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Abstract

Global teams are a growing phenomenon, particularly considering lockdown practices which have made working at a distance increasingly normal. This doctoral study explored the extent to which misunderstandings develop in global working using the critical incident technique. Through the presentation of two cases, the study demonstrates that misunderstandings are more likely to occur in the presence of language asymmetry and when asynchronous media such as email are used to communicate as these do not easily afford calibration of meaning. The study found that once misunderstandings are realised the incidents was either contained or became damaging to team cohesion, leading to splits. Teams can manage misunderstandings through skilful use of technology and leaders avoiding blaming team members with lower *lingua franca* proficiency for misunderstandings rather than recognising reciprocity.

Key words

Misunderstandings, linguistics, calibration, global working, power, language asymmetries, media synchronicity, schisms, emotions

Introduction

Geographically distant work teams are often between strangers with unfamiliar communication patterns, and so conversations are more difficult to hold (Donnelly and Proctor-Thomson, 2015). During technology mediated communication when global working, talking at cross-purposes is both less obvious and harder to resolve. Given this, misunderstandings are of particular interest to studies of language in virtual teams, especially given the long-established link between language difference and shared understanding (Pietikainen, 2016). Yet, despite the various studies in the field of global working on communication breakdown (Bjorn and Ngwenyama, 2009), conflict (Vigier and Spencer-Oatey, 2018) and knowledge transfer (Welch and Welch, 2008), there are very few studies of misunderstandings in the global working field.

This deficit is concerning given that virtual work has conditions which could lead to more serious misunderstandings than would occur in face-to-face teams: the only study specifically on this topic has shown that online misunderstandings take longer and more effort to resolve, requiring engagement, commitment and buy-in (Avison and Banks, 2008). Research in the linguistics field has shown the effects of misunderstandings can be significant on both individuals and group processes, including distress, emotional disconnection, and rancour between groups (Robles, 2017). Because of this significance to communication, misunderstandings remain a central working category in intercultural communication studies (Hinnenkamp, 1999).

Given the longstanding global convergence of English as the international language of business collaboration, understanding the hidden communication patterns for speakers of other languages are more important than ever for the effective management of global virtual teams. Mandating non-native speakers to communicate in English can be experienced as denial of cultural identity (Bordia and Bordia, 2015; Laming, 2008) and even hegemonic (Piekkari et al, 2005). Yet whilst English as *lingua franca* studies in linguistics have explored misunderstandings in the context of informal, face-to-face settings, there is a gap in the global working field on the subject, where power contests and computer mediated communication (CMC) are likely to greatly influence communication including the likelihood of misunderstandings (Chen et al, 2006; Weigand, 1999).

Misunderstandings

According to Bavelas et al's (2017) pragmatics approach, mutual understanding is achieved on a continuous basis through calibration, which is a specific process for understanding new knowledge. In this process, when new information is received, the hearer responds and then the speaker provides evidence of understanding. This is a continuous, quick and efficient process which is almost omnipresent in face-to-face communication (Bavelas et al, 2017). Under this model, mutual understanding is usually a moment by moment, highly interactive process. In their analysis, calibration was followed in 97 percent of conversations undergoing conversation analysis which implies that in conventional face to face interactions mutual understanding is far more common than misunderstanding.

The wider process by which understanding occurs is described by Pietikainen (2016). Initially, hearers always unconsciously have a 'hunch' (or interpretation) of what a speaker is communicating. This hunch is not a complete understanding of the speaker and the hearer may choose to: 1) *question* the hunch leading to entering a clarification cycle); 2) conclude their

hunch is *not sufficient* leading to non-understanding, and perhaps asking for clarification or; 3) *accept* their incomplete hunch leading to either misunderstanding or understanding depending on whether their initial hunch was correct.

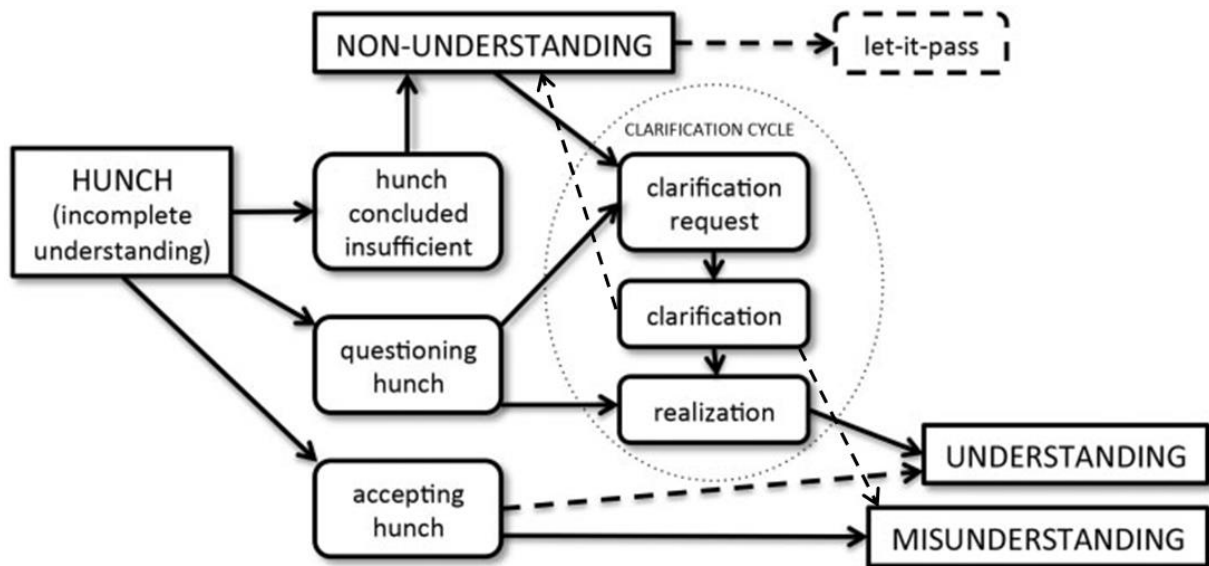


Figure 1 The process of understanding and misunderstanding (adapted from Pietikainen, 2016)

