

A Preliminary Study of Understandings and Misunderstandings in Language Communication

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本論文では、言語コミュニケーションにおいて誤解と理解が起こるプロセスに関して、認知文法論のいくつかのコンセプトを道具立てに考察する。すべての言語表現は、話し手の意図を聞き手に理解してもらうために話し手が提示する参照点（手掛かり）にすぎない。話し手や書き手のメッセージを氷山に例えれば、その一角にすぎないのである。この事実をいくつかの具体事例で観察し、コミュニケーションにおける誤解は、コミュニケーションを取れば付き物であることを提示する。語用論（pragmatics）の研究テーマの1つ、「人がなぜ分かり合えないか？」に関する論の紹介から始め、メトニミー能力、コミュニケーションにおけるフレーム知識の重要性、精緻度（granularity）の調整による事態のカテゴリー範疇の動的性、生体心理学の概念の1つ、エコロジカルセルフとインターパーソナルセルフの道具立てを提示から、いくつかのコミュニケーションにおける誤解が生じる例を分析し、今後の研究への青写真を提示するものとして。さらに、ここでの分析から、コミュニケーションにおいて理解を目指すためには、自己のフレームを立ち上げて誤解に至ることを避ける必要があり、そのために必要なことは、相手の言葉から立ち上がる自分のフレーム抑える能力（negative capacity ability：否定的能力）と相手の話を最後まで辛抱強く聞く態度（tolerance：寛容）であることが述べられる。

Keywords: language communication, cognitive linguistics, pragmatics, frame

キーワード：言語コミュニケーション、認知言語学、語用論、フレーム知識

1. Why can't people understand with each other?

Why is it often difficult or sometimes almost impossible for people to understand each other? This is a question that has been discussed in pragmatics, one discipline of linguistics. As Yasutake (1997) stated, *roughly speaking, they do not speak the same language*. Her statement does not necessarily imply that the mother tongue of a speaker and that of a hearer are different, but that even if the speaker and the hearer share the same mother tongue, they cannot always understand each other. Most people might feel this idea strange at first because they have thought that the language ability humans possess enables them to communicate with one another. It is of course true that thanks to languages we can communicate

with one another, but it is also at the same time the case that many misunderstandings occur due to languages.

Regarding why people can't understand each other, Ito (2000) analyzes this problem from an interesting perspective. When people communicate with each other, the speaker and the hearer should take turns in their roles. However, in reality, there exist no listeners at all. (Ito 2000: 18) What we are hearing in talking with other people is not the message the speaker is trying to convey, but our interpretation that is evoked by the language expression the speaker has just uttered. (ibid.: 61) The author agrees with Ito's idea. This is what is really happening sometimes while we are talking with others.

This paper will discuss the reasons that people

cannot necessarily communicate with each other with the help of pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, and communication theory.

2. Metonymy ability

Let us start by considering a conversation that could be conducted frequently. Imagine a situation in which Jack and Maria are having a chat over a cup of coffee at the coffee shop where they regularly meet one another. Then a regular customer both Maria and Jack see very often in the coffee shop comes in. Maria notices the man and says something about the customer to attract Jack's attention to the customer.

Maria: Look! Here comes **Hot milk!**

Jack: I didn't order **hot milk**. I ordered coffee.

Maria: No, I mean the man who has just come in and is going to sit at the counter.

Jack: Oh, I see. He's one of the regulars, who you nicknamed Mr. Hot milk.

Maria: That's right. You remember him, don't you?

Jack: Yes, of course. He seems to be a professor of science or something. I happened to see him in front of the science and technology department of XYZ University the other day. He usually spends time here in the evening, reading books or checking papers over a glass of hot milk. Did you notice that he orders ice milk in summer?

Maria: Yes, that's right. I think he is a milk person!

In the short dialogue above we can observe a miscommunication between Jack and Maria. Misunderstandings of this kind frequently occur in daily conversation. You may come up with similar examples as in this dialogue where people misunderstand each other. The main cause of the misunderstanding here is a language expression that Maria used, "Hot Milk." Maria meant a regular customer by this phrase. Namely, she used the phrase as a figurative language called metonymy. However, Jack took her meaning literally. The literal meaning of hot milk is a type of drink, which is listed on the

menu of most cafés. In this dialogue, however, hot milk is used metaphorically to refer to a person, a regular customer who usually orders hot milk at this café. This is an example of the NP, hot milk, does not refer to the entity to which it normally refers, but to one that is conceptually linked to it in some way. (Lee: 2002: 97) Compare the following sentence examples.

