

TOWARDS A PRAGMATIC TAXONOMY OF MISUNDERSTANDINGS

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ABSTRACT

The increasing emphasis given to the pragmatic perspective in the studies of everyday conversation over the last few decades has uncovered the reality which lies behind everyday conversation: the fact that communication is subject to risk and effort, and that we understand each other through continuous fallible hypotheses about our interlocutor's intended interpretation. In this study, I address misunderstandings from a pragmatic (mainly relevance-theoretic) approach and analyse the reasons why they occur in face-to-face interaction. The main hypothesis underlying this paper is that all the possible varieties of misunderstanding can be accounted for in the outcome of the combination of three preliminary *continua*: *intentional vs. unintentional*; *verbal vs. nonverbal*; and *explicit vs. implicit*, which yields a taxonomy of twelve possible cases.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication is not an easy task. Every day, people engage in conversations of many kinds with different purposes and, on every single occasion, addressees have to rely on their ability to overcome inherent obstacles that can arise in face-to-face interaction in order arrive at the interpretation that their interlocutors intend them to process.

The traditional *code model* of communication, according to which utterances are simply decoded, has given way to a more down-to-earth (nondemonstrative) *inferential model* (or, rather, to a combination of both models), which provides a more reli-

able picture of human communication. Instead of straightforward, machine-like decoding of utterances, it is now admitted that interpretation is a matter of raising hypotheses about which proposition the addresser intends to communicate, and success in reaching the correct interpretation is constrained (or helped) by a whole range of contextual features, some of which are difficult to pin down.

The present study will analyse several contextual factors determining the emergence of misunderstandings. First, a definition of misunderstanding will be provided, followed by the description of the three pragmatic *continua* involved in misunderstanding. The combination of these three *continua* will yield a taxonomy of twelve possible cases. In the last section of this paper, definitions, causes and examples will be given for these cases.

2. MISUNDERSTANDING

According to Humphreys-Jones (1986: 109), a misunderstanding occurs “when a hearer (H) fails to understand correctly the proposition (p) which a speaker (S) expresses in an utterance (x)”. This analyst makes a preliminary distinction between *misunderstanding* (incorrect hypothesis in the comprehension of a proposition) and *non-understanding* (lack of comprehension, that is, no hypothesis raised). Nevertheless, this approach to misunderstanding seems to be incomplete, since the erroneous interpretation of both nonverbal communication and unintentional transmission of information are left out in the above definition. Therefore, I would like to propose an alternative approach which I think will be found helpful: in this study, I will regard it as (a) the addressee’s inability to select one interpretation, among all the possible interpretations that a stimulus¹ can have in a context C , which is precisely the interpretation that the addresser intends to communicate; and (b) the addressee’s inability to process optimally the contextual information that the socio-cultural environment *exudes*, as it were, without any prior intentionality in its communication. Following Wilson & Sperber’s (1993) terminology, I will label this “communication” *accidental transmission of information*.

A mismatch between the speaker’s (intended) stimulus and the hearer’s selected interpretation is far from uncommon. All of us have faced situations in which we realise that we have not been understood properly, but the course of the interaction makes it possible to clear away most of the problems and end up with the feeling that communication has been, on the whole, successful (Tannen, 1991: 15). *What do you mean...?* is often the safest way to remove any obstacles that might arise in everyday interaction.

Misunderstandings are particularly easy to find in cross-cultural communication and also in situations in which there are errors in the identification of the interlocutors’ *conversational styles* (Tannen, 1984, 1991). Nevertheless, here I propose to examine specific pragmatic aspects of face-to-face interaction such as (*in*)*directness* and contextual aspects such as *mutual* and *background knowledge*, all of them affecting the final outcome of interpretation. In other words, it is usually not enough to select a proposition as likely to be the one intended; it is also necessary to locate it inferentially in the right context (for instance, to measure its illocutionary force, see

Thomas, 1984; Dascal, 1983: 31, 1992: 41). In general, a frequent source of interpretive errors lies in the sender's choice of a certain stimulus, which increases, reduces, or even makes it impossible to access the intended interpretation (Blakemore, 1989: 37). Addressees are right to assume that their interlocutors will produce a stimulus which strikes the right balance between the interest that it arouses, and the effort that it takes them to process the stimulus. The more information the communicator leaves implicit, the more uncertain the interpretation will surely be, and the more likely to end up in misunderstanding.²

Therefore, although the communicator expects his interlocutor to be able to access the right contextual information and eventually reach the correct interpretation, there can be a miscalculation of how much contextual information the hearer is supposed to supply and how much the speaker himself has to provide inside a specific *activity type* (Thomas, 1995: 136). In this study, I will propose reasons for these mismatches and group them in a set of taxonomical categories.

3. MISUNDERSTANDING AS A COMBINATION OF *CONTINUA*

In my opinion, all the possible types of misunderstanding that can arise in face-to-face interaction are the result of the combination of three pragmatic *continua*: (a) the *intentional vs. unintentional continuum*; (b) the *verbal vs. nonverbal continuum*; and (c) the *explicit vs. implicit continuum*.

The choice of the word *continuum* is not arbitrary: it accounts for the fact that these three combined pragmatic aspects are not clear-cut dichotomies, but *fuzzy-edged qualities* that tend to overlap during interaction. For instance, the information conveyed by verbal means is often contradicted by the information supplied by the communicator's nonverbal behaviour, and sometimes we cannot work out to what extent a certain stimulus is explicitly intentional or the sender in no way intended to provide the information that it communicates. Needless to say, the overlap of both ends in the three *continua* proposed can be a source of difficulty in processing, besides the actual combination of *continua*. I will analyse the quality of these problems involved in the exemplification of the taxonomical cases. Before that, I will provide some theoretical input on the nature of the *continua*.

3.1. INTENTIONAL VS. UNINTENTIONAL CONTINUUM

Intention plays an important role in communication and what Sperber & Wilson (1986a) call *ostensive behaviour*, and often determines the outcome of interpretation. Since intention is located in inextricable areas of human cognition, addressees often find it difficult to estimate accurately the nature of the sender's intentions, and this may be a source of misunderstanding. Yet, in disagreement with our approach to the role of intention in communication, Kendon (1981: 9) states that:

the question of intentionality is irrelevant because [...] to witness a behavioral event is to receive information and the process of communication has, accordingly, taken place, regardless of what was intended by the production of the behavior. The question of intentionality is not determinable because whatever

message an actor may have intended to convey there are always messages at other levels that are conveyed simultaneously.

