Misunderstanding as a resource in interaction

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The phenomenon of *misunderstanding* is a recurrent feature of everyday life – sometimes a source of frustration, sometimes a site of blame. But misunderstandings can also be seen as getting interactants out of (as well as into) trouble. For example, misunderstandings may be produced to deal with disaffiliative implications of 'not being on the same page,' and as such they may be deployed as a resource for avoiding trouble. This paper examines misunderstanding as a pragmatic accomplishment, focusing on the uses to which it is put in interactions as a practice for dealing with threats to *intersubjectivity*: the extent to which persons are aligned in terms of a current referent, activity, assessment, etc. A multimodal discourse analysis of audio and video recordings of naturally-occurring talk inspects moments in which misunderstandings are purported or displayed (rather than overtly invoked) as well as how such misunderstandings are oriented to as simply-repairable references, versus inferential matters more misaligned and potentially fraught. Rather than being a straightforward reflection of an experience of trouble with understanding, misunderstanding may also be collaboratively produced to manage practical challenges to intersubjectivity.

Keywords: discourse analysis, misunderstanding, repair, reference, inference, intersubjectivity

"We're not on the same wavelength." "They're talking at cross-purposes." "You've got the wrong end of the stick." There are a number of idioms in the English language characterizing the phenomenon we might call *misunderstanding*, in which two or more people do not have a shared sense of something – be it some referent (person, place or thing), an activity (how to do something, what a current situation is), and so forth. Many people in their everyday lives tend to think of misunderstandings as a reflection of different knowledge-states. This is also assumed in much of the psychological and cognitive literature. But this paper takes an interactional and pragmatics-based approach, asking instead, "for what practical purposes might misunderstandings be produced?"

Drawing on multimodal discourse analysis, this analysis examines transcripts of naturally-occurring audio and video recordings in which participants display or attribute 'having misunderstood' as an account for a sequential hiccup in the ongoing interaction. Typically, participants use a number of resources to work up the misunderstanding as simple and unproblematic: as something which ultimately aids in moving a conversation along, and which only for that reason would (as briefly as possible) halt it. Indeed, the preference for progressivity in interaction suggests that even more 'serious' misunderstandings might be treated as simple mismatches of meaning. Conversely, however, apparent 'mere' misunderstandings may be pursued and expanded as a way of doing disagreement. This paper focuses on cases where misunderstandings are produced and managed collaboratively to preclude any potential troubling moral implications of intersubjectivity loss and avoid explicit disagreement. The first section lays out the practices through which participants accomplish misunderstandings, and how these practices show a preference for minimal, referential repairs. The second section analyzes how misunderstandings may exploit inferential ambiguities to manage interactional troubles and avoid disagreement.

This paper begins by reviewing literature on interactional approaches to understanding and intersubjectivity (Section 1), followed by a description of the methods employed and the data analyzed in this paper (Section 2). The analysis (Section 3) reviews a number of cases of purported misunderstanding (in which the misunderstanding is indexed rather than explicitly labeled as such); these cases illustrate pragmatic materials participants draw on for crafting their 'misunderstanding' moments, then present how misunderstanding may be enrolled to avoid or pursue disagreement. The final section (4) reflects on these results and considers the morality of apparent misunderstanding.

1.   Understanding and intersubjectivity in conversation

'Understanding' is a familiar topic in philosophy and psychology, where exploration has ranged from the hermenutic to the experimental (e.g., Bransford & Johnson 1972; Kvale 1983; Tamir, Thornton, Contreras & Mitchell 2016). This research tends to link understanding to knowledge, and knowledge has largely been presumed to be a cognitive matter involving implicit mental models (e.g., Johnson-Laird & Byrne 2002). Pragmatics approaches that examine language in use (for instance discourse analysis and discursive psychology: Cameron 2001) have by and large set knowledge-as-an-internal-mental-state aside in favor of empirical approaches that look instead at interactional evidence for, or displays of, individual and shared knowledge, shared frames of reference, and epistemics

(c.f., Bocéréan and Musiol 2009; Drew 2012; Kataoka & Asahi 2015; Muntigl & Choi 2010; see Mikesell 2014, for work that combines approaches). Mutual understanding, or intersubjectivity, has often been defined phenomenologically or philosophically as mutuality, empathy, emotional accord, agreement about beliefs, a capacity to see from the other's point of view, and even as opposed to interaction (e.g., Finlay 2009; Gillespie & Cornish 2010; Hall 2010; Harwood, Stone & Pines 2012; Johannson 2007). By examining understanding for practical purposes as an interactional achievement rather than a feature of emotion or belief (Koschmann 2011; Lynch 2011; Sadler 2010), this paper focuses on the communicational dimension of the social world, and how participants actively, demonstrably coordinate and construct shared meaning.

In ethnomethodological work (Garfinkel 1967), shared understanding – intersubjectivity – was proposed as the very foundation of human social behavior in daily life. Garfinkel saw intersubjectivity as the shared expectations assumed (and taken for granted) by interactants in their everyday dealings with one another. As Levinson (2006) put it, we attempt to read others' minds and we imagine how others are trying to read ours (see also Duranti 2008); by this method we interpret one another's responses and design our own for them. This assumption is a precondition for interaction and provides for the possibility of communication. This means, practically, that intersubjectivity is presumed to have been accomplished unless signs indicate otherwise (Heritage 1987) and that there is a preference for intersubjectivity in conversation (Heritage 2007; Schegloff 1992).

In conversation analytic (CA) research, this intersubjectivity was proven through sequence (Heritage 1987; Schegloff 1992). In the CA approach, intersubjectivity is grounded in the ways in which participants display understanding of one another's turns by producing intelligible responses. Understanding in interaction is therefore about adjacency and 'nextness' (Mondada 2011): progressively accomplishing actions in discourse. In this way, intersubjectivity is largely implicit, visible in the extent to which the appropriate next turn is produced and accepted. Sacks (1992) described different positions where it is relevant to show more explicit understanding across a sequence. That is, at key sequential placements, there may be a sort of check for understanding from a speaker, or a proffer of understanding from the recipient. These can be as subtle as a minute pause or the use of continuers such as "m hm" and "uh huh." Certain final particles have also been shown to do work in maintaining intersubjectivity in the assumed understanding interlocutors' display of prior utterances (Haselow 2012). Other research distinguishes types of acts that achieve intersubjectivity, such as joint attention versus requesting (Mundy, Kasari & Sigman 1992), or the coordination of action versus displays of feeling and being (Du Bois 2011).

