Negotiating What Is Said in the Face of Miscommunication[[1]](#footnote-1)

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**Abstract**

In post-Gricean pragmatics, communication is said to be successful when a hearer recovers a speaker’s intended message. On this assumption, proposals for ‘what is said’ – the semantic, propositional meaning of a speaker’s utterance – are typically centred around the content the speaker aimed to communicate. However, these proposals tend not to account for the fact that speakers can be deliberately vague, leaving no clear proposition to be recovered, or that a speaker can accept a hearer’s misconstrual even though the speaker didn’t intend it. In such cases, identifying ‘what is said’ is more contentious, even though communication is arguably no less successful. Building on recent interactionist approaches to meaning, this chapter offers a proposal for ‘what is said’ that can account for cases of ‘imperfect’ communication in which the recovery of a speaker’s intention goes awry. This involves taking ‘what is said’ as the co-constructed meaning that the speaker and hearer jointly agree on, giving ‘grounded meanings’ – those mutually and manifestly accepted into the discourse by speaker and hearer – higher precedence in a theory of communication than simply the speaker’s intended meaning. In such cases, rather than speaker and hearer converging at the level of explicit utterance content, communication is expected to be successful as long as the hearer recovers a proposition which is compatible with the speaker’s higher-order discursive goal. The hearer’s uptake is then allowed to override the content of the speaker’s intended meaning in the process of negotiating ‘what is said’.

**Keywords**: background assumptions, co-construction of meaning, hearer inferences, miscommunication, semantic contextualism, speaker intentions, theory of communication, truth-compatible inferences, utterance meaning, what is said

1. Introduction

Following Grice’s (1989) seminal writings on ‘meaning’, the latter parts of the 20th century, extending into the first decade of the 21st century, saw a surge in proposals for what should constitute the unit of analysis for semantic theory: ‘what is said’. It was these proposals that were credited at the core of the debate between semantic minimalism and semantic contextualism, what has been termed the so-called ‘border wars’ (Horn 2006). At the heart of this debate is the question of the extent to which context should play a role in determining ‘what is said’. At one end, semantic minimalists purport that the aim of semantics is to determine the invariant properties of language in order that stable truth conditions can be ascribed to abstract sentences, while contextualists, at the other, are concerned with finding the intuitive truth conditions that interlocutors use in everyday communication, thus acknowledging and hence allowing that aspects of context will inform the truth conditions of utterances used in context.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Insofar as a theory of *communication* aims to describe and explain the ways in which people use and understand language in everyday conversation, this chapter puts forward a view on ‘what is said’ that falls squarely in the contextualist camp. However, this chapter calls into dispute one central assumption that dominant extant contextualist proposals rest on, namely, that successful communication is dependent on hearers recovering speakers’ intended meanings.[[3]](#footnote-3) We know that the process of recovering speakers’ intended meanings can be more or less straightforward depending on how determinately the meaning can be recovered from the explicitly uttered sentence form. At the more syntactic/semantic end, indexicals and other context-dependent expressions require contextual resolution for their referents; at the more pragmatic end hearers very often engage in complex inferential work to figure out a speaker’s intended meaning, taking into consideration an array of contextual information in the process. In short, language vastly underdetermines meaning, and, given that communication occurs more or less successfully more or less most of the time, the goal of semantic – and pragmatic – theory is to explain what these meanings are and where they come from. This chapter shows that the problem of recovering speakers’ intentions goes further than simply identifying speakers’ intended meanings from underdeterminate forms. Rather, one of the central aims of this chapter is to highlight that the problem becomes more complicated when we acknowledge that (a) speakers do not always communicate determinate propositions, and (b) hearers do not always recover propositions that align with those intended by the speaker. While occurrences of (a) are well acknowledged by Relevance Theorists (since Sperber & Wilson 1995), instances of (b) are typically considered to lie outside the remit of a normative theory of meaning, in that such a theory aims to provide generalisations of what interlocutors *should* do, not what interlocutors *actually* do. However, work in interactional pragmatics (e.g. Haugh 2012) provides evidence that interlocutors do have observably patternable ways of resolving misunderstandings, opening the way for a normative theory to account for such recurring patterns of interaction.

Opposed to a view on ‘what is said’ that relies on speakers’ intentions perfectly aligning with inferred content, this chapter builds on recent approaches to propositional meanings informed by interactional pragmatics (e.g. Elder & Haugh forthcoming) to offer an alternative proposal for the unit of analysis for semantic and pragmatic theory that can account for ‘imperfect’ communication: cases in which speakers’ intentions do not necessarily align with the inferred content (perhaps because there is no determinate proposition to be recognised), and yet communication is arguably no less successful. The idea is that as long as a hearer recovers a proposition which is *compatible with the speaker’s overall communicative goal*, the hearer’s uptake can contribute to a process of meaning recovery, rendering ‘what is said’ not as determined solely by the speaker’s intentions, nor by the hearer’s recovered meaning, but by the *negotiation of meaning between the speaker and the hearer*. The resulting proposition in one that the speaker and hearer co-construct which, in turn, takes on the status of ‘what is said’.

