

# Misunderstandings in Communication: Maxims of Conversation and Intercultural Differences between Interlocutors

Svjetlana Janković-Paus\*

## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present the violation of Grice's maxims of conversation and discuss interculturally conditioned misunderstanding as one of the causes of their violation. Based on 10 examples of conversations between international students in Italy<sup>1</sup>, the situations of misunderstanding in communication will be presented, and the linguistic and cultural background of the participants' statements and the possible roles they have in communication will be presented. The focus will be on discussing violated maxims of conversation, and which possible contextual factors could have affected the misunderstandings between the participants in conversations created in certain situations.

*Key words:* communicative intention, conversational implicature, maxims of conversation, misunderstandings, cultural knowledge, cultural context

---

\* University North (HR); sjankovicpaus@unin.hr

<sup>1</sup> All examples of conversations used in this paper are recorded (HIAT transcription).

## 1 Introduction

In communication between participants from different cultural backgrounds, the risk of misunderstandings is not a rare occurrence. A person's cultural knowledge determines the context as verbal and non-verbal background to an act of communication. Also, the cognitive approach to communication includes the concept of communicative intention as an important aspect in conveying information (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). This paper analyzes the occurrences of misunderstandings in communication between students from Croatia, students from Italy, and students from England (one example). The theoretical background applied in this study is Grice's theory of maxims of conversation and conversational implicatures. We will analyze and interpret the communicative intentions that have been revealed by the interlocutors on the implicit levels of their speech in order to see (1) whether there was any violation of the maxims of conversation, and (2) whether there were any intentional degradations between participants in conversation. Also, our analysis is guided by the question of why there may be misunderstandings between members of different cultural groups and how much those misunderstandings are conditioned by intercultural differences, the amount of cultural knowledge of each individual interlocutor, and by the question of when it is appropriate to talk about intercultural differences between the interlocutors. Therefore, we will analyze (1) the situations of misunderstandings that occurred in conversations between international students and their statements interpreted by means of maxims of conversation that were violated in all instances, and then (2) describe these individuals and the linguistic and cultural background of their statements. In instances of misunderstandings we will describe what happened, with details on the participants and on their roles in the communication situation. We will discuss linguistic, contextual and cultural factors that could have caused mutual misunderstandings in communication. We will analyze the context that was available to every participant and support the thesis that the probability of misunderstanding is greater among participants from different cultural communities. The examples in the paper will be guided by the question of how conversational participants' statements work in context, that is, we will analyze the relationship between what the participant of a conversation meant and what they actually said, that is what their interlocutor understood at that point – having in mind that intended and attributed meaning sometimes may not coincide, especially in communicative interactions between participants with different cultural backgrounds and different cultural knowledge about the respective communicative context. In the context analysis, we will use Paltridge's distinction between (1) the context of the situation, which indicates what the conversation participants know about what is happening in that situation; (2) the context of the background knowledge, including intercultural<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Intercultural knowledge implies a common cultural representation between the interlocutors (Sperber and Wilson, 1995 cited by Žegarac, 2008).

and interpersonal<sup>3</sup> knowledge; and (3) the common textual context (“co-textual context”), which refers to the knowledge of conversation participants about what they are talking about (2006: 54).

## 2 Cultural Knowledge

A misunderstanding refers to differences in meaning that one statement may have for two interlocutors, i.e. for a speaker and for a hearer. According to Leech’s pragmatic position, meaning of a speaker’s statement *x* “is characterized as a REFLEXIVE INTENTION, i. e. an intention whose fulfilment consists in its recognition by *b*<sup>4</sup>”, i. e. by the intention for which the speaker of that statement wants to be recognized by his listener (1983: 34). It is necessary that both interlocutors have some common knowledge or shared beliefs. Levinson also believes that such ‘mutual knowledge’ of the world between the interlocutors is necessary for their communication to take place successfully, that is, to reach the “common” meaning of the statement, in other words, that the listener correctly understands the meaning of the speaker’s statement *x* (1983: 16). Through ten examples of misunderstandings we will try to find out if the participants had a similar knowledge-base of the world, while the concept “knowledge of the world” will primarily concern cultural knowledge in this study.

