

Misunderstanding Children

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Introduction

Human development is often conceptualized in terms of an evolving competence to perceive, know, feel, and act in a normal manner. Every society establishes norms of competence and all members of society, including infants and small children, are evaluated in terms of them. We may be deemed incapable, awkward, peculiar, enigmatic, able, impressive, masterful, or creative, depending on society and situation. Within the very large domain of competence is the competence to make sense out of strings of expressed propositions in the form of speaking or writing. The activity of making sense, the intellectual plaything of philosophy for centuries, has been a driving concern within the social sciences in the past several decades.

How children gain competence in sense-making has been an important research focus among developmental psycholinguists. Sense-making is discussed in terms of comprehension and noncomprehension of expressed propositions in the form of words, phrases, clauses, or strings of clauses. Each linguistic form is associated with one or more meanings which in turn a child may comprehend to different degrees and in different ways. The work of the researcher is to not only establish the nature of the child's comprehension but as well to account for its particular pattern. In most developmental paradigms, (1) the meanings assigned by the researcher are deemed normative, (2) meaning-assignment is based primarily on intentions and seen as an individual activity, and (3) degrees and avenues of

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comprehension/noncomprehension are said to evidence levels of linguistic competence. With respect to (1), most developmental paradigms assume a model of communication in which meanings of particular linguistic constructions are conventional and specified. In this model, the task of the child is to acquire knowledge of these conventional meanings, that is, recognize and express meaning correctly. With respect to (2), comprehension studies presume a communication model in which meanings are conveyed from a sender (e.g., a researcher) to a receiver (a child). Within this *conduit* model of communication, there is a meaning or set of meanings intended by a sender that is or is not successfully grasped by the receiver. In this framework, the focus is on sender and receiver as individual language processors rather than on meaning-assignment as a joint psychological activity (Vygotsky in Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner, & Souberman, 1978). With respect to (3), a child who systematically assigns normative meanings (that match assigned, intended meanings) in a comprehension activity is said to have acquired an understanding of some structure within language. Contrastively, a child who assigns other than intended, normative meanings is seen as making errors or as not yet competent. Although the psycholinguistic literature focuses on dimensions of meaning children are capable of processing and on (non)comprehension as a cognitive status, this chapter examines how comprehension and noncomprehension are organized by local social orders and local theories of knowledge, communication, and competence. It visualizes relative comprehension as a social and cultural accomplishment as well as a cognitive outcome of (mis)communicative activity. The bulk of this essay is devoted to communicative activity in which one or another participant signals noncomprehension or potential noncomprehension. We refer to such activities as *misunderstandings*.

Each activity of misunderstanding—whether it takes place in the flow of daily life or in the prescribed environment of a psycholinguistic experiment—is structured in local and universal ways. The activity of misunderstanding appears universally. Further, strategies for signaling and responding to noncomprehension are common to many communities. Communities distinguish themselves, however, through their local preferences for particular forms of signaling and responding to noncomprehension. Communities do not necessarily share the same expectations regarding which forms are appropriate for a particular set of interlocutors in a particular setting. This means that in each community, competent participants to a misunderstanding bring to this activity tacit knowledge of such considerations as how noncomprehension or partial comprehension is indexed, when it is expected, when it is important, how it is anticipated, how and when it is handled by particular participants. Each

enacted activity of misunderstanding perpetuates or transforms interactants' tacit knowledge of miscommunication. When children participate—even when children are audience to noncomprehension of others—the activity of misunderstanding provides an opportunity space for socialization. Children are socialized into a form of competence, namely, the competence to engage in the activity of misunderstanding. In this sense, developmentalists' interest in children's misunderstandings includes what children understand of the activity of misunderstanding in addition to their grasp of the semantic scope of linguistic constructions. Among other skills, children must come to recognize signals of misunderstanding, isolate sources of misunderstanding, and determine strategies for responding to misunderstandings.