This view on ‘what is said’ is contentious for a number of reasons. First, in some cases it will not necessarily correspond to the speaker’s explicit utterance meaning and so the extent to which such a meaning can constitute what is *said* is clearly up for dispute. Of course, the idea that ‘what is said’ need not be constrained to the logical form (or developments or modulations thereof) but can, on occasion, pertain to an implicature that diverges from the logical form altogether is not new. This latter idea is reminiscent of Jaszczolt’s (2005) ‘primary meaning’, which is a representation of the main meaning that is intended by a Model Speaker and is recovered by a Model Addressee, or Ariel’s (2002) ‘privileged interactional interpretation’, the speaker’s most relevant contribution to the discourse.[[4]](#footnote-4) But where the notion of a co-constructed ‘what is said’ diverges from that of a ‘primary meaning’, is for those cases in which the speaker’s main intended meaning or most relevant contribution is *not* recovered. In those cases, the hearer’s uptake is also allowed to *override* the content of the speaker’s primaryintended proposition, and instead to point at a proposition which both the speaker and hearer agree on, which, in turn, is compatible with the speaker’s overall communicative goal recovered by the hearer. The benefit of opting for such a unit of semantic investigation is that – from the point of view of the speaker-hearer dyad – the meaning that is ‘operationalised’ (cf Arundale 2013) is the one that is mutually agreed upon by the participants in the process of *communication*.

With this brief overview in place, the structure of the chapter is as follows. In Section 2, I outline some background on the unit of meaning analysis in extant semantic/pragmatic theory. Section 3 presents some evidence to motivate extending the notion of ‘what is said’ to account for cases of ‘imperfect communication’. Section 4 offers an alternative proposal that builds on extant contextualist notions of ‘what is said’ but that also accounts for potential mismatches, and Section 5 points towards directions for further research.

2. Background: From Grice to Radical Contextualism

Grice’s seminal contribution on non-natural meaning, or ‘meaningNN’, set the stage for the received view on the semantics-pragmatics boundary. For him, ‘A meantNN something by x’ as long as “A uttered x with the intention of inducing a belief by means of the recognition of this intention” (Grice 1957: 220), explicitly defining utterance meaning in terms of the speaker’s intended meaning, and implicitly defining ‘successful communication’ in terms of a hearer inferring that intention. Grice acknowledged that sometimes the speaker’s intended meaning may depart from the logical form of the utterance as a conversational implicature, in which case meaningNN is composed of ‘what is said’ – the unit to which truth conditions are applied – and speaker meaning, or ‘what is implicated’. On his view, ‘what is said’ comprises “the particular meanings of the elements of *S* [the sentence], their order, and their syntactical character” (Grice 1969: 87), rendering *sentences*, in abstraction from context, as the input to semantic theory.

Now, while Grice’s early pragmatic theory gave us a two-tiered picture of meaning in which the study of semantics is a separate enterprise from that of pragmatics, Grice (1978) himself recognised that sentences underdetermine semantics in cases of ambiguity and reference assignment, and that context is necessarily required for their resolution. However, in making that move, he admitted that some sentences only acquire their ‘meanings’ once they are uttered in context, paving the way for the future ‘boundary dispute’ concerning the proper unit of semantic analysis. Since then, a variety of proposals have emerged that aim to offer a conception of ‘what is said’ that can output intuitive truth conditions of uttered sentences as natural language users use and understand them (e.g. Sperber & Wilson 1995; Carston 2002; Recanati 2004, 2010), alongside a backlash of ‘minimalist’ views that aim to retain a purely sentence-driven conception of semantics that is devoid of contextual intrusion (e.g. Borg 2004, 2012; Cappelen & Lepore 2005).