According to Žegarac (2007), the cultural knowledge of each individual determines the context of communication, and the greater the differences in cultural knowledge among the interviewees, the smaller the context available for communication, resulting in a greater chance for misunderstanding. Sperber and Wilson’s discernment of inter-cultural and intra-cultural communication depends on differences in cultural knowledge between the interlocutors (Sperber and Wilson, 1995 cited by Žegarac, 2008). In communication, the interlocutors can share most of the cultural representations<sup>5</sup> and then their communication is intra-cultural. On the other hand, if interlocutors share only a few cultural representations, their communication is inter-cultural. In order to evaluate the communication as clear communication or miscommunication, we need to see if the interlocutors belong to culturally more or less distant cultural backgrounds. Through the examples in this paper, we will try to determine the degree of difference in cultural knowledge and whether the interlocutors’ communication was inter-cultural or intra-cultural. We will also try to see how much their cultural knowledge, or knowledge of

---

<sup>3</sup> Interpersonal knowledge refers to aspects of meaning that are important for determining and maintaining social relations, or social roles, and to express their own personality (Crystal, 1997: 201).

<sup>4</sup> *b* – abbr. hearer.

<sup>5</sup> Cultural representations are formed and widened through causal relationships involving mental and public representational products such as statements, texts and images, and reproducing and achieving stability and distribution (see Žegarac, 2007).

the context of the current state of conversation and the topic of conversation influenced the violation of maxims of conversation. Furthermore, we will try to understand the link between Grice's cooperative principle and maxims of conversation with a cultural context on which the meaning of a statement partially depends (Carston, 2002 cited by Žegarac, 2008).

### 3 Intercultural Aspect, Conversational Implicature and Violation of Maxim of Quantity

Let's look at the conversation between two students, one from Croatia and another from England<sup>6</sup>, who met while studying together in Italy and saw each other at the exit of a sports hall after a joint gymnastics session:

- 1) Student English: "Hello! How are you?"
- 2) Student Croatian: („)<sup>7</sup> ”
- 3) Student English "Mhm. (.) Shall we go out..."
- 4) Student Croatian: "Yes, sure..."

The English student, after a conventional greeting, asked the Croatian student "How are you?", to which the Croatian student gave no answer resulting in an unpleasant silence. It is a well accepted view point that the phatic function of language prevails in everyday conversational situations, which are not aimed at exchanging information, but primarily in maintaining communication (Katnić-Bakaršić, 2001: 18). Namely, in this example, the Croatian student did not give any answer to one of the typical polite questions posed by an English student by which she would signal the continuation of the conversation, which also confirms the mild disapproval of the English student.

For this reason, in this example we have a phatic conversation as a specific situational context in which the conversational maxim of quantity was violated. This maxim relates to the amount of information provided, which, according to Grice, states the following:

1. Make your contribution as informative as required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than required. (Grice, 1989: 26)

According to the Grice's theory, the Croatian student in the situation of a conventional conversation with the English student was not sufficiently communicative. The Croatian student did not know how to lead a verbal interaction in the specific situation and

<sup>6</sup> Authentic examples (students M.B. and R.S.), recorded by the author.

<sup>7</sup> The mark („) = long pause. (.) = short pause.

had no background knowledge of the phatic conversation expected by the English student.

The Croatian student in this conversation was not sufficiently cooperative, since the co-operative principle, according to Grice, requires the conversation participants to contribute as much as necessary “[...] at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.” (Grice, 1989: 26). The Croatian student did not sufficiently contribute to the conversation with the English student by not recognizing the purpose or the direction of the conversational implicature. If she had recognized the purpose of the conversational implications of this conversation, her response would not have been silence, but a conventional answer.<sup>8</sup> If a conversation participant, for some reason, such as insufficient cultural knowledge, does not recognize the purpose of the conversational implicature within the conversation, does it mean that we should attribute him non-cooperative and impolite communication? On the other hand, the second part of this conversation after an unpleasant silence shows that both students are both rational and cooperative, since after the English student asked (3), the Croatian student gave an appropriate answer. Based on this, we can conclude that the Croatian student did not violate the conversational maxim of quantity with implicit intention to be rude or to degrade her interlocutor.