A misunderstanding is a relatively serious occurrence in comparison to phenomena such as non-understandings because, until they are made aware that a misunderstanding has occurred, interlocutors act as if their misunderstanding is correct. As implied by Hinnenkamp's types of misunderstanding, most misunderstandings are recognised, usually after the speaker notices an aberrant remark, which allows them to initiate a 'repair' process (Pietikainen, 2016). This repair can be achieved in various ways, either by a hard rejection of the hearer's interpretation or a softer correction (Pietikainen, 2016). In all communication, not everything can be said explicitly as it is not efficient to do so; much meaning in communication is therefore implicit or unmentioned in conversation (Weigand, 1999). In global teams it is likely that interrogating a speaker's meaning is more difficult, for a variety of factors explored below.

Factors affecting misunderstandings

The first factor that may affect reaching an understanding is language. Known linguistic issues in global work include impaired performance, coordination, and relationship development (Zander et al, 2011), inefficiency, (Neeley et al, 2012) increased costs and conflicts among headquarters and subsidiaries (Harzing et al, 2011), knowledge transfer difficulties, uncertainty and loss of trust (Kulkarni, 2014). Recent studies include research showing language to be associated with some hallmarks of misunderstanding: communication avoidance (Lauring & Klitmoller, 2015), subgroup development (Hinds et al, 2014), varieties of media richness (Klitmoller & Lauring, 2013) and emotional responses (Neeley et al, 2012). Some studies, such as Deterding (2013), have shown that in non-native speaker interactions many misunderstandings are left unnoticed and unaddressed. Despite these contributions, multilingual virtual teams remain understudied and underconceptualised (Hinds et al, 2011) with the majority of studies focusing on practical issues (Kulkarni, 2014), and only a single conference paper on misunderstandings in global teams (Avison and Banks, 2008).

From the linguistics literature, misunderstandings are a predictable aspect of conveying meaning in any language (Kaur, 2011) but multilingual communications are more likely to lead to misunderstandings than monolingual communications (Pietikainen, 2016; Hinnenkamp, 1999). The seriousness and frequency of multilingual misunderstandings is debated in the field. Varonis and Gass (1985) suggest interactions between native speakers and non-native speakers are likely to have serious communication issues and Beldad and Steehouder (2012) see comprehension problems as unavoidable. Yet according to Pietikainen (2016) and House (1999) there are few overt misunderstandings when English is used by non-natives; non-understandings are more common than misunderstandings. However, despite misunderstandings being less frequent than expected, linguistic diversity is undoubtedly a condition where misunderstandings occur more often than in mono-lingual settings.

Pickering (2006) suggests that the processes by which understanding is achieved in English as *lingua franca* interaction are qualitatively different from those observed in native speaker-based interaction. For instance, non-native listeners are far more reliant on deciphering phonological forms (the sounds of words) to gain understanding (Deterdin, 2005). In verbal communication, pronunciation has been described as “possibly the greatest single barrier to successful communication” (Jenkins, 2000: 83). Linguistic based misunderstandings are more likely in unplanned speech, which is “notoriously disfluent” (Brennan and Schober, 2001: 274). Misunderstandings when non-natives communicate in English can be caused by mispronunciation and mishearing, ambiguity, knowledge issues, topic organisation, and attention difficulties (Pietikainen, 2016). These factors are particularly pronounced in global working situations, where the ability to read body language, ask for clarification, hear audio clearly and the usual tolerance for lower linguistic skills may be diminished, influencing the incidence of misunderstandings, and reducing the pathways for resolving them.

A second factor affecting misunderstandings in global teams is mode of communication. Whilst most linguistics research on misunderstandings is based on studies of face to face interactions, Pietikainen (2016) has shown that the significance of a misunderstanding, that is its seriousness, is affected by the mode of communication. Weigand also finds that the quality of linguistic means inhibits understanding and stretches communicative competences (Weigand, 1999). Computer mediated communication (CMC) may also mask inter-personal differences and lessen the extent that speakers communicate in a way that accommodates linguistic differences. Relatedly, when communication breakdowns occur due to lack of shared meaning between team members, problems become more salient when teams meet face-to-face (Bjorn and Ngwenyama, 2009).

From the misunderstandings literature, it has been noted that triggers for misunderstandings in one context can ease misunderstandings in others (Pietikainen, 2016). The global working literature support this assertion, in that technology mediates relationships in a dynamic manner, depending on the groups involved: for example, the use of email may help avoid miscommunication and conflict in contexts where the group are argumentative in face-to-face communication (Lee, 2009; Lee and Panteli, 2010). One underlying factor in which medium is more comfortable to communicate in is language proficiency in different forms: for instance, where interlocutors have learnt English in a context where writing is prioritised above speaking, email may be a more comfortable communication medium, such as in Japan (Harzing et al, 2011). This implies that language proficiency is variable also by form of communication: if a

speaker must communicate through writing despite lack of proficiency it may make misunderstandings more likely.

Media synchronicity theory suggests that an understanding is more likely to form when there is high synchronicity (such as a face to face meeting) as this supports information processing and convergence on shared meaning (DeLuca and Valacich, 2006; Dennis et al, 2008). Given the rarity of face-to-face meetings, there are more likely to be unrecognised misunderstandings in global work than in co-located teams.

Whilst limited, the literature around power and misunderstandings in global teams indicates power imbalances and take-up of leadership roles generally may cause of miscommunication. Lockwood's study of virtual teams found that causes of communication breakdown include power differentials and resistance (Lockwood, 2011), whilst Daim et al (2012) found that leadership can affect the chance of communications breaking down (Daim et al, 2012). Whilst communication breakdowns occur at a work level, they require wider reflection beyond task discussions to resolve (Bjorn and Ngwenyama, 2009).

