Identifying and Managing Meaning Mismatches in L2 Communication

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Abstract

L2 speakers often notice that the meaning of their utterance does not match their intended meaning after producing it. The purpose of this study was to explore how L2 speakers identify and cope with meaning mismatches during L2 communication. The participants of this study were Korean students studying in the United States. The data was collected through interviews, conversations, and stimulated recalls. The inductive analysis of the data showed that the participants identified meaning mismatches (a) from their own judgment or (b) the interlocutor’s verbal or non-verbal responses that express his/her misunderstanding and inability to understand the participant’s utterance. The findings also revealed that L2 speakers tried to manage meaning mismatches by employing two types of meaning mismatch communication strategies (MMCSs): (a) abandon MMCSs, which refer to overlooking meaning mismatches, and (b) achievement MMCSs, which refer to attempting to resolve meaning mismatches. Achievement MMCSs were further classified into self-initiated meaning repair and interlocutor-initiated repair, depending on who identified the need for repair first. This article also provides examples of conversation that demonstrate how each MMCS was employed. Based on these findings, I suggest that L2 speakers should use achievement MMCSs and attempt to repair meaning mismatches, rather than abandon MMCSs.

Keywords: meaning mismatches, meaning repair, communication problems, communication strategies (CSs), L2 communication

1. Introduction

L2 speakers tend to spend a great deal of time and effort negotiating and struggling to cope with the various problems that they encounter during the course of communication [1]. Due to a limited command of the target language, L2 speakers often experience problems before producing an utterance as they do not know how to say their intended message. After producing their output, they also encounter semantic problems by realizing that their utterance does not deliver their intended meaning to the interlocutor(s) correctly and sufficiently. In other words, they identify meaning discrepancies when they notice the meaning of the utterance that
they have already produced does not match their intended meaning.

L2 speakers generally manage to overcome their problems experienced during L2 communication by employing what are known as communication strategies (CSs) [2]. Færch and Kasper [3] defined CSs as potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communication goal. Extending the concept of CSs, Dörnyei and Scott [4] considered CSs as every potentially intentional attempt to cope with any language-related problem of which the speaker is aware during the course of communication.

Researchers have argued that CSs play an important role in the management of communication and language acquisition [5][6]. Given its important role, the ability to use CSs effectively has been included in the criteria of several major speaking tests: The American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) speaking scale, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) speaking test, and Educational Testing Service (ETS) [7] As noted by Faucette [8], therefore, employing effective CSs to overcome communication difficulties is very crucial for L2 learners.

Drawing on its importance in successful communication and language learning, researchers have studied CSs employed to cope with problems during L2 communication. Much CS research has explored the definition of strategies, the development and elaboration of taxonomies, the effectiveness of CSs, and the teachability of CSs. Most studies on the taxonomies have focused on two classifications of CSs: achievement (compensatory) strategies and reduction (avoidance) strategies [3][4]. Achievement (compensatory) strategies are associated with the use of alternative resources, and reduction (avoidance) strategies involve avoiding, changing, and abandoning a communicative goal [5].

Despite a large body of the literature, CS research was limited. CS research has mainly addressed problems encountered when speakers attempt to construct their message. Therefore, there has been a lack of research examining CSs for meaning mismatch problems identified in the utterance already produced. Given the gap in the literature, this study explored the following research questions:

1) How do L2 speakers identify meaning mismatches during L2 communication?
2) How do L2 speakers manage meaning mismatches during L2 communication?
2. Method

2.1 Participants

The participants of this study were Korean students who were studying at a university in the United States. The age of the participants varied from 23 to 43. When the data collection started, the length of stay in the United States ranged from 2 months to 6 years. The participants' English proficiency, tested in the beginning stages of the data collection, also varied from a beginner level to an advanced level.

2.2 Data Collection

For the purpose of triangulation, the data were collected through interviews, observations and recordings of conversations, and stimulated recall interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on the basis of guidelines for conducting interviews in Seidman [9]. The participants' conversations in various situations were observed and recorded in various sites where they spoke English. The main research site was the Chat Room, where nonnative and native speakers of English had face-to-face conversations. After each conversation session, stimulated recall interviews, which can be used to explore learners' processes or strategies at the time of an activity or task [10], were conducted while watching the recorded conversations. Drawing on Kasper and Kelleman's [5] argument that researchers have to rely on two resources of evidence to identify CS: markers in the discourse and retrospective protocols, in this study, CSs were identified through both conversation data and stimulated recall data.