The Language Socialization of Misunderstanding

Socialization can be considered as a process whereby one gains competence and understandings that mark membership in a social group. This process takes place in the course of daily social life through interactions with members and through the use of tools (e.g., spoken language, literacy materials) produced by or available to members. Language plays an important part in socialization, although its role relative to nonvocal modes of socialization will vary cross-culturally (cf. Rogoff, 1989). Language is the most elaborate symbolic and formal system available to the human species and humans universally exploit its symbolic and formal potential to socialize children and other novices. Cultural skills and knowledge are transmitted symbolically in part through the meaning-content of verbalized messages (e.g., "Say 'thank you'", "The grownups get knives; the kids do not".) That is, what members say and write is a vehicle for cultural reproduction.

On the other hand, the form of a message is an important medium for socializing skills and knowledge. Every utterance displays to novices a set of linguistic forms that members of a social group conventionally use to construct particular social actions, social identities, and stances. These forms tell or *index* to those present what type of social situation is taking place. A more accurate formulation is that these forms index what type of social situation *may* be taking place, for any one form often indexes not one but a set of possible situations. For example, the use of an imperative construction may index a number of social actions (e.g., order, warning, advice, threat), social relationships (e.g., employer-employee, parent-child, friends) and stances (e.g., sympathy, irritation). To narrow the scope

of possible definitions of the social situation, children and other novices learn to relate particular forms to others that co-occur and have situational meanings. They relate the imperative form, for example, to a particular intonational contour, voice quality, morphological indexes of stance, and pronominal choices. In these ways, children and other novices organize their universe through language. And in these ways, the indexical potential of grammatical and discourse forms render them powerful media for socializing culture.

How can we relate this general process, which we call *language socialization* (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986), to the activity of misunderstanding? This chapter proposes two links:

First, every social group relies upon a set of linguistic (and gestural) forms to constitute the social and linguistic activity of misunderstanding. In this sense, the co-occurrence of these particular forms indexes that the activity of misunderstanding is taking place. Language socialization takes place when repeated co-occurrences of these forms socialize children into an understanding of how this activity is accomplished. The developmental literature indicated that misunderstandings involving children occur repeatedly in all societies and that even very young children participate with some competence in such activities. American infants 12-18 months of age display that others have misunderstood their messages (e.g., gestures and/or vocalizations) through repeating and paraphrasing their original actions (Golinkoff, 1986). Further, quite early in their development (Brown's Stage II [1973]), children are able to respond appropriately to both specific requests and global requests for confirmation, by repeating only a portion of the original utterance in response to the former and repeating the entire utterance in response to the latter (Gallagher, 1981).

Second, just as linguistic forms help to constitute the activity of misunderstanding so the activity of misunderstanding may be seen as helping to constitute other facets of the social and cultural context. For example, participation in the activity of misunderstanding may be limited to particular social identities. We know, for example, that certain societies limit who can ask questions (see below). When speakers opt for one or another strategy for engaging in the activity of misunderstanding, they are constituting their social identities. In addition to social identity, misunderstandings may be limited by local theories of how understanding is achieved. In this sense, each misunderstanding helps to instantiate and create local systems of belief. Through misunderstandings, then, children are socialized into further definitions of the *context of situation* and *context of culture* (Malinowski, 1978).

Socializing Structural Aspects of Misunderstanding

Let us now examine ways in which misunderstanding activities in which children participate are organized. We consider here misunderstandings of children's utterances by others and misunderstandings of others' utterances by children.

Misunderstanding Children's Utterances

Following the work of Cherry (1979), Corsaro (1977), Golinkoff (1986), and Ochs (1988a) on clarifying children's utterances as well as Schegloff, Jefferson and Sack's (1977) classic study of repair in adult conversation, we may analyze misunderstandings of children's utterances in terms of a discourse activity in which a verbal behavior of a child is perceived by either the child or other participant to the interaction as partially or fully unclear to others. In other words, our concern is with the activity of engaging in recognized misunderstanding rather than with misunderstanding that goes unrecognized by the participants at the time of its occurrence. Children and others involved in recognized misunderstandings have a number of alternative strategies available to them for responding to perceived unclarity. For purposes of this discussion, we focus on strategies available to those other than the child who produces the unclear utterance.