Stamp & Knapp (1990: 292) also comment on the problems for the identification of the intention behind everyday interaction:

While encoders exhibit intentions through their gestures and speech, and decoders attribute intentions to the encoders based on observations of those features, the intentions of the encoders and decoders are not necessarily clear to one another. Therefore, participants in an interactional sequence, by virtue of the differing perceptions each may have of the verbal and nonverbal behaviors manifested by the other, as well as the inability to express fully the “truth” behind their own perceptions to the other interactant, are not likely to fully understand the “true meaning” of the intentions of the other.

From the pragmatic perspective, intention is essential in the so-called *intersubjective* approach to interaction, which has aroused the interest of many linguists. It is now commonly acknowledged that success in communication often depends on the hearer’s (prior) recognition of the sender’s intention to communicate information. Sperber and Wilson (1986a) labelled this intention *communicative* (as opposed to the sender’s *informative intention*, which has to do with the information to be transmitted). Strawson (1964), for instance, distinguishes three sub-intentions that explain this approach to intention in communication. Addresser A has to have the intention that:

- (1) (a) his utterance *e* should produce a certain response *r* in an addressee B.
- (b) B should recognise his intention (a).
- (c) B should recognise his intention (a) at least as part of B’s reasons to produce the response *r*.

In the present study, a stimulus will be considered *intentional* when communicators *deliberately intend* to convey a certain amount of information to their interlocutors. In relation to this intention, my approach is rather *sender-centred*, although there are other possible analyses of intentionality such as focusing on the receiver’s evaluation of the sender’s behaviour, or on the purely interactive aspect of intentionality (Stamp & Knapp, 1990). This means that a stimulus can be intentional, regardless of whether it is or it is not considered intentional by the interlocutor.

3.2. VERBAL VS. NONVERBAL CONTINUUM

The importance of the information communicated through nonverbal means has been stressed in the pragmatic perspective to communication. Often, certain nonverbal behaviours can replace verbal language completely (Sperber & Wilson, 1986a: 25):

- (2) A: How are you feeling today?
- B: [pulls a bottle of aspirin out of her bag and shows it to him]

On other occasions, nonverbal behaviour can contradict the information conveyed by verbal means (a smile to force an ironical reading of an utterance, for instance), or it can help the speaker to communicate the intended interpretation (Dascal, 1983: 35). For example, in dialogue (3), from the alternative British comic *Viz*, A's (indirect) requesting utterance is misinterpreted, and therefore A is forced to use a nonverbal action (*hold out his hand*) which, following Barthes's (1977) terminology, works as an *anchorage* of the utterance reducing the range of possible interpretations:

(3) [a postman -A- at character B's front door]

A: A very Merry Christmas to you!!

B: Thank you. And to you.

A: [*holding out his hand*] Hold on! I said, Merry Christmas!

B: Oh! I see! all right. Just let me get my purse!

A: Jesus! 50p... I got a quid from next door!

In this article, a message will be considered *verbal* when it is produced by verbal means (that is, a shared verbal code). The other sources of information (kinesics, proxemics, paralinguage...) will all be considered *nonverbal*. Obviously, although the two poles of this continuum are very different and clear-cut, we frequently find both sources of information combined in a single communicative act. As Kendon (1986: 12) points out:

gesticulation is often an important component of the utterance unit produced, in the sense that the utterance unit cannot be fully comprehended unless its gestural component is taken into consideration. [...] The gesticulatory component has a complementary relationship to what is encoded in words, so that the full significance of the utterance can only be grasped if both words and gesture are taken into account.

Nevertheless, on those occasions in which verbal and nonverbal means of communication share the same communicative act, the verbal means will be considered the primary source of information, while nonverbal behaviour will reinforce or contradict the information conveyed by verbal means.

3.3. EXPLICIT VS. IMPLICIT CONTINUUM

As suggested above, this *continuum* accounts for the fact that communicators can weigh up how much information they convey in an explicit, straightforward way and how much information they leave implicit, relying on the interlocutor's ability to extract information from various contextual sources. This dichotomy, used here in a relevance-theoretical perspective, is clearly related to Gricean direct vs. implicated meaning (cf. Yus Ramos, 1995 for discussion), and to the traditional notions of literal vs. indirect meaning, but there is no equivalence in the scope of these labels, as I will attempt to clarify below.

Literal meaning has been traditionally considered the meaning of an utterance when no contextual information is involved, that is, the meaning of a sentence obtained through the meaning of its composite elements only (cf. Gibbs 1994: 25).

The discussion on this continuum has taken two specific directions: (a) whether literal meaning is a necessary element in everyday discourse processing or not; and (b) whether literal meaning is a necessary and preliminary stage in the processing of indirect utterances or not. I will comment on these two issues (headings (a) and (b)), and then I will suggest that a relevance-theoretic framework is more suitable for the delimitation of the literal/indirect quality of an utterance (heading (c)). I will finally explain my own approach to this issue (still under relevance theory) and define the limits of *explicitness* and *implicitness* in the present analysis of misunderstanding (heading (d)).

(a) After many years in which the basic unit of linguistic analysis was the context-free idealised sentence, pragmatic research has focused on the contextual aspects of the utterance, which constrain its meaning and the final outcome of its interpretation. Yet, the gradual pragmatic shift into *use* has not led to a definite rejection of decontextualised literal meaning, but to a growing scholarly discussion on the role that literal meaning plays in interpretation, since its status is nowadays considered (at least) problematic.³

Toolan (1991), quite rightly, states that, traditionally, the existence of literal meaning has been considered essential, and that even in many linguists who can be labelled pragmatic, we can find residues of this traditional emphasis. Searle (1980), for instance, seems to reject the idea of literal meaning when he rejects meaning in a “zero-context” and opts for an alternative “meaning relative to a series of background assumptions” which can be a part of utterance meaning. Searle’s most conspicuous example is about the different senses of *cut* depending on the context where it is used. Nevertheless, Toolan (ibid.: 333) is right in assuming that, in reality, Searle is preserving the notion of literal meaning as invariable, while leaving all its possible variations to contextual uses of the word.

