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TO (MIS)COMMUNICATE IN 'SCORCHING HEAT'

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Abstract: *Miscommunication can be defined as failure of communicating the intended meaning as well as failure of understanding the communicated meaning. Miscommunication can be intra-cultural and inter-cultural which accounts for the fact that it is not necessary for two speakers to belong to different cultures since miscommunication can appear between speakers who belong to the same culture and speak the same language. Miscommunication is interpreted as a normal phenomenon since people have different visions and representations of the world and of reality.*

Key words: *miscommunication, misunderstanding, misinterpretation, inference.*

1. Statement of Purpose

I base my paper on *Jenny Thomas*'s statement 'there isn't in the British society a single system of pragmatic values' (75). I start my argument with this quotation because it best illustrates the idea of diversity and multiplicity, which represent the premises for intra-, inter-, and cross-cultural miscommunication. Miscommunication arises / appears between the members of the same linguistic community independent of their knowledge or will. With this being said, I state my purpose which is that of analyzing the reasons that bring about miscommunication and which are the factors that contribute to the solving of misunderstandings, the so-called '*negotiated communication'* (Gass & Varonis, 75). In order to do this, I picked up a well-known Romanian play 'Căldură mare' (Scorching heat) written by *I.L. Caragiale* But, before the proper analysis, I will attempt at a literature review on the topic of miscommunication.

2. Key Concepts

Miscommunication, misunderstanding, misinterpretation, negotiated communication, inference, repair, failed linguistics, pragmatic failure.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Definition of Miscommunication

Miscommunication is a concept very much dealt with by pragmaticians, sociolinguists, and anthropologists. *Banks, Ge & Baker* (quoted in Coupland, Wiemann and Giles, 148) define miscommunication as a 'label' that speaker and interlocutor give to their interpretation of the communication. They go further and claim that miscommunication is a matter of reading/ deciphering of the meaning. Often, misunderstanding has been taken for error, slip of tongue, dysfunction.

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3.2. Features of Miscommunication

Researchers have tried to identify its features which might allow them to discriminate it from the others problems that appear in communication. Thus, the major features that differentiate it from the other communication problems are 1) non-initiation of repair, 2) social consequences. If both or at least one of these conditions is not met, then, there is not any miscommunication. In the texts that I have reviewed, I noticed a contradiction in what concerns the non-initiation of repair as a hallmark of miscommunication. *Banks, Ge & Baker* (quoted in Coupland, Wiemann and Giles, 39) consider the non-initiation of repair as a feature of miscommunication, whereas *Coupland, Wiemann, Giles* (174) state that 'miscommunicative sequences are frequently repaired'.

3.3. Miscommunication Components

Researchers seem to agree that miscommunication encompasses on the one hand *misrepresentation* (problematic verbal representation) on the part of the speaker and on the other hand *misunderstanding* (inaccurate, adapted to one's knowledge or reality interpretation) on the part of the hearer (*Milroy* quoted *in Coupland, Wiemann, Giles*, 76). To put it differently, both speaker and interlocutor are involved in communication and each of them might confront problems or troubles.

3.4. Indeterminate Utterances

There are some other researchers who claim that neither the speaker nor the interlocutor is responsible for the miscommunication. *Dijk* (quoted in *Coupland, Wiemann, Giles*, 48) argues that the utterances are 'intrinsically indeterminate'. The indeterminate character of the utterances backs the idea that miscommunication is not a deviation but the norm even with people speaking the same language. *Habernas* quoted (in *Coupland, Wiemann, Giles* 96) claims that 'the very sharing of a common language code is itself very deceptive, since it falsely suggests a common ground and a "naturalness" of communication'. This means that speaking one and the same language does not stop miscommunication from occurring. This can be best illustrated by pointing out the fact that miscommunication does not appear only between two communicators of different languages, but also between the communicators of one and the same language as it is the case in "Scorching Heat".

3.5. Nature of Miscommunication

Some researchers identified the cultural background and the language as a whole as a source of miscommunication. *Edda Weigand* (54) grouped the sources of miscommunication as follows: misunderstanding the means which refers to being aware and understanding the potentialities of a language, idiomatic expression, unexpected vocabulary combinations, coinages and grammar adaptations on the one hand and misunderstanding of purposes which signals the fact that interlocutors fail to see the reason why certain utterances are said and why or why in that form.