Universally, caregivers or others interacting with a young child may employ four alternative post hoc strategies to respond (overtly) to children's unintelligible utterances (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1988):

Ignore

They may ignore the child's unclear utterance. In her study of the Inuit children of Arctic Quebec, Crago (1988, p. 210) notes "In several of the tapes that were made of them, they frequently made unintelligible vocalizations. The large majority of these vocalizations went unheeded. Many times their parents did not respond, not even by looking up at the children." This characterization may apply to Athabaskan children's interactions with others, as noted by Scollon (1982, p. 87):

Children in American middle-class society are treated as persons who have a right to be heard, even when their speech is unclear. This contrasts with the treatment of Athabaskan children whose speech is normally ignored. Although infants are treated as if their noises are meaningful, this does not usually apply to toddlers who have actually begun to speak.

Similarly, Heath (1983, p. 75) observes among working-class Black families in South Carolina that "when infants begin to utter sounds which can be interpreted as referring to items or events in the environment, these sounds receive no special attention."

Show Minimal Grasp

Others may signal that the child's utterance is unclear to them. Ochs (1988a) refers to this response as the '*minimal grasp*' strategy. Golinkoff (1986, p. 464) specifies three means of marking nonunderstanding: (1) nonverbal indicators (e.g., raised eyebrows, quizzical looks), (2) clarification requests such as "huh", "whatø", "what do you want", and (3) statements of noncomprehension (e.g., "I don't know what you want"). In addition, caregivers and others may indicate to children that their utterances are unclear through teasing (cf. Crago, 1988). Teasing along with clarification requests and the other means of indicating unclarity may promote the child to rearticulate and redesign the previously produced utterance. The rearticulation may or may not be clearer from the point of view of others co-present.

Guess

They may verbally formulate a guess at what the intended unintelligible utterance might be. Ochs (1988a) refers to this response as the *expressed guess* strategy. Golinkoff (1986) notes that guessing may be vocal or nonvocal (i.e., gestural). A caregiver, for example, may guess by holding up an object to an infant as a candidate referent. Or, a caregiver may vocally reformulate or expand what she or he believes the child to be intending (e.g., "Milk?", "You want the milk?" "Are you saying 'I want the milk?'"

In Golinkoff's observations of American mothers interacting with preverbal infants, these verbal and nonverbal reformulations accounted for almost half of mothers' signals of their failure to understand (Golinkoff, 1986). A study by Cherry (1979) of talk to American children aged two and a half to four years indicates that the proportion of maternal guesses (referred to as *requests for confirmation* versus *requests for repetition* (a type of minimal grasp strategy) increases with age of child. Presumably younger children's utterances are seen as less intelligible than the utterances of older children and hence less amenable to reformulation in the form of an explicit guess.

The apparent preference of American mothers for overtly guessing at what a child might be saying is not matched in other societies. Among the

Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, verbal guessing of what the child might possibly be saying is not done (Schieffelin, 1990), and in traditional Western Samoan communities, it is rare (Ochs, 1988a).

Provide Cultural Gloss

They may provide a culturally appropriate formulation of the unintelligible utterance (Scollon, 1982). In these cases, others are not so much concerned with the child's intended meaning as much as what the child should be meaning given the social situation at hand. More mature persons surrounding the child will provide the child with a cultural *gloss* or *translation* (Scollon, 1982). Lock (1981) has described how such glossing may address children's gestural communication long before they begin producing words. He proposes that infants' gestures come to assume a conventional meaning through a process in which initially adults systematically provide a conventional meaning to children's gestures which is eventually assumed by the infant (see also Vygotsky, in Cole et al., 1978). In other words, an infant's gestures are related to a particular goal (e.g., "more") by a co-present adult (regardless of what goals, if any, the infant had in mind) and subsequently an infant learns to use such gestures to indicate that goal. In many societies, there are conventional glosses for first words. Thus, among the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, children's first words are conventionally glossed as "breast" and "mother" (Schieffelin, 1990). Among Samoans, children's first word is said to be the curse "shit". An interview with a Samoan mother (Ochs, 1988a, p. 160) indicates that sib and parental caregivers may be aware of this process of glossing of first words:

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Mother (Mo) and researcher (E) have just been talking about babbling, and E has just asked about first Samoan words.

