Sociologica. V.18 N.1 (2024)
ISSN 1971-8853

The Power of Babel: When Misunderstanding can be Productive

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Submitted: January 20, 2024 – Revised version: May 18, 2024
Accepted: May 19, 2024 – Published: June 20, 2024

Abstract

Misunderstandings often lead to accidents, delays, missed opportunities, waste, and conflict in organizations. However, on occasion, they can also lead to beneficial outcomes, at least for one of the parties involved. Prior scholarship on productive misunderstandings and strategic ambiguity illustrates this with a range of examples in diverse contexts, but there is no coherent framework to understand the conditions under which misunderstandings can be beneficial. This paper elucidates three mechanisms — establishing truce, encouraging search, and creating resonance — through which misunderstandings can create positive outcomes, as well as the different boundary conditions for each mechanism.

Keywords: Productive misunderstandings; strategic ambiguity; miscommunication; communication.

Acknowledgements

Authors are listed in alphabetical order. We thank Dan Levinthal, Jeff Loewenstein, and Dan Newark for reading earlier drafts of this paper.

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1 Introduction

Millennia ago, the story of the Tower of Babel captured the difficulty of coordination without effective communication. Most of the time, our attempts at communicating with each other are sincere, and aim at successful mutual understanding. Yet our attempts do not always succeed. Axley (1984) noted that even if one assumes "[...] that most people are interested in understanding others and in being understood by others as clearly as possible, [...] miscommunication and unintentional communication are to be expected, for they are the norm" (p. 432). Misunderstandings often lead to accidents, delays, missed opportunities, waste, and conflict (Bechky, 2003; Korovyakovskaya & Chong, 2015; Snook, 2000). Consequently, organizations typically prefer to avoid or mitigate the harm caused by communication breakdowns.

But communication breakdowns are not always harmful for all parties. In a thoughtful and generative discussion, Teubner (2000), introduced the notion of "productive misunderstandings," to refer to instances where people can work together despite differences in meanings they attribute to legal contracts. For instance, an artist might accept and successfully execute a commission from a corporation, despite little convergence on the meaning of the artistic endeavor for the two parties. Subsequently, Seidl (2007) applied the concept of "productive misunderstanding" to strategic discourse. He argued that the use of the same label across organizations does not necessarily imply convergence of behavior, "[...] what appears as the adoption of a general strategy concept would have to be treated as an *illusion* based on the fact that organizations use the same labels, or sets of labels, for their own (i.e., *distinct*) constructs" (p. 206). This illusion might be productive when an organization that misunderstands a practice it is adopting ends up exploring and finding a better practice (Seidl, 2007).

Such misunderstandings can be cultivated to create opportunities for strategic action, as examined in the literature on strategic ambiguity. Eisenberg (1984) argued that leaders can employ ambiguity strategically, to support fruitful interaction and collaboration among parties with conflicting interests and values (also see Davenport & Leitch, 2007; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010). In addition, scholars have found that ambiguous strategic statements not only allow leaders to get buy-in from constituents with divergent interests, but also encourage exploratory sensemaking by followers (Gioia et al., 2012), search for new strategic actions by middle management (Sillince & Mueller, 2007; Sillince et al., 2012), and generate creative responses from external stakeholders (Davenport & Leitch, 2005).

These diverse pieces of research show that miscommunication can produce some benefits. But there is no explanation of which types of miscommunication or which contexts make miscommunication productive, thus providing no path to predictability. However, in his book *Sense of Dissonance*, Stark (2009) discusses the possibility of "coordination through misunderstanding," pointing at "circumstances in which coordination takes place not despite but because of misunderstandings," he argues that the misunderstanding in those situations are not

> some chaotic confusion or random noise. [...] It is structured, we could even say 'organized,' so long as we see organization as something that could be an emergent process and not necessarily the result of deliberate design. Above all, this is not misunderstanding of the "simply false variety." (p. 191)

Our goal in this paper is to offer a general theory of the ways in which communication breakdowns arise and the conditions under which they can generate positive outcomes. Drawing on the concept of a communication code (e.g., Arrow, 1974) we first show that misunderstandings can arise fundamentally from two sources: differences or ambiguity in communication

codes. Misunderstandings produce useful outcomes through three distinct mechanisms with their own distinct necessary conditions. We demonstrate that misunderstandings can help find truth by generating *search*, they can help create appealing arguments through *resonance*, and they can contribute to stable social relations by establishing *truce*. These outcomes are conceptually separable (though they can co-exist in particular instances). To repurpose Lave and March's criteria for a theory to be useful (Lave & March, 1975), miscommunication can be useful by producing truth (through search), beauty (through resonance), and justice (through truce), even though we might expect only falsehood, ugliness, and injustice.

The paper is constructed as follows. A review of the literature in Section 2 reveals some "science friction" (Edwards et al., 2011) in the study of miscommunication. For instance, while different authors propose ways in which misunderstandings can lead to useful outcomes, the underlying mechanisms are not the same in their discussions, and in fact require mutually inconsistent conditions. We use a simple model of communication in Section 3 to illustrate how misunderstandings arise. Section 4 introduces our typology of mechanisms through which misunderstandings prove beneficial: truce, search, and resonance. Section 5 uses our model to elucidate the role that ambiguity and other antecedent conditions play in creating each outcome. Section 6 concludes by pointing to some questions that remain open in this line of work.

2 Prior Scholarship on the Benefits of Misunderstandings

Misunderstandings leave senders and receivers of messages with divergent interpretations that they may not realize are divergent. Divergent interpretations often lead to failed coordination (as in accidents, e.g., Snook, 2000) and conflict (as in legal disputes, e.g., Solan, 2004). However, some scholars have shown that divergent interpretations can on occasion lead to positive outcomes. Two notable streams of literature that have examined positive outcomes from misunderstandings are the ones on strategic ambiguity (e.g., Eisenberg, 1984; Gioia et al., 2012) and on productive misunderstandings (e.g., Teubner, 2000; Seidl, 2007). Despite their different origins and separate development, these two literatures have considerable overlap.