But what are such understandings 'about?' Hepburn, Wilkinson and Shaw (2012) show how participants orient to different referents toward which they are managing convergent or divergent understanding. So *what* is being understood does matter. But that 'what' may refer to very simple or very complicated things, and the understanding required may vary. It is a commonplace that people assume, claim to experience, and comment on different 'depths' of shared meanings, as evidenced in metadiscourse on ideas such as "dialogue," "really communicating," and "deep understanding" (or deep/meta learning) in ordinary and academic talk and texts (e.g., Craig 2008; Katriel & Philipsen 1981; Osman & Herring 2007; Rochat, Passos-Ferreira, & Salem 2009). This intuition we have when adopting the 'natural attitude' that some misunderstandings are small and others big is also reflected in the examples at the start of this article, all of which seem to characterize deeper misunderstandings. In other words, they suggest a misunderstanding is not a misrecognition of a single referent, but a misunderstanding of a situation, the gist of an argument, someone's purpose, etc.: something that is implicit or that has been under management across sequences.

Participants may also treat the content of their understandings as relevantly differentiable in their interactions. Sidnell (2014) describes a number of dimensions of intersubjectivity, from the 'basic' forms of attention and phatic communion, through joint attention and shared stance, to reciprocity, collective intention, and mutual understanding. Each of these dimensions may be considered more or less complex, difficult, serious, and so forth – equally so, those moments where such dimensions are not realized in interaction. In describing the organization of intersubjectivity in turn structure, Sidnell notes that utterances are designed to display understanding of the prior turn and its action, both of which are empirically distinguishable. This is true also of misunderstandings, of which Sidnell lists some common types including problems arising from the use of unfamiliar words, problems of reference, problems of action recognition, and problems with assumptions or common ground. The primary mechanism for correcting these and other sorts of misunderstanding – as well as the phenomenon through which misunderstandings are made visible – is repair.

Schegloff (1992) implemented an empirical analysis of the phenomenon of intersubjectivity based in the CA approach to repair of understanding, or "trouble in the socially shared grasp of the talk and the other conduct in interaction" (p. 1301). Analyses of repairs note that they are overwhelmingly initiated and completed by the speaker of the trouble-source turn (the turn in which the error occurred), within that turn. However, repair can also be initiated (though is rarely completed) by the other participant, and either can do so in between or in subsequent turns. Repair is almost always accomplished in the first or next turn; repair positions that occur after the hearer has indicated trouble are rarer, and generally there must be

a re-realization of relevance of the trouble-source to provide another opportunity for repair (Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks 1977).

In the absence of explicit labeling of interactions as 'misunderstanding,' then, repair instances provide empirical insight into the event of a misunderstanding and how it unfolds. Schegloff (1992) defines repair on understanding as a sign of possible loss of intersubjectivity in the derailment of an ongoing interactional project (c.f. Kim 2001; Wilkinson 1999; Wootton 1994). In terms of locating the source of a repairable misunderstanding, participants may identify the source precisely (for instance with closed repair initiation sequences) or use an 'open class repair' (such as "what?") (Drew 1997), the latter of which is canonically deployed as a mishearing repair (Svennevig 2008). Though it can be used as a sort of challenge, according to Schegloff (1987), understanding repairs typically proceed without direct participant attention to aspects of the trouble source beyond talk-endogenous matters. In other words, if an apparent problem with understanding emerges, participants tend to treat the 'fix' as something that is literal and correctable within the context of the immediate local talk itself – as a matter of semantic mismatch, perhaps, or a misrecognition. This is consistent with Heritage's (2007) observation that there is a preference for recognitional and minimized references for doing understanding.

Repair is a fairly frequent cross-cultural phenomenon in which the preference for specific, minimal repairs prevails (Dingemanse, Roberts, Baranova, Blythe, Drew, Floyd, Gisladottir, Kendrick, Levinson, Manrique & Rossi 2015). Schegloff (1992) suggests that multiple repairs and unrepaired problems sustained over multiple turns can evolve into disagreement. Dispreferred variations such as third and fourth turn repair, other-initiated repair, and pursuits of misunderstanding are used to challenge, to do disagreements, and to accomplish moral assessments of particular actions or of understandings about the world (e.g., Hayashi, Raymond, & Sidnell 2013; Goodwin 1983). And research has shown that using repair to pursue indexical referentials in the absence of actual uncertainty can be a way of covertly managing potential disagreement or misalignment while only going on record as seeking repair on a referential (Bolden, Mandelbaum & Wilkinson 2012, Lerner et al. 2012). Thus, different participant courses of action in managing understandings (and misunderstandings) have a number of possible links to dealing with more conflicted forms of trouble with intersubjectivity (Hayashi, Raymond & Sidnell 2013).

Schegloff's 1992 paper on intersubjectivity was subtitled "the last structurally-provided defense of intersubjectivity." This title suggests a number of interesting things, including (1) that if third position repair is the "last," then there might be other possibilities which come before; (2) that if it's "structurally-provided," then there might be other non-structural strategies; and (3) that if it's a "defense," then there might be intersubjectivity building (as well as defending) practices. Sacks (1992) describes how participants might claim understanding or

demonstrate understanding ('doing understanding') (Heritage 2007). This paper looks at a number of sequences in which participants 'do misunderstanding' and how intersubjectivity is at stake.

2. Analyzing misunderstanding

In the work of discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter 1992), purportedly-psychological concepts are reanalyzed as interactional phenomena. This paper's analysis takes this approach as a starting point, examining the phenomenon of 'misunderstanding' from a pragmatics-focused approach to language. Using ethnomethodologically-inflected discourse analysis, the analysis also attends to a detailed transcription of discourse and sequential analysis of turn-by-turn acts based on work in conversation analysis (Hutchby & Wooffitt 2008; Schegloff 2007), while incorporating multimodal elements involving coordination between simultaneous sequences of verbal and nonverbal acts in a semiotic environment of objects and space (e.g., Eriksson 2009; Fox 1999; Goodwin 2000; Heath 2002; Mondada 2009).

The analysis of misunderstanding herein is also problem-centered, insofar as it is interested in how participants manage practical challenges encountered in interaction. Taking the perspective of grounded practical theory (Craig & Tracy 1995), this analysis reconstructs 'misunderstanding' as a communicative practice designed to manage ordinary dilemmas and troubles. Taking this perspective highlights how the practical use of misunderstanding reveals participants' situated ideals around intersubjectivity. The work that misunderstanding does is underpinned by the moral accountabiltiy of common ground in everyday discourse, as described in ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967).