More broad sociological ideas of power in global teams are underexplored yet appear to have potential applications. For instance, the gathering of power appears more complex when viewed under Zygmunt Bauman's (2013) concept of power: the principal technique for consolidating power as the art of avoiding responsibility. Given the notorious difficulties with control for managers in remote teams, the power of avoidance is accentuated when teams are dispersed, in that it is difficult to hold people accountable at a distance. Conversely, face-to-face meetings provide a rare opportunity to consolidate power by laying blame upon others. This would imply that assigning responsibility and blame for misunderstandings in global teams by managers is reduced in global teams, unless co-located during meetings.

Research Aims

As a new topic in global work this study had a broad focus on scoping the *types of misunderstandings* with the *types of effects* rather than quantitative measurement of the degree of the effect of misunderstanding on team performance. The overall research question for this study is:

How do misunderstandings impact on communication in globally dispersed teams?

There are three sub questions to be answered as part of this overall question:

1. What types of misunderstandings can be seen in the communications of globally dispersed teams?
2. What conditions generate misunderstandings in the communications of globally dispersed teams?
3. How can the effects of misunderstandings in globally dispersed teams be managed?

Research Methods

To answer the questions, I examined critical instances of misunderstandings. This research used multiple qualitative interviewees of employees with experience of global working on temporary, inter-organisational R&D projects. I used critical incident techniques (CIT) during interviews to explore cases of misunderstandings. The use of a critical incident approach to

interviews has been specifically selected to grapple with issues of identifying significant misunderstandings and facilitating the discussion of potentially painful experiences. The critical incident approach derives from positivist paradigms but was redeveloped as an investigative tool in organisational analysis within an interpretive or phenomenological paradigm and can be used within multi-site investigations (Chell, 2004). CIT explicitly focuses on specific events that are exemplars to explore and contrast accounts. Unlike conventional interviews these incidents can be analysed explicitly and allow the researcher to combine several accounts of an incident whilst not judging which of the voices was 'truthful' (Chell, 2004).

In this study, critical incidents were identified by interview participants at the prompting of the interviewer. Once an incident was identified by an interviewee, I would probe other team members in follow-up interviews for their own experience of these same incidents. This meant that often incidents were composed of multiple perspectives on the misunderstanding. These interviews are complimented by written communications (emails and online interactions) and documents such as meeting notes and reports where possible. Given that multiple accounts of the same incident were generated and supported by documentary evidence, this provided a stronger base for theory development (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). The global working teams from which the interviewees were chosen have been selected on six criteria: variety of misunderstandings; variety of language policies; diversity of organisation type; similarity of sector; relatively recent incidents; and over two years of collaboration.

Following coding using the grounded approach of Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2012), analysis was conducted by within-group and between-group comparison of incidents to develop categorisation of incidents. The research results were checked for fit, plausibility and relevance (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). In order to consider and crystallise my own interpretations of others more thoroughly I also analysed my interpretations by following up research interviews by investigating internal policies, reports, online communications, and email records.

In total 29 critical incident interviews were completed for the study, 26 of which concerned EU collaborations and three were in the field of UK-China collaborations. These interviews were supported by a database of over 5000 emails, reports and other documents. From the interviews 48 incidents of discord in global teams were identified. Each incident of discord was coded as a case in NVivo and, following several rounds of analysis, distinct categories of discord were identified. Of these 48 incidents of discord, 17 were misunderstandings (35%), which are the focus of this paper.

From this categorisation, five topics of discord were coded (words/content, tasks, roles, norms of behaviour, purpose of teams); and the resolution status of the incident was coded (quickly resolved, resolved, partially resolved and unresolved). Following this, four broad types of 'discord' were coded (nonunderstanding, misunderstanding, hidden disagreement, open disagreement). After further analysis, sub-categories of misunderstanding and hidden disagreement were identified and coded through between-group comparison. The section below presents an analysis of this typology for misunderstandings.

Types of misunderstandings

As presented in the literature review, a misunderstanding (or nonunderstanding) is a situation where interpersonal understandings do not match (that is, there is an discrepancy between

subjective impressions) and the group are unaware of this discrepancy (that is, it is under the surface of group interactions). Misunderstandings were identified as following Weigand's (1999) definition of "a form of understanding which is *partially or totally deviant* from what the speaker intended to communicate" (Weigand, 1999: 769 [emphasis in original]). In all instances, the misunderstandings were a result of a misreading or mishearing by one party in a globally dispersed team, where the listener had a divergent interpretation of the speaker's meaning.

Overall, discord appears to be a common occurrence in globally dispersed teams. Three interviewees identified six separate incidents; there were no interviews where no incidents were identified, and only one interview which only identified one incident. This implies that incidents of discord are a pervasive and persistent phenomenon amongst participants of globally distributed teams. In contrast, significant incidents of misunderstanding were less pervasive, and only occurred in three of the six teams and so arose in more specific conditions than disagreements.

Misunderstandings in all cases followed ineffective communication, whether a recipient was engaged in dialogue or misunderstood a text. This is because misunderstandings are a result of a failure in the calibration process, where listeners (or readers) fail to effectively check their understanding before proceeding. In globally dispersed team, calibration was utilised differently depending on the synchronicity of the communication medium: sense-checking was most frequent in face-to-face meetings, and least frequent when reading written outputs. Therefore, misunderstandings were most likely to form in the gaps between face-to-face meetings and were often revealed during such meetings. Because opportunities to check understanding are so variable in globally dispersed team, some instances of misunderstandings lasted for months, in other misunderstandings lasted a matter of seconds or minutes.

As shown in figure 2 below, three sub-types of misunderstanding were found through the interviews through within-group and between-group comparison of incidents. Following grounded coding of the interviews and the identification of incidents, several rounds of categorisation were undertaken focusing on the pathways of misunderstanding and the aftermath of realisation which resulted in three subtypes being identified. Each subtype had an initial point of communication when one party misunderstood another (point A). Following this initial communication, the misunderstanding either went unrealised or was realised (point B). Where realisation did occur, it was either resolved in a way which was functional and contained within the team, or was partially resolved/unresolved, and damaged the team's cohesion (point C).