- Mo: Oh, A Samoan Word!
 E: Mmm.
 Mo: ((Laughs)) Well I'm ashamed! ((Laughs)) ((Coughs))
 E: Don't be ashamed! ((Laughs))
 Mo: They call a Samoan word ((pause)) a, you know, when the Samoan kids ((?))=
 E: { uh huh
 Mo: =then the Samoan ((pause)) WOMAN you know,=
 E: Hmm.
 Mo: =or Samoan people said 'Oh! she said "Tae" ["shit"]
 E: { Hmm. Yeah.

- Mo: Shit! So maybe that's the FIRST word they know ((pause)).
 E: Hmm.
 Mo: Shit. And so the people ((emphatic particle)), we - we as adults...=
 :
 :
 Mo: ((Laughs)) ((pause)) = then we know - then we know=
 E: Hmm.
 Mo: ((self)) =oh my - my - my child is starting to first say the word 'shit' or ((pause)) stupid =
 E: { Yeah: ((pause)) swearing a lot ((Laughs))
 Mo: =stupid. That's a first word but ((pause)) but to a kid,=
 E: Hmm. ((pause)) Hmm.
 Mo: =to a kid it is - ((pause)) he doesn't really mean 'shit'
 E: Hmm
 Mo: =He doesn't. We are translating into that word 'shit'
 E: { Hmm. { Hmm.
 Mo: =because we = we mean he says 'shit'
 E: Hmm.
 MO: But to a kid, NO!
 E: Hmm.

Japanese mothers also make frequent use of cultural glosses, replacing children's inappropriate utterances with a culturally more acceptable paraphrase as in the interaction below:

- Child: Baibai tte itta no.
 "He said 'Byebye.'"
 Mother: Itta no ne. Papa nante itta? Itte mairimasu tte itta deshoo. Itte mairimasu.
 "He said it, didn't he. What did Papa say He said, 'I go and will come back,' didn't he. 'I go and will come back.'" Clancy, 1986, p. 236

Children's Misunderstanding of Others' Utterances

Just as there are universal strategies for responding to children's unclear utterances, so there are universal strategies for responding to children's nonunderstanding of the utterances of caregivers and others. In these cases, either the caregiver who produces an utterance or the child who listens to an utterance perceives the utterance to be unclear. As above, the focus of the discussion is on recognized unclarity and the behavior that recognition provokes. The discussion considers caregivers' responses not only to children's displayed noncomprehension after an unintelligible utterance is produced (*post hoc unintelligibility*) but also to children's

ossible noncomprehension of a not yet produced, anticipated utterance *a priori* unintelligibility).

A Priori Unintelligibility

In observing the speech of others in the presence of infants and children, researchers have noted two strategies for handling the possibility that children may not understand the talk in their presence:

Modify complexity of utterance. One strategy is to adapt the talk of others to facilitate the understanding of young children. One of the most widely reported behaviors of caregivers interacting with young children is that they modify their speech and other behavior in ways that anticipate possible misunderstanding. These modifications together constitute a distinct social register referred to as *baby talk* or *simplified register* (Ferguson, 1977), or *motherese* (Newport, 1976). Characteristics of this register include simplification of syntax, reduction of sentence length, restriction of vocabulary, exaggeration of intonation, slowing of articulation, reference to the immediate here-and-now, repetition, and paraphrases. These modifications appear to reflect a desire on the part of caregivers and others to maximize the comprehensibility of their utterances.