The data analyzed in this project come from a corpus of more than 50 hours of video-taped naturally-occurring or home movie interaction which was recorded in California, Colorado, and New Hampshire in the United States between the late 1930s and 2012. The videos have been transcribed with Jeffersonian notations (Jefferson 1984; see appendix) and some supplemental notations, including visual elements and screen shots (embodied actions are described in data for which visuals cannot be shown due to consent constraints). These data were collected and transcribed as part of an ongoing project on how morality is displayed and constructed in interaction (Robles 2011). The excerpts discussed were selected from a collection of cases in which misunderstandings were made visible. The primary corpus of 62 cases led to an inquiry into how aligning understandings for action may be accomplished or pursued through embodied acts. The current project focuses on misunderstandings that are produced but not explicitly labeled as such, and does not start with the most basic level of intersubjectivity (phatic

communion, attunement, involvement and engagement – see Sidnell 2014), instead focusing on higher-order intersubjectivities: shared reference, stance coordination, and mutual understanding. The results presented in the following sections examine how misunderstandings are practically accomplished and what actions those misunderstandings are doing to manage intersubjecitivity.

3. Misunderstanding as an accomplishment and a resource for managing trouble

The basic sequence through which misunderstandings are produced begins with repair initiation that suggests something (a referent, an implication, the course of action itself) in a prior turn was misunderstood such that the sequence cannot progress. This is generally followed by the repair, then some display of understanding. The first section lays out the techniques through which participants accomplished misunderstandings through repair, in accordance with a preference for minimal, referential repairs, and shows how these maintain intersubjectivity. The first example deals with an immediate case of misrecognition or lack of familiarity with a particular word or the word's referent; and the second example deals with a delayed identification of misrecognition.

3.1   Misunderstanding for reference and stance alignment

In the first excerpt, the participants have been discussing their Halloween costumes, as the holiday had recently passed. Meg brings up an idea she had for 'matching' costumes involving herself and her half-brother. In this case the referent for the half-brother's costume "Shortround" is unknown and therefore unrecognizable to the recipient.

(1) "Shortround"
```
1    Meg:    >I was gonna be< Indiana Jones and I wanted him
2              to be my Shortround
3    Lila:   [.hh]
4    Meg:    [so-]
5    Lila:   u::h ((looks up, scratches head; 0.5)) I've never
6            actually se↑en Indiana Jones?=
7    Meg:    =°what's wrong with you°
8    Lila:   #sorry#
9    (0.5)
10   Lila:   [((laughs))
11   Meg:    [he's like this (0.5)] um >Asian kid< that
12           follows Indiana Jones aro↑und
```

Lila displays no difficulty with having heard Meg's reference to "Shortround," nor a lack of understanding that Shortround is a character: she seems to hear and recognize, in the context of the conversation being about Halloween costumes, that Meg "being" Indiana Jones means she'll dress up as the character for Halloween, and the referenced "him" "being her" Shortround means the "him" will dress up for Halloween as whatever a Shortround is (line 2). The first possible moment at which understanding may be in trouble occurs in line 3 with Lila's in-breath: Meg seems to hear this as a possible initiation of speech (c.f. Scobbie, Schaeffler, & Mennen 2011) since she stops in mid-initiation of a next turn (line 4). Lila's next turn begins with a drawn-out "uh," which could be doing a word search or signaling confusion; it is a potential sign of trouble and is accompanied by a matching facial expression and gesture (see below) followed by an admission, which implies an account for a confusion without stating what the trouble is.

Scratches head, gazes upward
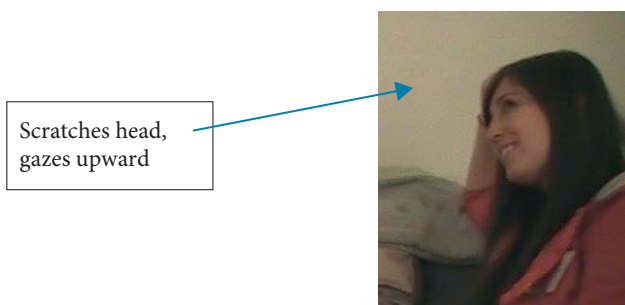
By not specifying the exact source of the trouble, Lila's repair initiation allows Meg the opportunity to identify and correct the trouble, and positions the reasoning as based in Lila's lack of precise knowledge rather than a lack of clarity on Meg's part. Lila's admission that she has not seen *Indiana Jones* the movie (line 6) indicates *some* knowledge (for instance, that it's a film, and perhaps the gist of what it's about or who the main character is), but not of particulars, positioning Meg as having greater epistemic access (Heritage 2012) in this regard. That Meg interprets this as a lack of recognition of the specific reference to "Shortround" is evidenced by her treatment of Meg's admission as a repair initiation on the term Shortround, which Meg does by explaining who the character is (lines 11–12).

This repair is initiated and resolved fairly quickly, as is preferred under the presumption of a preference for progressivity – in this case moving forward with the description of Meg's unsuccessful costume idea, which is probably a preface to what her actual costume ended up being, and which may prompt an assessment or similar sharing from Lila as the second pair part (Schegloff 2007). This example shows how Lila displays a lack of recognition on a referent which Meg

repairs with a description, accomplishing a simple enough understanding of what "Shortround" is to carry on with the conversation, and establishing shared understanding of a particular reference to a movie character. The next example shows a similar sort of misrecognition, but one which is delayed.

(2) "Pocket Shots"

```
1    Amy:    oh my god last night when you were s- talking about
2            °bringing liquor° um Nick was carrying around like
3            pocket s(h)ots when we went to the bars
4    Janie:  was he r↑eally?
5    Amy:    yeah we were just like [as( )
6    Janie:                          [was he just like
7            chugging [them
8    Amy:             [smok]ing a cigarette and he like pulls
9            em out and goes "o:hh look what we still hhave"
10           >or something< I was like oh my god
11           [you've gotta be kidding
12   Janie:  [that's funny::=
13   Amy:    =((laughs))
14   Janie:  uhh=
15   Amy:    =it looked so terrible it was just like a
16           clear like pouch of like- it looked like vodka
17           but [I'm not sure
18   Janie:      [eu::w=
19   Amy:    =so terrible=
20   Janie:  =oh I thought you meant like a (1.0) shooter
21   Amy:    no pocket shots they're like- they're like
22           pouches with liquor in them but they're like=
23   Janie:  =o:::h=
24   Amy:    =you can stick em in your pocket they're-
25           they're just like liquid in a=
26   Janie:  =that's disgust[ing
27   Amy:                   [like] a little gel packet or
28           something
29   Janie:  I think I've seen one of those now that I think
30           about it that's- I just never heard the name
31           that's dis[gust(ing)
32   Amy:              [yeah] we used to bring them to
33           like the football games
34   Janie:  a:h that's a good idea
35   Amy:    I know cuz when they pat you down they don't
36           find them
```

In this excerpt, Amy and Janie discuss the "pocket shots" over the course of several turns before discovering that they may have different referents 'in mind' for this term. The first mention comes with no explanation and is met with no sign of trouble (line 3). The next reference is not by name, but by gesture: as Amy tells her story, she enacts the non-present person's interaction with the aforementioned pocket

shots (pulling the pocket shots 'out') while referring to 'them' ("em," line 9). As she enacts this performance her hand makes a gesture as if to hold an object with the index finger and thumb and pull it up (and out) of an imaginary place (pocket).