Contra the semantic minimalist view is the view which prioritises ‘what is said’ as a reflection of the ways in which natural language users understand meanings in ordinary discourse. Post-Gricean developments with such a ‘contextualist’ orientation are guided by the overarching principles that ‘what is said’ need not be constrained by the sentence form, and that context is allowed to play a significant role in determining the truth-conditional unit. It is this recourse to context that satisfies the aim of generating a semantic unit that aligns with speakers’ intuitions about truth conditions. However, different accounts diverge in the extent to which they allow context to influence and inform the unit of semantic investigation. At the more conservative end of the contextualist spectrum is ‘indexicalism’, where any contextual information that contributes to establishing truth-conditional content has to be attributed to context-sensitive ‘slots’ in the logical form (e.g. Stanley 2000). On this view, pragmatics is only called upon when the linguistic system demands it, and when the linguistic system demands it, pragmatics is required. This has the aim of ensuring that truth conditions align with speakers’ intuitions while ensuring that enrichments are systematic and non-arbitrary. However, when aiming for a conception of ‘what is said’ that is “in conformity to the intuitions shared by those who fully understand the utterance – typically the speaker and the hearer, in a normal conversational setting” (Recanati 2004: 14), we may favour the view that not all pragmatic processes that contribute to semantic content are mandated by covert variables, but that in addition to these ‘bottom-up processes’, we may also allow optional ‘top-down processes’ operating on the words uttered to produce an enriched, ‘developed’ (e.g. Carston 2002) or ‘modulated’ (e.g. Recanati 2010) logical form. Thus, we move away from a sentence-centric view on semantics, and towards one that takes *utterances* as the input to semantic theory.

These contextualist options take us some way towards producing intuitive truth conditions of natural language utterances. But, as extensively noted by Jaszczolt (2005, 2010, 2016), sometimes the main proposition expressed goes beyond enriching the extant logical form of the utterance or modulating senses of individual words. In a move to understand ‘occasion meaning’, Jaszczolt (2016: 8) argues that a theory of meaning should be concerned with “the full, intuitively most plausible, meaning as intended by language users on a particular occasion.” Note that as we get closer to occasionalism, the possibility of generalisation becomes more difficult; if meaning is constrained by use, we cannot abstract meanings from, e.g. an independent lexicon or grammar, and all we can do is describe the meanings that individual instances of language use give rise to. To get around this problem of the occasionalist, Default Semantics marries an occasion-based conception of meaning with a formalisation by relativising acts of communication to *model communicators*, offering “a formal account of how a Model Speaker constructs meaning in his/her head, and how a Model Addressee recovers this intended message” (Jaszczolt 2016: 10). This takes the onus away from *actual* speakers and hearers; the concern is not with actual interpretations of meanings on specific occasions, but with identifying the general mechanisms in meaning comprehension.

Default Semantics, then, is a radical version of semantic contextualism in which the truth-conditional unit pertains to the *primary, intended content* of the utterance. To generate such a unit, the logical form of the utterance may be enriched and, in some cases, even overridden. For example, while the mother’s utterance in (1) would pertain to the enriched version (1’) on standard contextualist analyses, Default Semantics assumes that the most salient, plausible candidate that the interlocutors are likely to recover is actually the implicit meaning given in (1’’).

(1) Child: Can I go skiing?

Mother: You are too young.

(1’) The child is too young to go skiing.

(1’’) The child cannot go skiing. (adapted from Jaszczolt 2010, p. 195)

On this theory, word meaning and sentence structure – one source of information in this theory – are not given any priority in determining ‘what is said’; rather, in different contexts of utterance, different sources may take precedence over others. So, while in traditional Gricean pragmatics we have two layers of meaning, namely ‘what is said’ and ‘what is implicated’ corresponding to ‘literal’ explicit content versus ‘non-literal’ implicit content respectively, in this radical version of semantic contextualism, the explicit/implicit divide is supplemented with the primary/secondary meaning divide, where primary meanings (instead of explicit meanings) take on the status of ‘what is said’. In the same way that primary meanings can pertain to either explicit or implicit content, secondary meanings too can correspond to explicit or implicit content. The unit of truth-conditional analysis comes about as a result of contextual information, and word meanings interact with other sources of information to generate intended meanings. The result is a completely pragmatic, contextually-driven theory of communication that attempts to reflect cognitive reality.

The unit of analysis of Default Semantics is grounded in Grice’s notion of meaningNN insofar as it relies on the assumption that there is a single proposition that a speaker intends to communicate as primary, and that successful communication rests on a hearer recovering that proposition. And indeed, in the ideal case, that is, when speakers’ intended meanings are successfully communicated to hearers, the notion of a primary meaning works well: it captures the intuitively most plausible meaning that the speaker intended and that the hearer recovered. However, while sympathetic with prioritising primary meanings when speakers’ intended meanings are automatically recovered, this chapter questions what happens to our theory of communication when we move away from Gricean assumptions, examining cases in which (a) speakers don’t communicate determinate propositions to be recognised, or (b) hearers fail to recognise speakers’ main intended meanings, as failing to explain the process of meaning recovery of such instances would reduce the remit of our theory of meaning to an implausibly constrained, idealised set of communicative interactions. Admittedly, while a normative theory with explanatory power necessarily has to posit a level of idealisation, the fact that we can observe recurring patterns of meaning negotiation provides some rationale for extending the scope of a formal theory of meaning. Such a theory would allow that even ‘model’ speakers engage in ‘imperfect’ communication while accounting for the ways in which they successfully resolve such imperfections. The following section thus calls into question the assumption that even model speakers and hearers are expected to communicate according to the ‘speaker implicates, hearer infers’ mantra. It then moves to propose a view on ‘what is said’ that can account for ‘imperfect’ communication that considers both speaker and hearer perspectives in the negotiation of meaning, thus foregrounding the importance of ‘grounded meanings’ – those mutually and manifestly accepted into the discourse by speaker and hearer (Clark and Brennan 1991) – in the notion of ‘what is said’.