Dascal also defends the importance of literal meaning in several studies. First, Dascal (1987: 260) proposed his *moderate literalism*, in which he gave up “the attempt to provide a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be a literal meaning. Instead, a number of conditions and the corresponding criteria are described which are semantically relevant to the characterization of the notion of literal meaning so that, when a large number of these conditions are satisfied, an aspect of meaning can be reliably seen as belonging to literal meaning, but no single condition is strictly necessary in the sense that its absence would *ipso facto* prevent that aspect of meaning from being so described”. Dascal (ibid.: 261) adds that although literal meaning does not have to be *part of* the final interpretation of an utterance, this does not imply that literal meaning has to be rejected: “the idea of a *complete* determination of literal meaning by compositional means is unwarranted, but this fact does not show that compositionality as such should be entirely rejected as a factor in the determination of literal meaning”. Last, in Dascal (1989: 254), he insists that a sentence is processed tentatively before its definite interpretation, and suggests a parallel processing of sentence, utterance and speaker meaning (see also Gibbs, 1994: 88). Once speaker meaning is accessed, the interpretation of sentence meaning and utterance meaning is inhibited.

I hope to be able to show that literal meaning (and here I must disagree with Dascal) seems to play no fundamental role in interpretation because, even if speakers

intend to communicate the most explicit information that can be conveyed through an utterance, some basic contextualization is necessary (referent assignment, disambiguation, deixis, etc.) in order to build up a basic enrichment of the logical form in the form of a proposition, also called *explicature* in relevance-theoretic terminology. In this sense, the role of literal meaning could be left, perhaps, to the outcome of the mental *raw material* that speakers use in the formation of grammatical and acceptable strings of words, but the role of these strings is short-circuited as soon as these words access the interactive side of language (the shift from *null-context sentence* into *context-dependent utterance*), no matter how explicit communication is intended to be.

(b) Literal meaning is also thought to be a necessary (and preliminary) stage in the interpretation of non-literal language, which implies a kind of sequence and, hence, a higher processing cost for indirect utterances than for more literal ones.

To start with, it must be stated that if indirect utterances were always more difficult to process than literal utterances, people would avoid the use of indirectness and rely on as much explicit information as they could in order to guarantee a correct interpretation, but this is not the case. People show a high tendency to indirect speech, sometimes because they *want to*, and on other occasions because they *have to*.

While on the subject of people's willingness to use indirectness, it is interesting to note that by being indirect, one can convey a great deal of information which would not be possible to convey through a literal stimulus. Indirect utterances are also useful for signalling and stressing *mutually shared* information. Also, Tannen (1981: 223) suggests the following reasons for using indirectness: (a) to satisfy the needs of *rapport* [the satisfaction of being understood] and *defensiveness* [to be able to save face in case the stimulus is not received well]. In Tannen (1991: 64f) she adds: (b) to convey information without actually *telling* people in a direct way; (c) to avoid confrontation; (d) for the sake of humour and irony in discourse. Thomas (1995: 143), along the same lines, suggests (e) to make one's language more/less interesting; (f) to increase the force of one's message; (g) to use an alternative way of conveying information when there are competing goals; (h) for the sake of politeness and saving face (see also Blakemore, 1992: 127).

On other occasions, though, people have to rely on indirectness or else they would not be able to convey the same amount (and quality) of information as they would by using direct utterances. The message conveyed by metaphors, for instance, can rarely be conveyed by any other verbal means (Gibbs, 1994: 53f). Besides, often indirect utterances have to be used if the speaker intends to make mutually manifest (using the terminology from relevance theory here) certain information that might be shared by the interlocutors (Blakemore, 1989, 1992). For example, the hearer's comprehension of the indirect answer (4c) indicates and reinforces the fact that the information about Muslims not drinking alcohol is (mutually) known by both interlocutors at this stage of the conversation, information which (4b) certainly fails to provide (cf. Sperber and Wilson, 1986a):

- (4) (a) Would you like some wine?
 (b) No, thanks, I don't feel like drinking wine now.
 (c) You know I am a good Muslim.

Therefore, the widely extended use of indirectness in discourse seems to invalidate the idea that they necessarily demand more processing effort than literal utterances (McQuiddy, 1986). This idea is reinforced by the evidence that our mind is structured in a poetic, non-literal way (Gibbs, 1994: 80). Besides, various studies have demonstrated that figurative language need not take longer to process than literal utterances if the contextual features are appropriate (Gibbs, 1979; 1994: 113).

A related issue is whether there is a *direct-indirect* processing sequence in the comprehension of indirect utterances, that is, whether literal meaning is a necessary (and preliminary) stage in the comprehension of indirect utterances, the so-called *standard pragmatic model* (Vanderveken, 1991: 375; Gibbs, 1994: 83). Dascal (1983: 38), for instance, suggests that “sentence meaning is needed in order to determine utterance meaning, and the latter is needed in order to reach speaker’s meaning”. Also, Clark & Lucy (1975) propose a three-stage model of literal-indirect comprehension: (a) “determine the literal meaning of the utterance (presumably by a simple composition of lexeme meanings); (b) compare the literal meaning so determined with various contextual and conversational rules to decide if the literal meaning could also be the intended meaning; (c) if the literal meaning is determined inappropriate, apply additional rules to determine the indirect, or conveyed meaning” (see also Airenti et al., 1993).

Several studies have tried to demonstrate empirically that people compute literal meaning before reaching a more connoted indirect meaning (Clark & Clark, 1977: 126; Dascal, 1983: 130). Clark & Lucy (1975: 63), for example, detected more processing effort for (5b) than for (5a):

- (5) (a) Can you make the circle blue?
- (b) I would love to see the circle coloured blue.

This research is counteracted by other studies which try to demonstrate that there is either a parallel in-tandem processing of both meanings (Swinney & Cutler, 1979; Keysar, 1988), or that (mainly through familiarity with contextual features) literal meaning plays practically no role at all (or at least *needn’t play* any role) in the interpretation of indirect utterances (Gibbs, 1979, 1983, 1986, 1989, 1994; Ortony et al. 1978; Glucksberg et al., 1982; Shinjo & Myers, 1987; Glucksberg & Keysar, 1990, among others).⁴

Perhaps the most revealing (and over-used) example of this discussion is the (indirect?) speech act performed by the utterance *can you pass the salt?* The traditional speech-act view would suggest that in this case a request is made in the form of a yes/no question which literally asks about the hearer’s ability to pass the salt. Although this approach might be, in theory, appropriate, it does not account for the fact that hearers are not usually aware of the covert question about their ability and, instead, they merely identify the request, as Searle (1979: 46) himself noticed (see Toolan, 1991: 335). This fact can be accounted for under relevance theory and its *explicit/implicit* dichotomy (further developed here as *degrees of explicitness vs. degrees of implicitness*), as shall be explained below.