(1) a. I'd like a **hot milk**, please.

b. **Hot milk** seems to be in a good mood today. He's smiling and humming.

In (1a), hot milk refers to a kind of drink, while in (1b) it refers to a regular customer who always orders hot milk. As is mentioned above, technically speaking, the use of hot milk in (1b) is called metonymy. One entity or thing is used to indicate, or provide a mental access to, another entity. What underlies this phenomenon is reference-point ability. The ability of metonymy is one of the subcategories of reference point ability. It is a cognitive ability humans possess that makes it possible for a word to have more than one meaning according to its context. In the hot milk example above, metonymy ability (or reference point ability) enables the meaning of hot milk to be inferred. In language communication, the author thinks that all language expressions serve as reference points. In other words, a speaker uses language expressions as reference points to let a listener infer what the speaker means. The listener's task is to try to infer the speaker's meaning by using these language expressions (reference points) as one clue, along with grammatical knowledge, background knowledge, context information, and theory of mind (Yanase: 2007). In the dialogue example above, Maria selected the expression, Hot Milk, to refer to a regular customer who always orders hot milk in the café with the belief that Jack can understand the message since he is also a regular customer of the café and knows that the customer always orders hot milk when he comes to the cafe. Unfortunately, however, Jack interpreted the meaning of hot milk

literally, leading to miscommunication.

This is the way it goes when misunderstandings or miscommunications occur. People frequently use metonymy ability (or reference point ability) in conversation, but in metonymical use of language, a language expression as a reference point can be interpreted in more than one way according to which frame is evoked. Frame refers to a kind of image that is evoked whenever you hear a language expression. In the Mr. Hot Milk example above, the speaker and the hearer must have shared the same background information about the regular customer, Mr. Hot Milk. Namely, both of them know that the person comes to the coffee shop very often and always orders hot milk. Also important here is the fact that people think and act metaphorically or metonymically as is stated by Lakoff. In this case, the conceptual metonymy, OBJECT USED FOR USER (Lakoff & Johnson: 1980: 38) underlies successful language communication.

3. The importance of frame knowledge and the ability of adjusting granularity in communication

Regarding the importance of frame knowledge in communication, let us start by giving some thought to the statement that is made by someone named H.F. Smith. The author came across this statement while searching for an English expression on the internet. The statement says:

When two speakers are arguing a point on different levels of abstraction or with different frames of reference, they talk past each other. (H.F. Smith)

Smith's statement can be analyzed through two fundamental concepts of Cognitive Grammar. One is the ability of adjusting granularity. The other is the importance of frame knowledge in communication.

First, I will start by reviewing the ability of adjusting granularity along with an explanation by

Imai (2008). This ability enables humans to construe things or situations schematically or specifically. Depending on the schematicity level which is focused on by the conceptualizer, the same things or situations can be construed in different ways. It is sometimes said that people are the same, while it is also mentioned that each person is different. The reason that these two statements are not contradictory could be explained by humans' ability to construe things or situations both roughly and precisely. The former way of seeing the situation is considered from a birds' eyes viewpoint, while the latter is from an insects' eyes viewpoint.

By way of illustration, consider a concrete example. If you are asked how old you are, how do you usually answer the question? If you are now 21 years old, you can answer the question by any of the following options (a) to (d).

- (2) "How old are you?"
- a) I'm young.
 - b) I'm in the early twenties.
 - c) I'm 21.
 - d) I'm 21 years, 3 months, 6 days, 5 hours, and 37 minutes old.

If you categorize person's ages based on a unit of one year, a person who is 21 years old and another person who is 23 years old can be assimilated into two different age groups. In this case, the two persons are not considered to be of the same age. In contrast, if we categorize persons' ages according to a unit of ten years, we can regard them as being of the same age group. That is because the two people I mentioned above are both in the 20s. Thus, depending on whether we construe things or situations schematically or specifically, the things or situations can be categorized either in the same group or in two different groups.

In example (2) above, a), b), c), and d) reflect different levels of granularity. Therefore, c) is the most natural way of answering the question. But d) is too specific to be regarded as normal. Just for future

reference, this level of granularity was actually employed in a novel the author had read before. The title of the novel is: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*.

The policeman squatted down beside me and said, “Would you like to tell me what’s going on here, young man?” I sat up and said, “The dog is dead.” “I’d got that far,” he said. I said, “I think someone killed the dog.” “How old are you?” he asked. I replied, “I am 15 years and 3 months and 2 days.” [Underlined by the author] (Haddon: 2003, 6)

A) and b) are more schematic ways of answering the question. Humans can adjust the granularity according to how much information is required in context. How much information is needed to get your idea across should be considered. This ability is compatible with Grice’s cooperative principle.