**3. What is said when speakers and hearers diverge in understanding**

The motivation for a revised view on ‘what is said’ comes in part from an observation that Grice himself recognised vis-à-vis the calculability of conversational implicatures:

[…] since there may be various possible explanations, *a list of which may be open*, the conversational implicature in such cases will be an *open disjunction* of such specific explanations, and if the list of these is open, the implicatum will have just the kind of indeterminacy that many actual implicata do in fact seem to possess. (Grice 1975, pp. 39-40, my emphasis)

The fact that speaker meaning is potentially indeterminate with respect to the precise proposition expressed was a motivation of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995) to take *hearer inferences* as the object of study in place of speaker meaning. Sperber and Wilson (2015) have recently revived this line of argument, demonstrating that expressed propositions lie on a continuum from more to less determinate, with fully propositional forms at one end, and instances of communication that are not paraphrasable at all at the other. Metaphors and hyperbole are included at this latter end of the spectrum: expressions for which although there exists no unique paraphrase that corresponds to the full import of the speaker’s intended meaning, the hearer nevertheless can gauge the relevant ‘impression’. That is, the speakermakes manifest an array of propositions that are compatible with the explicit content (‘explicature’ in their terminology) that give rise to a relevant impression, but no single one of these propositions is, or indeed should be, *the* unique proposition that is attributable to the speaker’s intended meaning.

The idea that speakers can communicate indeterminate propositions has received some recent attention with respect to the object of semantic inquiry. Savva (2017) examines instances of subsentential utterances, identifying relatively clear-cut cases of syntactic ellipsis that can be given a unique proposition with determinate syntactic structure, as well as those cases where the recoverability of the communicated thought depends on an interaction between linguistic and extra-linguistic information, and the corresponding proposition lacks a determinate syntactic form altogether (cf. Stainton 2006). Elder and Savva (2018) use the case of open-ended conditionals to show that this is a ubiquitous practice in everyday conversation:

(2) (Casual conversation about common friends)

A: And Karen and Ian want to buy her half of the mortgage out, so they’ll have too much mortgage.

B: Yeah… It really is…

A: I know. With Ian only a tennis coach.

B: Well even now. I mean, **if he has good rates, good bank rates, and he’s got a steady job…**

A: That’s true.

(ICE-GB, S1A-036: 035)

The incomplete conditional sentence in (2) can be syntactically completed in a number of different, but equally plausible, ways. Possible completions include: ‘he’ll be able to pay the mortgage’, ‘he won’t have a problem’, ‘I think he’ll be okay’, and many others. But even though the speaker may not necessarily have in mind a single consequent with determinate syntactic structure which would yield a full conditional proposition, admissible completions are expected to be members of a set of *equivalent* or *interchangeable* propositions that overlap in their *pragmatic* implications (Savva 2017, Elder & Savva 2018). So, as long as the hearer recovers a message which is compatible with the speaker’s intended impression – comprising the set of interchangeable propositions – communication can be deemed ‘successful’ insofar as the transmission of information is adequate for the conversation at hand. In this case, the hearer’s response, ‘that’s true’, indicates that enough information was provided for the speaker and hearer to come to a joint agreement on the content of the utterance. Indeed, even if the speaker lacked a determinate intention vis-à-vis the precise content of the subsentential conditional utterance, it would be unnecessarily time consuming and inconvenient for the hearer to request clarification (cf. Elder & Beaver 2017).

Unlike the Relevance Theoretic position of modelling hearers’ inferences, Savva (2017) proposes an amended version of the unit of analysis from Default Semantics, by which ‘what is said’ corresponds to an ‘informationally basic proposition’ that includes only the intersection of information that is communicated by all of the interchangeable, fully sentential propositions. Unlike semantic minimalism, which might co-opt the term ‘basic proposition’ for a context-free notion of ‘what is said’ (e.g. Cappelen & Lepore 2005), Savva’s basic proposition is ‘contextualist’ insofar as its content is dependent on both linguistic and extra-linguistic information available in a given context. In the case of (2), the informationally basic proposition would correspond roughly to ‘if he has good bank rates and a steady job, money won’t be a problem’, with the consequent being contextually supplied by previous utterances in the discussion, and the interlocutors’ social and cultural knowledge about having a job and one’s presumed ability to pay a mortgage (see Elder & Savva 2018 for example representations in the Default Semantics framework).[[5]](#footnote-5)

