



Business Prospects

Chinese Creativity and Innovation Development Association (CCIDA)
journal homepage: www.ccidanpo.org

<https://doi.org/10.52288/bp.27089851.2021.06.09>

Triggers and Communicative Functions of Deliberate Misinterpretation

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Received: 2021.04.05; Accepted: 2021.04.15; Published: 2021.06.01

Abstract: Based on the data collected from the conversations in some American TV plays, this paper analyzes the phenomenon of deliberate misinterpretation in English daily conversations in terms of its triggers and communicative functions. Two categories of triggers are explored in the present study, which are the indeterminacy of contextual meaning and the indeterminacy of force in Speaker One's (S1's) utterance. Three categories of communicative functions are analyzed including improving interpersonal relationship, manipulating information, and creating special communicative effects. Light may be shed on English teaching and learning, TV talk shows, courtroom languages and debates.

Keywords: Deliberate Misinterpretation; Triggers; Communicative Functions

1. Introduction

In human verbal communication, when the hearer's understanding of the speaker's utterances is not identical with the speaker's intended meaning, misunderstanding occurs. However, in some cases, the hearer may deliberately choose the interpretation diverging from the speaker's intended meaning in order to achieve certain communicative effects. This kind of linguistic phenomenon is defined as deliberate misinterpretation by He and Shen in the article *Pragmatic Analysis of Deliberate Misinterpretation* in 2004. The present study focuses on the linguistic phenomenon of deliberate misinterpretation in English daily conversations.

The specific objectives of the present study are to find out the answers to the following two questions:

A. What are the triggers of deliberate misinterpretation?

Deliberate misinterpretation is the result of Speaker Two's (S2) negotiable choice from a various range of options. There must be some factors that supply the possibilities for S2 to choose to misinterpret S1's utterance. These factors are called triggers. This study intends to explore the triggers of deliberate misinterpretation in English daily conversations.

B. What are the communicative functions of deliberate misinterpretation?

Deliberate misinterpretation is the result of S2's negotiable choice from a various range of possibilities to satisfy his communicative needs. The practice of deliberate misinterpretation is actually the process of a highly conscious and purposeful behavior of linguistic choices. This study attempts to find out what communicative functions S2 achieves by using the strategy of deliberate misinterpretation.

2. Triggers of DMI

The term "trigger" originates from the study of misunderstandings by Bazzanella and Damiano (1999) where it's used to refer to the factors that facilitate the occurrence of misunderstanding. It is later adopted by He and Shen (2004) to refer to the factors in S1's utterance that make it possible for S2 to choose an

interpretation diverging from S1's intended meaning. If triggers in S1's utterance can be treated as one of the causes of DMI, they are the external causes, the internal causes being the S2's intention to satisfy certain communicative needs.

The analysis of the data collected for this study suggests that the triggers in S1's utterance fall under two categories: the indeterminacy of contextual meaning and indeterminacy of force.

2.1. Indeterminacy of Contextual Meaning

Contextual meaning (also called utterance meaning) is defined as "a sentence-context pairing", that is, contextual meaning is indeterminate without context. Thomas (1995) points out that in general, competent native speakers do not have to seek laboriously for the contextual meaning of a word, phrase or sentence. But in the case of DMI, S2 takes advantage of the indeterminate contextual meaning in S1's utterance and gives a different interpretation in his respondent utterance. The factors leading to the indeterminacy of contextual meaning includes homophones, homonyms, deictic expression, minimal information and structural ambiguity.

2.1.1. Homophones

Homophones refer to the words which sound alike but are written differently and have different meanings. When the word in S1's utterance is a homophony with other words, it may trigger S2 to use the strategy of DMI to fulfill his communicative goal. Here is an example:

(1) (Scene: At Ross' place, Chandler asks Ross to lend him some money. Ross hands him a check.)

Ross (S1): Here is the check.

