relations, first of all because the ability to understand is a part of linguistic competence and belongs among the things one must learn in learning a new language. It is not possible to know a language without being able to discriminate, recognize and understand the expressions of the language. Successive steps in improved understanding are just as important a part of language learning as successive steps in language production.

It is probable that both children and adult language learners go through definite developmental stages in learning to understand a new language. As a first approximation we would like, on analytical grounds, to propose the following three-partite division, into an initial, medial and final stage with the following properties:

### **Initial stage**

Lack of understanding and misunderstandings occur within most areas. There is a total dependence on expectations and preunderstanding deriving from the learner's source culture and language. The "wait-and-see" strategy is used together with the keyword strategy to try to understand whatever is possible to understand. When communication is important one indicates that one cannot understand.

**Medial stage** A gradual development of auditive discrimination, word recognition and word understanding. The keyword strategy is now combined with processing of longer sequences of linguistic context. Misunderstandings which are dependent on superficial cultural differences diminish. The "wait-and-see" strategy is combined with indications of lack of understanding and attempts to explicitly ask conversational partners to change or clarify their utterances. The learner waits and sees in order to clarify something that is unclear, rather than to try to understand whatever is possible to understand.

### **Final stage**

The learner has a good auditive discrimination and a good understanding of single words both in isolation and in linguistic context. Lack of understanding and misunderstandings determined by more fundamental cultural differences concerning attitudes and values still remain. The learner uses all strategies available to avoid and amend lack of understanding and misunderstanding. The five language learners we have discussed are all, in this study, in the beginning of the medial stage. They had all, when they were recorded, been in Sweden somewhat more than one year. At

present we cannot determine their level more precisely than this, since we lack a precise theory for how acquisition of linguistic understanding develops.

Another type of direct relation concerns what is learned. A misunderstanding could, for example, lead to an incorrect conclusion about what a word means which is then committed to memory by the learner. This could later have consequences for both production and understanding since production is continuously guided by understanding. Such incorrect learning can apply to all linguistic traits which connect content with expression but can also apply to the correct use of an expression in different types of context.

Indirect relations between language learning and problems of understanding are largely social-psychological and concern processes of motivation. Lack of understanding and misunderstanding can perhaps in some cases have a positive motivational effect on language learning by, for example, raising curiosity and interest, but in most cases they probably have a negative motivational effect. Lack of understanding and misunderstanding nearly always entail an increased effort for the individual both emotionally and cognitively. The effect of this type of strain will mostly diminish the desire for language acquisition.

Problems of understanding therefore have a double interest in investigations of language acquisition. Directly, they concern certain skills the individual must develop to become linguistically competent and indirectly, they are connected with causal factors influencing the language acquisition process as a whole.

A final question is whether studies of problems of understanding can teach us something about the natural strategies used by adults in order to learn to understand a new language. Insight into such strategies could, for example, be valuable in improving foreign language teaching for adults.

Our study gives a few hints on how to begin to answer this question. The strategies we have earlier discussed for what a learner does, when he does not understand, could also be seen as strategies for what a learner does in order to learn to understand.

1. He activates his own cognitive processes, e g by repeating words or by waiting-and-seeing. This hypothesis is supported both by Sorenson's 1967 report about the learning strategies of the multilingual Indians in the North West Amazon and by Vygotsky's 1962 ideas about how so called pseudoconcepts are successively made deeper in learning.
2. He indicates when he has not understood in the hope of being given help.
3. He creates his own hypotheses about how utterances should be interpreted and tries to get his hypotheses corroborated by his conversational partners. His hypotheses can, for example, be based on what we have called key words.
4. He asks his conversational partners to change, repeat or explain parts of what they say.

All of these strategies have earlier been discussed in the literature on language acquisition. However, the relationship between a (rational) strategy for understanding and a (rational) strategy for learning how to understand has not been sufficiently observed.

## **7. Summary**

In this paper we have distinguished what is not understood from why it is not understood and these first two phenomena, in turn, from what the effects of problems of understanding are on interaction and language acquisition. Concerning what is not understood we have found that any expression feature which is systematically linked to a content feature can be involved and that often problems concern several features simultaneously. On the content side we have found that attitudes and values in combination with every day phenomena are important.

If we try to explain problems of understanding, we have found that they are always multicausal, involving a subset of, at least, the following factors: auditory discrimination and recognition, vocabulary, grammar, presuppositions and expectations about the content of interaction, recognition and understanding of body communication, need to interpret, insecurity and uncertainty about interpreting and the conversational partners- sensitivity to lack of understanding and misunderstanding.

When it comes to the effects of problems of understanding on interaction our main conclusion is that such problems, whether they are noticed or not in the interaction, always cause some strain. We have then discussed some of the ways in which problems of understanding are handled in interaction. Finally, we have discussed the relevance of problems of understanding for studies of adult language acquisition and have pointed out that there is both a direct relationship, in that learning to understand a new language is part of what it means to learn the new language, and an indirect relationship, in that problems of understanding can have a causal effect on language acquisition, and that strategies for solving problems of understanding in interaction can also be seen as strategies for acquiring a better understanding of a new language.

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