While the notion of an informationally basic proposition allows a speaker to communicate a deliberately vague proposition that can take several possible interpretations, it still relies on the hearer recovering a proposition that is compatible with a set of propositions that the speaker *intended* to communicate. That is, while the speaker does not point at a specific proposition with determinate structure, it is assumed that the speaker has an intended impression that is being communicated that gives rise to a set of interchangeable propositions. However, there is a growing wealth of empirical evidence that sometimes hearers recover a meaning that extends beyond the remit of a speaker’s intended set of propositions, but rather than constituting instances of ‘misunderstanding’ that are problematic for communication, the hearer’s divergent interpretation contributes to a process of information growth that is beneficial to the communicative exchange. So regardless of whether or not the speaker has a determinate proposition in mind that corresponds to his or her utterance or whether that utterance gives rise to a potentially open disjunction of alternatives, it is still possible for a hearer to recover a message that lies outside the ‘intended’ set.

What I offer instead is a view on ‘what is said’ that both aims at an empirically-justified view on a propositional, ‘primary meaning’ that takes both speaker and hearer perspectives into consideration, but that is also grounded in a view in which speakers’ intentions and hearers’ inferred meanings align. So rather than pursue a view on ‘what is said’ that is determined either by the speaker’s intended utterance meaning or the hearer’s inferred content, a viable alternative is to track the meanings that interlocutors jointly make operative in the course of a conversation, thereby taking ‘what is said’ as *the most salient proposition that is interactionally achieved between participants* (cf. Elder & Haugh forthcoming). Admittedly, sometimes the meaning that is interactionally achieved may diverge significantly from the speaker’s initial intended *utterance* meaning, whether that pertains to an explicature or an implicature. In that case, the alignment between speakers’ intentions and hearers’ inferences is assumed to come at a higher level, namely, at the level of the speaker’s *overall communicative goal* which is recovered by the hearer.

The process of interactionally achieving meanings is proposed in formal terms by Elder & Haugh (forthcoming), which highlights that the negotiation of utterance meanings is subject to (at least) a three-part process (see also Haugh 2012). In this three-part process, the meaning of speaker A’s utterance is subject to

1. A’s inference about how the utterance will be understood, made available by the utterance itself,
2. speaker B’s inference about how A expected to be understood, made available through B’s response, and, crucially,
3. A’s inference about how B understood A’s initial utterance, made available through A’s response to B.

Very often, (i) and (ii) align well enough such that (iii) does not do any substantial work in determining the content of A’s initial utterance. However, in other cases, a mismatch between (i) and (ii) can be resolved by attending to (iii), which makes available the speaker’s inference about how his/her initial utterance is being operationalised while also making manifest where and when divergences in understandings between speakers and hearers occur.[[6]](#footnote-6) So, through this three-turn process, the meaning that is attributed to A’s initial utterance can be subject to complex inferential work that is a joint process between the participants, but crucially, those inferences are *formally dependent* on one another, and the resulting proposition is one that cannot (always) be determined by looking at the utterance turn alone. The inference made available by the third turn thus contributes to the co-construction of ‘what is said’: the proposition that is operationalised by both speaker and hearer.

The theoretical move to take co-constructed meanings as the object of semantic study is inspired by the large and growing body of work in interactional pragmatics (starting from Sacks et al 1974) based on the idea that participants engage in a process of displaying their inferences about previous utterances via their responses to those utterances. However, there is a relative scarcity of works that aim to theorise propositional meanings – in the spirit of post-Gricean pragmatics – in terms of interactional achievement. There is, admittedly, a seeming incompatibility in the epistemological and ontological commitments of interactional analyses versus philosophical semantic analyses of meaning, with the former grounded in a constructionist view of meaning that resides only with the participants themselves, and the latter aiming to represent meanings as somehow objective to the minds in which they reside. However, despite these differences in paradigmatic commitments, as advocated by Haugh (2010), interactional data can be used to inform the minimalism-contextualism debate and, in particular, to test empirically-oriented views on ‘what is said’ that strive for cognitive reality.

4. Negotiating what is said when understandings diverge

At this point, it is worth giving some examples of how such a co-constructed ‘what is said’ can arise in conversation. In addition to outlining the process of negotiating ‘what is said’ through the three-turn procedure, the remainder of this chapter attends to an outstanding question regarding the circumstances under which a hearer’s inference is likely to contribute to a process of ‘successful communication’; that is, when a hearer’s inference will be accepted by the speaker. The simple case is when the hearer recovers a proposition that aligns with the speaker’s main intended proposition—even when this intended proposition diverges from the logical form of the uttered content. That is, the hearer infers a meaning that corresponds to either the literal content of the speaker’s utterance that the speaker intended to communicate (including modulations or developments thereof, depending on one’s contextualist outlook), or a communicated implicature that is both intended by the speaker and derived by the hearer through an interaction of the uttered content with extra-linguistic contextual factors. However, when we add in the considerations that (a) a speaker may not have a determinate proposition in mind that is communicated, and that (b) a speaker may accept a different proposition to the one that was initially intended, the circumstances under which a hearer’s inferred content will viably contribute to a process of ‘successful communication’ is less clear cut.