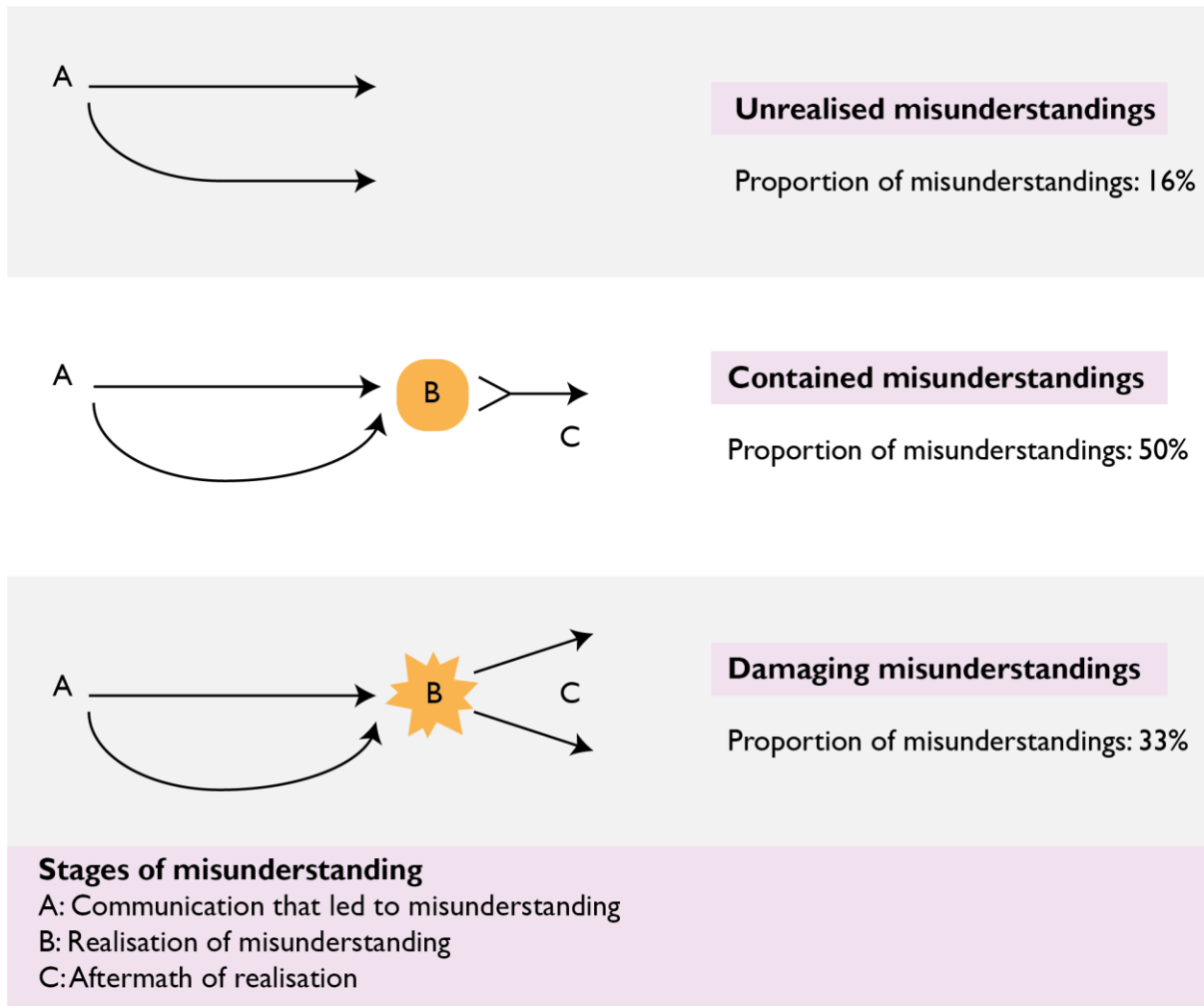


Figure 2: Sub-typology of misunderstandings identified in research interviews

An **unrealised misunderstanding** was the least commonly recorded type of misunderstanding. This type is introduced by Hinnenkamp (1999): in an unrealised misunderstanding there is no recognition of misunderstanding by the main participants, though as shown in the examples, observers may notice but do not act to address the misunderstanding. In unrealised misunderstandings, the main parties (listener and speaker) do not realise that a misunderstanding has occurred. This type of misunderstanding is, by definition, not resolvable until at least one participant recognises the misunderstanding. Two cases of unrealised misunderstanding were found through the interviews, neither of which were sufficiently detailed for further analysis.

Contained misunderstandings were the most common type of misunderstandings. A contained misunderstanding is a misunderstanding which is revealed and fully resolved, and contains any potential emotional pain with sensitivity. A contained misunderstanding has a positive or neutral impact on team relationships and processes, so that the overall group identity is strengthened or maintained. Six cases were identified from interview data.

In comparison to damaging misunderstandings, contained misunderstandings tended to be of only marginal importance to a team. These incidents were often resolved through the fast action of managers and demonstrate the value of leaders who display sensitivity, decisiveness, and

awareness of how to use a variety of communication media to resolve misunderstandings. As they were resolved quickly, none of the incidents became an ‘event’ which defined a team.

The second most common type of misunderstanding was **damaging misunderstandings**. A damaging misunderstanding is a misunderstanding which is revealed and realised but has a negative impact on team relationships and processes, leading some members of a team to split or diverge from the wider group. This is in line with social identity theory and team faultlines literature which suggests that globally dispersed teams tend to fracture into subgroups that are characterised by an *us vs them* mentality (Hinds et al, 2014; Cramton & Hinds, 2005; Metiu, 2006; Polzer et al, 2006). five cases of damaging misunderstandings were identified in the interview data.