It seems difficult to accept that both meanings of *can you...?* are computed and processed in parallel or in tandem during interpretation (cf. Clark, 1979), an idea which underlies most definitions of indirect speech acts.⁵ Instead, I would suggest that it is contextual information that determines the *ability-* or *request-connotation* of

this question, either in terms of cognitive schemas (Raskin, 1979; Abbeduto et al., 1989), or information from the speech situation. As Gibbs (1989: 246-7) points out, “speakers might agree that the conventional meaning of the indirect speech act, *Can you pass the salt?* is ‘pass the salt’. But this meaning presupposes a typical context of use where salt is being requested and not where one’s ability to pass the salt is questioned. The conventional interpretation of an utterance presupposes some context of use perhaps so widely shared that there *seems* to be no context at all”. Bertolet (1994: 339) adds that “one who utters ‘Can you pass the salt?’ at a dinner table typically cannot be taken to have any real interest in the hearer’s competence at salt-passing. What the speaker does have an interest in, and indicates an interest in, is having the salt passed”. In this sense, it makes more sense to accept Clark’s (1979) *obviousness of the answer rule*, which directly makes one of the two alternative readings the most prominent (see also Groefsema, 1992: 119):

(6) Question: [A and B at home] A: Can you open the window?

Explanation: Here a request would be the most obvious interpretation since the windows open normally and B is not physically incapacitated to perform the action.

(7) Question: [A and B in a rather derelict house] A: Can you open the window?

Explanation: Here a question about B’s ability to open the window could be the most appropriate interpretation, since they are likely to find it hard to open old windows.

Therefore, *can you...?* has only one reading, depending on what contextual features are like. I would go further and state that *can you...?* is, in fact, a *convention of use*, in Morgan’s (1978: 247) sense. Certain polite formulas for requests are part of the conventional use of language and have become part of the speakers’ *literal* interpretation of language. The request-question, I would suggest, is not a *literalised implicature* (Groefsema, 1992: 104-5), but a polite formulaic phrase of the kind that has always belonged to the explicit end of the *explicit vs. implicit continuum*, even if these phrases are obviously not the most literal way of requesting an action. This leads to my rejection of the discussion on the direct/indirect status of *can you...?* Instead of demonstrating that hearers compute first the indirect meaning of *can you...?* (Gibbs, 1994: 266), an explicit-only reading can be proposed depending on contextual information. The fact that hearers may actually identify the polite connotation of the request can be accounted for via *degrees of explicitness* (more on this in sub-headings (c) and (d) below), a kind of *second-order continuum* inside the preliminary division of the *explicit vs. implicit continuum*.

(c) Under relevance theory, the literal/indirect dichotomy is replaced by a more gradual *continuum* from the most explicitly communicated information to the most implicitly (and hearer-dependent) communicated one.⁶ Blass (1990: 50-52) shows how answers (8b-d) to the question (8a) become more and more indirect as the number of *contextual assumptions* needed to reach the right (i.e. intended) *contextual implication* (“she does not look strange in this tunic”) gradually increases:

- (8) (a) Do I look strange in my cover cloth?
 (b) Everybody wears them around here.
 [contextual assumption needed: (1) people do not look odd if they wear what everybody is wearing]
 (c) We are in Africa.
 [contextual assumptions needed: (1) many women in Africa wear cover cloths;
 (2) people do not look odd if they wear what everybody is wearing]
 (d) We are in a hot continent.
 [contextual assumptions needed: (1) Africa is the continent that she is talking about; (2) many women in Africa wear cover cloths; (3) people do not look odd if they wear what everybody is wearing]

In everyday interaction, speakers choose the stimulus they are going to use to convey the intended proposition, and they have to bear in mind to what extent they can trust that their interlocutors will be able to extract the relevant (and necessary) contextual information and reach a matching interpretation (Tannen, 1981: 30).

Therefore, the role that the intentionality of communicators plays should be stressed when selecting a stimulus with a certain balance of explicit and/or implicit contextual information. Literalness/indirectness might even be described in intentional terms, as Itani's does (1996: 46): "when its propositional form shares identical logical and contextual implications with the propositional form of the speaker's thought, the utterance is considered to be a *literal* interpretation of the speaker's thought". But the orientation of a stimulus towards the *explicit* or the *implicit* end of the *continuum* could be defined more accurately in terms of the number of contextual assumptions needed in order to reach the right interpretation, as in Blass's example quoted above. This might be an argument for those who defend a higher processing effort for indirect utterances but, as I have tried to show above, this need not be the case, although on certain occasions this increased effort may occur (Gibbs, 1994: 110). For example, if a speaker hypothetically uttered (9b) instead of (9a) in order to ask for the salt, he would be demanding a much higher processing effort from his interlocutor than necessary in exchange of the same amount of information (a simple request to be passed the salt):

- (9) (a) Can you pass the salt?
 (b) Are you sitting near the salt?

A further elaboration of this idea is my proposal of *degrees of explicitness vs. degrees of implicitness* inside the *explicit/implicit continuum*. Instead of *one* explicit (literal) meaning of an utterance and *several* would-be increasingly implicit (i.e. indirect) meanings depending on contextual information, there are several possible explicit meanings of a stimulus, all of them in a hierarchy, but which can still be labelled *explicit*. In this *explicit sub-continuum* we would find factual information plus set-phrases like politeness formulas and certain *non-implicative metaphors*, among other possibilities. This idea can be illustrated with Sperber & Wilson's (1986b) notion of *loose talk*. Often, speakers do not communicate the exact information that they know because being exact would make the interlocutor extract unintended and unnecessary implications. For example:

- (10) (a) I live three kilometres from Alicante.
 (b) I live 2.850 kilometres from Alicante.