Chandler (S2): Why do you call it the Czech? Why not Yugoslavia? (Friends)

Here the lexical form "check" is homophonic with another word "Czech"—the country. From this perspective, the lexical form "check" embodies the indeterminacy of contextual meaning. Given the context that S2 is asking S1 for money, he can easily understand that S1 is giving him "a written order to a bank to pay the amount specified from funds on deposit", but he deliberately makes use of the indeterminacy to choose another word with the same pronunciation—"Czech", the country and comes up with another European country Yugoslavia, thus creating a humorous effect and to some extent relieving his awkwardness for borrowing money from his friend.

2.1.2. Homonyms

Homonyms are words which have the same spelling and pronunciation but separate and unrelated meanings. Although, in a certain context, the word produced by S1 is determinate, S2 can still deliberately choose a meaning other than the intended one. The indeterminacy caused by homonyms may trigger DMI, as the following example illustrates:

(2)(Scene: In a hospital, Rachel's father, who is a dentist, has a heart attack and is sent to hospital. She goes to see him in the hospital with her friend Ross, who has a doctor's degree in paleontology. She is looking at her father lying in the hospital bed and she talks to Ross.)

Rachel (S1): It's just so weird seeing him like that, you know? I mean he is a doctor. You don't expect doctors to get sick!

Ross (S2): But we do!

(Friends)

The word "doctor" has two meanings—a doctor in hospital or a person who gets a doctor's degree. In this example, with the mutual knowledge and the immediate context, S2 can certainly infer that S1 is actually talking about her father getting sick, and the "doctor" in her utterance refers to her father, but S2 intentionally chooses the second meaning and makes himself the "doctor" indicated in S1's sentence, thus to some extent comforting S1 and making the atmosphere a little relieved.

2.1.3. Deictic Expressions

Deixis is a technical term for one of the most basic things we do with utterances. It means "pointing" via

language. Any linguistic form used to accomplish this “pointing” is called a deictic expression. Deixis is the most important element that embodies the indeterminacy of language. Deictic expressions depend, for their interpretation, on the speaker and hearer sharing the same context. In the case of DMI, the hearer (S2) shares the same context with the speaker (S1), but deliberately misinterprets S1’s “pointing”. Look at the following example:

(3)(Scene: In the hospital, Ross’ ex-wife Carol is breast-feeding her baby. Their friends Chandler and Joey find it embarrassing to look at it. But Ross tries to convince them that breast feeding is a natural thing and there’s no reason to feel awkward.)

Ross(S1): Look, would you guys grow up? That is the most natural beautiful thing in the world.

Chandler(S2): Yeah, we know, but there’s a baby sucking on it.

(Friends)

The deictic expression of “that” can be pointing at either “breast” or “breast feeding”. It’s easily understood that S1 means the latter, given the context that he doesn’t agree it’s awkward to look at breast feeding; but S2 deliberately misinterprets it as the former thus telling S1 that they see different things in the same case.

2.1.4. Minimal Information

According to the Principle of Informativeness by Levinson (1987), in communication, the speaker should say as little as necessary, that is, produce the minimal linguistic information sufficient to achieve communicational ends. Then it’s the recipient’s responsibility to enrich the informational content of the speaker’s utterance. Therefore, in many cases, there are gaps between the speaker’s linguistic information and the recipient’s enriched information, or at least, they may not be totally coincident with each other. In most cases, the recipient can amplify the proper and sufficient content or amount of information in the speaker’s utterance. However, in the case of DMI, the recipient (S2) may misinterpret the speaker’s minimized information on purpose.

The following example will illustrate how the minimized information triggers S2 to employ DMI.

(4) (Scene: In a café, Ross is complaining to his friend Chandler about his ex-girlfriend Rachel’s moving on immediately after breaking up with him.)

Ross (S1): If she wants to kiss some guy she barely knows about, so will I!

Chandler (S2): Oh, I didn’t know you liked that guy too!