In these cases, the damaging misunderstandings created “*unpleasant situations*” and were “*bad for relationships*” (Anna interview). The listener (who misunderstood the task) felt ashamed, whilst the speaker (who was misunderstood) was angry, frustrated, and distrustful. In addition, non-participants were often left embarrassed by the incident. In all four cases, the partner who misunderstood self-professed to have below average English language proficiency and admitted a lack of confidence in communication. There was a status effect for those who misunderstood in these incidents who appears subjugated by the process, and either made to correct their ‘mistake’ or be deemed incapable of doing so.

Presentation of cases

For illustration of this typology and to explore the effects and conditions that lead to misunderstandings in global working, two cases are presented below. These cases will be the basis of the analysis although other incidents will be also drawn upon. The incidents were selected based on typicality and level of detail in comparison to other incidents.

The first case, Incident A, was a contained misunderstanding that occurred during a global team working project. This misunderstanding was between Bianca, an Italian who teleworked from Italy in a Spanish company, and her manager, Jose, a Spaniard based in Spain. All communications in the team were in Spanish and, whilst Bianca is not a native Spanish speaker, she has a high level of Spanish proficiency. The misunderstanding occurred over email, when Jose alluded in an email that someone had performed poorly on a recent task. Bianca explained the situation in her interview:

“we were working in a project as a team. And [my manager Jose] sent out a message commenting negatively something that had happened. And I understood it was a comment on me. So I reacted very defensive. But in fact it was aimed at someone else.... We clarified it was not at me. But it was, you know, not easy” (Bianca interview).

Incident A was a case of mistaken identity, which occurred when Bianca misinterpreted a subtle critique in an email. As this upset her, she quickly emailed Jose, who responded to clarify that the email was directed at another colleague and not her. Because a calibration cycle was quickly entered, this incident was quickly resolved.

Incident B was a damaging misunderstanding over a task. This incident occurred over a series of months, beginning at the project inception. This misunderstanding was partially resolved over time but caused damage to team relationships. Unlike Incident A, this incident was recalled

by three interviewees and supported by documentary evidence, though the two primary participants did not wish to be interviewed.

Incident B occurred as part of a global team collaboration containing six partners, which began in March 2014. An Italian partner managed the project, and a Spanish partner was responsible for project marketing. This incident was regarding a document written by Maria who worked for the Spanish organisation. The instructions for the document were contained within the project proposal which stated that this document should outline the project's marketing strategy; the outline of this Plan was brief: "*The Plan analyses the stakeholders to be addressed and builds a strategy based on this*" (Project A proposal). The Project Manager, Francesca emailed a month prior to the second face to face meeting that "*It will be useful to have a marketing plan, describing which is the project marketing strategy and milestones*" (extract of email from Francesca to all team members 15-07-2014). Maria responded to this email the same day thanking Francesca for her comments. Francesca did not outline in more detail what was expected to be within scope for the Marketing Plan (besides writing this plan "*is the project marketing strategy and milestones*"), only that she expected it soon. Likewise, Maria did not display lack of understanding on this task. There was a shared assumption that Maria understood the task sufficiently to present the document at an upcoming meeting in Helsinki.

The following week, (on 22-07-2014), Maria sent a Draft Marketing Plan to all partners by email and Dropbox. This was a comprehensive document of 18 pages. The stated purpose of the document was, however, focused on the activities of the project rather than the strategy. The document described the "*relevant activities which will be undertaken to realise [Project A's] goals*" (Draft Marketing Plan). Maria asked for feedback from the whole team on the Draft Marketing Plan before 27-07-2014. She only received one response, from Francesca on the following day. Francesca's response did not mention any issue with the focus on activities and the lack of details on the marketing strategy: she wrote "*The plan is a good starting point for the [Project A] marketing indeed and it has a set of coherent tools for its implementation and relevant timing*" (email from Francesca to all team members 23-07-2014). This was the final email communication on the topic before the face-to-face meeting two weeks later.

During the meeting in Helsinki, Maria was scheduled to lead on two agenda items: a presentation of the Marketing Plan and a discussion of how to ensure the marketing was successful in the project. The meeting minutes did not mark the discussion of the Marketing Plan besides noting that "*The plan has been introduced*" (Helsinki meeting minutes). According to participants in the meeting, the presentation of the Marketing Plan led to a long and emotional argument between Maria and Francesca about the content of the Plan. Perhaps not recalling or knowing that this document had been shared three weeks before the meeting, another team member, Rosa, suggested that "*in the face-to-face meeting, [Maria] produced something that was totally irrelevant*" (Rosa interview). Francesca, apparently also not admitting or recalling that she had already largely approved of the document, became angry at the presentation "*then actually ended up in pretty much a shouting match. The [Project Manager, Francesca] was shouting at [Maria], much to the dismay of pretty much everyone. It was quite violent*" (Rosa interview). According to another team member, Anna, Francesca was largely at fault for how the interaction unfolded: "*the person who was in charge of coordinating the project was not facilitating. And maybe she was more interested in highlight the differences rather than solve the problems*" (Anna interview).

During the following day, which was the final day of the meeting, there are only two lines written in the meeting minutes for a total of eight sessions. This implies a large degree of distraction from the tasks of the meeting. According to interviewees, following the conflict, there was a lot of discussion between partners, not about the report, but about the aggression of Francesca: *“I remember after that meeting we spoke a lot with the others.... We thought we should ensure that at least we had a decent environment, in that case we don't want this environment which is very impolite”* (Anna interview). These discussions helped set some boundaries and processes for resolving issues, yet were also a distraction from several important tasks. As a result, the team decided to set up a further, unplanned meeting in Brussels nearly four months after the Helsinki meeting.