The concept of conversational implication is important because it serves the conversation participants to recognize the implication of a particular statement behind the semantics (Levinson, 1983: 104), i. e. illocution. We could recognize here a large part of an explanation for the above conversation example: it is likely that there is a misunderstanding between the students due to the incompatibility to understand the meanings of statements within the phatic conversations typical of the Anglophone cultural context or, according to Leech, because of the misunderstandings resulting from different linguistic knowledge of the participants about such statements (1983: 34).

In other words, their different linguistic knowledge refers to the statements that are used in the conversations and are related to the context of cultural knowledge, which involves verbal communication between participants, who do not know each other well. Namely, in the Anglophone world and, generally, in the English-speaking countries, it is considered polite to avoid silence between the participants who are not well acquainted (as well as those who know each other).<sup>9</sup> In this example we can observe that cultural knowledge is extremely important for understanding the meaning of a conversational implicature, since if one participant does not share enough common cultural representations with his interlocutor, and thus fails to understand the implication of a statement given by his interlocutor, we can assume that his inferences will not be valid.

---

<sup>8</sup> Something like “Fine, thank you. How are you?” (“Well, thank you, are you?”).

<sup>9</sup> Generally speaking, in Croatia it is not customary to avoid silences among the participants who are not well acquainted. There is a tendency to avoid conversation in such situations. Furthermore, in Croatian linguistic literature there is not much research about phatic communication (which could be expanded to different social variables, such as age, gender, specific social context, etc.).

In other words, although the Croatian student certainly did not want to be impolite, the conversation in which she participated was almost disrupted due to her inadequate cultural knowledge and her misunderstanding of meaning of the utterance of the English student.

Grice emphasizes that the conversational implicature, together with the maxims of conversation, is important because it produces inferences, that is, the conclusion based on the content of the statement, but also the assumptions of each participant of the conversation about the cooperative nature of their verbal interaction (1989: 26). Nevertheless, as Levinson points out, in most cases, with violating the maxims of conversation, it is often a case of specific context, which leads us to consider the intercultural differences between the participants of a conversation as a specific context in which the violation of maxims of conversation occurred (1983: 126).

The misunderstanding in this example was due to the different conceptions of Croatian and English students on phatic communication<sup>10</sup>, or a different understanding of (verbal) behaviour in situations with which communication participants are not well acquainted. According to Leech (1983: 139-142) a silence at a wrong time has the implication of indifference, which the English student could have readily attributed to the Croatian student, unless she understood her silence as a result of the lack of the knowledge of Anglophone cultural norms in the context in which the Croatian student should have responded differently.

Phatic communication reflects a very close relationship between politeness and speaking for the purpose of being social and cannot be reduced to the maxim of “avoiding silence” or “mere speech”, and rather serves the purpose of extending the area of agreement and experience shared by the interlocutors. In other words, the English student wanted to include her in a shared area of experiences, which they shared studying together, or use phatic communication as the first stage of conversation, after which a better acquaintance might be acquired. On the other hand, the Croatian student was silent with the intention of being polite, hoping that in her silence, the English student might recognise an act of courtesy.<sup>11</sup> Her inadequate response is thus possibly a result of insufficient cultural knowledge, a lack of understanding of the implications of the English statement, leading to a false inference.

The lack of understanding in communication was clearly due to the context of the differences in cultural knowledge of the phatic communication between participants from, although European, still culturally distant environments. Therefore, in this example, we see an intercultural-based misunderstanding in communication, because, as Paltridge argues, the ways in which people perform speech and what they imply by that what

---

<sup>10</sup> Phatic communication as a sort of “social institution” includes many different social functions (see Žegarac, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> The Croatian student had a belief that a question such as “How are you?” should appropriately met by silence, because it is a question that, when asked by the English student, does not require an answer about how someone really feels.

they pronounce differs between speakers coming from different cultural environments (2006: 66).