(Friends)

In S1’s utterance, he follows the maxim of minimization to give the minimal linguistic information. “So will I” is incomplete and it can be interpreted as “so will I move on with another girl” or “so will I kiss that guy”. S2, as his friend for a long time, knows S1 is not a homosexual who likes men. But he makes use of the minimized information in S1’s utterance and deliberately chooses the second interpretation to make a deliberate misinterpretation, so as to tease his friend and create a humorous effect.

2.1.5. Structural Ambiguity

Structural ambiguity occurs when a phrase or sentence has more than one underlying structures. Indeed, the existence of such ambiguities provides triggers for DMI. Look at the following example:

(5) (Scene: In front of a clothes store, Elaine and her boyfriend Jerry are looking at some clothes.)

Elaine (S1): Do you think I should try on that dress in the window?

Jerry (S2): Well, don’t you think it’d be better to use the dressing room?

(Seinfeld)

The utterance “try on that dress in the window” can be interpreted as either VP+ NP or VP+NP+PP, but S1 is pointing at the dress in the window, so by “in the window”, she means where the dress is. But this conversation takes place when S2 asks S1 out for a date for the first time. He’s trying to impress her with his sense of humor, so he deliberately chooses to interpret “in the window” as where to try on the dress, thus creating a humorous effect.

2.2. Indeterminacy of Force

As mentioned above, the indeterminacy of force of an utterance lies in conversational implicatures. With regard to DMI, the speakers may exploit the indirectness of conversational implicatures as triggers. And as a matter of fact, when S1 produces an utterance that embodies conversational implicature, he intends S2 to derive from the implied meaning. In the normal cases, S2 may derive the conversational implicature from S1's utterance on the basis of the mutuality of context. But in the case of DMI, since S1's force is not explicitly expressed, it may leave the space for S2 to utilize the DMI as a communicative strategy, as in the following example:

(6) (Scene: At Edie's place, Carlos breaks up with his girlfriend Edie. Edie is angry with him and cuts a hole in his painting.)

Carlos (S1) (shocked to find his painting with a hole in it, but tries to calm down): There's a hole in it.

Edie (S2) (shrugs her shoulders): I don't get modern art either.

(Desperate Housewives)

Instead of complaining explicitly "You cut a hole in my painting", S1 chooses to express his complaint in an implicit way and expects S2 to derive his intention. But S2 deliberately interpret it as sharing with her the fact that there's a hole in his painting, telling S1 that she does not want to shoulder responsibility for it.

Figures of speech such as metaphor, hyperbole and irony also provide examples of conversational implicature because of the non-literal nature. The analysis of the data of this study suggests that two types of figures of speech most frequently trigger S2 to employ DMI. They are irony and hyperbole.

Irony is a frequently employed form of figurative language. Naturally, in context, an ironical expression will inferentially acquire a meaning that is different, and in most cases, opposed to what the expression would have in a "neutral" context. Speaking ironically in some situation enables the speaker to convey complex propositional and interpersonal meanings in a compact manner. At the same time, he may risk misunderstanding, because of his non-literal utterance. In the case of DMI, S2 deliberately takes S1's ironical utterance at face value after inferring S1's communicative intentions. Thus, the non-literalness of ironic language triggers S2's use of DMI. Consider the following example.

(7) (Scene: On the street, Rachel is fined by the policeman for speeding. Ross is sitting in her car. She is complaining about it to Ross while putting something in her bag in the back seats of the car without looking at the road. The car swerves and almost hits another car.)

Ross (S1): (Sarcastically) Rachel! Oh God! I can't believe the policeman gave you a ticket. You are such a good driver.

Rachel (S2): Thank you!

(Friends)

By saying "you are such a good driver" after what S2 did, S1 is certainly not complimenting on S2's driving skill but mocking at her for that. With the mutual immediate context, S2 can recognize S1's ironical manner in this specific context, but she resorts to the indeterminacy of force and deliberately misinterprets S1's utterance as a compliment with the purpose of saving her face.