3. Findings

3.1 Identifying Meaning Mismatches

Meaning mismatches between the speaker's intended meaning and the meaning delivered to the interlocutor(s) were caused by various factors, such as speaker's slip of the tongue, incorrect or unclear pronunciation, and incorrect word/structure choice. The participants could identify meaning discrepancies from their own judgment or the interlocutor's verbal or non-verbal responses that expressed his/her misunderstanding or inability to understand the
3.2 Managing Meaning Mismatches: Meaning Mismatches CSs (MMCSs)

The participants attempted to manage meaning mismatches in the utterance that they had produced by employing CSs. CSs for meaning mismatches (MMCSs) were employed when the participants realized that their utterance did not deliver their intended meaning to the interlocutor(s) correctly and unambiguously. MMCSs are classified into two main categories: 1) abandon MMCSs and 2) achievement MMCSs, which are further subcategorized into two groups: 1) self-initiated meaning repair and 2) interlocutor-initiated meaning repair.

3.2.1 Abandon Meaning Mismatch Communication Strategies (MMCSs)

Abandon meaning mismatch communication strategies (MMCSs) were identified as the first type of MMCSs. Abandon MMCSs refer to overlooking and not attempting to resolve meaning mismatches even if the participants identified that their utterance did not deliver the intended meaning correctly or unambiguously. Abandon MMCSs are found in excerpt (1-3).

(1) Utterance Produced: They grew a city.
   Intended Message: The city grew bigger.

Participant: Let me show you another map, New Amsterdam (show a map). . . You see Manhattan is land, right? After this island was purchased at the worth of 24 dollars worth products, [they grew a city], (pause) called New Amsterdam, right? (show another map) And this is another map of New Amsterdam at those days.

"After saying 'they grew a city,' I knew that it delivered a different meaning from what I intended to say, 'the city grew bigger.' But I decided to let it go. There was no time to fix it and I thought it was not the important part.”

In her practice teaching class, the participant was explaining about New Amsterdam to the ESL students in an elementary school. As shown in her comment, after she said “they grew a city,” on her own, she recognized that it conveyed a different meaning from her intended message: The city grew bigger. Although she knew that there was a semantic mismatch between her utterance and her intended meaning, employing an abandon MMCS, she did not attempt to correct it and moved on to the next topic.
(2) Utterance Produced: up and down

Intended Message: left and right, and from top and bottom

Tutor (NS): How is Chinese written?
Student (NNS): Left and right (Gesture: move his hand from left to right) that’s modern Chinese, ancient Chinese … up and down (Gesture: lift up a book and move his hand from top to bottom of a page) and right and left (Gesture: move his hand from right to left on a page)
Tutor (NS): Korean is written left and right? (Gesture: move her hand from left to right.)
Participant: [Yes, and from up and down.] (Gesture: move his hand from up to down)
Tutor (NS): Oh! It is up and down, interesting, very interesting.

“I said ‘Yes, and up and down’ to express ‘left and right and from top and bottom.’ When the tutor said, ‘Oh, it is up and down, interesting, very interesting,’ I realized that the tutor misunderstood that Korean is written from top to bottom. But I did not feel like correcting it. I did not feel like stopping the conversation, which had already moved on to something else.”

As expressed in the participant’s comment, in excerpt (2), he identified a meaning discrepancy between his utterance and his intended message from the tutor’s response. Although he realized the meaning mismatch, he employed an abandon MMCS and did not repair the semantic problem.

(3) Utterance Produced: I got some idea of that.

Intended Message: I got some ideas about how to manage my life more effectively.

Participant: Now I a little bit got # I got some kind of # I got something how to say that? (put his hand on his head) [I got some idea of that] right now. I suppose. I am not sure, I am pretty young right now. Did you ever consider to join, enlist?

