



Mishearings are occasioned by contextual assumptions and situational affordances



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ABSTRACT

This article is an empirical study of 220 mishearings in Swedish conversations. A mishearing is defined as a specific perception that appears in a hearer's mind immediately after a speaker's source utterance, and is lexically discrepant from what the speaker actually said. Starting from a dialogical meta-theory, the paper is a study of how mishearings are nearly always situation-appropriate; they invoke relevant contextual assumptions. A systematic coding of mishearings yield a classification based on types and subtypes of participants' references to current topic, situational referents and other topics near-at-hand.

At a theoretical level, this article has ramifications for a general theory of utterance understanding, and also more specifically for the theorising of repair and misunderstanding.

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1. Introduction: mishearings

The phenomena I will be concerned with in this paper are immediate, spontaneous utterance perceptions that appear in the listener's mind on the spot, without any prior conscious reflection or internal dialogue (for example, with the listener already being aware of a problem and asking herself what the speaker actually said). Thus, we are concerned with immediate reaction rather than retrospective reasoning.

Immediate speech understanding has to be quick since the acoustic events (and their memorising) are rapidly transient. A *mishearing* (misperception, "slip of the ear") occurs when, under these conditions, a hearer H hears something specific in another person's (speaker = S) utterance (the 'source utterance'¹), something which, as it transpires later on (and typically immediately afterwards), is clearly distinct, in terms of lexical and sometimes grammatical content, from what S actually said or intended to say/pronounce. Accordingly, these mishearings are different from both non-hearings (cf. Grimshaw, 1980), on the one hand, and reflected interpretations, on the other. Just like most of accurate hearings, they are literally the first percepts in the process of making sense of somebody else's utterance.

As a first example, consider (1)²:

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¹ By '(trouble) source' I mean the stretch of talk that originates trouble (in this case, with hearing and/or understanding). This source should not be seen as the cause of the mishearing. As will become clear, mishearings are co-determined by different kinds of context.

² Details of notation: Actual utterances, all in Swedish, are in Courier New. Such an utterance may contain an object or source of mishearing, usually a word or a phrase, which is in **bold Courier New**. What the listener actually heard (the mishearing itself) will appear in the next line in *Lucida Handwriting*. Lines with normal numbering are actual utterances, lines within parentheses, with number, apostrophe and the listener identification B (i. e. (1' B:)) are silent mishearings by the person B. The letter A will consistently refer to the speaker of the object/source of mishearing, B to the person who hears this in a discrepant way. English translations are given in *italics*.

In addition, note the following specific points:

Underlinings of vowel signs indicate focally stressed words.

(xxx) denotes undecipherable words.

% (percentage signs) surround unclear pronunciations.

- (1) (PL: MH 206) A and B have dinner together. They are talking about a public panel debate, in which A has participated two days earlier. The debate has been reviewed in the local newspaper, and A refers to this (line 1). Meanwhile, she serves more wine and water:

1. A: dom skrev om va ja sagt . (.) i debatten. ((holding up a jar of water))
they wrote about what I said. (.) in the debate.
 (1' . B:) *lite vatten?*
some water?
2. B: nä tack.
no thanks.
3. A: i debatten, sa ja.
in the debate, I said.

This is a typical case where one topic is ongoing, when another activity, that of serving more to drink, is interspersed. A's source utterance (line 1) belongs to the ongoing ("current") topic, whereas the mishearing (line 1') refers to the other practical activity in the local situation.³ The part which is misheard (*i debatten*) is phonologically quite similar to the mishearing (*lite vatten*), although in this case the hearer puts the morpheme-and-word boundary in a different place than the speaker ('juncture misperception'; Cutler and Butterfield, 1992).⁴ The mishearing becomes detected since B provides a response (line 2) which does not fit the preceding contribution. Here, A makes the error detection explicit by repeating the crucial part of her prior utterance (line 3).

In (2), we have another case of an utterance and its mishearing, which are both interpretable as situationally triggered:

- (2) (PL: MH 244) A and B are travelling by ferry-boat from Stockholm to Helsinki and are just passing over the sea between the archipelagoes of Stockholm and Åland. Åland once belonged to Sweden, and in those times mail was transported by rowing-boats between Åland and the Swedish mainland. A and B are looking at the sea, with its isolated small islands, when A suddenly says:

1. A: här över de här havet rodde dom me post (.)
 (1' .B:) *torsk*
cod
2. °förr i tiden°
here across this sea they were rowing with mail, long ago
3. B: me torsk?
 4. A: me POST.

A's remark in lines 1–2 seems to be unexpected for B. B hears correctly that it is about the physically present surrounding, but she does not catch the reference to mail, perhaps because this is news for her. Instead, she hears a situationally plausible alternative ("cod"), which she immediately afterwards also pronounces out loud (line 3), as a kind of repair initiation. A detail in this is that she backs up and reproduces the whole prepositional phrase ("with cod"), not just the misheard item ("cod"). A then repeats (line 4) what he had said in line 1, but this time more loudly and with hyperarticulation.

As we have already seen from the first two examples, one reason to study mishearings is that some of them seem to have significant relations to the phenomena of repair and misunderstanding in languaging. Let us look at a somewhat more complex example (3):

- (3) (PL: MH 164) A and B are visiting another family's house and have spent the night there. A, who has got up rather late in the morning, meets with the host family's about five-year-old daughter Carina (C) outside the bathroom. Since last time A met Carina, she has cut her hair short. A is brushing her teeth and pronounces her first utterance (line 1) rather unclearly, as she has the toothbrush in her mouth. B is overhearing the conversation:

1. A: %har du klippt håret%, Carina? ((%...% unclear pronunciation))
did you cut your hair, Carina?
 (1' . C:) *xxx xxx*
(xxx: non-hearing?)

³ In terms of the categories introduced later (Section 5), the sequence is coded as C/S, i.e. a (contribution to) "current topic" (C) is heard as an utterance with a reference to the local speech situation (S).

⁴ As expected, phonological/phonetic similarity between source and mishearing is often present, but as we will see from other examples, it varies in degree. Cf. Linell (1983) for some discussion.

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