## Metaphor and Conversational Maxim of Quality

Let us take a look at the next conversation between a student from Croatia studying in Italy, who, after passing one of the hardest exams met an Italian colleague in a university hallway and happily exclaimed:

- 1) Croatian student: "Sono un' genio!"
- 2) Italian student: („) "Mhm."<sup>12</sup>

From a conversation with a Croatian student, we learned that her statement “Sono un' genio!”, although expressed in a humorous tone, provoked an astonishment of her interlocutor, in fact a consternation for the “arrogance”, which was attributed to her by the Italian student.<sup>13</sup> Namely, in the Italian cultural context, the term “genius” is not commonly used in a humorous sense, nor in the context of individual success, such as exam success, sporting or business success, but only when that term refers to extremely important personalities such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo etc. The Italian and the Croatian scope of the prototypical meaning of the term genius, including also wider set of meanings conveyed by the utterances in different pragmatic situations are similar.<sup>14</sup>

To consider this example, we can use Grice's distinction between the conventional meaning of the sign and the speaker's conception of the sign (1989: 17-20). The conventional meaning of the term “genius” is very similar in the Croatian and the Italian cultural contexts (referring to extraordinary personalities). Interpreted in the terms of the speaker's conception, the statement “Sono un' genio!” meant that the Croatian student in this particular moment felt successful because she had passed a very difficult exam. The Croatian student intended for the Italian student to understand this meaning, but the Italian student did not recognize it. This example demonstrates the incompatibility

<sup>12</sup> Translation: “I am a genius!” / („) “Mhm.” (Croatian student).

<sup>13</sup> The Italian student later recalled a similar situation and told it to the Croatian student: At the entrance door to his room, another Croatian student had written: “Non entri quando genio lavora!” (“Do not enter while genius is working!”), resulting in a surprise reaction from all other students on campus. In her conversation with the Croatian student the Italian student realized that such use of rhetorical figures in humorous contexts or in the context of great events such as passing an exam or in sport success, are allowed in the Croatian cultural context (verified by a story of the Croatian student about Goran Ivanišević who, at the time of his win at Wimbledon, had said “I'm a genius!”). Although the semantic meaning is allowed in both respective languages in speech situations, pragmatic meanings differ.

<sup>14</sup> “Genius m 1. the extraordinary power of spirit, intellect, imagination, inventiveness; spirit, talent 2. the one that has a very big spiritual and mental abilities, a great creative mind; a genius 3. a special or prevailing spirit, atmosphere, in some time, space or group of people (time) lat. genius: the spirit, the protective deity” (Anić and Goldstein, 2007: 481).

of meaning on two levels: (1) at the level of conventional and spoken meanings, and (2) at the level of intended and attributed meanings. According to the distinction of the intended and attributed meaning (Sperber and Wilson, 1995 cited in Žegarac, 2007) we can say that in this example there was also a misunderstanding between the meaning that the student from Croatia was trying to convey through her statement and the meaning that the student from Italy attributed to her own statement. According to the conversation, the implication which the Italian student applied to the meaning of the other student's statement, was that a Croatian student, by saying that she was a "genius" was therefore implying that she was a genius like exceptional personalities. Such an inference of the Italian student resulted in her consternation for the "arrogance" attributed to the Croatian student.

On the level of conventional meaning, the conversation participants had very similar mental representations of the concept of a "genius", which was not the case with the level of the individual speaker's use of the same term for both students. Interestingly, despite the similar conventional use of the term "genius" in the Croatian and Italian cultural contexts, the Croatian cultural context still implies the use of this concept in humorous and similar purposes. The question is whether it is intercultural or intra-cultural communication. The answer may be twofold. On the one hand, since participants of the conversation in the Croatian and Italian cultural contexts both share similar mental representations of this term in conventional use, we could say that this is partly a matter of intra-cultural communication. On the other hand, in their analysis of Grice's theory of meaning, Devitt and Sterelney state that when we have a term that has multiple meanings, and in the absence of a speaker's meaning we cannot precisely determine a conventional meaning of the concept, it is often impossible to attribute a notion of any conventional meaning without knowledge of the convention the speaker had in mind (2002: 163). In our example, although the Italian student could determine the convention the student from Croatia had in mind when using the term "genius", a misinterpretation occurred due to the publicly unacceptable use of such utterance in some contexts. Therefore, since the Italian student then interpreted her use of the concept of "genius" by means of a convention close to her, the incompatibility of these conventions, conventions in the wider pragmatic sense, could be said to belong to intercultural communication.

