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Converging and diverging routes of comprehension: how do we understand each other in SMS?

Cell phone messages are written texts showing the properties of spoken language. This is of special importance, considering the fact that the special features of written texts, e.g. a higher degree of explicitly, more elaborated descriptions etc., are functional: they replace the contextual elements of a spoken interaction that are essential for comprehension between the interlocutors. How do we understand each other in SMS, if neither the contextual elements nor the textual elaboration help to complete the meaning coded in the words?

The question is hard to answer on the basis of the folk linguistic concept of understanding. In public discourse, „understanding” means something like „to know what the other wanted to say”. Similarly, the question is difficult to answer on the ground of classical (mainly structuralist) approaches of linguistic meaning which would phrase the folk linguistic concept in a more technical way, like „to decode exactly what the sender coded into the message”. Both notions suggest that the thought generated in one mind can be transmitted in a whole or at least without significant loss into another mind.

Comprehension is a more complex concept in linguistic approaches founded on cognitive linguistics and discourse analysis. Understanding is a scale of similarity between the speaker’s and the hearer’s interpretations of the message. According to these approaches, the bulk of the interpretation is based not on the explicitly communicated words but on the non-explicit levels of meaning. Non-explicit meaning has several layers, e.g. nonverbal signs (intonation, stress, gestures, facial expressions, posture), the physical setting and the occasion (the place, purpose, and the ritual bonds of the interaction), implications and presuppositions, and meanings activated by the above layers of meanings (culturally transmitted or personal experience based cognitive patterns and frames). The more knowledge the interlocutors share, the closer their interpretations are to each other.

Understanding in messaging emerges mainly from the non-explicit layers of meaning, similarly to spoken interactions. But in messaging, non-verbal signs are mostly lacking except for some replacements (smilies), and although the physical setting of the messaging partners may be known for each other (rarely it may be even shared), in most cases the setting of the interlocutors does not contribute to the comprehension between them as it does when they are in a shared physical space.

The hypotheses drawn from the above considerations are that 1. misunderstandings are frequent in messaging because it lacks some elements that contribute to comprehension in spoken interactions and because it lacks elements that replace the elements of spoken interactions in writing, and 2. the main source of misunderstanding is the lack of nonverbal signs in messaging. I study in this paper whether empirical data support these hypotheses.