3.5.1. Language Failure

Phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics are all components of language that build up communication. A failure in any of these components might have as result miscommunication. In this sense, *Banks, Ge & Baker* (quoted in Coupland, Wiemann and Giles, 84) identify two types

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of failures that could actually cause miscommunication: *linguistic failure* and *failed pragmatics*. *Linguistic failure* is any failure at the phonologic, morphologic and syntactic levels that might have as consequence miscommunication. Failed pragmatics refers to meaning making and meaning interpreting, focusing on 'choices that people make when they want to say something' (*Banks, Ge & Baker,* quoted in Coupland, Wiemann and Giles, *132*). They may be vocabulary or turn of phrase choices. Thomas's (65) account of pragmatic failure (PF) focuses on the production portion of messages. She deals with PF, which she defines as the inability to understand what is meant from what is said. In Thomas's view both pragmatic-linguistic and socio-pragmatic failures are failures of production. Riley (quoted in Oleksy, 234) suggests the following definition for pragmatic errors: "Pragmatic errors are the result of an interactant imposing the social rules of one culture on his communicative behavior in a situation where the social rules of another culture would be more appropriate". According to Liebe-Harkort (quoted in Oleksy, 173) difficulties in intra-cultural communication are potentially compounded further, if one of the speakers is monolingual and cannot imagine that the intentions of their speaking partner may be different than his or her own would be if s/he were to use a form or expression the other uses. Clearly, *communicative competence* must include *pragmatic-linguistic competence* (i.e., choosing appropriate form) and socio-pragmatic competence (i.e., choosing appropriate meaning) if inter-cultural pragmatic problems are to be avoided (Trosborg, 10).

3.5.2. Cultural Difference

Banks, Ge & Baker (quoted in Coupland, Wiemann and Giles, 85) see different cultural belonging as another source of miscommunication. This, they say, belies in the fact that there are high-context and low-context cultures where focal elements differ. *Banks, Ge & Baker* (quoted in Coupland, Wiemann and Giles, 74) draw on Hofstede's classification which provides the contrastive features of the two types of culture. Thus, high-context cultures are individualist while low-context cultures are collectivist. Many differences derive from the type of culture and the differences are likely to result in miscommunication.

3.5.3. Misunderstanding the Means

Edda Weigand (49) divides language into two components. One is 'how to do it' and she refers to the means that people use when communicating. The misunderstanding of some of the means such as phonology or differences in syntactical processing might lead to miscommunication.

3.5.4. Misunderstanding the Purposes

The other component identified by *Edda Weigand* (57) is 'what is meant by what is said'.

Both sources identify the same causes for miscommunication but they categorize them according to distinct criteria. *Banks, Ge & Baker* (quoted in Coupland, Wiemann and Giles, 170) focus on the language failure and cultural difference. Edda Weigand (70) covers by the misunderstanding of the purpose *Banks, Ge & Baker's* failed pragmatics. And *Weigand's* phonology and differences in syntactical processing cover *Banks, Ge & Baker's* language failure. The only element that is not to be identified in *Banks, Ge & Baker* is Weigand's absent-mindedness, which cannot fall into the cultural category.

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4. Practising Analysis on Miscommunication

As I have already said in the statement of purpose I intend to analyze how miscommunication occurs, whether the conditions for miscommunication are met and how it functions. For this, I chose to analyze a fragment from 'Căldură mare' (Scorching heat) written by *I..L Caragiale*. Due to space constraints I shall refer to only some fragments from the play.

1) 'D: Atunci să-i spui c-am venit eu.
F: Cum vă cheamă pe dumneavoastră?
D: Ce-ți pasă?
F: Ca să-i spui.
D: Ce să-i spui; de unde ştii ce să-i spui dacă nu ți-am spus ce să-i spui?'

"D: Then tell him that I came.
F: What is your name?
D: What do you care?
F: To tell him.
D: To tell what? How do you know what to tell him if I haven't told you what to tell him?" (my translation)

This situation starts with the gentleman who asks the servant to inform his master about his visit. While doing this he doesn't provide his name because he doesn't think it necessary, relying on the fact that his friend will know who it was about. The word that triggers the miscommunication is 'eu' (I). The servant doesn't know the gentleman and asks him for his name. Gumperz & Tannen (in Gass & Varonis, 57) strengthen the idea that:' the more participants in a conversation know about each other, the less the likelihood of significant instances of miscommunication.' Then, the servant is asked what is his reason for asking the gentleman's name. The servant motivates his question by the need of telling it to his master. This is the moment when misinterpretation occurs. The gentleman infers that the servant wants to tell his master the reason his friend came there for. His misinterpretation of the servant's intention is stressed by his question: 'de unde ştii ce să-i spui dacă nu ți-am spus ce să-i spui?'' (How do you know what to tell him if I haven't told you what to tell him?) Actually, the servant's answer: 'Ca să-i spui' (To tell him) referred to the gentleman's name which was asked with the purpose of being told to his master. There isn't any congruity between the question and the answer. The turn-taking doesn't proceed smoothly because they don't answer each other's question. They seem to carry a monologue. According to *Edda Weigand's* classification (59) this is a misunderstanding of purpose 'what is meant by what is said'. According to *Banks, Ge & Baker* (quoted in Coupland, Wiemann and Giles, 156) this is failed pragmatics because the gentleman did not grasp the meaning of what the servant said. There isn't any repair initiated and the misunderstanding is not solved. There isn't any negotiated communication going on.