On the individual, i.e. the speaker's level, the use of this concept by the Croatian student can be said to be a rhetorical figure or a kind of metaphor<sup>15</sup>. In this regard, when dealing with the problem of meaning of rhetorical figures, Devitt and Sterelney point out that metaphors support the difference between the conventional and the speaker's meaning, that the speaker in the imprecise use of the language thinks something that is

---

<sup>15</sup> Metaphors are mental, i. e. conceptual operations in human language by which speakers through much more concrete and more practical terms can structure and construct abstract areas of knowledge (Hurford, James R., Heasley, Brendan and Smith, Michael B., 1983: 331).



different and somewhat independent from the common sense of the word even though it is derived from it (2002: 163-166). Conventional, that is, the literal meaning of the student's statement that she is a "genius" is not true, but she used a metaphor to say she feels very successful and similar to a real "genius" after passing a difficult exam.

In this example, we need to see if there was a disruption of the conversational maxim of quality, which, according to Grice, is the most important of all conversational maxims, and reads: "Under the category of Quality falls a supermaxim – Try to make your contribution one that is true. – and two more specific maxims: Do not say what you believe to be false. / Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence." (Grice, 1989: 27)

If we consider both subordinate maxims of quality, then we see that the maxim of quality is not violated if the speaker of a statement *x* has made the statement thinking it to be true and if there is evidence for the content of their statement. In the above example, from the point of view of the speaker, a Croatian student who thinks that she is a genius, we can ask whether she said something about what she thinks is false, despite her intentions to flaunting, and did she say something for which there is no evidence. The answer to this question again gives us a distinction between the conventional and the speaker's meaning. Namely, within the conventional meaning of the concept of genius, her statement is false as she has no proof of that, and therefore in this example we have the violation of the conversational maxim of quality. As the speaker's meaning in this example differs from the conventional meaning, i. e. it is derived from personal use of the term, preserving the conversational maxim of quality becomes questionable. Although the Croatian student's semantic field of meaning of the concept of genius was similar to that of the Italian student and coincides with the standard meanings of that concept within the Croatian and Italian cultural contexts, her illocution had a somewhat idiosyncratic meaning. That was precisely why there were misunderstandings in their communication. But can we say that this is because of the conversational maxim of quality being violated or does Grice's maxim refer to too idealized conversations? According to Levinson, metaphors undermine the conventional meanings of utterances, since they are, with some set of properties, non-cooperative and because speakers want to express something different by them (1983: 110).

Therefore, we can assume several premises: (1) that the Croatian student was unaware of the differences between the conventional and the speaker's conception of the sign in the pragmatic context, i. e. did not consider whether her use of this concept was understood by the Italian student, (2) that she believed that she was like a real "genius" because she felt very successful for a moment and (3) had successfully passed a hard exam. It seems that thanks to the first premise we can conclude that the conversational maxim of quality was violated. Also, from the perspective of the recipient of this statement, the Italian student, the statement "I am a genius!" is false, since (1) within the domain of her cultural knowledge it does not belong to the understanding that someone who successfully passes an exam is a genius and that (2) she does not know the

possibility of using the term genius in such an unconventional way, because such a type of unconventional use of the term in Italy is not practiced.

#### 4 Social Dominance and Violation of Maxims of Conversation

In the following two examples, we will consider the function of social roles and dominance in relation to the violation of Grice's maxims of conversation, whereby an intentional degradation of an interlocutor has occurred. In the first example, we have a Croatian student studying in Italy speaking to another student, an Italian, about life during the famous President of the former Yugoslavia Josip Broz Tito, claiming that Yugoslavia was a state of peace and security.