“I had a hard time to express my idea, ‘I got some ideas about how to manage my life more effectively.’ To express it, I just said ‘I got some idea of that,’ which was the best I could come up with. I knew that it did not sufficiently deliver the intended meaning. The tutor also did not seem to understand it although he nodded his head. … I did not know how to make him understand it. I just wanted to get out of the topic, and thus I asked a question to change it.”

Despite the identification of the semantic insufficiency in his utterance, in excerpt (3), the participant did not attempt to clarify it. The participant knew that his utterance, “I got some
idea of that" did not sufficiently deliver his intended message: I got some ideas about how to manage my life more effectively. As he chose to use an abandon MMCS, however, he did not attempt to clarify it. Instead, he asked an unrelated question, “Did . . . enlist?” to change the topic of the discussion.

As shown in experts (1-3), the participants employing abandon MMCSs didn’t attempt to repair meaning mismatches and were not able to achieve their communicative goal of delivering their intended message.

3.2.2 Achievement Meaning Mismatch Communication Strategies (MMCSs)

Achievement meaning mismatch communication strategies (MMCSs) were identified as the second type of MMCs. Achievement MMCs refer to attempting to resolve the meaning mismatches when the participants identified that their utterance did not deliver the intended meaning correctly or unambiguously. Achievement MMCs involved repairing speaker’s own utterance to resolve the semantic mismatch between the meaning of the utterance originally produced and that of the intended message. MMCs were often accompanied by “I mean.” In excerpts showing the use of MMCs, the utterance that triggered a repair is presented in [ ] and the utterance that was produced as a result of repairing is underlined.

Two types of achievement MMCs were identified: (a) self-initiated meaning repair and (b) interlocutor-initiated meaning repair, depending on who identified the need for repair first. MMCs triggered by one’s own identification of the semantic problem are called (a) self-initiated repair, while MMCs triggered by the interlocutor’s response are called (b) interlocutor-initiated repair.

3.2.2.1 Self-Initiated Meaning Repair

Some achievement MMCs were used to repair a semantic mismatch that the participants identified on their own. This type of MMC is called self-initiated meaning repair. Self-initiated repair MMCs are found in excerpts (4-8).

(4) Utterance Produced by Repairing: [they used to]
Utterance Produced by Repairing: they get used to

Participant: They want to stick to one that [they used to], I mean, they get used to.

In excerpt (4), on his own, the participant identified a semantic mismatch between his
utterance used to and his intended meaning after producing it. Thus, employing a self-initiated repair MMCS, he repaired it by saying “I mean, get used to.”

(5) Utterance Originally Produced: [major]
Utterance Produced by Repairing: class

Participant: I have to take a lot of different of [major] ah, I mean, class.

In excerpt (5), after saying ‘major,’ the participant realized that it had a different meaning from his intended word, ‘class.’ To correct this semantic problem, employing a self-initiated repair MMCS, he changed ‘major’ into ‘class.’

(6) Utterance Originally Produced: [I went to office.]
Utterance Produced by Repairing: I work at the office.

Participant: [I went to office.] (pause) I work at the office.

After the participant said “I went to office,” which was directly translated from Korean, on her own, she identified that it had a different meaning from her intended message. In order to correct this meaning mismatch, she employed a self-initiated repair MMCS by saying “I work at the office.”

(7) Utterance Originally Produced: [job is filled . . . very fast.]
Utterance Produced by Repairing: Job is available at any time.

Participant: Job is, you know [job is filled, you know, very fast.] I mean, Job is available at any time.

In excerpt (7), on her own, the participant recognized that her utterance “Job is filled very fast” had a different meaning from her intended message. To deliver her intended message correctly, she employed self-initiated repair and said “Job is available at any time.”

(8) Utterance Originally Produced: [very polluted] city
Utterance Produced by Repairing: high population city

Participant: I lived in very [very polluted] city no, I mean, high population city.
In excerpt (8), by a slip of the tongue, the participant uttered "very polluted" when she described that she lived in a city with a high population. As she identified the meaning mismatch problem on her own, she used a self-initiated repair MMCS and corrected it by saying "I mean, high population city."