For instance, Eisenberg's (1984) seminal account highlights how myths, sagas, and stories can be used to achieve symbolic convergence despite divergent goals:

> Values are expressed in this form because their equivocal expression allows for multiple interpretations while at the same time promoting a sense of unity. [...] Allowing multiple interpretations to exist among people who contend that they are attending to the same message — i.e., perceive the message to be clear fosters coexistence and enables successful coordination without consensus (p. 231).

Similarly, Teubner (2000) argues that contractual misunderstanding can create the conditions for agents pursuing multiple and contradictory logics to build on and benefit from each other's actions, ultimately coordinating on an outcome that satisfies all parties.

The two literatures also find that beyond accommodating diversity under the façade of similarity of viewpoints, divergent interpretations of communication may also serve the purpose of triggering search. Gioia et al. (2012) note:

> In times of major change, however, visionary ambiguity creates the grounds for new and divergent sensemaking. [...] At the cognitive level, individuals can alter their existing frameworks for understanding by localizing their interpretations of

> the vision to suit their own requirements and applications, thus generating a series of, for example, custom business unit plans and actions that influence the activities of the local unit in the service of the larger vision (p. 7).

Misunderstandings within organizations thus not only help preserve diversity, but also lead to the creation of further useful variation. A similar dynamic is illustrated in Seidl's (2007) account of the power of misunderstanding to trigger exploration.

However, closer inspection also reveals several points of divergence in these accounts with respect to the necessary conditions for the benefits of misunderstandings to be realized. First, the authors differ in their assumptions about interdependence between individuals. We must presume that agents in Eisenberg (1984) and Teubner (2000) are largely independent. If this were not the case, their failure to coordinate actions would reveal their mutual misunderstanding, bringing an end to the useful illusion of unity. In contrast, interdependence is crucial for Gioia et al.'s narrative (2012), though there are specific assumptions about the form it takes. This can be understood by looking closer at the key premise for their argument: that strategic changes (as opposed to incremental ones) can benefit more from the coexistence of diverse viewpoints which result from misunderstandings between leaders and followers. Gioia et al. (2012) state:

> To be sure, trying to maintain an ongoing state of ambiguity is a dangerous game, so it is essential to establish increasingly specific goals relatively soon. After the launch phase, subsequent change implementations need to limit the sense that "anything goes" and establish a core set of more specific consensual goals to be accomplished by the organization as a whole (p. 8).

Put differently, these authors argue that misunderstandings are useful when the organizational challenge is one of search, not execution. Conversely, Teubner's (2000) account suggests that a requirement for close coordination between the parties (to jointly execute an organizational action, for instance) will in fact make it impossible to sustain a misunderstanding.

The attempt to integrate the pieces from these diverse literatures into the same picture suggests a double role for interdependence: on the one hand, decoupling of agents makes it possible for them to hold divergent interpretations, which in turn enables co-existence of inconsistent actions (including search) under the pretense of unity. On the other hand, it may be the coupling between agents' actions, i.e., their interdependence, that creates the jointly beneficial outcomes to be found through search. In time, as parties discover joint actions with beneficial outcomes, the communication gap narrows, potentially eroding the truce that accommodated autonomous search. Reflecting the complex effects of interdependence on the outcomes of misunderstandings, Abdallah and Langley's (2014) case study on strategic planning shows "strategic ambiguity initially plays an enabling role as participants engage in enacting their respective interpretations of strategy. However, over time, the mobilizing effects of strategic ambiguity lead to internal contradiction and overextension" (p. 235). In this account, while initial ambiguity arising from misunderstandings between leaders and followers aided search, eventually as the landscape became better understood, the revealed structure of interdependence surfaced the incompatibility of understanding among the organization's members. Ruggedness of the payoff landscape (Levinthal, 1997), produced by the unknown nature of interdependence, is thus a necessary condition for the benefits of misunderstandings to materialize here.

Another piece of the puzzle is the role that misunderstandings play in creating motivational benefits. In Eisenberg (1984) and Gioia et al. (2012), beyond preventing conflict, ambiguity

also appears to energize search. A misunderstood message fails to transmit meaning, but it can still generate a connection between the sender and receiver, echoing studies of resonance in organizational communication (Giorgi, 2017). This motivational effect of such a misunderstanding, while not inconceivable in the situations described by Teubner (2000) and Seidl (2007), is not prominent in their accounts.

Finally, the role of strategic intent is quite salient in Eisenberg (1984) and Gioia et al. (2012). Consequently, the need for plausible deniability — to be able to offer a believable alternative explanation for what they meant — is also important for the leaders who engage in ambiguous communication. In contrast, neither party may have a strategic intent to create misunderstanding for the other in Teubner (2000) and Seidl (2007), and therefore plausible deniability is irrelevant. This suggests that the nature of the misunderstanding may be qualitatively different for intentionally generated ambiguity and that its creation may require some specific skills in language use.

In sum, while these prior studies offer a very useful set of ingredients, they do not yet lead to a clear statement of the necessary conditions that make misunderstandings valuable for at least one of the parties. In the following sections, we draw on these prior studies to conceptually separate out three distinct mechanisms through which productive misunderstandings may arise as well as the distinct necessary conditions for each mechanism.

3 A Model of How Misunderstandings Arise

Before we address whether misunderstandings lead to positive or negative outcomes, we first consider how they arise. To do this, we draw on a simple model of communication through communication codes illustrated in Figure 1. A communication (or lexical) code consists of associations between stimuli and labels (Arrow, 1974; Cremer et al., 2007; Koçak & Puranam, 2022).[1] Figure 1 illustrates codes for a Sender and two Receivers interpreting the Sender's message. The Sender may wish to communicate something about their environment (a "stimulus") to the Receiver and does so using a "label." A stimulus is any object, event, process or attribute in the environment. A label could be written, oral, or gestural, conveyed in any format or through any technology (channel). The receiver, based on the label, infers what stimulus the Sender had intended. On checking back with the Sender, if the Receiver can confirm that the inferred stimulus coincides with what the Sender intended, we can say communication has been successful and there is no gap in communication (Clark, 1996; Skyrms, 2004; Spike et al., 2017). Otherwise, a communication gap — a misunderstanding — has arisen.