Hyperbole, one of the common figures of speech, is not limited by the objective realities. However, it expresses the speaker's original feelings actually by the fuzzy words in artistic thinking which seem not so accurate according to the facts.

(8) (Scene: In a shoe store, Gaby and her husband Carlos are shopping in a shoe store where Gaby finds the shoes very much her taste)

Gaby (S1): I'm going to buy a million pairs of shoes!

Carlos (S2): Honey, I don't think we have enough room for so many shoes in our house.

(Desperate Housewives)

In this interaction, S1 expresses her wish to buy as many shoes as possible in the store, and she uses a hyperbolic expression "a million" to express her favor for the shoes. S2 intentionally misinterprets the hyperbolic use of "a million" as a precise number, tactfully expressing his negative attitude towards her idea.

3. Communicative Functions of DMI

In the case of DMI, when S2 chooses an interpretation of S1's utterance diverging from the one intended by S1, he's impelled by certain communicative needs, and the choice made—DMI, is expected to perform certain communicative functions. The communicative functions that each case of DMI performs can be multiple and they often take effect simultaneously, usually with an emphasis on one of them. The aim of this study is to try to find out all the possible communicative functions that DMI can perform.

Some scholars have discussed the functions of misinterpretation in their studies related to DMI. Liu and Cui (2017) argues people can employ misunderstandings deliberately as a face-saving strategy in interaction. They discuss a few categories of intentional misunderstandings used as facework: (1) teasing as a face-enhancing strategy in interaction; (2) intentional misunderstandings as hearer's face-saving strategy; and (3) intentional misunderstandings as an attack to the speaker's face.

This paper attempts to give a more comprehensive account of the communicative functions that DMI performs based on the analysis of the data collected from four American TV plays.

3.1. Improving Interpersonal Relationship

In communication, a communicator always tries to improve the personal relationships towards the positive direction. This need is certainly reflected in verbal communication. DMI can be chosen by S2 to improve the interpersonal relationship with others. Specifically, S2 may adopt the strategy of DMI to break the ice or resolve interpersonal conflict.

3.1.1. Breaking the Ice

Despite the fact that most people intend to build a harmonious relationship with others, sometimes it is still difficult to initiate a new relationship. Meeting new people and making new acquaintances is, for most people, a stressful experience. When meeting an unfriendly new acquaintance, speakers may resort to the DMI strategy to break the ice and at the same time create interpersonal harmony. The following example will illustrate this point.

(1) (Scene: In a restaurant, Jerry and his new girlfriend Mona are on the first date. The atmosphere is a little awkward for a while. Jerry asks Mona what she would like to order.)

Mona (S1): I don't know. Anything is Ok

Jerry (S2): Ok. Waiter, do you have the dish of "anything" on your menu?

(Mona smiles.)

(Seinfeld)

In this conversation, things are not going well in the beginning. When S2 asks S1 to order something for herself, she is either nervous or just does not have any interest in this dinner, so she says any dish would be Ok. S2 intentionally misinterprets S1's indifferent response "anything" as the name of a dish, making the girl smile. By way of DMI, S2 successfully breaks the ice and creates a harmonious relationship between him and the girl.

3.1.2. Resolving Interpersonal Conflicts

In communication, a communicator often confronts an act that contains elements of both cooperation and competition. Sometimes the communicator competes with the other person because he wants to protect a self-concept and maintain a self-image. In other words, the communicator desires to maintain his own interest, since it is easy to be threatened in many types of activities. It is undeniable that conflict in interpersonal communication is so common that it is normal. Individuals must create a unified relationship by working through their differences, such as different personalities, different self-concepts, and different emotions. Their interaction is bound to include some conflicts every now and then. Sometimes conflicts can be harmful to an interpersonal relationship, so when encountering interpersonal conflicts in communication, speakers try to find ways to deal with those threatening acts. In some cases, one may employ DMI to resolve interactional conflicts. By confronting the conflict, one may remove the source of the problem from the relationship and blame it on something else. In other words, without needing to find fault directly in the relationship between the speakers, one attempts to solve the problem by dealing with specific things. The effectiveness of managing conflicts depends on whether the speakers use appropriate strategies in a conflict situation. DMI is one of the strategies

to confront the conflict. Here are two examples:

- (2) (Scene: In front of Edie's house, Susan and Edie are neighbors. Susan is furious when she finds out that Edie steals her boyfriend, Mike, after he wakes up from a coma)

Susan (S1): You lie! You cheat! You scheme! You ruin people's relations! How do you sleep at night?

Edie (S2): Soon, with Mike on top of me.

(Desperate Housewives)

In this conversation, S1 and S2 both know clearly about the communicative context: S2 is the evil person who steals other people's boyfriend by cheating, which is an unacceptable behavior according to the social norms. So S1 has every right to condemn her, and by "How do you sleep at night", she means S2 should feel guilty of her behavior. However, S2, having successfully won the boyfriend with her big scheme, doesn't want a verbal conflict with S1 in public, so she deliberately misinterprets S1's utterance as a real question and gives a "truthful" answer, thus avoiding a potential verbal conflict and saving her own face.

- (3) (Scene: Raj fails in dating the girl his parents set him up with. Now Raj's parents are scolding him in video chatting.)

Raj's Dad (S1): What are we supposed to say to Lalita's parents? I play golf with her father. I won't be able to look at him.

Raj (S2): Maybe you should keep your eyes on the ball, papa.

(The Big Bang Theory)

Raj's father sets him up with his friend's daughter while Raj screws it up. His father now blames Raj and says he feels ashamed to look at the girl's father when playing golf. In order to avoid conflict with his father, Raj deliberately misinterprets his father's words "look at" and says he should look at the ball when playing golf, thus easing the stormy situation between himself and his father.

In these examples, S2 uses DMI to defuse a tense or hostile situation, thus enabling him to back off from the confrontation without loss of face. In other cases, DMI is invoked as a control to restore composure and self-presentation on embarrassments when they are undermined by some sudden and perhaps unexpected event. More commonly, people are embarrassed by some events which spoil the image they wish to convey at that particular moment in time-for example, encountering a question to which they don't know the answer. DMI can save the situation, concealing the speakers' ignorance or inability. The speakers can respond as if they misunderstood others in order not to be left out or not to look stupid.

3.2. Manipulating Information

According to Fairclough (1998), manipulation is the conscious use of language in a devious way to control others, where "using language in a devious way" means using it in a way which hides one's strategies and objectives. "Manipulating information" here is used to refer to speakers' conscious use of language to control information in a devious way. In some cases, people use DMI to keep information from others, that is, withholding information. There are many ways to withhold information, among which DMI may serve as an important strategy. Here are two examples:

- (4) (Scene: At Rachel's place, Ross is about to ask Rachel to be his girlfriend, but unexpected to find that Rachel is dating an Italian guy Paolo.)

Ross (S1): Where does this guy come from?

Rachel (S2): ...From Italy, I think.

(Friends)

In this example, S2 has introduced Paolo as an Italian to S1, so she knows that he is not asking for the nationality of Paolo by the utterance "Where does this guy come from?" What he really means is where S2 makes acquaintance with this guy and why she is dating him. But S2 chooses to tell a self-evident truth "From Italy", offering superficial and unimportant information to S1, and successfully withholding the information from S1.

The following is another example.

(5) (Scene: In a bar, a stranger comes up to Jerry, a comedian who has some books published. The stranger wants to learn something about writing from Jerry.)

Stranger (S1): What is the best way of writing?

Jerry (S2): Just from left to right.

(Seinfeld)

In this example, S1 is trying to learn about the techniques of writing. But S2 is not willing to share his secret of success, and misinterprets “the way of writing” as “the specific way of writing words on paper”, thus withholding the information that he’s not willing to share.