As discussed, we know from Grice that an utterance can potentially give rise to a number of propositions of which the speaker may or may not be consciously aware, and all of these propositions are available to a hearer to infer. However, as noted by Ariel (2016, p. 23), we must be wary of conflating potential inferences that are *compatible* with what the speaker said with implicatures that are speaker-intended inferences. As she says, ‘truth-compatible inferences’ may well be speaker *endorsed*, but they need not necessarily be speaker *intended*. Ariel (2016) proposes a battery of tests that distinguish different kinds of pragmatic inferences, including inferences that the speaker intends to communicate directly (including variants of both explicatures and implicatures), but also:

1. inferences that the speaker intends the hearer to *consider*, but are not intended to be *communicated* by a given utterance (‘background assumptions’), and
2. inferences that the speaker does not intend the hearer to consider (and are not intended to be communicated), yet that the speaker would be held normatively accountable for and hence should *accept* should the hearer derive them (‘truth-compatible inferences’).

These latter two kinds of inference will be useful in explaining when and why a given inference may be accepted by a speaker in the negotiation of ‘what is said’, in the situation where the inferred content does not straightforwardly map onto the speaker’s intended content.

To utilise Ariel’s terminology, when a speaker produces an utterance, the speaker not only potentially gives rise to a range of propositions that are compatible with the uttered content, but, in addition, makes manifest a set of *background assumptions* that the speaker intends the hearer to consider in order for the hearer to recover a relevant proposition. As Ariel (2016, p. 15) states, background assumptions are entertained by the speaker and are intended for the hearer to consider, but the speaker does not *communicate* them. Background assumptions are akin to Jaszczolt’s (2010) ‘sources of information’, which include world knowledge, stereotypes and presumptions about society and culture, but also even aspects of the situation of discourse that includes knowledge about the participants and the immediate contextual environment. A speaker may expect his or her hearer to draw on particular background assumptions in order to make relevant inferences regarding his or her specific utterance, but it is not in virtue of the *content* of the utterance that these background assumptions are invoked.

Given this apparatus, the proposal of this chapter is as follows: in case a hearer does not recover a proposition that is intended to be communicated by the speaker by a given utterance, communication can still be considered successful as long as the hearer derives an inference that is not necessarily truth compatible with the explicit content of the utterance and, crucially, not necessarily truth compatible with the speaker’s intended meaning, but that is *truth compatible with the intended background assumptions*. In other words, speakers and hearers need not necessarily align at the level of the utterance meaning as it is intended by the speaker at the utterance time. Rather, alignment can occur as long as the relevant background assumptions are accommodated—even when some aspect of the content of the utterance is not.

To exemplify this idea, let us return first to the case of indeterminate propositions as in (2), repeated below.

(2) (Casual conversation about common friends)

A: And Karen and Ian want to buy her half of the mortgage out, so they’ll have too much mortgage.

B: Yeah… It really is…

A: I know. With Ian only a tennis coach.

B: Well even now. I mean, **if he has good rates, good bank rates, and he’s got a steady job…**

A: That’s true.

B’s subsentential conditional utterance could arguably be ‘completed’ to communicate any one of an infinite number of possible propositions. However, despite the fact that the speaker may not have an intended completion in mind with determinate syntactic structure that would give rise to a fully-fledged proposition, there will be a range of *admissible* completions that the speaker would endorse; i.e. there will be a set of propositions that comprises inferences that are truth compatible with the speaker’s intended message. The question concerns how to arrive at that set. The idea here is that the speaker’s utterance makes manifest a range of background assumptions that the hearer is expected to consider in the process of utterance interpretation: in this case, there is a relevant societal assumption that having a steady job is likely to facilitate an ability to make regular payments on a mortgage. Then, the set of admissible completions of the subsentential conditional becomes restricted to those propositions that are truth compatible with the relevant background assumption. As long as the hearer infers a proposition that is in that set, the speaker is likely to accept the inference derived by the hearer.