### 3.2.2.2 Interlocutor-Initiated Meaning Repair

Achievement MMCSs were also used to repair a semantic mismatch that the participant identified from the interlocutor's response or feedback. This type of MMCSs is called interlocutor-initiated meaning repair. Interlocutor-initiated meaning repair, which corrected a meaning discrepancy identified through the interlocutor's feedback, differs from self-initiated repair, which corrected a semantic problem identified by the participants on their own. Interlocutor-initiated repair MMCS are found in excerpts (9-11).

(9) Utterance Originally Produced: [language problem.]
Utterance Produced by Repairing: English problem

Participant: Uhmmm you know. One of the Ph. D. students is gonna analyze my [language problem.]
Elementary Student (NS): Language problem?
Participant: English problem

In excerpt (9), while the participant was teaching the Korean language in an after school program in an elementary school, she was explaining the reason why the researcher was present to observe and record the class. After she said "One of the Ph. D. students is gonna analyze my language problem," one of the elementary students repeated her utterance "language program" with a raised intonation. From this repetition, she realized that something was wrong with what she had said. Soon after, she realized that language problem had a different meaning from her intended meaning, English problem. To solve the meaning discrepancy, employing an interlocutor-initiated repair MMCS, she corrected "language problem" into "English problem." The repair employed in this excerpt was interlocutor-initiated repair as the meaning repair was triggered by the interlocutor's repetition.
In excerpt (10), while the participant was describing a movie that he and his group members made for a class project, he related what he and his female partner had to do in a scene. After he said, “We have a scene that is about making love,” the interlocutor said “uh?” At that moment, through the interlocutor’s response, he realized that his utterances might have been misunderstood because of making love. In order to correct the meaning discrepancy, employing an interlocutor-initiated meaning repair MMCS, he expressed that what he meant was not making love, but just hug.

(11) Utterance Originally Produced: [rice ] (lice was mispronounced as rice)
Utterance Produced by Repairing: little insect living in your hair

Participant: New York … the hotel was expensive, but that was not good. I bitted. You know [rice]?
Tutor (NS): Mice?
Participant: No, rice!
Tutor (NS): Like a little animal?
Participant: Little insect living in your hair, I bitted. (laugh)

In excerpt (11), when the participant wanted to ask the interlocutor if he knew lice, he uttered “You know rice?” because he mispronounced the sound ‘r’ as the sound ‘l’. When the interlocutor responded with mice?, asking the participant if what he said was mice, he expressed that what he meant was not mice, by saying no, and said rice again. Even after the participant repeated it, the interlocutor still did not seem to understand him. Thus, using an interlocutor-initiated meaning repair, he attempted to solve the miscommunication by providing a definitional description of the word that triggered the semantic problem, “little insect living in the your hair.”

As illustrated in excerpts (4-11), achievement MMCSs involved repairing the word or expression that differed semantically from the intended one. As the both self-initiated meaning repair and interlocutor-initiated meaning repair were used to achieve the communicative goal of
delivering the intended message, rather than overlook the semantic problem and abandon the intended message, these two types of MMCSs belongs to achievement MMCSs.

4. Conclusion

This study has sought to illustrate how meaning mismatches are identified and managed by L2 speakers during L2 communication. The findings showed the participants identified meaning mismatches from their own judgment or from the interlocutors' responses. For successful communication, therefore, L2 speakers should be aware of the interlocutor's verbal or non-verbal responses expressing his/her misunderstanding or inability to understand their utterance.

This study also indicated that two types of MMCSs, abandon MMCSs and achievement MMCSs, were employed when semantic mismatches were identified. Achievement MMCSs were used when the participant chose to attempt to deliver the intended meaning correctly and sufficiently, while abandon MMCSs were used when the participant chose to overlook the semantic problem. Meaning mismatches could be managed by the participants who used appropriate achievement MMCS with verbal and nonverbal resources available to them. Despite the experienced semantic problems, these participants were able to achieve their communicative goal by delivering their own intended message, at least to some extent.

The findings of this study convinced us that L2 speakers should be encouraged to use achievement MMCSs, rather than abandon MMCSs, to manage L2 communication successfully and achieve the goal of delivering their intended message. Given this useful role in managing semantic problems, achievement MMCSs will be useful resources for both language learners and language professionals, and therefore should be taught in language classrooms.

References


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