- 1) Croatian student: "Quando Tito era in vita, in Yugoslavia regnava ordine e sicurezza..."
- 2) Italian student: "Dittatore è dittatore!"
- 3) Croatian student: "Non è..."
- 4) Italian student: "No. Tu sei vissuta dentro e non potevi renderti conto della realtà... Voi eravate segregati dentro un sistema comunista e non potevi percepire che lui dirige con tutto e con tutti..."
- 5) Croatian student: "(„)"<sup>16</sup>

From the point of view of conversational analysis in a certain way, the answers (2) and (4) of the Italian student can be seen as ignoring the Croatian student. In their "turn-talk" the dominance of the Italian student was achieved by repeated interruptions of the Croatian correspondent's statements<sup>17</sup>, by direct and determined statements (2), and an extensive response (4) that resembles a monologue. Through such conversational methods she wanted to emphasize her own social role as an older student and a tutor and her sense of superiority and dominance over the Croatian student. The subjection of the Croatian student can be observed in the act of her withdrawal in this conversation, hesitating to contradict the use of incomplete sentences, and can be interpreted as her avoidance of conflict with her dominant interlocutor obviously possessing much more discursive power. We could confirm this by Bourdieu's statement, who believes that "If

<sup>16</sup> Translation: "When Marshal Tito was alive, rule and security were in the former Yugoslavia ..." / "Dictators are dictators!" / "No ..." / "No. You lived inside and you could not perceive reality... You were locked in a communist system and you could not perceive that he commanded everything and everyone..." / („) (This other statement by the Italian student is even extensive and more precise.)

<sup>17</sup> In the conversation with the Croatian student, we learned that the Italian student had very sharply interrupted in both her statements, although the Croatian student wanted to give examples or proof of her claim.

acts of communication - exchanges of gifts, challenges, or words - always bear within them a potential conflict, it is because they always contain the possibility of domination.” (Bourdieu, 1977: 237). In this example, the absence of the answer, or the silence of the Croatian student after the long statement by the Italian student, is her withdrawal, i.e. avoiding a potential conflict related to their different views on the political system of the former Yugoslavia.

In this conversation, we can consider two of Grice’s maxims of conversation: the maxim of quantity and the maxim of manner. The first statement of the Italian student “Dittatore è dittatore” is a tautology<sup>18</sup>, or a statement that does not contain any information. In the example “Dittatore è dittatore!” we see, therefore, her statement which as such can only distort the conversational maxim of quantity. Nevertheless, Grice notes that tautologies are “informative at the level of what is implicated, and that the listener’s identification of their informative content at this level depends on his ability to explain the speaker’s selection of tautology” (Grice, 1989: 33). This means that the informativity of such statements should be sought at the implicit level of speech, that is, that the listener should recognize why the speaker has chosen the very form for the content he wanted to express. Similarly, Levinson considers that if we assume that the speaker of such a statement is cooperative in his communication, we need to find out what informative inference he wanted to produce (1983: 111).

Thus, in our example, the Italian student wanted to say that the politician Josip Broz Tito should be considered a dictator, and her tautological statement “Dittatore è dittatore!” we can translate as “that, while providing order and security in the former Yugoslavia, in his leadership of the state as well as every dictator, he used dictatorial methods, etc.”. On the other hand, the Croatian student recognized the intention of the statement by the Italian student and replied (3) “He was not ...” trying to give her an explanation or the reasons for her opinion. However, the Italian student impolitely interrupted her. On the other hand, in the statement “Non è ...” and the silence after the second statement of the Italian student we can see the Croatian student’s sensitivity to the discourse of ideology including direct expressions of ideological attitudes. This conversation can therefore be brought into direct connection, according to Brown and Levinson’s theory, with “face-treatment” within a conversational organization that is clearly manifested by this example through “interrupting, ignoring selections of other speakers, not responding to prior turns” (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 232). In the response (4) by the Italian student there was a distortion of the conversational maxim of manner, for which Grice prescribes:

Finally, under the category of Manner, which I understand as relating not (like the previous categories) to what is said, but, rather, to *how* what is said is to be said, I include the supermaxim – “Be perspicuous” – and various

---

<sup>18</sup> In the linguistics of formal logic, the tautology “Dittatore è dittatore!” is written as:  $\forall x [E(x) \rightarrow E(x)]$ .

