

# Meaning, Intention and Miscommunication: A Study of Albert Camus' Misunderstanding

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## ABSTRACT

Meaning is central to the study of both communication and miscommunication. Exploiting linguistic resources in negotiating meaning is not adequate; speaker's intention forms a crucial part in this process. Misunderstanding arises when the hearer does not understand or interpret the speaker's utterances in its intended meaning. Both the speaker and the hearer are not in a position to control the communicative situation. In Camus's play the misunderstanding, the speaker provides input that is false, may be sometimes a deliberate distortion and the hearer would not know because of mistaken assumption.

This paper is an attempt to study miscommunication which it considers to be a fact of life. The paper benefits from some insights on the subject from Grice (Cooperative behavior in interaction – Violation of Maxims-Implicature), Austin-Searle's indirect speech-act and C.David Mortensen's Confusion, distortion and disruption). From the point of view of this paper, Language is most widely used as a medium of human communication but by no means is the most efficient because of its ambiguity and vagueness. Hemingway claimed that an author does not have to explicitly reveal the explicit meaning. To Beckett, Language is most efficiently used if it is being misused. Same is in line both with Freud's 'Ice-berg' theory', suggesting that most invisible part of discourse is below the surface and Chomsky's ideas of Deep structure'

The paper tries to capture Man's desire to find meaning in his existence. Albert Camus' reflects on the absurd condition of human life and struggles to find meaning and purpose in a meaningless world.

The paper is organized into two parts.

(i) Attempts to conceptualize the various hypotheses of Meaning-Intention and Miscommunication.

(ii) to study human condition in not a very friendly world as articulated by Albert Camus's play Misunderstanding.

Here is a conversational situation where a party knew the identity of the others. Jan has come to see his mother and sister after a lapse of twenty years, but he did not reveal his identity. Sister Martha and their mother hoodwink the tourists, drug and kill them, loot their valuables. He was mistaken for a visitor.

Jan's passport could have revealed his identity but Martha, so obsessed with the act of murder that she said, "What would happen if every condemned man insisted on confiding all his heartaches to the hangman". To Martha, her brother was looking for the right words to reveal his intention but before then he died. It is this view of human situation that emerges constitutes the context for our discussion of miscommunication

## Keywords

Gricean Maxims, Implicature, Speech Acts, confusion, Equivocation

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## A Concept Note

### Part (A)

We use language to express, impress and suppress facts and the suppression of information has links with speaker's intention and the hearer assigning meaning to the speaker's utterances. Language is used in context, and if the context is not accessible, it leads to misinterpretation. Everything people say is a result of choices. Someone says, "How are you?", you say, "Fine"- it does not accomplish anything particular because 'fine' is the obvious way to say. Silence might seem rude, to extend further, if someone says, "Tomorrow is my birthday" ... Does the speaker invite the hearer to attend the party or it is just information, he may neither speak the truth nor he be too embarrassed to say that he did not mean an invitation.

Language is goal directed: It has communicative function. (Halliday, Searles 69). Saying something means doing something (Austin :62) . So one locutionary act can have multiple illocutionary forces. Another angle: if we use illocutionary intentions using a phrase 'I promise' is to make a promise. Here the speaker's intention is unambiguous but these explicit performative verbs are less common.

None can understand the meaning with verbal features only. Body-language experts depend upon the facial expressions and decode the meaning effectively. All the participants' character in the proposed play might have revealed their intention the way there emotion is expressed, but Non-verbal communication is not within our purview.

Pragmasticians study the figurative language and resolve the ambiguity. Language is metaphorical and literal meaning of a text is not adequate.

Location of Meaning: Misunderstanding arises when speaker says, That is not what I meant' The New critics on the contrary emphasize on the structure of the text and avoid the 'the intentional fallacy' i.e what the author might have had in mind! Some look for meaning in the readers responses. An influential view of meaning lies in the abstract social space besides speaker, hearer, texts. The meaning is socially constructed.

Insights: Grice, Austin-Searles and Mortensen: -

Grice provides an illuminating framework for study of meaning. He posits the cooperative principle. In simple term, it refers to how we should express ourselves in order to be understood.

He enunciated (1975) five conversational maxims and dedicated his life to this problem: a basic rule for effective communication. A brief outline of Maxims.