Simplification in many ways is the counterpart to the expressed guess strategy in that both strategies give importance to the speaker's intended meanings and organize the activity of misunderstanding around the understanding of a speaker's intentions. In the case of a *a priori* simplification, the speaker works toward clarifying his or her intentions before any evidence that the child has misunderstood. The speaker tacitly assumes a set of cognitive and other developmental limits on the child as recipient of talk and assumes that certain modes of presentation are more likely to be understood by the child than other modes. In the case of *post hoc* guessing, the speaker works toward clarifying the child's intentions. The speaker tacitly assumes a set of cognitive and other developmental limits on the child producer of talk. In both simplifying and guessing, the caregiver assumes the goal of misunderstanding activity to be comprehension of the speakers' intentions and in both cases the caregiver takes on the major burden of achieving this goal. With both strategies it is the caregiver and not the child who takes on the responsibility of formulating the comprehensible utterance. In the case of simplification, the perceived "author" of the comprehensible utterance is the caregiver; in the case of expressed guessing, the perceived author of the now comprehensible utterance is the child (although the analyst could argue co-authorship quite strongly).

Simplification is a widespread strategy of caregivers across the world's societies. Indeed we might say that it is universal. Recent cross-cultural

research, however, suggests that it is far more pervasive in certain societies than in others and that the type of simplification may differ across societies. In traditional Western Samoan communities, for example, sib and parental caregivers rarely simplify their utterances directed to young children (Ochs 1982, 1988a; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). Further, the form of simplification is much more restricted than what is reported for other communities. In Samoan communities, simplification tends to take the form of repetition of utterances (i.e., a discourse strategy). In other communities, such as in mainstream families in the United States, simplification tends to be syntactic and morphological as well as on the level of discourse.

Sustain level of utterance complexity. Although the bulk of the studies of talking to children focuses on caregivers' speech modifications, an equally important response to children's potential misunderstanding the world over is to avoid such modifications. The Kaluli of Papua New Guinea (Schieffelin, 1990) believe, for example, that children will be locked in a condition of prolonged misunderstanding and incompetence if adults and older children simplify their speech in the presence of the young. For the Kaluli, then, the route from misunderstanding to understanding is through exposing children to well-formed adult speech. Samoans, as well, rarely simplify their speech to young children. Children's development from misunderstanding to understanding is through their careful attention to the situation-appropriate words and actions of others. This world view contrasts with that of many White middle-class Europeans, who believe that the route to understanding is through a particular kind of assistance, namely assistance through utterance simplification. This is not to say that Samoan and Kaluli caregivers do not assist children in the activity of understanding. In these communities, assistance takes the form of drawing children's attention to the well-formed utterances and actions of others and sometimes *post hoc* strategies such as presenting the child with a repeated presentation of the well-formed utterance/action rather than *a priori* simplifying the complexity of any one utterance/action (cf. Rogoff, 1989; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1988).

Yet another perspective on the question of sustaining or modifying are complexity of utterances for infants and young children is that it is not always deemed important or even appropriate for children to understand the speech of others. Universally caregivers utilize strategies to make their utterances unintelligible, sometimes switching to a different code or spelling out a word. Crago (1988) describes how older generations of Inuit women feel strongly that although at times adults may simplify their speech, the talk of adults need not be always accessible to children. Indeed

direct involvement may hurt them in their development. One Inuit informant comments: "(Children) should not participate in adult conversation . . . to prevent them getting involved with adult stuff before they are mature enough" (p. 166). This attitude contrasts with some European caregivers who involve their infants and young children in complex conversational activities as a means of enhancing their development. Having so involved them, these caregivers assist their charges by paraphrasing and simplifying the talk that surrounds them.

Post Hoc Unintelligibility

In addition to anticipating unintelligibility, caregivers and others universally are often faced with some evidence that a child has not understood some intended meaning behind an utterance that has been expressed (post hoc evidence).