maxims such as: 1. Avoid obscurity of expression./ 2. Avoid ambiguity. /  
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity). / 4. Be orderly. (Grice, 1989: 27)

In answer (4), the Italian student directly told the Croatian student that her knowledge of the communist regime was insufficient, that she lived under control and ignorance, and that she could therefore not have a proper picture of the communist regime of the former Yugoslavia. Her implicit assumption was that her cultural knowledge is wider and truer than the cultural knowledge of the student from Croatia. Such an answer, on the other hand, reflects its attachment of a greater epistemic value to its own statement, or to its own knowledge of the former Yugoslavia, because of the implicit assumption that someone outside a certain political system can give a more objective and realistic picture of it. Violating the maxim of manner is related to the long, extensive statement.

Another example we can consider is the following conversation:

- 1) Croatian student (being offered a Coca-Cola): "No, grazie, io non bevo Coca-..."
- 2) Italian waiter: "Eh, tu fai vieni da un paese comunista!"<sup>19</sup>
- 3) Croatian student: („)<sup>20</sup>

In this conversation, we see that after the waiter's statement the Croatian student was silent, i. e. feeling threatened by the Italian waiter. She attached to his statement the meaning of the pernicious act which, according to Forrester, contains "face-treatment" quality as a quality that could be attributed to male speakers when they interrupt their interlocutors (1996: 119). Therefore, in their conversation, which is a type of every-day conversation, the Italian's interruption of a student by a statement in which he wanted to express his political stance can be interpreted as establishing his position of power, or the act of endangering the student's integrity.

At the implicit level of speech, we see that in this example, the Italian waiter's answer (2), 2) "Eh, tu fai vieni da un paese comunista!" expressed his political attitude towards Croatia as a communist country (although the conversation took place after the collapse of the former communist, socialist Yugoslavia). By attributing to Coca-Cola the symbol of the system of values of the capitalist West (actually America and developed Western Europe), he used the statement by the Croatian student that she did not drink Coca-Cola (in which she intended to say she did not like to drink Coca-Cola) to give her knowledge of: (1) not perceiving the importance of political changes for the Croatian state (its independence), (2) although he knows that the Croatian political system has been changed, she is for him still a part of the Eastern, Communist and Balkan system 3) that he, as a "representative" of the superior European states can say that to her and (4) that "being from Croatia" means being socially inferior. In the example of this

<sup>19</sup> Example from the mid-1990s

<sup>20</sup> Translation: "No, thank you, I do not drink Coca-Cola." / "Ah, you come from the Communist country!" / (Croatian student R.B.).

conversation, we see the dominant political and social status of the Italian as the power-bearer, and the subordinate position of the Croatian student.

But at the explicit level of conversation, his answer had no relevant value with respect to the statement of the Croatian student, who only subsequently understood what the Italian speaker implicitly wanted to say<sup>21</sup>. About the conversational maxim of relevance, in which Grice's description directly recognizes that it is difficult to determine when an answer in a communication conversation is not relevant, he says:

Under the category of Relation I place a single maxim, namely, "Be relevant." Though the maxim itself is terse, its formulation conceals a number of problems that exercise me a good deal: questions about what different kinds and focuses of relevance there may be, how this shift in the course of a talk exchange, how to allow for the fact that subjects of conversation are legitimately changed, and so on. (Grice, 1989: 27)

The miscommunication in this example can also be explained in terms of opacity towards the Croatian student, because in the context of the situation in which she refused to drink Coca-Cola, his statement, which implies social asymmetry on several levels was completely incomprehensible.

Both these examples, as well as the other examples used in this paper, show that "particularized conversational implicatures" as called by Paltridge, arising from particular, cultural and situational contexts (2006: 71), are very common in intercultural communication. That is, in these examples, we wanted to show how much statements within communication are dependent on the context of the current situation, the background cultural knowledge, and the knowledge of conversation participants about what they are talking about in conversation. We could conclude that, even in cases from neighboring countries, both examples confirm a great difference between the mental representations of the political system of the former Yugoslavia between the participants, which is why we can describe this conversation as intercultural.