The extent to which cases of indeterminate propositions can be considered ‘divergent understandings’ will depend on one’s theoretical commitments, and assuming that a radical contextualist theory aims to recover propositions at the discursive level as opposed to the level of explicit utterance content, the proposal offered here is expected to be largely uncontroversial. What is more controversial is the attempt to account for cases in which a hearer infers a meaning that does *not* align with the speaker’s intended meaning; given that a model hearer has the cognitive power and resources to recover a speaker’s intended message, such cases are typically considered beyond the scope of a normative theory of meaning. However, such cases do not always straightforwardly result in communication problems, as the misunderstanding can be resolved through acceptance, with an alternative construal even being preferred by the initial speaker. Such cases are labelled by Clark (1997: 589) ‘accepted misconstruals’, where “speakers present an utterance with one intention in mind, but when an addressee misconstrues it, they change their minds and accept the new construal”.

Let us consider Clark’s exchange below between himself, a customer (C), and a waiter (W).

(3) W: And what would you like to drink?

C: Hot tea, please. Uh, English breakfast.

W: That was Earl Grey?

C: Right.

Here, W’s uptake ‘that was Earl Grey?’ does not align with C’s ostensibly determinate intention to request English breakfast tea. However, rather than correct W, C resolves the misalignment in content by accepting W’s construal. As Clark claims,

I initially intended to be taken as meaning one thing, but I changed my mind. Speakers may accept a misconstrual because they deem it too trivial, disrupting, or embarrassing to correct. Still, once it is grounded, it is taken to be what they mean. (Clark 1997, p. 589)

So although the speaker may have a determinate intention at the time of producing the utterance, the hearer’s response in the second turn may diverge from that initial intention in such a way that is permissible to the speaker. In that case, the speaker accepts the meaning inferred by the hearer in the third turn, which then becomes ‘operative’ (cf. Arundale 2013) between the speaker and hearer in the current exchange.

Let us take the target utterance that is being negotiated to be C’s utterance, “English Breakfast”. Through this utterance, C makes available an inference that he did, indeed, request English Breakfast tea from the waiter. W’s clarificatory request then makes available her inference on how she thinks C wants to be understood – as requesting *Earl Grey tea* – and, crucially, the third turn by C *confirms* W’s inference, thereby operationalising a proposition that was not intended at the time of utterance. However, the fact that both participants were ostensibly satisfied with this interactional outcome, dismissing the interaction as conversation breakdown is counterintuitive. According to the proposal outlined here, the outcome can be explained as follows. First, it is already in the conversational background that C wants to order hot tea from the previous utterance. This information is therefore salient as contributing to the interpretation of the following utterance, ‘English Breakfast’. Crucially, it is expected that C would *intend* the hearer to take the information that C is requesting hot tea into consideration when deriving an inference about the meaning of ‘English Breakfast’. Now, although the hearer derives an inference that is not truth compatible with C’s explicitly *uttered* content, she does derive an inference that is truth compatible with the background assumption that C intends to order hot tea. There are various reasons why C might not correct W in her inference, perhaps because C decides that Earl Grey is preferable to English Breakfast tea, that C does not want to embarrass W, or that C deems it too much effort to correct her. But, as I argue, since an offer of Earl Grey is compatible with the background assumption – and overall communicative goal – of C ordering hot tea, in this case C is happy to accept the misconstrual and retrospectively update the meaning that he ascribes to his initial utterance, landing on a joint view on ‘what is said’ as a request for Earl Grey.

Note that the post-Gricean may argue that the interaction in (3) *does* display a misunderstanding insofar as the explicit content of the speaker’s utterance was not recovered by the hearer. But this is to take a speaker-centric view on the notion of ‘what is said’; the contrasting view that prioritises hearer inferences would not aim to represent that misunderstanding as, from the perspective of W, C confirmed W’s initial inference and hence no misunderstanding occurred. But the benefit of tracking the meanings that are made jointly operative between the participants in the exchange is that we can incorporate both speaker and hearer perspectives in a single notion of ‘what is said’, as ‘what is said’ pertains to a unit co-constructed by participants, attributed to the speaker-hearer dyad.

While I have outlined the proposal for the positive cases, to finish it is worth examining an instance in which communication is not so ‘successful’, at least insofar as the three-turn process of meaning negotiation does not make manifest a proposition that is operationalised between the participants. Consider the following example (adapted from Varonis & Gass 1985):

(5) [A customer (C) aims to telephone a retail store to buy a new television, but mistakenly calls a representative (R) at a repair centre]

R: Seventeen inch?

C: Okay.

(pause)

R: Well is it portable?