Inappropriately/incorrect response. Children's nonunderstanding may be signaled through their inappropriate or incorrect responses to an utterance. Such responses are utilized not only by caregivers. Researchers in developmental psycholinguistics as well rely on children's verbal or nonverbal responses to index their linguistic competence.

Just as researchers vary in the emphasis that they place on comprehension versus production as a measure of language acquisition so communities vary in their reliance on comprehension versus productive ability as a measure of acquisition. In certain communities, comprehension far more than production is an index that a child has competence in his or her language. Among the Inuit, for example, a woman commented about her child; "When she is able to understand, then if she was told to get a mitten and if she went and got it, and when she was told to bring it over to the person who sent her to get it and if she understood that, then we can know that she has learned language in that way today" (Crago, 1988, p. 207). Similarly, Inuit mourn the loss of Inuit language competence among the younger generation through comments such as "These children are losing their language. They don't *understand* [emphasis mine] what we ask them to do" (Crago, 1988, p. 209). Great emphasis on displays of comprehension is also characteristic of Japanese interactions with young children (Clancy, 1986). Mothers do not readily tolerate inappropriate responses of children and persistently repeat their utterances until a valid response is provided. Clancy suggests that insistence on the child's demonstration of comprehension socializes Japanese children to attend and empathize with others.

Displays of minimal grasp and guesses. In other situations, children may signal nonunderstanding through a minimal grasp (e.g., "huh?", "What?")

or expressed guess (e.g., "more?") type of request for clarification. In many communities, such requests are ubiquitous in interactions with young children. In other communities, children's requests for clarification may be rare. Scollon and Scollon (1981, p. 138) suggests this is the case for Athabaskan communities: "Where deference or respect for adults is valued, children must learn ways of gaining information without directly questioning adults." Similarly, Inuit women often comment, "We don't like our children to ask questions of adults" (Crago, 1988, p. 214). Native Hawaiian parents feel similarly and discourage children from asking questions. Boggs (1985, p. 55) notes: "In requesting information, children typically ask a question several times, reformulate it, and perhaps speculate, while waiting patiently for a reply. The parent typically does not reply right away, if replying at all." Goody (1978) reports that Gonja children of northern Liberia are also discouraged from asking questions.

Caregiver probes. In yet other cases, children's nonunderstanding may be revealed through some probing questions directed to the child relevant to prior talk. Much like in classroom discourse, caregivers and others may request that a small child show evidence that she or he has understood some piece of information expressed in the caregiver's or other's utterance. The requested piece of information is already known to the requester. What isn't known is whether the child knows the information. While such questions are characteristic of European middle-class households, they are rare in other communities, including Samoan (Ochs, 1988a), Kaluli (Schieffelin, 1990), Inuit (Crago, 1988), and Athabaskan (Scollon & Scollon, 1981).

Attempts to clear misunderstanding. Regardless of how children's nonunderstanding is signaled, others may subsequently utilize any one of the responses noted above, in sections discussing misunderstanding children's utterances and a priori unintelligibility. They may ignore the nonunderstanding, may tease the child, may insist that the child try again to produce a culturally acceptable response. They may simplify the misunderstood utterance or may repeat the earlier utterance, sustaining the same level of complexity.

Socializing Culture Through Misunderstanding

The discussion thus far has proposed that misunderstandings have a discourse organization that traverses languages and communities. That is, misunderstandings are almost universally characterized by similar verbal strategies for signaling and responding to perceived unintelligibility. In this sense, children the world over are exposed to and acquire a similar

discourse structure of misunderstandings. It is this shared knowledge that facilitates communication among speakers who cross the boundaries of their speech communities. Speakers from all sorts of communities are able to coordinate their actions while engaged in the activity of misunderstanding because they share a partial understanding of how that activity is structured.

On the other hand, we have noted that children are socialized through the activity of misunderstanding into important local cultural structures of knowledge. The socialization of local knowledge takes place because the activity of misunderstanding has not only culturally universal properties—it is also organized in terms of culturally local preferences that are tied to the local social order and local theories of communication and understanding.