In terms of the Marketing Plan, which was the object of the misunderstanding, partner input into the document continued to be remarkably slow. Following revisions by Maria and her colleagues, a second draft of the document was sent for partner review in October 2014 (six weeks after the meeting in Helsinki) to two team members as part of the quality assurance process. However, partner inputs were slow to arrive, and the report was only finally completed nearly nine months after the first version was circulated when an upcoming client meeting focused attention. The lack of engagement of team members in marketing activities including the marketing report was never fully resolved. Maria also partially disengaged from the project following the incident, by reducing the number of face-to-face meetings she attended: she appeared in person at the extraordinary meeting in Brussels but did not attend any further meetings in person until the final conference.

Effects of misunderstandings

Each incident of misunderstanding covered in the study was to some extent a distraction from the task in hand. The damaging misunderstanding, Incident B, illustrates inefficiency most dramatically: the misunderstanding was fully realised in the middle of a three-day meeting. The arguments and discussions that followed meant that the rest of the agenda was not followed, and an extraordinary meeting had to be arranged four months later to discuss the remaining agenda items. Prior to the realisation of misunderstanding, the report was being written to wrong specification which led to an inefficiency to be later corrected. For Incident A, the mistaken identity over email, inefficiency occurred in the time taken to clarify the mistake but was short-lived due to the prompt communication from both participants.

The more sustained effects from misunderstandings can be clustered into two areas: norms of conflict management and splits in team cohesion. On norms and patterns of collaboration, Incidents B and C had an influence on the teams' 'social order', that is the patterns of interaction and norms of behaviour (Goffman, 1971). Incident A was a minor event due to the fast reactions to the incident, despite being by email. This reaction supported a group norm of quickly recognising and resolving misunderstandings in the team. Whilst Bianca in Incident A was emotive, this was not reciprocated by her manager. In contrast Incident B was highly emotive for all participants and observers at the Helsinki meeting. This event led to the recognition and normality of the presence of *“very powerful emotions in that group which was face to face and continued online”* (Rosa interview). The fact that this misunderstanding occurred in a highly emotive manner meant that the incident made a great and permanent change in the potential range of behaviours in the team. That is, whilst the behaviour of Francesca was criticized, the behaviour itself set a precedent which could be followed. Underlining this point, a later incident

in the project was viewed as “*a hangover and a legacy from all the meetings we’ve had... the frustrations sort of really blew up*” (Rosa interview).

Several incidents in the research, including Incident B, had a further legacy on norms of behaviour by creating opportunities for sensemaking and addressing underlying issues within the project team. In Incident B, the day following the realisation of misunderstanding was taken as an opportunity to recalibrate communication and roles in the team, with more regular calls, assistance in running meetings by Rosa and more discussion of the group’s norms. The emergence of a sensitive leader in Rosa, who had a particular expertise in process consulting, was a decision which helped address the communication problems in the project and establish norms of behaviour during meetings that were agreed and enforced. These actions would each benefit the team, even if they did not prevent further damaging misunderstandings later in the project due to the precedent set.

In terms of team cohesion, the negative impacts of this incident appear to have been upon Maria whose status and trust within the partnership was eroded. On Maria’s part, the purpose and contents of the report were not elaborated in detail until a face-to-face meeting occurred. Given the lack of clarity given to Maria, it is significant that some interviewees believed that Maria may have been deceitful rather than only misunderstanding. For instance, Rosa displayed distrust of Maria when saying she was “*probably very clever because she’d actually, via email everything was fine wasn’t it? So, I suppose it was very easy to kind of give that kind of a context by which things were going fine*” (Interviewee A4 (Rosa)). Both interviewees who discussed Incident B blamed Maria for her misunderstanding in the first place rather than others in the partnership such as Francesca not adding further instructions.

This blaming behaviour was significant for the team cohesion, particularly as relating to further marketing tasks. During the realisation of the misunderstanding, Francesca was overly aggressive in a way which may have amounted to a public shaming. This likely left Maria in a weakened position in the team, and the experience of being blamed for these misunderstandings may have led her to disengage from the project (her lack of participation in face-to-face meetings indicates a degree of avoidance of further incidents). Whilst she was deemed a ‘weak’ member of the team, the results of the client review suggest that the Marketing Plan document was ultimately high quality. Instead, the reviewers deemed the inputs from other partners on marketing insufficient: “*...good marketing materials were generated (see... Final Marketing Report)... However, the marketing activities could have been better harmonised among the partners*” (Final client review report). This implies that the reduced status of the marketing partner had a deleterious effect on their ability to coordinate partners, which was also shown in the slow contributions from other partners on their document.

In summary, misunderstandings in global working tended to both provoke emotional reactions and effect norms of collaboration. In damaging misunderstandings, the team also suffer a reduction in team cohesion. Conversely, such harmful events also provide an opportunity to understand and address the reasons for the incident and attempt to address them, to reduce the chance that the precedent will lead to further incidents. The effects are summarised in table 1 below.

Type of misunderstanding	Common emotional reactions	Common effects on teams
Contained misunderstanding	Anger, embarrassment	Support norms of resolution, minor inefficiency
Damaging misunderstanding	Anger, shame, anxiety	Blaming behaviour and splits in team, significant inefficiency, opportunity to address underlying issues

Table 1: Type of misunderstanding by type of effect

Factors affecting misunderstandings

Of the three factors introduced in the paper, language appears to interact in the most complex manner. The first area that language was significant was in the identity of the person who misunderstood, that is, their proficiency in the team's *lingua franca*. In Incident A, the participant who misunderstood, Bianca, was an Italian reading a Spanish language email in a team when all other speakers were Spanish natives. Maria, the subject of the misunderstanding in Incident B, was acknowledged by several interviewees to have language difficulties. According to the Project Director, she had the lowest level of English proficiency in the team, even commenting "*her English was terrible*" (Alberto interview). This appears to have affected her quality of communication and comprehension of instructions within the team. In some emails it was clear she did not understand some subtleties in instructions. Language proficiency was recognised as an issue in causing many misunderstandings: "*main issue*" is "*language... and expressing yourself. And that might create some chances for misunderstanding*" (Eva Interview). Lower proficiency, particularly in those who were interpreting written messages, appears to increase the chance of misunderstanding.