As the reader will notice, (10b) is so exact that it simply is not relevant for the hearer in normal circumstances, and the speaker is risking the breakdown of successful communication by demanding extra effort in exchange for very straightforward factual information. Besides, (10b) is more literal than (10a), but we could still state that both (a) and (b) are explicitly conveyed information. Blakemore (1992: 60) also suggests the possibility of *degrees of explicitness* in utterances such as *it's in that room*, compared to *the meeting is in room 307*, the former demanding more contextually inferred processing, but still on the *explicit* side. Consequently, it can be stated that there is no single *continuum* ranging from very *explicit* information to the most *implicit* information that can be communicated in a specific speech situation. Instead, two *sub-continua* are proposed, one on the *explicit* side and one on the *implicit* side, and each of them with different degrees of indirectness.

The key word for the shift from the *explicit sub-continuum* to the *implicit sub-continuum* is the speaker's "awareness" that he is demanding from his interlocutor the use of contextual information (encyclopaedic knowledge, mutually manifest assumptions, etc.) which is not part of the information which can be extracted from a minimal contextualisation, in order to reach the intended information. In other words, awareness of not demanding a straightforward enrichment of the logical form to yield a proposition (explicature). The problematic *can you...?* discussed above (11b) would be explained now as an explicit request but more literal than, for example, (11a); and less literal than (11c), which would be the most explicit of the three, and all (11a-c) would still be placed inside the limits of the *explicit sub-continuum*:

- (11) (a) Could you pass the salt?
 (b) Can you pass the salt?
 (c) Give/pass/hand me the salt, please.

Therefore, even though the speaker may be aware that he is using a polite formula for his request, I do not think that the speaker is *intentionally* demanding extra-cognitive effort from his interlocutor. He is merely asking for the salt by means of a shared convention of a shared language: a polite fixed formula. There would be a world of a difference if, instead, the speaker said (9b) mentioned above:

- (9) (b) Are you sitting near the salt?

Since there is a great deal of (implicit) contextual information needed to reach the intended interpretation of the request, (9b) would definitely belong to the *implicit sub-continuum*.

Metaphors and certain figurative language can also be explained using this terminology. Often, metaphors are incorporated into the normal, ordinary use of language (together with many other metaphorical mappings which show that our mind is organised figuratively (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Gibbs, 1994). On these occasions, the speaker is likely not to be aware of conveying a metaphorical message and,

consequently, these “fossilized” metaphors would be regarded as explicitly communicated information (for example, in utterances such as *the prices have gone up*). In theory, only when the speaker is aware of trying to relate two conceptual mappings in an innovative, metaphorical way, would a shift into the *implicit sub-continuum* take place.

I assume that my concept of *explicitness* is broader than many linguists would be ready to accept. For example, my idea of *explicitness* would cover utterances (12a), (12b) and (12c) of Roulet’s (1980) examples of increasingly indirect requests, and also utterances (13a) and (13b) in Thomas’s (1995: 135) proposed examples, with (13c) being, perhaps, *just* too indirect to be labelled *explicit*:

(12) Intended interpretation: “I want you to close the door”.

- (a) I beg you to close the door.
- (b) Close the door, please.
- (c) Can you close the door?
- (d) It’s cold in here.

(13) Intended interpretation: “I will not marry you”.

- (a) No, I won’t marry you.
- (b) I don’t respect you and I could never marry a man I don’t respect.
- (c) I could never marry a clergyman.
- (d) I refuse to marry a complete buffoon!

Needless to say, mismatches between the amount of implicit information demanded from the interlocutor and the interlocutor’s ability to extract implicit information can result in misunderstandings.

(d) As a result of the discussion of the issues mentioned above, in the present study I will consider a stimulus *explicit* when the speaker intends to convey a direct interpretation which only requires a minimal contextualization such as reference assignment, disambiguation and deixis, together with the addressee’s awareness of certain conventions of use shared by the speech community, basically in order to reach a propositional enrichment of the logical form of the sentence or explicature (cf. Geukens, 1978: 262; Sperber & Wilson, 1986b; Blakemore, 1989: 34, 1992: 60; Gibbs, 1994: 66), which is not unique, but context dependent (Itani, 1996: 41). There are different possible explicit meanings of a given stimulus, but there is a kind of shared contract among interlocutors which guarantees that the intended interpretation has been explicitly communicated and that no extra contextualization is needed in order to reach the intended interpretation (Toolan, 1991: 337).

This proposal, somehow, draws *explicit meaning* closer to Grice’s (1975) *utterance meaning*, but instead of being an intermediate stage between *sentence meaning* and *speaker meaning* (as in Dascal, 1983), I would suggest that on certain occasions in which the speaker intends to communicate *explicit* information that can be expressed by a certain stimulus, *utterance meaning* and *speaker meaning* might in fact coincide inside the *explicit sub-continuum* suggested above. Blakemore (1989: 29) is right in proposing that languages do not express propositions, but ‘blueprints’ for the construction of propositions.

This definition of *explicitness* involves the rejection of all literalness which is not linked to contextualization, regardless of how minimal this cognitive operation is. Consequently, in my opinion, theories such as the *extensionalist theory* (see Gibbs, 1994: 30) or Katz's (1977) *compositional view* of meaning in a *zero or null context* (that is, "where any sentence-meaning is derived from a complex synthesis of meanings of its composite words", see Toolan, 1991: 334) should be rejected, contrary to the opinion of analysts such as Dascal (1987: 261), or the definition quoted by Wunderlich (1980: 298) which suggests that the meaning of an utterance of a sentence *s* of language *L* is said to be literal if it is only composed of the meanings of the words and phrases in *s* in accordance with the syntactic conventions in *s*". Even in very explicitly communicated information, some contextualization is needed.

On the other hand, *implicitly communicated* information would involve the sender's awareness of relying on the interlocutor's ability to extract information from different non-evident contextual sources such as shared knowledge, background knowledge or encyclopaedic knowledge, among others. Not surprisingly, the shift *within* (and *between*) the *explicit* and *implicit sub-continua* will be suggested as one of the main sources of misunderstanding in face-to-face interaction.

4. TOWARDS A TAXONOMY OF MISUNDERSTANDINGS

The main goal of this paper is to demonstrate that all kinds of misunderstanding can be accounted for by one of the various possibilities that result from the combination of the three *continua* presented above. The outcome of this three-way combination yields the twelve cases that are described briefly in table 1.