Misunderstandings in this stylized model arise when individuals in a communicative interaction draw upon divergent associations of stimuli and labels. This can happen in two basic ways. First, a misunderstanding can arise because the communication codes are different (e.g., between Sender S and the receiver on the right, R2) — who differ in whether they use the word "wood" for a cluster of trees- S does but R2 does not, as can be seen from their codes. It is hardly surprising that two agents with entirely different codes (either stemming from differences in categorization or differences in labeling) fail to communicate. A code difference of this kind is presumably what led to the productive misunderstandings illustrated by Teubner (2000). The artist and the public relations officers likely construed the art project differently or

1. Formally, we can think of a communication code as the transpose of the multiplication of two matrices: Stimulus-Categories and Categories-Labels, which yields a code as a Label-Stimulus matrix. Code differences can thus result in differences across individuals in either of the two matrices being multiplied to produce a communication code.

had entirely different associations for the labels appearing in their contract, owing to the fact that they inhabited entirely different thought worlds (Fleck, 2012).

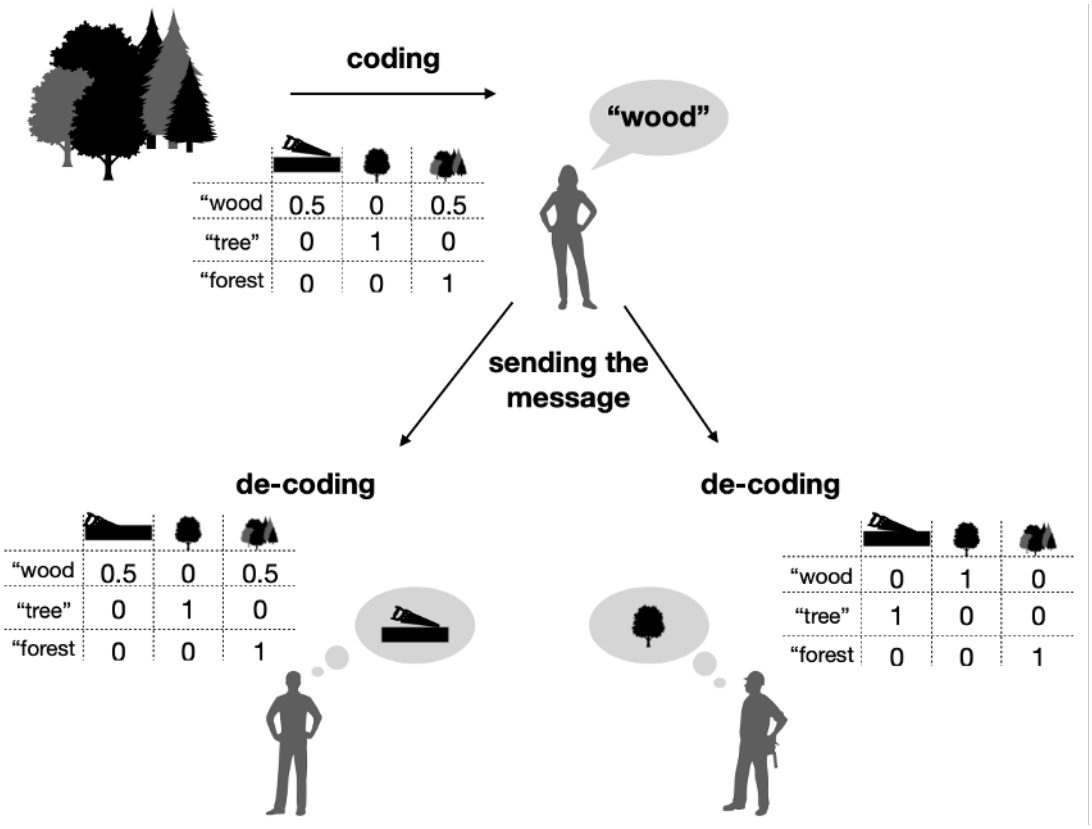

Figure 1: A model of (mis)communication (adopted from Koçak & Puranam, 2022). A communication gap arises in this picture between the sender and receiver on the left due to fuzzy codes; between the sender and receiver on the right due to dissimilar codes.

If we want to go into some detail, we can trace differences in codes to two sources. First, there may be differences in how individuals label the same category of stimuli (Arrow, 1974). Speakers of different natural languages (such as Mandarin and German) will normally have different labels for the same stimulus. Even speakers of the same natural language can on occasion draw from different associations, due to homonyms or different communal lexicons (Koçak & Puranam, 2022). For instance, Bechky (2003) describes an organization where designers and assemblers misunderstood each other because each group used the word "slide" to mean a different component. Second, there may be differences in how individuals categorize the same stimulus (Murphy, 2002). Two individuals looking at a tree may differently categorize it as a source of material or as an ecosystem, leading to misunderstandings. Keller and Loewenstein (2011) show that people in the United States and China differ in how they categorize instances of "cooperation": Chinese participants see competition within a workgroup and non-confrontational behaviors as indicating cooperation while US participants classify the same behaviors as indicating non-cooperation. Solan (2004) finds that conceptual differences, such as these, are where most of the problems arise in law, because people typically have resolved differences in terms used during contracting. While these two sources of code differences are distinct, we will not delve further into their differences, continuing to use a communication

code (which combines the acts of categorization and labeling) as our building block.