2)'F: Pe stăpânu-meu nu-l cheamă d. Costică; e propitar …
D: Ei! Şi dacă-i propitar?
F: Îl cheamă d. Popescu.
D: Şi mai cum?
F: Cum, mai cum?
D: Fireşte … Popescu, propitar … bine … şi mai cum?
F: Nu pot să ştiu.'

"F: My master's name is not Mr. Popescu; he's an owner ….
E: Well! So what if he's an owner
F: His name is Mr. Popescu
D: How else?
F: What, how else?
D: Naturally … Popescu, owner … all right … and how else?
F: I cannot know". (my translation)

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Obviously, while trying to find out the master's name a miscommunicative situation occurs. Thus, at the question 'What's your master's name?' the servant answers by the title that his master detains. Probably, the servant's answer 'e propitar' represents his attempt to highlight his master's prestige. 'Propitar' was someone who was worth respect in servant's view. This is confirmed two lines lower when he eventually makes his master's name known by using the master's surname. It only now becomes obvious why he denied that his master's name was mr. Costica to whom he instantly opposed the title of owner. The reader finds out that the servant has high opinions about masters and that he thinks inconsiderate of addressing an owner by his first name. The gentleman doesn't notice the subtlety and the misinterpretation occurs because he can't see the relationship between the master's name and his being an owner. In support to this interpretation comes one idea developed by *Wolfson* (57) in her essay 'Rules of Speaking' where she states that 'the errors concerning the sociolinguistics are interpreted as bad manners'. The way the dialogue continues shows clearly that the servant cannot conceive of his master as being addressed by the first name. To the question: 'si mai cum?' (How else?) he answers with another question where he is looking for clarifications:' cum, mai cum?' (What how else?). A proof of miscommunication is initiation of repair quoted in *Coupland, Wiemann, Giles*'s view (86). Thus, the gentleman reviews all the knowledge they have so far got to: 'Fireste … Popescu, propitar … bine … si mai cum?' (Naturally … Popescu, owner … all right … and how else?). Unfortunately, the answer is ambiguous and it is difficult to say whether it is a refusal or sheer lack of knowledge. According to *Edda Weigand's* classification (59) this is a misunderstanding of means. In other words, the servant does not respond to and agree with the gentleman's perceptions and ways of finding out the owner's full name. According to *Banks, Ge & Baker* (quoted in Coupland, Wiemann and Giles, 73) this is failed pragmatics because the servant did not understand the meaning of what the gentleman said.

3) 'D: Nu-l cheamă Costică Popescu?
F: Nu
D: Nu se poate.
F: Ba da, domnule.
D: Apoi vezi?
F: Ce să văz?'

"D: Isn't his name Costică Popescu?
F: No
D: It can't be.
F: It can, sir.
D: Then, you see?
F: See what? (my translation)

This fragment starts with a question by which the gentleman tries to find out whether the master's name is Costică Popescu. His question is answered 'no' by the servant. The gentleman expresses his distrust to the servant's answer and says: 'Nu se poate' (It can't be). The servant wants to confirm that his master's name is not Costică Popescu and a confirmation is always positive, therefore, the use of 'yes' is absolutely necessary. Yet, the gentleman misinterprets the servant's answer as a confirmation of the master's name. He infers that the answer of the servant is a confirmation of the master's name and he responds with another question: Apoi vezi? (Then, you see?) which acknowledges his initial statement about the master's name. According to *Edda Weigand's* classification (59) this is a misunderstanding of means 'differences in syntactical processing. That means that 'Ba da' (It can, sir.) is typically an affirmative

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answer given to a negative question. Its force is greater than that of 'yes', because it is the unexpected answer there where a negative answer seems to be the one that is preferred. It is a matter of language. With *Banks, Ge & Baker* (quoted in Coupland, Wiemann and Giles, 64) this is interpreted as linguistic failure because the gentleman did not follow the logic of the discourse and he did not stick to the answer-question pattern of the dialogue. He takes one answer as one for a question that was actually answered one turn before.

5. Conclusion

At the end of the analysis of the three fragments a few conclusions are worth drawing. Firstly, misunderstanding is created by the practice of delaying answers and of answering questions after the initiation of the next adjacency pair. Irregular, abrupt turn-takings, non-negotiated communications are the consequences. None of the miscommunicative situations is solved. Interlocutors create inferences relying on their own knowledge and very little on the proper dialogue. Miscommunication is created either by misunderstanding the means or by misunderstanding the purpose.

Their different social background, their lack of shared knowledge creates (a flaw communication) / miscommunication.

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