Another way in which language interceded as a condition framing misunderstanding was the effect of language differences on patterns of communication in the group. In Incident A, Bianca's angry response was in part due to writing in a non-native language. Bianca stated that she "*can't be subtle.... You can't be as careful when you're writing or speaking in a foreign language*" (Bianca interview). This was shown in her misunderstanding of Jose's subtle message and her direct reaction to his message. In Incident B, this lack of subtlety was combined with a clash of speech patterns. The team concerned was a partnership of six organisations, whose leadership consisted of three Italians. According Rosa, a dual national Italian-American, the dominance of the Italians in the group led to patterns of discourse which were notably Italian in nature: "*Every time [the Project Director] and [Francesca] were having a row. Then afterwards, they were laughing over a coffee. It was fine*" (Rosa interview). The number of high-status Italians in the group influenced the culture of communication in the group making argumentation more frequent: "*if you've got the majority of people from one country you tend to operate-- that behaviour becomes your dominant one and you forget that there're [other] people*" (Rosa interview). When this style of communication is translated into a multi-national setting it becomes "*dramatic*" and "*unpleasant*" (Rosa interview). Whilst the Italian-influenced discursive or argumentative style of communications made it easier for a diversity of opinions in the group to be expressed, it also led to situations such as Incident B where Francesca could express sincere anger and argue publicly in a way that was experienced as uncomfortable, unusual and, for Maria, humiliating.

The final major impact of language on misunderstandings in global working appears to be upon who was blamed for misunderstanding. In both Incident A and B, the responsibility for misunderstanding was borne by those with lower language abilities who had misunderstood the initial messaging. In Incident A, Bianca stated that *“because it was in another language, probably I had not understood the subtle message behind the words”* (Bianca interview). For Incident B, both Rosa and Anna blamed Maria, who was perceived as having poor English proficiency, for her misunderstanding in the first place rather than others in the partnership such as Francesca for not adding further guidelines. There was significant onus on Francesca as the manager and proposal writer to clarify any misunderstandings in instruction yet in this case she was allowed by the team to publicly blame Maria for misinterpreting brief instructions.

The second factor underlying these misunderstandings was **mode of communication**. Whilst in Incident A the misunderstanding was realised through an email exchange, this did not occur in Incident B despite an email chain of eight responses prior to the face-to-face meeting. These incidents indicate that it is more difficult to identify misunderstandings and enter calibration cycles when at a distance using written communication. The relative advantage of face-to-face and synchronous technology in this respect is shown in that Incident B was finally realised during a face-to-face meeting, months after the initial instructions were given. This dynamic was common to all damaging misunderstandings in the study: all were revealed during synchronous communication exchanges. This finding is mostly in line with MST’s notion that synchronicity can build understanding in a team. It is worth also noting that though Bianca’s skilful use of email in Incident A implies that we need not take technological determinism seriously and that asynchronous media can also benefit team understanding.

Mode of communication was a factor in determining the value of relationships in these global teams, in that colleagues who were geographically distant acted in a manner which emphasised that the relationships were shallow between members. The lack of rich relationships meant that upon realising the misunderstanding in Incident B, a public and ‘violent’ argument occurred, which risked breaking new relationships. For Bianca, following Incident A, the misunderstanding underlined her position as being a relative outsider as an Italian teleworker in a Spanish company:

“When you telework or when you are in a project where you meet for two days and then you don't see each other for like six months it's different. You know the people better, you have lunch with them you-- so then after that the relationship is more easy, I think. And also you attempt-- like in social networks --you attempt to preserve. You give more value to the relationship” (Bianca interview).

Incident A left Bianca recognising her sense of exclusion from her colleagues due to the physical distance between her in Italy and colleagues in Spain. The relative lack of rich interpersonal relationships in remote teams appears to imply that misunderstandings in global teams carry a greater risk of causing splits and reducing the cohesion of the team.

Like the splits in teams observed in studies such as Hinds et al (2014), **power struggles** also caused schisms in the global teams in this study, through the contestation over the meaning of the misunderstanding and the implications for the status of team members. In Incident A, a case of mistaken identity, Bianca reacted quickly to a perceived threat to her status in the team, as she felt she was being publicly blamed. Her anger at this situation was swiftly reacted to by the team coordinator, which removed the risk to her reputation in the group. In Incident B, a similar

situation occurred: it was publicly revealed that Maria misinterpreted a reporting task and Maria defended herself and her interpretation. However, this was not a simple case of mistaken identity which could be resolved with a quiet message, but a public, face-to-face discussion where the perceived wrongdoing was Maria's. The shared opinion that Francesca was not at fault for the misunderstanding can be seen as a manoeuvre which moved the fault to Maria: another participant even saw Maria as not misunderstanding but being "very clever" by pretending that "*things were going fine*" before the meeting when she had not actually done the work (Rosa interview). By blaming Maria, the powerful party managed to make other team members suspect her of malign intent, that the misunderstanding was purposeful rather than the consequence of flawed communication.

The action of locating blame is significant as it is not strictly necessary: in a privately revealed (and less consequential) misunderstanding such as Incident A, blame was not assigned to either the speaker or the interpreter. In a public, face-to-face setting, the responsibility for the misunderstanding was forced upon Maria, who misinterpreted sparse instructions, rather than Francesca, who delivered the sparse instructions. This reflects that for misunderstandings that transform into contestation, the relative power of the participants emerges as an important category in determining the pathway of realisation and reconciliation.