Second, misunderstandings can arise between agents that have similar, even identical, codes, if their codes are fuzzy. In Figure 1, both S and R1 use the label "wood" for both a cluster of trees and an ingredient to carpentry. While in this case S meant the former, R1 inferred the latter. The fuzziness in their codes — in particular, words that refer to multiple stimuli (homonyms or polysemous words[2]) — creates ambiguity in messages. Misunderstandings between agents that hold identical but fuzzy codes arise when each agent draws on different associations that are both part of the code. In some cases, agents may recognize the fuzziness in the code and craft their messages to avoid ambiguity, for instance by providing more contextual information (Clark, 1996). Yet, occasionally, messages remain ambiguous. For instance, in his account of a military accident in the book *Friendly Fire*, Snook (2000) describes how even common terms like "engage" could be interpreted differently by officers in different branches of the armed forces (referring to visual interception for some and shooting for others in this case) and notes that the official policy of minimum communication likely compounded communication failures that arose from these homonyms. Luckily, in many cases, agents may detect communication gaps and repair misunderstandings in communicative interaction (Schegloff, 1992; Clark, 1996). In fact, the reason that misunderstandings do not lead to more disasters is that repair is often possible through further communication.

This leads naturally to the question of what allows the different interpretations (communication gaps) to persist rather than be rectified once they occur. Misunderstandings are likely to persist when there is lack of feedback, so that agents do not realize that there is a communication gap. This is likely to arise in situations where there is no further interaction or interdependence in outcomes. In such cases people might not realize that there is a (possibility of) miscommunication. Conversely, interdependence between agents increases the likelihood of their discovery (and calls for their repair). In Figure 1, if Sender does not see R1's actions that follow from his interpretation of her message, the communication gap between them is more likely to persist. Similarly, if R1 and R2 do not interact with one another, they are not likely to find out that they have interpreted the same message differently. For instance, a leader might announce "we will henceforth be more competitive." One subordinate (holding a conception of cooperation that excludes competitive behaviors, as Keller and Loewenstein (2011) found in the US) might interpret that as precluding cooperation with rivals, while another might see it as consistent with a cooperative relationship. If the two are not in close contact and have independent roles in the firm (their actions do not affect each other), they may act in inconsistent ways, one continuing to cooperate with rivals and maybe exploring new ways to do that, while the other does not. If the two are in a close working relationship, they are more likely to experience a coordination failure that alerts them to the communication gap — for instance, one tells the rival she is terminating the plans for a cooperative alliance, while the other had intended to continue working on those plans[3].

2. Words that sound (or are written) the same but are not identical in meaning could be two different words that have very different meanings (such as with "bark" referring both to part of a tree and the sound a dog makes). These are homonyms. Identical words can also be used to mean different but related things (such as with "wood" in Figure 1). This is polysemy. We do not distinguish these further and our arguments apply to both. While synonyms are also instances of fuzziness in codes, synonyms in sender's code do not by themselves lead to communication gaps, because either label can lead the receiver to the correct stimulus.

3. Even when there is feedback, and agents realize there might be a misunderstanding, it may be difficult, if not impossible, to unambiguously establish what the different parties are referring to (for examples see Koçak & Puranam, 2022).

So far, we assumed that communication gaps arise and persist without intention. However, in some cases, Senders can choose to use imprecise language and create "non-specificity" (Gioia et al., 2012). Note that in this case the Sender must be aware of the properties of the Receiver's code. For instance, S in Figure 1 might know that R2 might infer a tree when he hears "wood" while R1 would not, and so purposefully tailors her message to create that divergence in interpretations between R1 and R2. Or, she might only know that "wood" may be interpreted differently by different receivers (without knowing exactly how R1 or R2 might interpret it) and "puts it out there" to see if different interpretations are generated. In both cases, persistence of the difference between R1 and R2's interpretations require that R1 and R2 do not interact. Senders may thus prevent revelation of misunderstandings by exploiting the structures of (non)-interaction. For instance, Battilana and Casciaro (2012) point out that change agents may exploit intentionally created communication gaps to appeal to different clusters of mutually unconnected receivers. This idea harkens back to Padgett and Ansell's (1993) theory of robust action, whereby agents in brokerage positions are able to ensure that different parties in their networks sustain different interpretations of the ego's actions.

To summarize, in situations as depicted in Figure 1, misunderstandings can occur in one or both dyads (S, R1) and (S, R2), with or without intention on the part of S. Finally, a misalignment of interpretations between R1 and R2 can also be produced, though there has been no direct communicative act between them. Mismatch can arise because the communication codes are different, fuzzy or both. Table 1 displays examples from the literature in a 2*2, with one dimension corresponding to seller's intention and the other to the structural properties of the codes. It illustrates our operationalization of the insight in prior art that misunderstandings are not attributes of the message itself but are a result of the communicative interaction (Eisenberg, 1984; Schegloff, 1987; Sillince et al., 2012).

Table 1. How Communication Gaps Arise

	Difference in codes (Each Receiver draws a single, different interpretation)	Fuzziness in code (Each Receiver can draw multiple interpretations)
Without intent by Sender	Differences in understanding of terms (Teubner 2000) (e.g. Keller and Loewenstein (2011) found that "cooperation" had different meanings for speakers in the US and China)	Differences in understanding of cultural symbols (e.g. 'Hacı Bektaş' in Massicard 2003)
With intent by Sender (requires Sender to have knowledge of Receiver's code)	Strategic change initiatives (Gioia et al 2012) (e.g. "thought leadership" may mean very different things to clinical and research faculty in a business school)	Strategic ambiguity (e.g. 'sustainability' in Leitch and Davenport 2007; 'relevance' in Abdallah and Langley 2014; green coloring and images of date trees in Gumusay et al 2020)

Finally, whether generated intentionally or not, in dyads or larger groups, due to differences or fuzziness in codes, a key aspect of misunderstandings that lead to (positive or negative) outcomes worth investigating is that they persist. A Sender may not confirm the interpretation of the message by the Receiver, because he or she is not able to do so or because he or she wants to maintain ambiguity of interpretation. In either case, a lack of feedback on the communicative outcome contributes to the persistence of communication gaps.

4 Truce, Search, and Resonance: Three Forms of Productive Misunderstandings

Next, we discern three mutually exclusive ways in which a communication gap can be useful (however it arises — intentionally or not — through fuzziness or difference between codes) and describe the necessary conditions for them to arise (Table 2).