The other important concept of Cognitive Grammar here is the importance of frame knowledge in communication. Whenever you hear or read words, phrases, or sentences, some knowledge in your brain will be activated. That knowledge is what the key word, “frame,” refers to. This recall of some knowledge will occur as long as you live whether you’re talking with someone, listening to a lecture, reading a book, watching TV, or doing anything else. The author thinks that any language expression is only a reference point for the listener to guess what the speaker intends to convey. In other words, we cannot express everything we want to say in language. Language is only the tip of an iceberg and given as a clue that is presented for the listener to understand what the speaker means. In order to understand speakers, listeners’ task is to reconstruct the speakers’ meaning. In this process, listeners need to refer to a frame in their brain. The frame is evoked when listeners hear the language expressions given by speakers as the tip of an iceberg. This is what usually occurs when people communicate with each other without noticing the procedure happening. Based on

this theory of the importance of frame knowledge in communication, it will be easily guessed that whenever we try to communicate with anyone, misunderstandings are in the territory. Consider, for example, the following famous parody. This parody has several versions and another version is introduced in Hoffmann, Th. R. & Kageyama (1986: 11). Since this parody is introduced in many linguistics text books, you might have read it somewhere before.

A man and his young son were apprehended in a robbery. The father was shot during the struggle and the son, in handcuffs, was rushed to the police station. As the police pulled the struggling boy into the station, the mayor, who had been called to the scene, looked up and said, “My God, it’s my son!” What relation was the mayor to the boy? ¹

The answer to this question is that the mayor is the boy’s mother. However, when the author asks students this question in his classes, various answers are given. Some students say that since the boy’s mother got divorced, the boy has two fathers. The father shot by the policeman is his father-in-law, and the mayor is his real (biological) father. Others say that for the mayor, all citizens are like his sons or daughters. That’s why the mayor said, “This is my son.” Then, why does a misunderstanding like that occur in this situation? The main cause should be the effect of the frame knowledge the readers have. Most, not all, readers think that the mayor should be male, namely, they take it for granted that mayors are likely to be male in their mayor frame. This frame knowledge, the author thinks, keeps the readers from

¹ The author found this passage somewhere before, but he can’t locate the source, even though he tried hard to find it. He searched the internet for the parody on March 1, 2011. The only information he got about the parody was in the next URL. According to this website, this parody was from *Foundations of Psychology (1989) 2nd Edition*, quoting from a study by Eakins and Eakins (1978): <http://www.avoiceformen.com/2011/02/17/omg-our-gender-is-being-oppressed-by-languag>

answering the question above correctly. Frame knowledge evoked by a word can sometimes lead us to misunderstandings. Similar kinds of misunderstandings frequently occur on a daily basis.

4. Ecological-Self and Interpersonal-Self.

Let us start by imagining a situation as this. You visited a coffee shop near the mountain with someone you loved. Since you had remembered feeling the sandwich and the coffee served at the place very delicious, you decided to come back to the coffee shop alone. You had been looking forward to having the sandwich and coffee until you came back to the place again. Contrary to your expectation, however, you didn't feel them as delicious as before. The reason for this phenomenon can be explained based on an idea from ecological psychology. Your evaluation on something is not determined by the quality of the thing alone. The way in which you construe things or situations at a moment will have much influence on your evaluation. In the situation above, when you had the sandwich and coffee with someone you loved, your mood must have been very good. When you returned to the coffee shop alone, your mood must not have been as good as the first time. That is to say, how you feel at a moment is likely to affect how you like the sandwich and coffee served at the same place. This phenomenon is called ecological-self in ecological psychology. You can easily come up with many other situations as the above. Whether you think a book or a lecture interesting also can be explained by ecological-self. This phenomenon can also be seen that there is nothing totally objective in this world. Anything can be subjective to some extent. How we construe things or situations is always included in our interpretation to some extent.

In the example that I discussed in the last paragraph, what mattered was the relationship between a person and a thing or a situation. In case the relationship is between a person and another person, the phenomenon is called interpersonal-self. Do you ever feel that someone is a nice person or

someone is not nice? Do you think your evaluation is totally determined by the person's character or behavior? The answer is not always yes. According to the concept of interpersonal-self, half of the responsibility is on you. If you feel someone is mean, it could be possible that you are mean to the person. Next time you feel have a bad feeling about someone who you meet first time, try to behave as if you liked the person. Then the attitude of the person toward you might change for the better. It doesn't always happen, though.