3.3. *Creating Special Communicative Effects*

In communication, people choose DMI to satisfy their expressive needs. The analysis of data for the present study suggests two kinds of effects are frequently produced by employing DMI.

3.3.1. *Creating Humorous Effects*

DMI may often be used as a means of creating humor. Look at the following example:

(6) (Scene: At Monica’s place, while Monica is making Thanksgiving dinner for her friends, she accidentally has one of her eyes hurt by some ice. Her friends suggest that she go to see her eye doctor, who happens to be her ex-boyfriend)

Monica (S1): I can’t see my eye doctor. I can’t go to him when I don’t have a boyfriend.

Chandler (S2): He’s really picky about his patients.

(Friends)

In this example, by the utterance “I can’t see my eye doctor. I can’t go to him when I don’t have a boyfriend”, she means that it’s not a good time to see her eye doctor, who is her ex-boyfriend. But S2 deliberately misinterprets it as “I’m not allowed to see my eye doctor when I don’t have a boyfriend.” giving a humorous effect and making the other friends laugh.

3.3.2. *Creating Ironic Effects*

Sometimes, DMI is used to create ironic effects. When the speaker wants to show his disagreement or discontentment in an indirect way, DMI is a common conversational device for him to frequently resort to. Look at the following two examples.

(7) (Scene: At Monica’s place, Monica and her friends are watching an old video of her when she was young and very fat. Everyone is laughing at her obesity)

Monica (S1): The camera added 10 pounds.

Chandler (S2): So how many cameras were actually on you?

(Friends)

By the utterance “The camera added 10 pounds.” S1 is trying to tell her friends that she wasn’t as fat as she looked in the video. But S2 misinterprets the utterance as S1 was carrying a ten-pound camera on her, which made her look fat. By the response “So how many cameras were actually on you?” S2 mocks at her obesity in an ironic way.

(8) (Scene: Four friends are having lunch in the restaurant where Penny works.)

Howard (S1): What do you recommend for someone who worked up a man-sized appetite from a morning of weight training and cardio funk?

Penny(S2): A shower.

(The Big Bang Theory)

In this example, S1 wants to seek advice from S2 what to eat and explains that he has done much exercise in the morning. In this specific context, S2 is expected to suggest some dishes which are good for energy restoration. However, ignoring the specific context, S2 suggests “a shower” instead of some particular delicious

dishes, showing her discontentment of S1's boasting and creating an ironic effect.

Based on the above analysis, we find that DMI is self-serving: speakers exploit it to satisfy their own communicative needs and to achieve favorable effects for them.

4. Conclusion

The present study makes a comparatively comprehensive and systematic analysis of the triggers and communicative functions of deliberate misinterpretation in English daily conversations.

Triggers in S1's utterances are prerequisite factors for the employment of DMI by S2. Two major categories of triggers are explored in the present study, namely indeterminacy of contextual meaning and indeterminacy of force in S1's utterance. Specifically, homophones, homonyms, deictic expressions, minimal information, structural ambiguity and conversational implicatures are the factors that trigger DMI. Those triggers provide potential alternative interpretations which make it possible for S2 to deliberately choose an interpretation diverging from the one intended by S1.

This study also discusses how deliberate misinterpretation serves as a means of pragmatic strategy, that is, the specific communicative functions DMI performs in interaction. Three categories of communicative functions are analyzed: improving interpersonal relationship, manipulating information, and creating special communicative effects.

There are some limitations owing to the restrictedness of data and the limit of research time. The communicative functions of deliberate misinterpretation may not be exhaustive. Since there are always new cases ahead in interpersonal communication, some usages might have been missed in the analysis. A research is usually one-dimensional and can only cover limited problems. Hence, the observations of this study are by no means conclusive and thus more efforts for further studies on this interesting language phenomenon are necessary.

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