	CHARACTERISTICS OF STIMULUS	SOURCE OF MISUNDERSTANDING
1	intentional, explicit, nonverbal.	intentional as unintentional.
2	intentional, explicit, verbal.	faulty interpretation (but correct location in the <i>explicit/implicit continuum</i>).
3	intentional, explicit, nonverbal.	faulty interpretation (but correct location in the <i>explicit/implicit continuum</i>).
4	intentional, explicit, verbal.	explicit as implicit.
5	intentional, explicit, nonverbal.	explicit as implicit.
6	intentional, implicit, verbal.	faulty interpretation (but correct location in the <i>explicit/implicit continuum</i>).
7	intentional, implicit, nonverbal.	faulty interpretation (but correct location in the <i>explicit/implicit continuum</i>).
8	intentional, implicit, nonverbal.	intentional as unintentional.
9	intentional, implicit, verbal.	implicit as explicit.
10	intentional, implicit, nonverbal.	implicit as explicit.
11	unintentional, explicit, nonverbal.	faulty interpretation.
12	unintentional, explicit, nonverbal.	unintentional as intentional.

Table 1.

The reader will notice that these twelve cases are not *all* the possible mathematical combinations of the three pragmatic *continua* analysed. The reason is that several cases, which were found inappropriate according to the characteristics of the three *continua*, have been suppressed. Basically, two criteria have been used as the main source of rejection:

(1) *Co-occurrence of no intentionality and verbal stimulus*. Being consistent with the characterization of intentionality suggested above (intention as *desire* to communicate some information), it is impossible for a speaker to communicate via a verbal stimulus without some intention to provide a certain amount of information (or else, no words would be uttered in the first place). Even in phatic exchanges, in which the interactive side of the encounter takes priority over the informative side of communication, at least some information about the speaker's willingness to be social is conveyed. In the same way, would-be sources of misunderstanding where intentional verbal communication is taken as unintentional have also been suppressed. The hearer sees the speaker speaking, and there is no reason why the hearer should take it as unintentional (that is, as the sender's lack of intention to speak!). People not only have the intention to speak, but also the expectation that their words will be worth being processed (Blakemore, 1992: 37).

(2) *Co-occurrence of nonverbal communication, no intentionality and implicit quality*. Although what is meant by *nonverbal implicit communication* will be explained later in this article, I will advance that all unintentional nonverbal behaviour should be considered explicit, because there is a close link between implicitness and the communicator's intentionality to rely on the interlocutor's ability to extract information from various contextual sources, as commented on above. Consequently, *implicit nonverbal stimuli* will all be considered intentional.

Table 1 also shows how the main obstacles for the correct comprehension of (non)verbal stimuli have to do with intentionality and contextual information, in a cognitive operation which I have labelled *processing challenge* (cf. Yus Ramos, 1998): on the one hand, identification of whether the stimulus is intentional or not is necessary. On the other hand, correct assessment of the stimulus as explicit or implicit adds to the problems in reaching an optimal interpretation (and also, in this *continuum* further interpretive demands are created in order to specify the place of the stimulus in the *explicit* and *implicit sub-continua*).

Despite this picture of interpretation as a *risky business*, addressees usually manage to match the intended interpretation with the help of the right contextual information.⁷ Some comments on the twelve taxonomical cases of misunderstanding follow.

(1) INTENTIONAL AND EXPLICIT NONVERBAL STIMULUS TAKEN AS UNINTENTIONAL

Often people convey a great deal of information in a non-intentional way: gestures, blushing, sweat, nervous tics, etc. suggest different emotional states which may even contradict what is being communicated by verbal means. Liars, for instance, are often given away by nonverbal messages that they cannot control (Leo, 1985; Zerman, 1997). A clear example is someone insisting that he is not nervous while sweat is pouring off him.

Many of these nonverbal actions may also be produced intentionally. For instance, we may yawn due to drowsiness, or as a hint that we want our unexpected

visitor to leave. The message conveyed might be the same, but the mediation of intentionality introduces an important difference in the outcome of interaction. In this first case of misunderstanding, the intentional nonverbal action is thought to be unintentional. In the example of the yawn, instead of a connoted interpretation of intentionality (“this person is dropping me a hint that I should leave”), the interlocutor picks up a more neutral one (“this person is drowsy; I’d better go”). Even though the subsequent action is the same (to the communicator’s relief), a misunderstanding has taken place.

(2) FAULTY INTERPRETATION OF AN INTENTIONAL AND EXPLICIT VERBAL STIMULUS

In the second case of the taxonomy, the hearer manages to locate the stimulus in the *explicit sub-continuum*. Problems arise when either the stimulus is not understood at all (due to a certain lack of encyclopaedic or background information), in which case the outcome of interpretation would be closer to *non-understanding* than to *misunderstanding*, or the hearer is unable to locate the stimulus correctly inside the *explicit sub-continuum* (due to ambiguity or problems with indexicals, for example).

Often, what has been communicated with an intention to be explicit and straightforward is misunderstood because words acquire strange or uncommon connotations in a specific speech situation. As Toolan (1991: 345) points out, people constantly use “fuzzy-edged” words in situations where one or another ‘typicality conditions’ of use is broken. In other words, “B’s perception of the conversational demand differs from A’s own perception of the conversational demand established by his utterance” (Dascal, 1985: 451). This possibility has been extensively exploited by Harold Pinter in his plays. On many occasions, characters fail to locate the exact meaning of apparently explicit information. In exchange (14), there is a request to define more clearly what was already explicit information (Pinter, 1996: 21-23):

(14) Devlin. [...] What place?

Rebecca Oh, it was a kind of factory, I suppose.

Devlin. What do you mean, a kind of factory? Was it a factory or wasn’t it?

And if it was a factory, what kind of factory was it?

Despite the lack of accuracy in Rebecca’s response, her utterance can surely be placed inside the *explicit sub-continuum*, but its interpretation turns out to be incorrect.

(3) FAULTY INTERPRETATION OF AN INTENTIONAL AND EXPLICIT NONVERBAL STIMULUS

In the third case of the taxonomy, the interlocutor is unable to access the right interpretation of some intentional nonverbal behaviour. The stimulus is indeed interpreted as intentional, but no meaning is extracted. One reason for this misunderstanding may lie in an apparent contradiction from the joint information conveyed by the verbal and the nonverbal channels.