4.1 Truce: Communication Gaps that Foster Co-existence

A breakdown in communication can support an (unintentional) *truce*, where neither side truly communicates with the other but nonetheless thinks they are in agreement. By truce, we mean not the cessation of conflict or hostility, but its prevention, despite latent disagreement. For instance, ambiguous terms in an agreement may allow both sides to think they are more similar in viewpoints than they actually are, allowing them to execute their contract without manifest conflict (Teubner, 2000). Similarly, ambiguity can be central to a public authority's discursive strategy for achieving inclusivity, despite ideological divides among key constituents (Leitch & Davenport, 2007). Ambiguity in organizational goals can even support temporary collective action by parties with divergent interests (Jarzabkowski et al., 2010).

Such a truce can persist only until the task environment produces adverse feedback on this coordination breakdown in the domain of meaning, such as when the two sides must actually implement the agreement or work together to execute a shared viewpoint, at which point the lack of underlying agreement will be revealed. However, if this is infrequent, and there are other parts of the agreement that the parties can act on in the interim, then effectively the misunderstanding has kept the conversation going in a productive manner.

Table 2. Conditions That Make Communication Gaps Useful

Form of productive misunderstanding	Nature of outcome	Necessary conditions
Truce: Accommodation / Co-existence through communication gap	Communication gaps preserve diverse beliefs, allowing parties to continue with what they want to do, possibly even collaborate in areas where their mutual understanding is not tested.	*No interdependence in outcomes or further interaction between actors (decoupling)* For communication gaps to remain undetected, the actions of the parties in the domain where communication gap occurs must be decoupled (i.e. not interdependent). If they were interdependent, a coordination breakdown would occur and the truce would break.
Search: Exploration-inducing communication gaps	Differing interpretations of the message by Sender and (multiple) Receivers generate search and exploration, possibly leading to better options. This can happen among different Receivers acting alone or through joint search by Sender and Receiver after a coordination breakdown.	*Rugged payoff landscape* Search is prompted by falling off a local peak. For communication gaps to help find better peaks, the landscape must therefore be rugged. This can arise because of interdependence between actors, or even within actors (i.e. between actions taken by an agent) who are independent of each other.
Resonance: Inspirational communication gaps	A (false) perception arises that the Receiver has understood Sender because the message aligns with pre-existing cognitive orientations and values, even though it does not succeed at conveying the stimulus the Sender actually intended. It can inspire loyalty or feelings of communion / fellowship. When used strategically, it can help leaders get buy-in from parties with diverging interests.	*No interdependence in outcomes or further interaction between actors (decoupling) and pre-existing cognitive orientations and values to be triggered.* For resonance to be a consequence of communication gap, that communication gap should persist (hence the decoupling condition).

Two parties, A and B, may find themselves in such a state of accommodative misunderstanding without intent. For instance, Massicard (2003) describes how the Hacı Bektaş festival in Turkey appeals to groups with conflicting ideologies and interests, thanks to the ambiguity (fuzziness) of symbols, "This symbolic consensus rests on the attribution of some kind of significance to a given symbol, and upon common affective sentiments toward it — not on any real agreement about its substantive meaning, nor on any homogeneity of motivations" (p. 4). Compared to other historic figures, "Hacı Bektaş is the figure who permits the widest range of interpretations, and thus is most easily appropriated for a symbolic consensus among different constituencies" (p. 5).

In other cases, people may be aware of the potential for conflict and purposefully avoid digging deeper into inferences to find out if there is true understanding. They may recognize that there is a possibility of talking past each other, yet suspend feedback, suppress the urge to find out if they are completely in agreement, instead using the communication gap as a "safe space" to pursue their own goals. For instance, Leitch and Davenport (2007) observe that governmental texts can use ambiguous terms (in this case, "sustainability") to create an inclusionary debate in a field where deep ideological divisions exist. It is plausible that Teubner's (2000) example

of communication between artists and public relations people could be purposefully created through mutual forbearance. Another example is provided by Liberman (1980), who finds that Australian Aboriginals often indicate comprehension of Euraustralian messages without actual comprehension. Such "gratuitous concurrence" sustains the interaction, without forcing either party to a commitment he or she doesn't wish to make. It is supported by interactional norms that prevent Sender and Receiver from pressing each other too hard for clarification and commitment to a particular interpretation. These norms prevent the detection of a gap by blocking the check-back process, which is crucial to guarantee gap-free communication (Clark, 1996).

In either case, the stability of accommodative communication gaps requires that they remain undetected or at the least, unacknowledged. Normally, parties to a communication initiate a repair immediately after they recognize a breakdown of intersubjectivity (Schegloff, 1992). But such repairs can also surface conflicts that were formerly held at bay, producing a form of unproductive understanding. As a general rule, we may expect that accommodative misunderstanding is most likely to appear and persist among actors who do not regularly interact, as in the examples provided by Teubner (2000) (patron and artist who are joined for a once-in-a-lifetime project) and Massicard (2003) (groups with different ideologies who visit the same religious site once a year). Sustained communication between actors is likely to reveal communication gaps (Schegloff, 1992). Even in the absence of sustained communication, if agents' actions are interdependent — that is, when they affect each other — communication gaps will lead to miscoordination and the likely discovery of these gaps.

This requirement of decoupling in communication and action poses a challenge for strategic ambiguity, where a Sender (S) intentionally and deceptively keeps Receiver 1 (R1) and Receiver 2 (R2) in a state of potential misunderstanding with respect to each other. For instance, Eisenberg (1984) argues that "strategic ambiguity promotes unified diversity" (p. 6), and Gioia et al. (2012) write:

> Ambiguity grants the necessary latitude to accommodate the varied desires of multiple stakeholders while disarming grounds for resistance. The key insight is that under an ambiguous vision, everyone can initially interpret the vision differently and still define themselves as consistent with the guiding image (p. 371).