Index finger and thumb touching
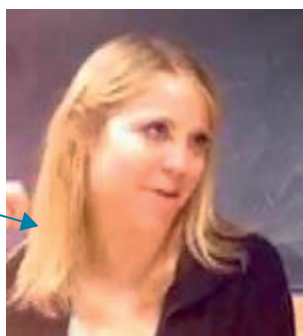
As will become relevant, this is a different way of holding the "object" in question than the way Janie represented the action of "chugging" (a U.S. American colloquialism for taking big, quick gulps) on line 7, which she delivered while making a small circular gesture with one hand and mimicking taking a quick drink (Janie tilts her head back and leans her body back as she makes the chugging gesture, temporarily removing all but her arm and hand from the frame).


Hand in circular "grasping" shape

Unless one was paying very careful attention to this small gestural distinction, there is little evidence that Amy and Janie do not mean the same thing by their references to the object "pocket shot." It is at the point of Amy's more detailed description of the pocket shot on line 16 that a possible trouble is identified. Along with her description of the pocket shot as a "clear like pouch," Amy makes a new gesture, holding her index finger and thumb apart, which seems to approximate the size and shape of the pouch, as she says the word "pouch."

Holding index
finger and thumb apart
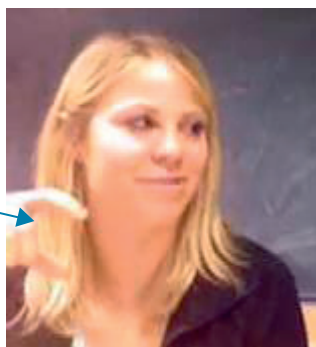
Janie does not bring up any potential discrepancy right away, instead responding to the assessment of the object as looking "so terrible" (line 15) with an aligning response cry (Goffman, 1978) of "euw" (line 18). It is only after Amy repeats "so terrible" (line 19) that the assessment sequence appears to be at a point of possible completion, providing an opportunity to initiate a new action which in this case reopens the repairable outside its more preferred repair space. Janie self-repairs her understanding of the object in third position, offering a formulation of what she hears pocket shots to be by re-labeling the referent a "shooter." She takes a second to select the term "shooter," doing an apparent word-search (c.f. Hayashi 2003; Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks 1977). While doing this, she also makes a gesture that she 'shakes' and watches as she performs the word-search, drawing Amy's attention to it. Her gesture is very similar to Amy's prior gesture.
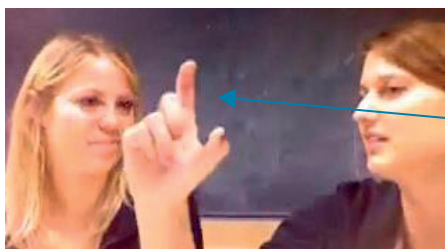
Holding index
finger and thumb
apart (also note gaze
direction)

This action does not specify what a shooter is in comparison to a pocket shot. In fact, by making nearly the same gesture, Janie's repair on her own understanding is potentially hearable as a repair on Amy's presentation of what the pocket shot looks like. Amy seems to take this up, as her repair repeats the term "pocket shots" and begins with a repair on the gesture rather than beginning with repair by expanding her previous description ("clear like pouch" line 16). She first brings her hand up with the fingers facing the camera and the thumb behind them, as if holding or imitating a flat object, while she says "pouches" in line 22.
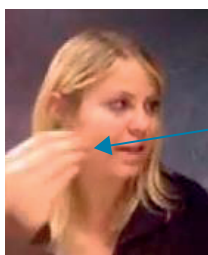
Fingers-front
thumb-behind

This changes the shape being represented. It is contrastable, for instance, with Janie's "chugging" gesture, which presented the shape as cylindrical; now it appears to be flat. Following this, Amy expands her description of the pocket shot, first repeating largely the substance of her initial description in line 16: "like pouches with liquor in them" (line 22). As she says "liquor," she simultaneously holds her right hand in a slightly clasped position with bent index finger and thumb touching (below) while holding her left hand underneath in the same fingers-front thumb-behind gesture with which she initiated the repair (above). She then tips her hand forward as she says "in them," indicating that her raised hand is demonstrating the "liquor," her lower hand the "pouch," and her tipping gesture a representation of putting liquor into a pouch.

Gasping and tipping
gesture

Janie's next turn (line 23) displays understanding of this elaboration with a change of state token (Heritage 1984) "oh" and acknowledging expression, with raised eyebrows (Mondada 2011) and opened mouth, but Amy continues modifying her verbal description further to "like liquid in a like little gel packet or something" (lines 25 and 27). Amy's gesture (below), which is the final gesture made in reference to the object, repeats the first she made in initiating repair as she says "little gel packet" (line 27).

This gesture mirrors her initial description and gesture in line 16 in a way that clarifies the nature of the object she is talking about, including the size (little, about two inches), shape (flat), characterization (packet rather than pouch), and even material (gel). By employing description and gesture, Amy and Janie

Repeat of fingers-
front thumb-behind
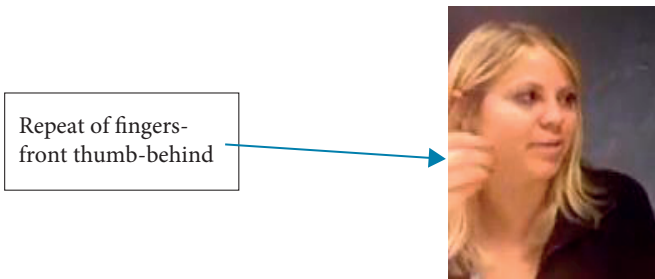
achieve an intersubjective match on the meaning of the pocket shot with relation
to its attributes and, in identifying a use for it (lines 32–36), come to a new shared
assessment and stance (Haddington 2006) toward pocket shots (as a "good idea"
versus "terrible" and "disgusting").

Excerpts 1 and 2 illustrate techniques for repairing misunderstanding of the
meaning of a single referent across the data, including repair on an unrecognized
referent versus a misrecognized referent, and repair which quickly follows a trouble
source versus a repair which occurs when trouble is realized outside the expected
repair space. In the first example, the description is dependent on the meaning of
the referent "Shortround," necessitating that this was understood in order for the
participants to make shared sense of the talk. In the second example, the referent
seems clear to both and there is a highly convergent assessment about it which is
not necessarily changed by correcting the misapprehension. However, the story is
expanded to produce new visual understandings of the pocket shot and eventual
new (but still shared) stances, allowing the story to do more affiliative work. In this
way the potential loss of intersubjectivity yields a more meaningful form of inter-
subjectivity: emphasizing shared stance and not just shared reference (Kärkkäinen
2007). The next section examines how similar-looking repairs – repairs that pur-
port to fix references – are used to avoid addressing implicit inferences that could
lead to intersubjectivity loss and trouble.