Discussion

Misunderstandings in global team working are a complex phenomenon that arise in specific situations. When language proficiency in the *lingua franca* is characterised by great deviation between team members (or when no *lingua franca* is possible due to lack of a shared language) this often created the conditions for misunderstandings to arise. This was particularly the case when the listener had lower proficiency and the speaker did not accommodate their lower language ability through simple, unambiguous messaging. Relatedly, poor use of computer mediated communication can exacerbate the incidence of misunderstandings where, for instance, asynchronous communication messages are used to come to an understanding, or synchronous communication is used to share information. These factors (language asymmetries and poor use of communication technology) help determine the frequency to which misunderstandings arise in global work.

The effects of these incidents once they occur appear to be mediated by patterns of communication in a team, and how power is wielded. Clashing communication habits can affect how a misunderstanding is dealt with particularly when participants in an incident have different communication norms regarding dialectical discussion and openness to confrontation. Differences in communication style can make the process of realisation and recalibration of understanding a painful and damaging experience in teams which have not formed effective dispute resolution mechanisms. Relatedly, when authority in a team is utilised to blame the misunderstanding upon one party (often towards the participant with lower *lingua franca* proficiency) this can be particularly damaging to the team cohesion. Conversely, misunderstandings are most often contained when the participant with greater power admits their culpability and this is reciprocated by the other participants, allowing the team to engage in redress and reflection to identify underlying issues in the team.

Language proficiency was only a major factor with serious language asymmetries, such as Incident B where the Spanish partner whose English was described as "*terrible*" (Roberto interview) by the Project Director. In such situations, if language is understood as entwined

with culture and identification, language has a multi-faceted impact on teams. Group identity around linguistic proficiency is relatively novel in the global working field. Whilst language has been associated with identity in other studies, notably Hinds et al (2014), only Tenzer and Pudelko (2017) have fully articulated that language proficiency is also a potential identity group, that is, in a global team, those with lower linguistic ability in the group's *lingua franca* may identify with each other. This implies that a misunderstanding can force participants in a global team to undergo identity work (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) with regards to their language proficiency and feel part of a group which is in some ways subordinate to the rest of the team. This process was demonstrated Roberto's comment that the misunderstanding "*caused an unbalanced situation between the ones who were with better English and the ones with poorer [English]*" (Roberto interview).

Technology also interceded with misunderstandings in a similar pattern predicted by Media Synchronicity Theory in that poor selection and use of technology contributed to incidence and resolution of misunderstandings. In both Incident A and B, the misunderstandings first occurred over asynchronous written communication, which are considered by MST as functional at conveying information but poor at building understanding. Whilst Incident A was quickly resolved due to Bianca quickly demonstrating her misunderstanding in an email reply, Incident B lasted several months and was only realised at a face-to-face meeting, the most synchronous communication medium. This implies that in the teams involved in these incidents, media synchronicity was not skilfully selected during incidents of misunderstandings which led to misunderstandings occurring and becoming damaging to the team cohesion and the task progression. In other incidents, where project managers explicitly selected suitable communication tools to build understanding (such as frequent telephone conferences, check in phone calls and emergency face to face meetings), incidents of misunderstanding were rare and quickly dealt with when they did occur.

In terms of the role of power, where power was exercised towards blame (or displacement of blame) rather than redress and reflection, it led to conflicts and so reduced the ability to compromise and make sense of why incidents occurred. Conversely, following the realisation of misunderstanding in Incident B, the team collectively diverted the meeting agenda to discuss strategies to ensure the team would function better. This finding is supported by Bjørn and Ngwenyama's (2009) paper which found that, whilst communication breakdowns manifest at the work process level, resolving such breakdowns requires critical reflection at other levels.

Critical reflection appears path dependent upon the emotional reaction of participants in a misunderstanding, as this determined whether a team was able to compromise. In Incident A, anger at a perceived injustice when Bianca perceived she was being wrongly blamed led to a swift clarification from the email author who did not reciprocate the anger. Conversely, in Incident B, Francesca's largely unjustified anger towards Maria was met by impotent anger by Maria and a long argument that derailed the remaining time of the meeting. This may imply that when anger is expressed upon realisation of misunderstandings it can be experienced as helpful when expressed by those with less power and felt as subjugating when wielded by those in positions of authority.

Following Bauman's (2013) notion of power, escaping responsibility is also a function of power in global teams. This implies that distance itself is a potential form of power, in that it is more difficult to in global teams to assign guilt and ask for redress in teams which are distant from

one another. When at a distance, members of global teams are often able to avoid scrutiny by managers: there are opportunities for all participants to avoid responsibility. This means that when misunderstandings are recognised remotely, as in Incident A, all parties are more likely to avoid taking responsibility. However, in Incident B the realisation of misunderstanding occurred in a face-to-face meeting and there the more powerful actor (Francesca) was able to evade responsibility for her role in causing the misunderstanding. This setting meant that a full discussion of the incident was more likely to occur and that discussion was likely to lead to the assignment of blame on the party with less consolidated power. This blame dynamic led to a decrease in team cohesion, yet also gave the team the possibility to engage in sensemaking at the meeting; the email exchange in Incident A afforded no such possibility.

Conclusion

Misunderstandings are caused by poor communication design and, subsequently, a deficit in calibration of meaning. In global teams, where communication is often written and language skills are unevenly distributed, there is an increased possibility for misunderstandings to occur. This study identified three overlapping factors that influence the potential for misunderstanding (language, mode of communication and power) and how these factors influenced whether a misunderstanding was contained or damaged a team. The study found that linguistic skill was a protective factor against misunderstanding, and that clashing patterns of discourse made the resolution of misunderstandings more difficult to effect. Lack of synchronicity in communication media such as email made misunderstandings more likely as calibration and checking of interpretation was less likely. This meant that misunderstandings were most often resolved in tele-conferences or face-to-face meetings. Computer mediated communication meant that the teams had weaker depth of interpersonal relationships and therefore contestation over the meaning of misunderstandings was more likely to lead to splits. These contests often led to the more powerful group assigning blame for the misunderstanding upon weaker participants, particularly where the lower status participant also had lower *lingua franca* proficiency.

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