In other words, the productive outcome of truce (between R1 and R2) is created purposefully by S, who knows about the (possibility of a) lack of understanding between them.

While the purposeful creation of a potential communication gap is noteworthy, an equally critical feature of strategic ambiguity is that R1 and R2 are members of the same organization. S benefits from accommodating diverse and potentially conflicting interpretations within the same organization. However, this makes the unintentional truce more tenuous. For the truce to persist in this situation (and thus continue to create its accommodative benefits), it is necessary that R1 and R2 do not realize the existence of a potential communication gap with S (or potentially with each other) and/or request S to clarify his or her message. This condition will be harder to meet in organizations where R1 and R2 are likely to communicate with one another or where actions of R1 and R2 are interdependent, leading to miscoordination when premised on different interpretations of S's message. In the example we quoted from Abdallah and Langley (2014) above, the communication gap was revealed with the mere passage of time, as the strategic change initiative unfolded and parties' actions on the basis of their interpretation of the strategic plan led to miscoordination. In fact, creation of a truce among conflicting

parties through strategic ambiguity may only work when there are limited opportunities for communication between R1 and R2 (Battilana & Casciaro, 2012).

This requirement of decoupling in communication and action may also limit attempts to accommodate incompatible institutional logics among an organization's stakeholders. For instance, Gümüsay et al. (2020) document an Islamic bank in Germany that created ambiguity in language and signs to support diverse motives for engagement with the bank (such as using the color green and images of date trees in their promotional materials to evoke both Islamic and environmental associations). Such a double *entendre* would be difficult to sustain if constituencies that prefer religious versus secular associations come into regular contact and discover their differences.

Strategic use of communication gaps can also give rise to long-term considerations in maintaining relationships. Eisenberg (1984) notes, "By complicating the sense-making responsibilities of the receiver, strategically ambiguous communication allows the source to both reveal and conceal, to express and protect, should it become necessary to save face" (p. 14). Plausible deniability and face-saving may be necessary for leaders to maintain followers' trust in them. If caught and blamed for duplicity, they might refer to the fuzziness in their own codes to establish plausible deniability ("I literally meant 'whack', not kill!") or synonyms that exist in some Receiver's codes but not in others ("painting houses" was synonymous with shooting people for gangsters but not others), as well as the difficulty of producing tangible referents ("That is what I tried to convey by a theoretical contribution").

4.2 Search: Misunderstandings that Induce Exploration

Eisenberg (1984) argues that as ambiguity and divergent understanding allow organizations to retain multiple points of view, inconsistent goals, and sufficient individual freedom, they can also lead to increased creativity and adaptability to environmental change. Similarly, in the academic context, Suddaby (2010) argues that while shared communication codes are essential for knowledge accumulation, "linguistically ambiguous" constructs can sometimes spark creativity. In this view, mere co-existence of heterogeneous beliefs (which communication gaps may create) is a spur to innovation and accommodation of diversity leads to further diversity.

Misunderstandings can also generate an active search for new alternatives, thus adding to the repertoire of beliefs and actions. One set of examples follows from cases of mistranslation. Seidl (2007) writes:

> the transfer of a set of labels from one discourse to another — e.g., from a consulting discourse to an organizational discourse — is associated with a (mostly unnoticed) re-interpretation, i.e., with a change of its meaning. In this sense, an organization might refer to the labels of a general strategy concept, but it will understand those in an organization-specific way that is different from the way they are used elsewhere (p. 206).

As the Receiver organization tries to make sense of the new labels, they create a new meaning. This leads to a situation in which general management concepts such as Total Quality Management have different meanings in different organizations (Seidl, 2007).

Wang & Heynen (2018) provide another example of mistranslation from architecture:

> When Postmodernism was introduced in China in the 1980s, it was stripped of its context, its philosophical position, and even the rich discussion that had

> accompanied it within the field of architecture. Simplified in translation, the phenomenon of "Jencks' Postmodernism," despite being decontextualised and de-intellectualised, was seized upon as a design manifesto rather than as resistance to Modernism. Simplified and misunderstood as it was in China, Postmodernism provided a relatively permissive method for design and an alternative answer to the question "In what style should we build?" To an extent, it freed Chinese architects from the dilemma of choosing between Modernism and Revivalism, and therefore created the conditions for the growth of pluralism in Chinese architecture (p. 357).

In this case too, even though there was no intent to communicate, the Receivers' misinterpretation of the Sender's signal (Post-modernism as an approach combining elements of Modernism and Revivalism, rather than as a critique of Modernism) led them to adopt behaviors that ended up being generative of new and diverse viable courses of action.

Perhaps it is not an accident that many examples of creative search pursuant to communication gaps are instances of translation across linguistic communities. These involve agents with different codes, which are likely to include not only different labels but also different sets of stimuli. Individuals that perceive different stimuli or that categorize the same stimuli differently may generate a greater variety of meanings in interaction.

Misunderstandings that generate exploration can arise from fuzziness, not only differences in codes. For instance, commenting on the role of imperfect understanding in teaching mathematics, Foster (2011) notes that ambiguity (because of code fuzziness) creates instability in what is known, which allows the formation of new knowledge. Posing a math question in a manner that prompts ambiguous interpretation, encouraging students to consider different aspects of the question and how its solution might differ across conditions. Within organizations, strategically created ambiguity around organizational goals may have the same effect. Gioia et al. (2012) argue that ambiguous vision statements challenge existing beliefs, destabilize established patterns of behavior, and trigger divergent sensemaking. Sillince and Mueller (2007) find that strategic ambivalence of top managers encourages risk-taking behavior by middle managers.

What is required for useful exploration is that the search landscape is "rugged," that is, there exist truly different alternative outcomes whose relative benefits are ex ante unknown (Levinthal, 1997; also see Rahmandad, 2019). Fitness landscapes map organizational actions to performance outcomes. If the landscape has many different fitness levels, agents with fuzzy beliefs about the best course of action, are likely to try many alternatives, compared to agents who are aligned in their beliefs (Koçak et al., 2023). A single peak on the other hand makes the trying out of a variety of alternatives less useful. We note that search is not always beneficial, as it takes time and there are no guarantees it can improve on the status quo.