3.2   Misunderstanding for managing trouble

The previous section analyzed techniques through which participants accomplish
misunderstandings with referential repairs on recognitions of referents or words.
The next section analyzes how misunderstandings may use similar repair tech-
niques to exploit inferential ambiguities and manage trouble. The first example
shows how misrecognition is produced to avoid trouble over a problematic facial
expression; the second example purports to be a misinterpretation/mishearing
to avoid the implications of an inappropriate sexual joke; and the third example

illustrates misunderstanding being used to avoid conflict and let someone off the hook for implicit disagreements over a prior action.

In Excerpt 3, Jill and her friend are visiting their friend Christa. Jill, who has a cold, has been coughing throughout the exchange. At the beginning of this excerpt, Jill has just coughed twice, then accuses Christa of having displayed a negative stance (Svennevig 2004) in response to Jill's coughing.

(3) "A Mean Look"
```
1   Jill:        ((coughs)) (0.5) ((coughs again)) (0.5) gave me
2                a mean look
3   Christa:     No I didn't I went (1.5) ((facial expression))a
4                concerned look, and you went "HUA" (( )like)
5   ((laughter))
6   Christa:     It was a concerned look, it was a (0.5)((facial
7                expression)) "I h(h)ope you feel better soon(.)
8                my d(h)ear fri(h)end"
```

This example features a repair on a term purporting to gloss a facial expression and what emotion it allegedly conveyed – a repair on an action as 'showing reproach' versus 'showing concern.' In line 2, Jill characterizes Christa's facial expression, delivered toward her in response to Jill's coughing, as a "mean look." Christa immediately disaligns with this interpretation and "quotes" the face she made (Streeck 1988), re-interpreting it as a "concerned look" (line 4). In doing so, she treats Jill's candidate interpretation of her facial expression as disaffiliative (Antaki 2012) and as an opportunity for repair by actually repairing the face she originally made (though her expression bears a resemblance to the first). After making a joke about the intensity of Jill's cough, followed by laughter among all, Christa re-repairs *and* re-characterizes the facial expression. First recycling the gloss of "a concerned look" and re-producing the face (which again bears a resemblance to both the original and first repair in line 3), Christa then quotes a *verbal* formulation of the expression.

This quotation (lines 7–8) is not just a description of the "look," but is delivered as a sort of propositional equivalent, something she might have said in place of or alongside the look if she had spoken. The quote presents itself as what Christa would have 'had in mind' when delivering the look, once again asserting positive (concerned) intentions rather than negative (mean, annoyed) intentions. In doing so, Christa simultaneously enacts a repair on an asserted misinterpretation (by Jill) of her facial expression, and accomplishes a mild disagreement with Jill's characterization of Christa's internal emotional state. However, by treating the disagreement as arising from a misrecognition of the stance Christa's face allegedly displayed, an attention to the possible inferential mismatch is avoided. Trouble (and potentially opening a disagreement sequence) is avoided by not

delving into whether Christa is actually annoyed at Jill's coughing, which could require (1) some indexical or background knowledge to ascertain as a reasonable interpretation on Jill's part (for example: that Christa is a known 'germophobe'); (2) knowledge of the prior discourse context (a recording earlier in the day in which Jill worries that Christa won't appreciate her coming over to Christa's house "sick"); and (3) a deeper examination into the tone in which Christa produces her account of concern (which comes across as possibly ironic – see for example Edwards 2000) in light of what the participants know of her character (that she does not typically display emotion seriously or straightforwardly).

As in the last case, this example demonstrates how trouble may be side-stepped by attending to potential inferential problems as remediable through recognition repairs. In this excerpt, six friends – all romantic couples – are eating dinner when one participant brings up an overheard utterance that occurred earlier in the evening.

(4) "Taking things out of context"
```
1    Jane:        John and Nicky were in the kitchen? And I heard
2                 Nicky whisper (1.5) "°fuck me°"
3    (0.5)
4    John:        ha
5    Jane:        ((laughs))
6    Nicky:       what?
7    Jane:        when you were in there=
8    Nicky:       =m:=
9    Jane:        =she was tryin to yank the=
10   John:        =classic Jane taking things out of context
11   Nora:        £she's trying to get people in trouble£
12   ((laughter))
13   Nicky:       no I think I looked at this ((picks up bottle))
14                and said "fuck me" cuz it's ahlmost empty
15   Jane:        but all I heard- all I heard was=
16   John:        =then she went and poured some mhore
17   ((laughter))
18   Nicky:       che::ers
```

Nicky's "what" (line 6) is hearable as a trouble potentially with attention, hearing, or speaking in regard to Jane's turn (lines 1–2). However, subsequent turns indicate neither of these are the trouble source, indicating that the "what" may function rather as an open class repair (Drew 1997) signaling an inappropriate prior turn. Jane does treat Nicky's turn as a request for an account or explanation, which she partly directs to Nicky (line 7, "you") and partly directs to the others present (line 9, "she"). The others also see explanation as relevant: John reformulates the meaning of Jane's quotation as an example of Jane "taking things out of context" (line 10), and this could be proposed as accidental (Jane misheard, for instance)

or intentional (Jane deliberately misheard). The latter interpretation is ratified by Nora in line 11.

Nicky then ends up providing her own reformulation of the event Jane describes. Her turn-initial "no" (line 13) could be directed toward the prior candidate explanations, or it could be directed toward Jane's initial characterization of the event. The latter interpretation is strengthened by Nicky's re-quoting of her alleged request-for-sex – culturally hearable in the contextualization cues of whispering and emphasis on the word "fuck," as it was initially produced by Jane in line 2. The repair on Jane's formulation is accomplished by shifting the emphasis to the word "me" (line 14), which makes the phrase re-hearable as a response cry (Goffman 1978) of dismay. Nicky contextualizes the re-quotation by re-enacting a relevant object of the event: while saying "I think I looked at this" (line 13), her deictic reference to "this" is filled in when she simultaneously reaches for, grasps, and picks up briefly (before setting back down) a bottle of wine in the middle of the table. This indicates that her "dismay" was in response to the dwindling supply of wine, and this interpretation of events is ratified by the subsequent turn in line 16.