Communities of speakers display different preferences in their responses to children's unintelligible utterances, in how they expect children to respond to the unintelligible utterances of others, and in the extent to which others are expected to take into consideration children's limitations in designing their own utterances for children. As noted earlier, certain social groups (e.g., Inuit, Athabaskan) tend to ignore children's unintelligible utterances, particularly infants' vocalizations, whereas other groups orient caregivers toward the activity of trying to make sense out of such utterances. In attempting to make sense of children's utterances, some communities (e.g., mainstream American) prefer to express a guess, whereas in other communities (e.g., Kaluli, Samoan), this response is highly dispreferred. Similarly, some communities (e.g., Tamil, mainstream American) prefer to anticipate children's nonunderstanding of others' utterances by simplifying those utterances. In other communities (e.g., Kaluli, Samoan), simplification for children is less frequent and restricted to certain types of discourse simplification. And in some communities (e.g., mainstream American), children are encouraged to display their nonunderstanding by requesting clarification, whereas elsewhere such questions are highly inappropriate (e.g., Inuit, Athabaskan, Gonja, Native Hawaiian).

These differences are distributional and have been presented here in an altogether superficial manner. The preference for one strategy over another is constrained by further situational parameters, including age of child and gender of speaker. For example, simplified register in mainstream American households declines as children get older. Speech to infants less than one year old is more repetitive, grammatically abbreviated, and semantically restricted than speech to older infants and children. Further, within the same community of households, gender is an important

consideration in that the preference for simplified register is more pronounced in mothers' speech than in fathers' speech to children (Gleason & Greif, 1983).

Misunderstanding and Social Order

These distributional patterns are important in that they reflect systematic expectations concerning how certain social personae are to behave. That one community prefers one set of misunderstanding responses over others is not arbitrary but rather rooted in social order. In the cases at hand, preferences are linked to local expectations concerning the social identities of child (at different developmental points) and caregiver (or other co-present party such as peer).

Let us consider, for example, the preference for explicit guessing as a response to a child's unintelligible utterance and the preference for simplifying one's own utterance in the presence of a child. As noted earlier, both of these preferences entail a cognitive orientation of high accommodation to the child (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). In the case of expressing a guess at a child's unintelligible utterance, the guesser accommodates by putting herself or himself in the position of some individual child at some particular moment and proposing a rendering of the proposition that individual child might at that moment be intending to convey. A good deal of cognitive reorientation may be entailed in formulating a guess. Guessing involves attempting to take the perspective of the other and where the other is an infant or young child, these attempts may include considerable detective work such as noting the direction of the child's gaze or gesture, objects in the child's environment, and recalling a prior action of the child.

Similarly, simplifying one's own utterances is an accommodation to what the speaker perceives to be the cognitive and social limitations of the infant or child. The speaker assumes the child to have a particular level of sociocognitive competence and then designs utterances to be understandable given that level of competence.

Societies that prefer simplification and guessing in misunderstandings involving children are those that nurture egocentricity and expect caregivers (e.g. mothers, sib caregivers, teachers) to be highly sociocentric in their communications with children (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). Simplifying and guessing are part of the expected role behaviors of caregivers. Thus, each activity of misunderstanding provides children with an opportunity for developing knowledge of this social role.

We have used simplifying and guessing to illustrate the socialization of social order but other verbal behaviors are equally powerful media for socializing this knowledge. For example, in societies where caregivers

show a strong preference for (1) not exhibiting extensive simplification, (2) ignoring or (3) exhibiting only a minimal grasp of a child's unintelligible utterance, and (4) providing cultural glosses, caregivers display low cognitive accommodation to children. Where these preferences prevail, children are socialized into cognitively accommodating to caregivers and others in the situation at hand (cf. Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984) to a greater extent than where simplifying and guessing prevail. In contrast to simplifying and guessing, these responses to children's limited capacity to produce and understand demand that children attend closely to the utterances of others if they wish to understand them and that they repeat or reformulate their own utterances to meet the social and cognitive requirements of the situation at hand. The role of child in societies where these preferences prevail is thus somewhat different from the role of child where simplifying and guessing are preferred strategies in the activity of misunderstanding.