## Conclusion

Based on the ten examples, we discussed the problem of misunderstandings in communication and violation of conversational maxims in conversations between international students in Italy. The analytical tool we used were Grice's maxims of conversation and conversational implicature, through which we analyzed implicit communication intentions in the background of statements. We have seen that some examples presented the

---

<sup>21</sup> In conversation with the Croatian student, we learned that the Italian had expressed his statement in extremely ironic tone, which is a communication element that helped the Croatian student to understand its implicit intention directed at breaking her integrity.

violation of Grice's maxims of conversation and also a disruption of the integrity of the participants to whom the statements were intended. In the analysis of the examples, we used the descriptive context of the situation, the background knowledge and possible knowledge of conversation participants about the realized statements, or the analysis of intercultural differences between the participants as an essential element of the conversation between the international students. The analyzed situations of misunderstanding and the description of the conversation participants, their linguistic or cultural background, and the role played in the discussion have proved to be relevant factors, which have caused the lack of understanding in communication. In some instances, we have shown that communication failure was highly dependent on the success of the attribution of the attributed and the intended, conventional and spoken meaning, or the selection of the right context for the correct interpretation of a particular conversational statement.

Thus, with the analysis of the examples of conversation through the analysis of the conversational implicatures and the maxims of conversation, we have investigated cultural knowledge and the way in which that cultural knowledge contributes to the creation of a context relevant to the understanding of the meaning of a statement. All the above examples showed that the difference in cultural knowledge is an important conversational context in situations of misunderstandings in communication, which are also more frequent in communication between participants from different cultural backgrounds. This study dealt with a small corpus of examples and a limited scope of culturally different participants, but in our further research we would like to expand both of these important levels to gain a deeper understanding of the complex components interacting in communication.

## References

- Anić, Vladimir and Ivo Goldstein. 2007. *Rječnik stranih riječi*. (Dictionary of Foreign Words). Zagreb: Novi Liber.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, Penelope and Stephen C. Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carston, Robin. 2002. *Thoughts and Utterances: The Pragmatics of Explicit Communication*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. Cited in: Žegarac, V. 2008. "Culture and Communication". <http://www.vlad.tv/publications/htm> [12 February 2009].
- Crystal, David. 1997. *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Devitt, Michael and Kim Sterelny. 2002. *Jezik i stvarnost: Uvod u filozofiju jezika*. (Language and Reality: Introduction in Philosophy of Language). Zagreb: Kruzak.
- Edwards, Derek. 1997. *Discourse and Cognition*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Forrester, Michael A. 1996. *Psychology of Language*. London: SAGE Publications.

- Garman, Michael. 1990. *Psycholinguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grice, H. P. 1989. "Logic and Conversation." In *Studies in the Way of Words*, 1-144. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hurford, James R., Brendan Heasley and Michael B. Smith. 1983. *Semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Katnić-Bakaršić, Marina. 2001. *Stilistika*. (Stylistics). Sarajevo: Ljiljan.
- Leech, Geoffrey. 1983. *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Levinson, Stephan. 1983. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Paltridge, Brian. 2006. *Discourse Analysis*. London: Continuum.
- Sperber, D. and D. Wilson. 1986. "Relevance Theory". [http://cogprints.org/2317/0/relevance\\_theory.htm](http://cogprints.org/2317/0/relevance_theory.htm) [15 March 2009].
- Sperber, D. and D. Wilson. 1986. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell.  
Cited in: Žegarac V. 2008. "Culture and Communication". <http://www.vlad.tv/publications/htm> [12 February 2009].
- Van Dijk, Teun A. 1998. *Ideology*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Žegarac, Vladimir. 2007. "A Cognitive Pragmatic Perspective on Communication and Culture." <http://www.vlad.tv/publications/htm> [10 March 2009].
- Žegarac, Vladimir. 2008. "Culture and Communication" <http://www.vlad.tv/publications/htm> [12 February 2009].
- Žegarac, Vladimir. 1999. "What is Phatic communication?" <http://www.vlad.tv/publications/htm> [25 March 2009].