Nicky's responses to Jane constitute an interesting instance of other-initiated (next turn) and other-completed repair (third turn) repair, both dispreferred moves. Even after this, Jane continues to maintain her initial interpretation based on "all she heard" (line 15), indicating that she is accomplishing a different sort of action than straightforward reporting (as she was accused of doing – "trying to get people in trouble"), but her turn is cut off and the sequence closed in lines 17–18. Here, trouble is made relevant firstly with the production and the interpretation of the prior spoken utterance "fuck me" to which only three people – Nicky, John, and the overhearing Jane – originally had access. The trouble with this repairable is identifying what action it was doing (request or expression) on the basis of how it was said (with the emphasis on "fuck" or "me").

But a second lack of convergence, which is less obvious, is on the implications of this difference. If the "fuck me" was a request for sex, then it was directed toward the only other co-present person in the kitchen at the time, John – who is not Nicky's husband Jim (who is present but doesn't speak during the excerpt), but who is Nora's husband. Even if Jane's attempts to "get people in trouble" are a form of light-hearted teasing, Nicky appears to have a stake in denying what is actually an implicit, if non-serious, accusation of infidelity. Her repair on Jane's turn is therefore not just a correction of interpretation, but a disagreement with its implications – it's not really a 'misunderstanding.' By treating this disagreement as an easily-remedied result of a simple misunderstanding or misinterpretation, trouble is avoided and the conversation can move on.

The next example provides a case in which misrecognition is enrolled to 'draw out' a problematic inference, the disagreement-relevant pursuit of which is

ultimately abandoned in favor of a more charitable reading as a misunderstanding. This excerpt comes from a series of home movies; one of the speaking participants (JR)[1] is behind the camera. JR has been filming her younger sister Sam, who is sitting on the floor of their shared bedroom flipping through a magazine (a younger brother is visible in the background but does not contribute).

(5) "The cherry ring"
```
1    JR:    Oh you have one of those rings where's mine
2    Sam:   do2 know (1.0) you didn't get one
3    JR:    I got one
4    (1.0)
5    Sam:   Is cherry?
6    JR:    Yeah
7    Sam:   Did you ever eat it?
8    JR:    y- no
9    Sam:   Was it in a basket?
10   JR:    I don't know (.) what basket
11   Sam:   The basket (.) next to the cupboards
12   JR:    n- u:h
13   Sam:   I'm not pointin over there=
14   JR:    =uh I don't know
15   (1.0)
16   Sam:   I think it was
17   JR:    Was that one yours- I mean m↑ine?
18   (1.0)
19   Sam:   I believe so=
20   JR:    =is it m↑ine? then why'd you eat it did you
21          already eat yours (.) huh?
22   (1.0)
23   Sam:   I didn't know
24   JR:    Oh yeah you already ate yours and you didn't
25          know
26   (1.0)
27   Sam:   I didn't know it was yours (.) I have this stuff
28          on my [tee::th]
29   JR:           [who'd] you think it was?
30   (2.0)
31   JR:    You're d↑umb
```

JR zooms in on the magazine just prior to line 1, which makes visible that Sam has a red "candy ring" on her finger (a kind of hard-crack confectionary in the shape of a stone affixed to a plastic ring meant to be worn on the finger and sucked). JR briefly brings the camera up to Sam's face, but then quickly moves it back down to the ring and makes the announcement on line 1 while zooming in on the ring now (below).

1.   A younger version of the author.

The cherry ring
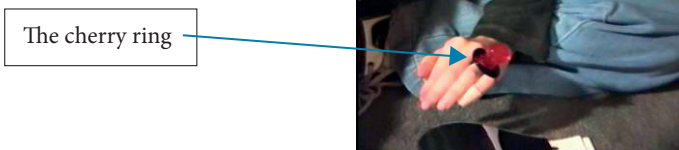
Following the announcement that Sam has "one of those rings" (which could mean a candy ring of a certain kind, or one of a set of candy rings available – it is not yet clear), JR asks "where's mine?" This makes relevant that "one of those rings" is, in fact, one of a collection available to both of them. Sam first claims ignorance, then suggests that there was no second ring available – more specifically, that JR did not "get" a ring (line 2). As she says this and the next several lines, Sam puts her hand, palm outward, to her mouth and intermittently chews/sucks on the ring between utterances while directing her gaze at the camera (below).


Eating the ring, gazing at camera
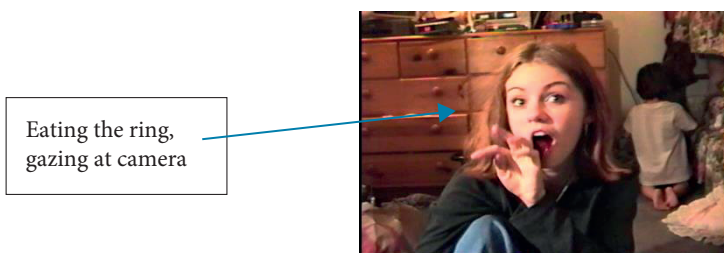
JR does not accept either of Sam's disavowals as adequate responses to her initial questions (line 3). After a pause Sam initiates a series of questions meant to discover what might have happened to JR's candy: whether the ring is "cherry" or cherry-flavored, if JR ever ate it, and whether the ring was in a basket (lines 5–9). These questions specify what sort of candy the ring was, whether it should still exist in the house somewhere, and where in the house the ring was likely to have been located. Sam displays more epistemic access (Heritage, 2012) to the ring than does JR, and this is confirmed by JR responding to the question of location with a repair requesting Sam specify to what basket Sam is referring. Sam gives a verbal formulation ("the basket next to the cupboards" line 11) to an assumedly shared sense of place while making a pointing gesture (her gaze continues to be directed to the camera). JR misinterprets this gesture, following it with the camera as though Sam were pointing to something in the room (below) and hovering around a jewelry basket while uttering the confused-sounding "uh" in line 12. Sam repairs JR's incorrect identification of the location of the basket (line 13), indicating that

she means a different space with cupboards outside of the room they are in (but assumedly in the direction of another part of the house in which she was pointing).


Pointing gesture while saying "cupboard"; blurred as camera moves to follow
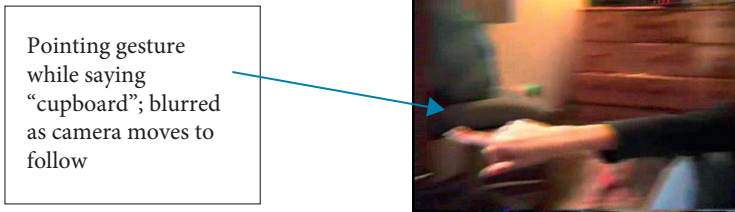
After establishing where the cupboards and the adjacent basket were not (though where they were hasn't been made explicit), Sam produces the turn "I think it was" while smiling, directing her gaze downward, and holding up her hand, ring side to the camera (line 16).