Maxim of quantity: say enough for your counterpart to understand but don't say too much or you will cause confusion.

Maxim of quantity tell the truth, don't speculate, don't dupe the person into believing something different

Maxim of Relevance Don't say anything irrelevant.

Maxim of manner: avoid ambiguity, vagueness, verbosity, and volatility and stick to logical argument.

If we don't follow the maxims, we then are flouting it (use of Irony, Antithesis, symbols, metaphor etc) Implicatures arise when these maxims are not adhered to 'Generosity Principle' states that human beings are basically generates to one another and ordinarily tending to assign positive meaning. The paper has tried to capture the Gricean insights.

Speech Act Theory: Austin

Some people do not announce their intention and use Indirect speech.

J.L. Austin 1962, How to do things with words; proposes that sentences have 'propositional meaning' i.e Information contained in the sentence which can be true or false, but sentences have illocutionary meaning. i.e we are doing something while saying something. (eg, request, order, threat)

People infer how utterances are meant to be understood. Even Noam Chomsky while deciding the grammaticality of a sentence emphasizes the role of Intention.

### The Study of Miscommunication:

C.David Mortensen (1997) admits that sometimes things make no sense at all. While profiling miscommunication, he dwells upon implication, distortion, confusion and misunderstanding. We often withhold much of what we very much want to share with another. Subject of human understanding is incomplete, error-prone. Each one is forced to deal with fuzzy and aspects of larger context. Cognition plays an important role. Several studies show a concern for clarity, that is making our intention clear but if our assumptions are faulty and mistaken, inferences hidden agendas are in force then. Communication difficulty occurs.

The second part of the paper analyses some conversations in Camus's play, Misunderstanding as illustrative examples.

Martha and her mother are supervising the work of the boarding house. Jan, concealed his identity from his mother and sister. He is there as a visitor. The Characters realize their situation not at the beginning of the play but only later, which makes coping with it difficult.

Martha being a true business person hankers after money and the mother wants 'rest' peace' and smells some trouble. Rest for mother means being free from doing the domestic chore. Mother does not like Martha's ambition and attitude, yet she does not tell it openly. The expressions are loaded and manipulative. Martha's double talk is evident when she dupes the clients.

Mother "habit begins with second crime (P5). Mother's intention to kill the client, (not knowing her son's identity) to show motherly love but involves herself in the act of killing Jan. Mother-daughters' talk gives sufficient hint for the impending calamity. By 'home' Martha means a

comfortable home but mother calls it a 'pathetic place' referred to the insidious activities taking place in the boarding house.

The same 'home' 'house' contrast affects both Jan and Maria. For Jan, their house is filled with wealth of nostalgia' while for Maria, it is an enigma. The house where Jan was born, presently occupied by his mother and sister is a strange place for Maria.

Jan is back at his ancestral home after twenty years. The people and the place appeared to be different from what they had earlier been. Jan did not reveal his identity. He was waiting for the right time to do so but each time as evident in the play, he struggled for the right words. Jan has violated the Gricean maxim of Quantity, Quality and manner. According to Maria, Jan should have identified himself from the very beginning ... 'one word would have been enough...' (P8)

Maria forewarned Jan for hanging on to his pretension which proved costly. Ambiguity spoils the Quantity of information. 'Words that came from heart' are always simple. Maria and Jan have different frame of reference. Maria read the creases on the face of mother and Martha and deplores "There is nothing for as that will make us happy," but to Jan, obligation for the family is important. Had the conversation between Jan and Maria been more continuous, and louder in the presence of the old man, that the Jan's identity would have been divulged to Mother and Martha and the tragedy would have been averted. Maria was apprehensive of all the people in the boarding house and wants to go back to Africa along with Jan. Maria does not find fault with Jan's love but she senses some trouble. Jan's rigidity can be explained in terms of fulfilling his promise to make his mother and sister happy. Maria's disagreement with Jan, leading to her temporary separation evokes fear that the relation mind end in disaster. The conversation has the following implication.

(1). Maria's love is intense and with Jan, hard not to bend, she is left with nothing.

(2). Maria said that he (Jan) can give all the wealth and money to his sister and mother.

The role of Oldman as a 'dumb' a spoiler or providential agent heats up the dramatic tension. His surreptitious presence widens the complication.

(i) Jan is missing many chances to be candid with his sister Martha.