In this extract, the source of trouble comes from the opening utterance ‘seventeen inch?’ by the service representative, R, about which the speakers struggle to come to an agreed meaning. While on my proposal a successful interaction should involve the customer, C, deriving an inference that is compatible with R’s background assumptions that R expects C to consider, it is the divergence in background assumptions about the conversational setting from the outset that lead to troubles in understanding. If there were no such divergence, a viable inference of R’s utterance should be compatible with the background assumptions that (i) R works at a repair centre, and hence that (ii) the television under discussion is in C’s possession and requires repairing. Thus, a likely truth compatible completion of the representative R’s fragment ‘seventeen inch’ that R would endorse would likely be ‘do you have a seventeen inch television?’. However, the customer C’s response ‘okay’ makes available an inference about the way in which C understood R’s utterance, namely as a suggestion – as opposed to a request for information – along the lines of, ‘would you like a seventeen inch television?’. That is, C does not derive an inference that is compatible with R’s background assumptions, and hence a problem in the interaction becomes manifest; the pause that ensues indicates that R recognises that something is not right with the interaction. Regarding ‘what is said’, as the two speakers do not operationalise any proposition that is attributed to R’s initial utterance, no proposition is grounded, and, from the point of view of the speaker-hearer dyad, nothing is ‘said’. It is only later in the interaction, when we would expect the participants to recognise the misunderstanding, and in particular realise their differences in background assumptions, that we would expect the speakers to jointly attribute propositional content to the previous problematic utterance, possibly (jointly) attributing two sets of content to the utterance: one per understanding.

5. Final remarks

In this chapter, I have aimed to show that instances of ‘miscommunication’ – in the sense of a hearer failing to recognise a speaker’s determinate communicative intention – do not necessarily result in what might be considered communication breakdown. In the ideal case, the meanings that are the most productive at progressing information flow are those that are the main intended meanings of the speaker and that are recovered by the hearer—and these are the cases that have dominated concerns in the field of post-Gricean pragmatics. While some theorists acknowledge that in some contexts and for some sets of interlocutors, the main meaning communicated may depart from the logical form to reflect the main intended speech act, I have aimed to develop the post-Gricean account by taking on board insights from interactional pragmatics, which recognises that information flow isn’t always this simple; but it is not always the case that we would want to label an interaction as ‘communication breakdown’ just because the main message wasn’t recovered. That is to say, this proposal is not intended to vitiate extant arguments for speaker- or hearer-centric approaches to representing propositional meaning but is aimed as a supplementary account for when hearers do not straightforwardly recover speakers’ intended utterance meanings.

Taking ‘what is said’ to track the most salient propositions that are mutually made operative between interlocutors is a move towards a theory of communication that accounts for the facts that speakers sometimes leave open the meanings of their utterances and/or that they can, on occasion, allow hearers’ interpretations to influence and inform the meanings of their own utterances, and that this is a regularly occurring pattern observable in real-life meaning negotiation. Insofar as speakers and hearers do not always straightforwardly agree on utterance meanings, but that speakers do systematically attend to the three-part architecture of conversational inference, it is not unreasonable to extend a normative theory of utterance meaning in communication such that it can account for and explain such instances. Attending to a three-part process of interaction in which speakers and hearers converge on a joint agreement on ‘what is said’ is a step forward in this direction that both highlights that the primary utterance meaning of the speaker may not be the one that is inferred by the hearer, and, crucially, where mismatches occur.

While I have exemplified the proposal for a small number of specific instances, the next step will be to test the proposal with more complex interactional data, both exemplifying the three-turn process of meaning negotiation and also showing how interlocutors attend to relevant background assumptions in converging on ‘what is said’ in interaction. But my broader point is that mismatches in understandings do not automatically result in communication failure; as I argue, a speaker and hearer are likely to come to a joint understanding as long as the hearer infers a content that is compatible with the speaker’s background assumptions that the hearer is expected to take into consideration. Thus, the resolution of operationalising ‘what is said’ may lead to meanings that weren’t ‘intended’ by the speaker at the time of utterance but which are nevertheless compatible with the speaker’s higher-order, overall communicative goal.

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2. There are also proposals by which ‘what is said’ does not map onto truth-conditional content, such as Bach’s (1994) ‘propositional radicals’ which pertain to locutionary content, as opposed to *illocutionary* content. I continue in the tradition of equating ‘what is said’ with the content of illocutionary acts of, e.g. stating and asserting. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Here I sidestep the many recent debates on the nature of ‘intentions’, using ‘speaker intentions’ to refer to a Gricean notion of a speaker’s (reflexively held) intention to communicate something to a hearer, by way of the hearer’s recognition of that intention. See Navarro (2017) for an overview of the different uses of the term ‘intention’ in the philosophical pragmatics literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Note that Ariel (2002, 2016) retains a view on ‘what is said’ that pertains to a context-dependent ‘explicature’ as per the Relevance Theoretic view (cf. Sperber & Wilson 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The notion of a ‘contextualist basic proposition’ is useful when identifying meanings that may be acquired by overhearers and bystanders who are necessarily not involved in the mutual co-construction of meaning, but discussion of the place of such a construct for a theory of communication lies beyond the scope of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. And sometimes utterance meanings are not settled by the third turn, in which case the negotiation of meaning continues beyond three turns. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)