Note that decoupling of agents, which we argued to be necessary for accommodative outcomes, is not required for successful exploration. A gap in communication among coupled actors that results in a breakdown in coordination may cause those actors to search for new meanings or experiment with new actions that they would not have under successful coordination. If, however, the outcomes of agents' actions are interdependent, some alignment in beliefs will be necessary during the search to prevent premature fixation on an inferior local peak, while avoiding premature relinquishment of a good possibility (Koçak et al., 2022). This need for coordination during the search, we think, is why the benefits of ambiguity produced through communication gaps between leaders and followers are limited under the typical conditions of stability or incremental change, as Gioia et al. (2012) note.

4.3 Resonance: Misunderstandings that Inspire

In some of the above examples, the Receivers' (mis)interpretation of the Sender's message also connects emotionally to their pre-existing understandings. In the Chinese architecture example, mistranslated texts on Postmodernism were interpreted through views of Revivalism and Modernism. In the strategic discourse example, organizations' pre-existing discourse about strategy shapes the meanings that newly adopted labels acquire. Gioia et al. (2012) argue that organization members interpret organizational goals to suit their personal needs, preferences, and interests. In other words, communication gaps can motivate accommodation and exploration by encouraging Receivers to tap into pre-existing meanings. This implies that misunderstandings can create resonance — a situation where a (false) perception arises that Receiver has understood Sender because the message aligns with pre-existing cognitive orientations and values, even though it does not match the stimulus the Sender intended.

Resonance of a message is significant not only because it creates a perception of cognitive alignment (and can therefore strengthen the accommodative effects described above), but also because it can create a perception of emotional alignment (Giorgi, 2017). A misunderstood message fails to transmit meaning, but it can still generate a connection between the Sender and Receiver. As Giorgi (2017) notes:

> This connection can be experienced at the cognitive level, as a fit with audiences' extant cognitive orientations, schemas, or understandings, or at the emotional level, as an alignment with audiences' feelings and desires. In both instances, resonance consists of striking a chord with an audience; the frame becomes important for a recipient because it takes on a personal meaning (p. 716).

This affective component of resonance is emphasized by Massicard (2003), who emphasizes the strong emotions that the Hacı Bektaş festival generates among audiences with different ideologies. While it emerges co-incidentally in this case, resonance can also be purposefully created. That it is intentionally exploited in art, to create value for audiences, is evocatively illustrated here by Richards (2010):

> What is it that makes you want to write songs? In a way you want to stretch yourself into other people's hearts. You want to plant yourself there, or at least get a resonance, where other people become a bigger instrument than the one you're playing. It becomes almost an obsession to touch other people. To write a song that is remembered and taken to heart is a connection, a touching of bases. A thread that runs through all of us. A stab to the heart. Sometimes I think songwriting is about tightening the heartstrings as much as possible without bringing on a heart attack (pp. 277–278).

Strategically created ambiguity may also elicit resonance and, therefore, be a part of effective communication by leaders. For instance, Gioia et al. (2012) write that strategic ambiguity helps leaders to get buy-in for strategic change initiatives from different constituencies with conflicting interests. Here, understanding (i.e., effective transmission of meaning) may not even be the goal as much as the motivational effects that stem from resonance. Note, however, that creating resonance with strategic intent requires not only knowledge of others' lexical codes, but also understanding of the emotions that these meanings will generate for those receivers. This additional layer of knowledge required to create an emotional response likely makes it more

difficult to create resonance than to generate diverse cognitions. Heterogeneity in the audience will compound this difficulty.

As with the truce and search, a misunderstanding by itself is not sufficient for the creation of resonance. Labels that the Sender uses must correspond to meanings that generate emotions or further cognitive associations. They need to be sufficiently familiar and have "cultural credibility" to achieve cognitive resonance and "emotional embeddedness" in the organizational setting to achieve emotional resonance (Giorgi, 2017). The pre-existence of these emotionally important understandings is therefore a critical necessary condition. For leaders to intentionally create resonance, they must be familiar with labels that have these properties. In this sense they are like crafty poets exploiting their knowledge of what will resonate with the audience while intentionally crafting communication gaps to resonate with even those with mutually inconsistent expectations.[4] For communication gaps to work this way, the pre-existence of cognitive orientations and values that the misinterpretation can exploit is necessary.

Furthermore, as with a truce, resonance also requires communication gaps to go undetected or unacknowledged. Few appreciate a literal exegesis of poetry. Where senders strategically craft messages to appeal and signal affinity to different receivers with conflicting identities, revelation of the communication gap may create distrust and betrayal on the part of Receivers. Plausible deniability may thus be especially critical to maintain when the communication gap not only creates a truce, but also resonance.

5 Scope Conditions

Misunderstandings are in the main, to be avoided (Schegloff, 1992; Clark, 1996). However, there are situations where they have benefits for at least one party. Can we predict when these arise? Or are these mere fortunate accidents? Teubner (2000) leans towards the latter view, when he notes, "There is of course no built-in guarantee that (such) a misunderstanding will be productive. You cannot say in advance whether in the famous shell, the irritation of the sand corn will at the end create a pearl" (p. 409). However, building on the work of other scholars who have progressed in identifying different conditions that enable misunderstandings to be useful (e.g., Stark, 2009), we have offered a theoretical framework that distinguishes three distinct forms of productive misunderstandings and their distinct necessary conditions: truce (which requires independence of actions), search (which requires ruggedness in payoff surfaces), and resonance (which requires pre-existing cognitive orientations and values).