Smiling, displaying ring, looking down
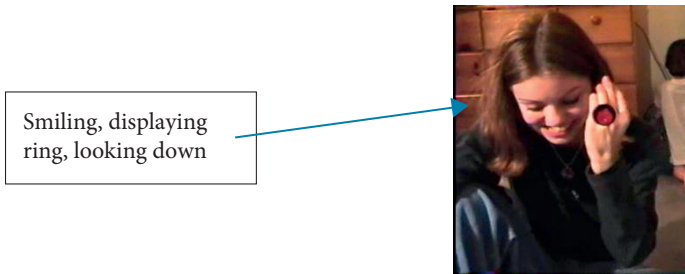
This turn is related not to the immediate prior turns, which are a repair on the reference to the basket, but to the base action of whether the cherry ring was *in* the basket. Her turn can be heard, therefore, as confirming that the cherry ring JR is referring to – the one she identified as "mine" in line 1 – was in the basket and is also the same one Sam is wearing on her hand. JR hears this implication and seeks confirmation (line 17). Since line 14, Sam's gaze has been directed downward, toward the magazine on the floor, and she continues to look down during the silence which may indicate an upcoming dispreferred response (Pomerantz 1984) at line 18. She then confirms with "I believe so" at line 19, framing this "belief" as something she has come to realize during the course of the current conversation (since admitting she knew all along would imply she deliberately violated the belief's attendant expectations: if there are two rings and she has already had one, then she should not eat the other because it belongs to JR). JR repeats her confirmation request in a higher tone at line 20, followed by a series of account demands delivered in quick succession that strongly imply Sam should have known the cherry ring belonged to JR. As this succession is accomplished, JR zooms in the camera, contributing to the presentation of her talk as an escalation of demands and pursuit of response.

Looking down, lines 14-23
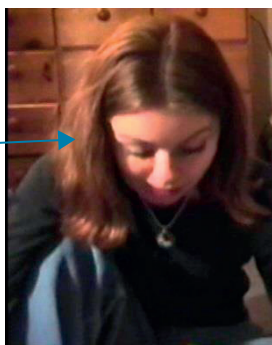
Close-up during line 21
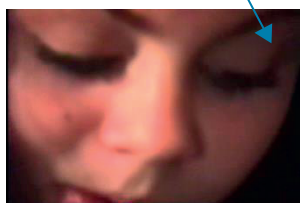
Although Sam does not explicitly admit having eaten 'hers,' she does not deny it either. Her next turn, "I didn't know," is delivered after another silence and seems to claim not to have known the other cherry ring was JR's, though it could also be claiming (albeit very implicitly) that Sam didn't know the rings were designated for each person. As she says "I didn't know," Sam does finally look up and into the camera again.

Returns gaze to camera
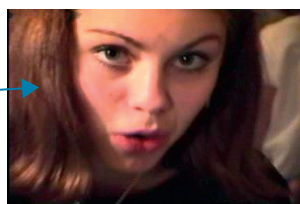
JR displays skepticism, formulating Sam's action of having eaten hers as well as her claim that she "didn't know" with a sarcastically-prefaced "oh yeah" (line 24). Sam looks down again and does not respond to JR's sarcasm with any form of account. Instead, after another pause, she delivers a complaint of having "this stuff on my teeth" (lines 27–28) while lifting her other hand (the one without the ring) to scrape her teeth (below). The "stuff" most likely refers to sticky residue that has accumulated as a result of chewing on the ring.

Scraping teeth with nail

JR's next turn ignores this non-relevant turn and returns instead to the question of what Sam "knew." She treats Sam's turn at line 27 ("I didn't know") as a claim that Sam didn't know the ring was JR's, again using the evidence that Sam had already eaten her own ring (which Sam again doesn't deny) by asking whose ring Sam thought it (the one she is currently eating) was (line 29). Sam continues to look down and does not respond (below) and after another pause, JR announces that Sam is "dumb" (line 31).

Continuing looking down

In this exchange, the sequence of turns slowly reveals that Sam is eating an item of candy that belongs to her sister. Over the course of the conversation, several points of understanding are negotiated in addition to and in service of uncovering this apparent 'fact': (1) there were two rings, making the rings a scarce commodity; (2) the ring Sam is eating is the second ring she has eaten, which would indicate that she already ate 'hers' and, therefore, is now eating 'JR's'; (3) the ring was in a basket that Sam appears to have known about but JR did not, and which contained at least the ring Sam is now eating; (4) JR appears to expect that one ring was designated for her and one for Sam, meaning anyone who has eaten two rings has eaten a ring that did not 'belong' to her. Relevant to these facts of recognizing and locating the ring in relation to other rings, as well as the expected division of rings, is the organization of knowledge with regard to these facts – a moral, accountable matter (Stivers, Mondada & Steenstig 2011).

Sam seems to have more epistemic access to the rings; JR, though showing a skeptical stance toward Sam's apparent lack of knowledge about whose ring was whose, does not directly challenge Sam as lacking knowledge regarding the distribution of the rings. Despite the violation of what can be considered a moral norm – an expectation of fairness, perhaps – it seems even *more* dispreferred to point out this interpretation than to offer every possible other interpretation. Perhaps Sam *should* have known that the rings would be shared – cuing relational and cultural expectations regarding the distribution of candy among siblings – but it would be worse to assume she did know that, but chose to ignore it. JR chooses to treat Sam as though Sam has made some misrecognition in need of repair. Sam never acknowledges this, and by saying little or aligning with the misunderstanding, she becomes complicit in producing the interaction as an uncovering of an error.

JR could have intensified her pursuit by being more direct, or by upgrading her repair-like challenges, but either of these may have resulted in an acknowledgement that Sam ignored (rather than didn't know) the prescription with regard to sharing the rings. This conflict-relevant sequence would very likely have caused an argument.

In his 1992 paper, Schegloff demonstrated how third position repair features in the sorts of disalignments that can emerge from unrecovered intersubjectivity losses. In this example repair was not attempted solely on a referent, but on the divergent meanings of what people said and did with regard to one another, and the reasonableness of those actions. Using repairs on apparent misunderstandings was a way of avoiding problems: divergence was only partially pursued, with a 'lesser evil' proposed as the reason for the violation. Even the final insult "dumb" is delivered in a resigned tone, which lessens its impact, along with its substitution for a more serious violation, thereby emerging as a way of giving Sam the benefit of the doubt. The next section summarizes these results and their implications.