(4) INTENTIONAL AND EXPLICIT VERBAL STIMULUS TAKEN AS IMPLICIT

Often, addressees connote an explicitly communicated stimulus and wrongly infer that a certain amount of implicit information is necessary in order to reach the

intended interpretation (Airenti et al., 1993: 315). The source of misunderstanding lies not in a shift inside the *sub-continua*, but in the preliminary inability to locate the stimulus in the *explicit/implicit continuum*. In general, as Dascal (1983: 86) points out, people tend to extract supplementary and implicit assumptions contrary to the speaker's intentions of explicitness:

no matter how exact (explicit, precise, complete) an utterance is, it is always possible to raise the further question of whether *it* is intended to be taken just to mean what it means, or not. Suppose, for example, that you use an explicit formula, such as *I request that you pass the salt*, which expresses exactly what you mean. If the context is such that a less explicit formula could be used with equal success, the listener is likely to look for an implicit meaning in what you said.

Another example fitting this case of the taxonomy would be *unintentional irony* (Gibbs, 1994: 388-390), in which the hearer is clearly adding ironical (i.e. implicit) connotations to an otherwise explicitly communicated stimulus.

In example (15), from Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* (1960: 15-16), an explicit request for information about the paper is understood as having other supplementary connotations beyond the speaker's intentionality:

(15) Gus. (*Rising; looking down at Ben*) How many times have you read that paper?
 (*Ben slams the paper down and rises*)
 Ben. (*angrily*) What do you mean?
 Gus. I was just wondering how many times you'd...
 Ben. What are you doing, criticizing me?
 Gus. No, I was just...
 Ben. You'll get a swipe round your earhole if you don't watch your step.
 Gus. Now look here, Ben...
 Ben. I'm not looking anywhere!

Clearly, the problem in this dialogue results not from a shift inside the *sub-continua*, but from a more general inability to identify the utterance as *explicit*.

(5) INTENTIONAL AND EXPLICIT NONVERBAL STIMULUS TAKEN AS IMPLICIT

It would seem that the *explicit/implicit continuum* can also be applied to nonverbal communication, in a series of possibilities ranging from the most explicit to the most connoted, and context-dependent nonverbal behaviour (*nonverbal explicature/implicature* would be the parallel terminology). The latter would require several contextual assumptions from encyclopaedic or mutually manifest assumptions for a correct interpretation, and therefore it is not directly inferred from the nonverbal action. This is typical of intra-cultural gestures which have no meaning outside the specific convention shared by the members of a community. In this sense, it would be possible, in theory, for someone to take an explicit nonverbal stimulus as if it had implicit (and maybe intra-cultural) connotations beyond its intended explicit meaning.

(6) FAULTY INTERPRETATION OF AN INTENTIONAL AND IMPLICIT VERBAL STIMULUS

As pointed out above, the more we rely on the interlocutor's ability to extract contextual information outside what can be directly interpreted from the stimulus, the more likely misunderstanding will be. In Blakemore's (1992: 131) words, "speakers make decisions not only about whether what they want to communicate is to be explicated or implicated, but also about the extent to which they will constrain the hearer's recovery of implicatures". Likewise, as Weizman (1989: 73) states, indirectness is not only "a lack of transparency, such as with the use of unusual words or ambiguous deictic references, but a lack of transparency *specifically* and *intentionally* employed by the speaker to convey a meaning which differs, in some way, from the utterance meaning. The key notion here is that of the *intended* exploitation of a *gap* between the speaker's meaning and the utterance meaning".

This is precisely what happens in this sixth case of the taxonomy. If a certain amount of information happens not to be shared by the interlocutors, for instance, an implicative stimulus will never succeed, even if, as in this case of the taxonomy, the addressee correctly locates the stimulus in the *implicit* end of the *continuum*. For example, Gibbs (1994: 362) comments that "if someone intends *John's a real Einstein* to mean 'John's stupid', then both the speaker and addressee must already share a low opinion of John's intelligence".

Metaphors and idioms are also a frequent source of misunderstandings fitting this case of the taxonomy. An example from Pinter's *The Collection* (1963: 33) is illustrative:

- (16) James You know something? you remind me of a chap I knew once.
 Hawkins. Yes. He was quite a tall lad.
 Bill Tall, was he?
 James. Yes.
 Bill. Now why should I remind you of him?
 James. He was quite a card (*pause*)
 Bill. Tall, was he?
 James. That's... what he was.

(7) FAULTY INTERPRETATION OF AN INTENTIONAL AND IMPLICIT NONVERBAL STIMULUS

If the nonverbal stimulus demands certain encyclopaedic knowledge for its optimal understanding, as happens with very intra-cultural nonverbal behaviour, the interlocutor might be unable to access the right interpretation of the stimulus. Greenham (1992) illustrates this possibility in the following passage (my translation):

An English gentleman, after tasting with delectation the drink he has just ordered—as he cannot speak French—makes a gesture of approval to the waiter. He puts together his index finger and his thumb, raising both fingers for the OK sign. The bar is packed with international customers. There is a dead silence around him and they look at him with hostility. [...] What Mr. Scott—let us call him that—does not know is that in France this gesture means zero and worthless, in Malta it is equivalent to accusing a man of being homosexual, [and] in Greece and in Corsica and Sardinia it is used for insulting someone by wishing him to be sodomised.

(8) INTENTIONAL AND IMPLICIT NONVERBAL STIMULUS TAKEN AS UNINTENTIONAL

This eighth case of the taxonomy is quite unlikely to take place. Yet, in theory, it is possible to take an indirect and intentional nonverbal stimulus as unintentional, that is, as the information of a nonverbal action which the interlocutor had no intention to transmit. Escandell Vidal (1996: 113) mentions the joke about a man who finds himself sitting opposite a beautiful woman on a train. He intentionally winks at her to show that he is (sexually) interested in her (and the interpretation of this nonverbal behaviour requires some cultural background in order to access the connoted sexual meaning of the wink). Suddenly, her husband enters and sits beside her. The poor man has to keep winking throughout the journey and hopes that there was no *implicit* intention in his stimulus. Here, the man expects that his intentional and implicit nonverbal stimulus will be taken as unintentional (that is, as an unintentional nervous tic).

(9) INTENTIONAL AND IMPLICIT VERBAL STIMULUS TAKEN AS EXPLICIT

The ninth case of the taxonomy accounts for the situation in which the addressee wrongly locates the sender's verbal stimulus at the *explicit* end of the *continuum* instead of at the *implicit* end. Example (3) above, about a character asking for money by wishing someone a Merry Christmas, would fit the characteristics of this case. Also, in exchange, (17) from the alternative comic *Viz*, a doctor refers to the patient's sexual organs euphemistically, but the patient insists on taking the most literal interpretation of his utterances:

- (17) Doctor. Well, then, let's see the patient.
 Patient. I am the patient.
 Doctor. No, no. Let's see your old man.
 Patient. My father died in 1974.
 Doctor. Come along now, let's see John Thomas.
 Patient. I know no-one of that nomenclature.

