

# Doing mutual understanding. Calibrating with micro-sequences in face-to-face dialogue

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## Abstract

“Mutual understanding” has both cognitive and social, interactive meanings. Interlocutors can *have* or *share* a (cognitive) mutual understanding. We propose they also *do* mutual understanding in an observable, reciprocal, three-step micro-process called *calibrating*. Following Mead (1934) and several subsequent authors, calibrating sequences require three steps: The speaker introduces new information, the addressee responds, and the speaker follows up with evidence that the addressee's response displayed sufficient understanding for current purposes. Without the third step, the addressee would not have evidence of mutual understanding. We developed a microanalysis for reliably identifying calibrating sequences, then applied it to a random sample of face-to-face getting-acquainted dialogues. The results confirmed our three hypotheses: (a) calibrating sequences were continuous throughout these dialogues; 97% of the 1232 utterances that introduced new information were followed by the second and third steps. (b) The micro-sequences were short, averaging 5 s each. (c) They were also efficient, with almost two-thirds of the utterances playing a role in more than one sequence. Several factors enhanced generalizability, including the unstructured and diverse content of getting-acquainted dialogues, random sampling, high inter-analyst agreement, and replication of an earlier study. Calibration can link cognitive theories of mutual understanding with observable social interaction. We also describe applications in practical settings.

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## 1. Introduction

In any dialogue, whether on mundane or consequential topics, interlocutors use their words and actions to convey their experiences, thoughts, opinions, and insights to each other. In order for the conversation to proceed, they must display their agreement on the meaning of their words and actions so that, over the course of a conversation, they accumulate mutual understanding and can presuppose more and more information. This article distinguishes between *having* mutual understanding as a cognitive state and *doing* mutual understanding as an interactive process.

Several authors have described meaning-making and mutual understanding between interlocutors as an interactive process. Linell (2009) said “Meanings are made in situated interaction and discourse. They are brought to life in situations” (p. 222). Svennevig (2009) proposed that meaning is found in the interactions between interlocutors, most

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evidently in conversation. Garfinkel (1967) emphasized even more strongly that shared agreement on meaning was “[a] social method . . . . *The appropriate image of a common understanding is therefore an operation rather than a common intersection of overlapping sets*” (p. 30, italics original).

At least four quite different approaches to dialogue have also treated mutual understanding as something interlocutors do together: In conversation analysis, Schegloff (1992) adopted Garfinkel's (1967) approach to intersubjectivity and offered a succinct analogy: Two computers with identical contents do not have common or shared knowledge (p. 1297). In Clark's (1996) collaborative theory, “speakers and their addressees go beyond . . . autonomous actions and collaborate with each other moment by moment to try to ensure that what is said is also understood” (Schober and Clark, 1989, p. 211). In Garrod and Pickering's (2008, p. 8) theory of interactive alignment, “interlocutors (conversational partners) work together to establish a joint understanding of what they are talking about”. Even more radically, Roberts and Bavelas (1996, p. 138) proposed that “the meaning of an utterance depends on both the speaker and addressee; it exists only ‘in’ their interaction.”

### 1.1. A three-step process unit for mutual understanding

This article follows in the interactive tradition and focuses on the observable details by which interlocutors create, ensure, and display mutual understanding between themselves. We start with George Herbert Mead's (1934) social and behavioral definition of *meaning* as a three-step process. In his well-known “conversation of gestures” (in which “gesture” meant any communicative act, verbal or nonverbal), he proposed that

It is not necessary, in attempting to solve this problem [of the meaning of meaning], to have recourse to psychical states, for *the nature of meaning*, as we have seen, is found to be implicit in the structure of the social act, implicit in *the relations among its three basic individual components*; namely, in the triadic relation of a gesture of one individual, a response to that gesture by a second individual, and completion of the given social act initiated by the gesture of the first individual. (p. 81, italics added)

In contemporary terms, Mead's “three basic individual components” would be three successive utterances, as illustrated in the following two excerpts from a getting-acquainted conversation between undergraduates (see Appendix A).<sup>2</sup>

*Example 1.* Robin and Lisa had established that Robin was “in Music,” and Lisa asked her, “What do you play?”

- 14. Robin: (matter of factly) “*French Horn*”
- 15. Lisa: (quietly) “*Wow*” (widens eyes, lifts head up and back)
- 16. Robin, overlapping: (nods)

Robin introduced new information at 14, and Lisa's response suggested that she had understood. However, it was only Robin's follow-up nod at 16 (which might otherwise seem redundant) that gave Lisa evidence that her response was sufficient evidence of understanding. This sequence was 1.83 s. In the following sequence, shortly afterward, the new information was not as straightforward.

*Example 2.* Lisa (who was not a Music major) volunteered information about what she played:

- 21. Lisa: (looking down; voice almost apologetic) “*I used to play the sax*” (with a shoulder and facial shrug,<sup>3</sup> then looks up at Robin and smiles)
- 22. Robin, overlapping: (smiles, short laugh)
- 23. Lisa, overlapping: (laughs, shrugs her shoulders, and rolls her eyes)

At 21, Lisa named the instrument that she herself had played and seemed to deprecate it. At 22, Robin's laughing conveyed that she understood not only the name of the instrument but also Lisa's self-mocking opinion of its status, perhaps compared to the French Horn. However, Robin could not know that her laugh and smile demonstrated sufficient understanding until Lisa followed up at 23 with her own laugh and an even more exaggerated shrug. They had displayed a mutual understanding of what playing the sax meant to Lisa in 3.16 s.

<sup>2</sup> Meaningful visible acts and voice qualities are in parentheses, and stressed words are in italics. The utterance numbers match the transcript in Appendix A.

<sup>3</sup> A quick retraction of one corner of the mouth, typically with the same meaning as a shoulder shrug (Chovil, 1991).

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