4.   The moral implications of "misunderstanding"

In research in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, intersubjectivity loss must be retrieved and righted, as it is the basis for intelligible interaction and, thus, for any course of social action. The usual righting mechanism is repair, which has its own operational constraints, for example being realized by the producer of the trouble-source as quickly as possible, and dealt with as quickly as possible (Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks 1977). Repairs on speaking and hearing lend themselves to this swift correction process. Recognition repairs on particular references – people, places, things, propositional meanings of turns, and so forth – can be more complex. However, though they may take several turns to right, recognition repairs seem to be the preferred form of repair on understanding. That is, given a trouble with understanding has occurred (rather than merely misspeaking or mishearing), the preference is to hear it as a misrecognition, preferably one which was accidental and cannot be strongly attributed to the speaker or hearer.

Sometimes, however, understanding troubles occur at another level, where possible reasons and intentions, multiplicities of interpretations, and potentially-divergent meanings of actions live. Intersubjectivity around assumptions and mutual inferential understanding (Sidnell 2014) requires an understanding, therefore, of sequences of turns, of their explicit content and actions as well as their implicit ones. And it is tightly interwoven with various indexical contexts in the world – identities, relationships, culture – which may be pragmatically relevant while not being articulated explicitly (Bilmes 1993). This analysis suggests that

misunderstanding is a practice used to produce this sort of situated ideal: that it's not that we have different ideas of reality – or that we actually disagree about something – but that we have just made a mistake about how we use words, a mistake easily resolved through clarification (which is not to say simpler referential understandings never lead to trouble: c.f. Eckberg 2012; Schegloff 1992). So if a possible misunderstanding arises, hear it as a misrecognition; if it's hearable as an inferential mismatch, treat it as a misrecognition; and if you have to index disagreement over inferential differences, do it briefly and attribute it to a misrecognition.

It is also possible to use the concept of misunderstanding *in order to* do disagreement and conflict – for example, one can deliberately misunderstand, or pursue misunderstanding where there appears to be none, or pointedly violate the preference for treating potential trouble as misunderstanding by surfacing inferences. To illustrate this point, consider this simply-transcribed example, in which Kelsey has just asked Matt about his day, and he is narrating what he did in the first turn.

(6) "Sassy"

```
1   Matt:      Too long, an hour, two hours maybe. Went to work,
               packed and
2              shipped some stuff, and then came to get you.
3   Kelsey:    Yeah you were kind of sassy.
4   Matt       I was not sassy. Maybe I was- I was sassy because
               you always call
5              right when I'm on my way, or right after I say that
               I'm on my way,
6              you call and see where I am. Like, I'm driving, in
               the snow.
7   Kelsey:    Fine we don't have to worry about it in the future
               because I have
8              my own car, hm?
9   Matt:      I know you do, but it's like I dunno do you think
               it's courteous to
10             call somebody and check in on them every five
               minutes? I mean,
11             don't take it the wrong way.
12  Kelsey:    You just took that to a whole other level. Screw
               you, I don't want
13             to talk about this.
```

Garfinkel (1967) suggested that the morality of interaction is based in the expectations that our ordinary assumptions will be shared with others: that when we speak we will be understood, and that if we are not understood, things will be fixed as quickly and as minimally as necessary. Therefore, active topicalizations of divergent understandings may constitute an interference of order beyond any slight correctable error, becoming themselves accountable (Buttny 2012). The

meanings of various elements in this conversation are unmatched. Sassiness is denied (line 4), then proposed as a reasonable response to a prior action (lines 4–6). The dismissal of the prior action as needing topicalization (lines 7–8) is rejected (lines 9–11), and a new candidate meaning for the action is proposed – not just unreasonableness, as initially stated (line 6), but a lack of courteousness (line 9). That Matt anticipates this suggestion will not be well received by Kelsey is imminent in his final disclaimer, "don't take it the wrong way" (line 11). That he was correct in his assumption is indicated by Kelsey's response in lines 12–13 which, in suggesting that the meaning of his prior turn was taking something to "a whole other level," demonstrates the extent to which Matt's pursuit of a misunderstanding is too great an interference, one that requires shutting down the sequence entirely. These are not troubles with recognitions of referential meanings, but troubles with inferential material on which the participants appear to disagree.

Future research could examine more ways in which misunderstandings are handled in interaction, or combine approaches (such as pragmatics and psychology; see Senft 2016). It would also be important to see how these interactions might play out differently in other contexts, such as institutional ones, or investigate what cultural variations might exist, or whether relationships make a difference. As a starting point, this analysis challenges the idea that any trouble may be attributable to misunderstanding, but also suggests some reasons why misunderstandings are invoked to explain trouble. Scholars have proposed that there has been a tendency in some research areas (such as intercultural communication) to treat disagreements as misunderstandings or miscommunication, much as we might in our own interactions, while ignoring how participants do otherwise (e.g., Bailey 2000; Cameron, 1998; Jacquemet 2005; Robles 2012). This is important because there are moral implications when conflict becomes relevant. Indeed, Garfinkel's (1967) breaches showed that it takes very little of such risky behavior to produce trouble.

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Appendix

Jeffersonian transcription notations

Symbol	Name	Use
Text [text] [text]	Brackets	Start and end points of overlapping speech.
=	Equal sign	No hearable pause between utterances.
(# of seconds) (0.0)	Timed pause	A number in parentheses indicates the time, in seconds, of a pause in speech.
(.)	Micropause	A brief pause, usually less than 0.2 seconds.
. or ↓	Period or down arrow	Falling pitch utterance-final or internal (respectively).
? or ↑	Question mark or up arrow	Rising pitch utterance-final or internal (respectively).
–	Hyphen	An abrupt halt, cut-off or interruption in utterance.
>text<	Greater than / less than symbols	Enclosed speech was delivered more rapidly than usual for the speaker.
<text>	Less than / greater than symbols	Enclosed speech was delivered more slowly than usual for the speaker.
°	Degree symbol	Whisper or reduced volume speech.
TEXT	Capitalized text	Shouted or increased volume speech.
text	Underlined text	Emphasizing or stressing the speech.
:::	Colon(s)	Prolongation of an utterance.
(hhh)	H in parentheses	Audible exhalation, laugh particles, breathiness.
(.hhh)	.H in parentheses	Audible inhalation.
(text)	Parentheses	Speech which is unclear or in doubt in the transcript.
((italic text))	Double parentheses	Annotation of non-verbal activity such as smiling, laughing, pointing, etc.

(from Jefferson, 1984)

Additional notations

Symbol	Name	Use
#text#	Hash/pound	Creaky, growly, gravelly, or guttural voice.
£text£	Italics	High-pitched sing-song or smiley voice.
(xxx)	X in parentheses	Speech which is unclear or in doubt and which could not be guessed or approximated.
ʔ	IPA glottal stop	Unvoiced consonant with slight nasal quality.
→	Arrow	Gesture, object, or expression of note in a video screenshot.