As I have been discussed in this chapter, we cannot see anything objectively. Lastly, consider the sentence below as a simple example.

(3) The sun rises in the east and sets in the west.

Do you think the message conveyed by example (3) is objective? The answer is no. The sun does not move. It is the earth that moves around the sun. However, if we examine the situation from the viewpoint of humans, the example (3) makes perfect sense. Humans construe the situation as is shown in (3). How people construe things or situation is always included in language expressions.

5. Language as a reference point

As I have been discussing so far, all language expressions are just reference points that infer what the speaker intends to convey. That is why misunderstandings are in the territory. We cannot communicate with anyone without some misunderstandings occurring. In this chapter, I am going to elucidate this point a little more by giving some concrete examples.

Consider example (4). What does example (4) mean?

(4) Family matters.

The expression (4) is an episode title of a drama named Crossroads Café. This sentence is ambiguous,

which means it can be interpreted in more than one way. Analyzing the ambiguity from the viewpoint of Cognitive Grammar, the reference point, “family matters” has two targets. Which one of the targets is appropriate cannot be decided just by seeing this sentence out of context. If (4) is an answer to a question as (5), what does the speaker mean by (4)?

(5) You look miserable today? What happened to you?

In this case, the meaning of “family matters” is family problems. The speaker is worried about some family problems, so she/he looks depressed today. How about (4) being given in the context as in (6) below?

(6) “Why don’t you join us for the year-end party?” “I’m sorry I can’t join you on new years’ eve. I usually spend time together with my family. Family matters for me.”

In this case, “family matters” means that family is important. (4) can be analyzed in two ways syntactically. That’s the reason why this sentence is ambiguous. In order to understand what the speaker means in this sentence, the listener should take context into consideration. Context counts for grasping the meaning of messages.

What about example (7)? This sentence can be used by customers at shops when they want to get a discount on what they are going to buy.

(7) Could you give me a **better** price?

From the viewpoint of customers, getting a discount on something that they are going to buy is desirable. How about for the owner of the shop? If he can sell the good at a higher price, he will get a greater profit. That is why the better price in this context will not be better for the shop owner. This is another example where different perspectives can convey different interpretations for language expressions.

6. How can we change misunderstandings into understandings?

In this final chapter of this paper, I’m going to think about what we can do to change misunderstandings into understandings.

As this is a very difficult question to answer, I do not think I can answer it easily. I believe, however, that we should begin by realizing that language expressions are just a reference point to convey what the speaker means. Moreover, the listener needs to actively participate in reconstructing the speaker’s meaning. Even so, misunderstandings will often occur.

Then how can we avoid misunderstandings when we communicate with someone. The first thing for us to recognize is that any language expression is only a reference point, namely, just a clue, to understand the speaker’s meaning. Whenever we hear any language expression, a frame is evoked in your brain. If everyone evoked the same frame for a specific word or expression, no misunderstanding would occur in communication. In reality, however, the frame knowledge that people have for a specific word or an expression differs from person to person as a function of their particular life experience. (Lee 2001: 11) That is why sometimes we evoke a frame that we want, but at other times we evoke a frame that we do not want. It is considered that messages are not included in the language expressions as is described as CONDUIT METAPHOR (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 10-13). The message should be searched elsewhere. The place in which you search for the speaker’s meaning is the frame knowledge in your brain. If you don’t have a frame knowledge that you should refer to when you hear an expression, successful communication will never occur. If you access to the wrong frame knowledge, misunderstandings will occur. Therefore, what we need to do when we serve as good listeners is that we should try hard to keep the wrong frame knowledge from being evoked. In order to realize it, “negative

capacity” and “tolerance” are inevitable.

When having a conversation with someone, have you ever experienced as this situation? When you have just said a few words and you're still going to say more, you may be interrupted by your listener and she starts talking. If she understands what you mean after hearing only a part of what you're going to say, there is no problem and the communication will be successful. If she misunderstands you, you are likely to feel frustrated or uncomfortable and you have to resume your conversation from the beginning. Even if you think that you understand someone before your speaker finishes what she is going to say, it is better to wait for her to complete what she wants to say. In order to do so, you should be tolerant and have some negative capacity. We should always confirm whether the frame knowledge that is activated by hearing some language expression is the right reconstruction of the message your speaker would like to communicate.

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