(ii) Jan did not reveal his name place of birth and profession the truth is all people lie in certain situation and here his compulsion is to disclose everything at the right moment.

Martha's question to Jan at the boarding house has plenty of information deficit. Similarly Jan's reply is also neither direct nor specific. He is silent about his commuting between Africa and Europe.

Jan's cover-up or hedging information to Martha is only to restore peace and happiness to his mother and sister. In the sense 'Manner- Maxim' of Grice is flouted. Had she further cross-questioned Jan, concrete information could have been obtained?

The turning point in the conversation is submission of Jan's passport but old Man's arrival made Martha to skip reading the details and further the old man snatched it away,

Martha's mind is elsewhere not on Jan's identification but it is the sea in Africa that lures her mind.

Jan avoids telling anything about his marriage, family. but on being insisted, he showed the 'wedding ring'. Martha stops further interrogation. She wants business relation. The conversation ends with no apparent reconciliation.

The mother-son talk demands close study. Mother is sad, brooding and not in tune with Boarding house hectic schedule after the death of her husband. On the contrary, Martha is prosaic, professional, a different breed.

Jan is ready to help the family financially. But straight rebuttal from Martha, not to rake emotion, silenced him. Mother depends on Martha's harsh words and lack of sympathy as a hint for Jan to leave the hotel and to save his life. In fact, such assumption of Mother cannot pass for an honest effort to save Jan from being killed.

Repeated heinous crime by both mother and daughter had diminishing returns, a huge cost on their psyche; practicing deception, pretensions have drained out their vigor. The hardened mind of Martha, being disgusted with European climate of immorality, pines for and escape to beautiful Africa (P27) only after executing the last crime of murdering Jan: The irony is blunt and mindboggling.

In the II Act, the crisis festers. Jan tells Martha to have patience, and wait for the renewal of good days in life. but she is disillusioned. She is addicted to crime, tinged with selfishness and arrogance. "the human side of me is not my better part..."

The hotel is a hot den of vices. Jan feels out of breath there. He says, "... throbbing like a wound, that every moment agitates ... it would turn into terror".

The tea episode: The problem is thickening. Martha's devilish plan to kill Jan with worst display of hypocrisy can be noticed. There is an admonition to Jan that everything is not proper... "My Lord God! Help me find the words I need! Jan decided to leave the hotel after dinner and perhaps he thought he may come back with Maria. The statements are ironical and pitiable.

The penultimate scene is heart-chilling. Jan has already swallowed the poisoned-tea. Mother and daughter dragged the unconscious Jan down to the depth off the river for a watery-burial. Mother could not save the situation. A crime is successfully perpetrated and the wealth of Jan is grabbed by Martha. Then, there Jan's passport was dropped, and the old man picked it up and handed it to Martha. Jan's identity was revealed.

The final scene resembles post-mortem scene. It was a death blow to the mother and she said, 'I was his mother and when a mother fails to know her son, her function in life comes to and end' Extreme remorse, anguish led her to commit suicide, scene of second death in the play. Expiation part of the story follows in terms of conflicting Mother-Daughter speech. (P-42)

Martha, crest-fallen, like a whirlwind' Screamed like an animal'. The metaphors of 'wave' and 'wind' sea gale are philosophical. Albert Camus is at his best to dramatize the existential dilemma. She is star-crossed, that forces one 'to search the sky in a servile grasp of Grace'

The pathos, tragedy overtook the end battle of existence and is further accentuated by the arrival of Maria. She knew about Jan's death. The sky fell on her. 'The world is a madhouse', defies any understanding. Martha's reasoning is

porous, she has lost her mother but Maria has lost her husband. Martha resolved to die, owning all responsibility of her misdeeds. Realization dawned on her only after the ghastly tragedy. Like devils quoting scriptures, Martha philosophizes over the futility of existence, "This dark sullen clay that swallows us up as food for sightless worms?" ... 'there is one home for all of us and that is unspeakable'...

Maria's mercy-cry to the savior-God is full of paradoxes

i) God is never benevolent

ii) Inscrutable are the ways of destiny.

This is both human and divine communication failure, more riddle-prone about Maria's fate and poetic justice if any and highlights the possibility of finding meaning in suffering. It is written in the psalms: "God preserves all your tears" None of Maria's suffering are in vain.

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