(10) INTENTIONAL AND IMPLICIT NONVERBAL STIMULUS TAKEN AS EXPLICIT

This case of the taxonomy is related to case (8) above, but here misunderstanding arises from a mistaken identification in the *explicit vs. implicit continuum*, and not in the prior estimation of intentionality.

(11) FAULTY INTERPRETATION OF AN UNINTENTIONAL AND EXPLICIT NONVERBAL STIMULUS

We are surrounded by an environment which is continuously turning into a multiple source of non-intentionally conveyed information. This *exuded* information does not reach us with the same degree of relevance. As Recanati (1993) concludes, we cannot pay attention to everything in the barrage of information which reaches us from the world around us. But, certainly, some information does attract our attention and we immediately try to attribute the most likely interpretation to this information, in spite of the lack of (source) intentionality. Context usually helps us to rule out unlikely interpretations of the *exuded* nonverbal behaviour reaching us. Goffman (1974: 440-441) shares this idea when he writes that "it is obvious that a given appearance can on different occasions have different meanings. He who cleans off his dinner

plate can be seen as starved, polite, gluttonous, or frugal. But usually the context, as we say, rules out wrong interpretations and rules in the right one”.

Nevertheless, misunderstandings of this *exuded* information do occur. In a (rather extreme) example from the alternative comic *Smut*, we can find a situation fitting the attributes of this eleventh case of the taxonomy:

(18) [*Character A watching his neighbour over a fence. The neighbour is surrounded by birds, and he is giving them bits of food*]

A: What are you doing?

B: What does it look like I'm doing?

A: You're a big softy at heart, "feeding the birds"!

B: I'm not feeding them, I'm poisoning the little bastards! That'll teach them to wake me up at 4 o'clock in the morning!!

Cognitive schemas and encyclopaedic information tend to deceive us sometimes in our tendency to select the most likely interpretation. If we see a man approaching the railway station carrying two cases, we will immediately infer that this man is about to catch a train, but he might pass by and enter a nearby building. The interpretation of this non-intentional information which was eventually correct, was blocked by the easy access to the normal and immediate interpretation of "man catching a train".

(12) UNINTENTIONAL AND EXPLICIT NONVERBAL STIMULUS TAKEN AS INTENTIONAL

This last case of the taxonomy shows how people can misunderstand *exuded* nonverbal behaviour and take it as intentional. As suggested above, it makes a difference whether a yawn by our host is unintentional or an intentional action inviting us to leave the house. In general, as Ekman & Friesen (1969) point out, although people express happiness, anger, surprise, fear, etc. unconsciously and through a repertoire of nonverbal stimuli (*affect program*), this repertoire can also be produced intentionally in a related but intermediate stage between production and reception of the behaviour (*display rules*) and, consequently, the unintentional stimulus may be amplified, neutralised, masked, etc. To a certain extent, it is likely that individuals ascribe intentionality when processing unintentional nonverbal behaviour.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper a taxonomy of misunderstandings has been proposed. The twelve resulting cases are a consequence of the combination of three preliminary *continua*: *intentional vs. unintentional continuum*, *verbal vs. nonverbal continuum*, and *explicit vs. implicit continuum*. The last one is particularly interesting for the explanation of misunderstanding. Under a relevance-theoretical framework, traditional notions of literal-indirect gradation have been rejected in exchange for a more inferential view of processing based on the number of *contextual assumptions* needed to reach the intended *contextual implication*. Problems for the right interpretation of a stimulus (and still related to this *continuum*) may arise in two complementary directions: ei-

ther addressees locate the stimulus at the wrong end of the *continuum* (explicit stimulus taken as implicit, and vice versa) or, despite correctly inferring that the stimulus is *explicit* or *implicit*, they fail to establish the position of the stimulus inside what has been labelled *explicit* and *implicit sub-continua*.

I have argued that all forms of misunderstanding can be accounted for in one (or several) of the twelve taxonomical cases that have been proposed in this paper from a pragmatic perspective.

Notes

- ¹ Since speakers can convey information through both verbal and nonverbal means, I prefer to use the intermediate concept *stimulus*, in the same way as Sperber & Wilson (1986a: 29) do.
- ² Dascal (1985) proposes different *layers of significance* in an onion-like way, starting from very straightforward and explicit information (inner layers) to information turning increasingly implicit, with contextual information becoming more necessary as more layers are added. This would also be the basis for a *semantics-pragmatics* distinction.
- ³ Gibbs (1994: 75) distinguishes the following types of literal meaning: *conventional literality* (literal usage contrasted with poetic usage), *subject-matter literality* ("certain expressions are the usual ones to talk about a topic"), *nonmetaphorical literality* (direct meaningful language with a one-to-one match between word and concept), *truth conditional literality* (capable of referring to existing objects or being true or false), and *context-free literality* (meaning devoid of communicative functions).
- ⁴ I would like to thank Sam Glucksberg for his comments on this issue.
- ⁵ For example, "an act in which the speaker says one thing and means it, but conveys a different speech act by virtue of the first" (Norricks, 1980: 34; see also Geukens, 1978: 361).
- ⁶ Unlike Grice's (1975) *implicature*, Sperber & Wilson (Wilson & Sperber, 1986: 383) define implicature as the contextual assumptions and implications which are needed to reach the intended interpretation. This definition implies that there are different degrees of implicature meaning depending on how implicitly information has been communicated (cf. Yus Ramos, 1996; Yus Ramos, 1997).
- ⁷ Optimal interpretation will be taken here not as an *exact* reproduction of the speaker's intended interpretation, since this is nearly impossible. I agree with Humphreys-Jones (1986: 109) that "S[peaker] and H[earer] are distinct individuals who have seemingly unique cognitive systems and separate auditory and vocal mechanisms, and who communicate through a medium beset by interferences. *x'* [received utterance] is therefore an approximation of *x* [pronounced utterance], and *p'* [proposition selected] an approximation of *p* [intended proposition]. Close approximation counts as equivalence" (see also Sperber & Wilson, 1986a: 230-231).

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