Misunderstandings in these ways socialize children into social statuses and social relationships. Through miscommunications, they come to understand what it means to be a child and a caregiver, for example. Similarly those who emigrate to different societies come to understand the status of "foreigner" through norms, preferences, and expectations that organize misunderstanding as a social activity. Misunderstandings in this sense constitute opportunity spaces for constituting and learning social order.

Misunderstanding and Theories of Knowledge

The activity of misunderstanding socializes not only social role expectations but also local theories of knowledge. When caregivers display preferences for one set of responses to unintelligibility over another, they may do so because they tacitly accept a particular set of assumptions concerning how knowledge is to be acquired, what kinds of knowledge can be acquired, and who can acquire (what kinds of) knowledge in what social situations.

For example, the strong preference for expressing a guess at a child's unintelligible utterance in American middle-class households is tied in part to a local theory that assumes that it is entirely appropriate to put oneself in the mind of another and to guess at the not-yet-intelligible psychological intentions of another (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). In this theoretical framework, one person's unclear psychological intentions constitute a culturally possible object of knowledge for another person.

In other societies, thoughts that are not evident through talk or gesture are generally off-limits as an object of knowledge for another person, or at least they are off-limits as an object of discursive knowledge. What

another may be thinking is not a usual topic of verbal inquiry. This is the case for Kaluli (Schieffelin, 1990) and traditional Western Samoan communities (Duranti, 1988; Ochs, 1988a). For these speakers, verbally speculating what another is thinking is highly dispreferred. In Samoan communities, verbal guessing does occur but its object tends to be a reported account of some past event or a statement of some future event. Outside of Western organized social settings such as school, speakers tend not to speculate about another's thoughts in the form of riddles and test questions. Further, in court trials, litigants and jurors tend not to speculate concerning the intentions of a defendant. What the defendant may have been intending is not part of the case discussion, only the defendant's actions and the consequences of those actions. Hence children in these communities do not find their unintelligible vocalizations the object of explicit guessing. Such dispreferences socialize children into the bounds of the knowable, the bounds of instruments for knowing, and bounds of the knowing parties—that unclear thoughts are out of the speculative bounds for parties other than the experiences of those thoughts. Within this theoretical perspective, speakers prefer strategies that place the burden of clarification of unclear thoughts on the experiences of those thoughts (e.g., through expressing minimal grasp or ignoring unclear utterance).

Conclusion

In this chapter, misunderstandings are seen as activity loci for the socialization of linguistic and sociocultural knowledge. On a linguistic level, each instance of misunderstanding involving a young child socializes the child into the discourse structures that constitute recognition of and response to misunderstandings. I have put forward the notion that responses to misunderstanding are widespread (e.g., guessing, expressing minimal grasp, ignoring, simplifying, maintaining level of complexity, providing cultural gloss) and that hence children across many societies are acquiring similar knowledge of misunderstanding. It is this knowledge that allows human beings to coordinate their linguistic communication across communities and languages.

On the other hand, the chapter stresses that misunderstandings are more than language activities. They are social and cultural activities as well. Although misunderstandings are part of social life universally, and although members of all cultures have available to them similar discourse strategies for engaging in misunderstandings, local expectations concerning particular social identities and concerning the scope and path to knowledge organize when and to what extent particular strategies will be

used. As such, the patterning of particular strategies indexes something about the immediate social situation (e.g., the social status of the speaker or addressee) and the cultural perspective on knowledge (e.g., that one can/cannot know the psychological states of another person).

From this point of view, misunderstandings are not loci in which social life breaks down. Rather, to the contrary, misunderstandings structure social life. Each misunderstanding is an opportunity space for instantiating local epistemology and for structuring social identities of interactants. Once we focus our ethnographic microscopes on misunderstandings, we can appreciate their extraordinary complexity and impact on human culture through the process of language socialization.