While these can occur independently of each other, they may also co-occur. Consider the situation when different leaders, say A and B adopt the same label to refer to different things, e.g., operationally different management practices adopted under the same broad label such as "TQM" (Seidl, 2007). Here A and B may satisfy and accommodate support of diverse stakeholders who find the label to resonate with their pre-conceptions of what legitimate organizations should do. A and B also gain through strength in numbers because they look like two instances of the same type, even though they are not. In an effort to join them, C may generate yet other practices that can be referred to as "TQM," possibly innovating very useful routines. Thus, in the same example, we can see a misunderstanding draw the veil over a potential disagreement (truce), create useful exploration (search), and motivate stakeholders to commit resources

4. Resonance may also arise unintentionally, as in many comedic situations. Consider the case of the avid comic fan who eagerly acquires a copy of Nietzche's *Thus Spake Zarathushtra* only to be disappointed because it did not feature Clark Kent.

(resonance). Here, there is no interdependence between A, B, and C, or between any of them and stakeholders. However, each may face its own rugged landscape, and the stakeholders have pre-existing beliefs that resonate with with their misunderstandings of what A, B, and C are doing.

We believe, however, that examples of truce may be harder to find within organizational units, because these require the misunderstanding to go unnoticed. This is unlikely when agents regularly interact or when the outcomes of their actions are interdependent. Conversely, search over a rugged landscape may be more likely in organizations, where coordination breakdowns may prompt the search for better alternatives.

These conditions point to a delicate balancing act that is required of leaders who aim to use misunderstandings strategically. Plausible deniability requires the use of fuzzy language, in the hope that messages can mean different things to different people, resulting under certain conditions in truce, search, and resonance. However, it requires a certain skill and level of sophistication to know others' code and what messages will resonate with one's constituents, to be aware of the structure of interactions to maintain decoupled interpretations, and to judge when search can generate useful new outcomes rather than useless diversions.

Misunderstandings through strategic intent of the Sender can exist with or without the Receivers' knowledge. In the typical instance related in the literature, receivers never realize that there is a misunderstanding. However, it is possible to imagine receivers who realize the potential for misunderstanding. In those instances, their complicity may be required for communication gaps to persist and for benefits of truce or resonance to endure. This may take the form of gratuitous congruence as in Liberman (1980), norms that prevent subordinates to ask for clarifications, or a lack of desire on the part of receivers to truly understand the sender's intended meaning. In other words, where leaders wish to create strategic ambiguity and followers are aware of potential gaps in communication, the willingness of followers to live with that ambiguity may be necessary if they become aware of it.

As the foregoing discussion makes clear, fuzziness and the resulting ambiguity in communication are not necessary for communication gaps to arise (they may arise through differences in codes), but they can play an important role in each type of productive communication gap because it allows strategic actors to claim that they were unaware of the gap. This is useful if not everyone is interested in accommodating multiple interpretations or searching for new ones. It can also help to generate a variety of (potentially resonant) interpretations by maintaining an aura of mystery. That said, communication gaps that arise not from similar and fuzzy codes but from different codes are likely to produce more extreme versions of truce (between groups with entirely different interpretations), search (associating previously uncombined stimuli, categories, and labels), and resonance (appealing to individuals with different identities).

6 Discussion and Conclusion

This essay makes three main contributions to the study of communication in organizations. First, it organizes examples of useful misunderstandings from the literature to delineate their benefits in terms of truce, search, and resonance. Our analysis offers a new synthesis on why organizations comprising a diversity of subcultures may enjoy some advantages in terms of adaptation thanks to communication gaps. The principle that the benefits of differentiation — created by specialization and diversity — must be complemented by integration (March & Simon, 1958; Lawrence et al., 1976) is usually interpreted in terms of effective communication and coordination among differentiated sub-units and members. However, if integration is ul-

timately a matter of the absence of conflict among differentiated elements of a larger system, communication gaps may contribute to it through truce and resonance. Conversely, if temporary breakdowns in integration within and between units can trigger a search, communication gaps can play a role in those as well.

Second, we show that a simple model of communication that builds on the concept of a communication code explains that misunderstandings may arise from differences or fuzziness in communication codes, with or without intent on the part of communicating agents. This exercise permits a theoretical bridging of prior work on strategic ambiguity and productive misunderstandings that has thus far remained unconnected.

Third, the study develops a list of necessary conditions for the three forms of productive misunderstandings. While the absence of interdependence and further interaction between actors is critical for truce, ruggedness of the payoff surface (which may or may not require interdependence between actors) is critical for search, and the pre-existence of certain cognitive schema and affective associations for the receiver (and no interdependence) are crucial for resonance. In addition, if truce, search, or resonance that is occasioned by a misunderstanding is to sustain, there must be some factors at play to keep the communication gap open. In some instances, this is a structural hole in networks of interaction — whether arising from modularity in organization designs or brokerage activities of actors seeking robust action. In others, it is interactional norms of "gratuitous concurrence." In some instances, the persistence of a gap might be accidental. In others, actors may privately be aware of there being a misunderstanding but refrain from calling it out publicly in order to deliberately sustain its productive outcomes.

Future research might examine whether or how lasting tolerance and productive exchange among distinct subcultures might stem from (a series of) temporary misunderstandings. If there is mutual interest in communicating across gaps, parties might be able to construct a new code for communication, akin to pidgins or creoles in "trading zones," as Galison (1997) found in his history of physics. Galison showed that theoreticians, experimentalists, and instrumentalists in distinct communities consistently managed to collaborate by developing contact or trading languages (e.g., in the form of models) in "trading zones" (e.g, in the form of labs). In Galison's examples, it is possible to see an element of "gratuitous concurrence," preserving an agreement to forebear from interrogating disagreements in global meanings, for the sake of achieving local coordination. The pidgins that developed in trading zones enabled search, as well as creating truce and resonance among scientists who might be using terms like "mass" and "energy" in significantly different ways in their own research programs. As restricted languages, these could not translate across the research programs. However, they allowed exchange of information, while at the same time forestalling any potential conflict that could arise from theoretical programs being vetted against each other. In some instances, these pidgins developed into "creoles" within which generations of students were raised, creating new fields of physics.

Future studies may also examine how misunderstandings might scale. Even though we started out in Figure 1 with a model of productive misunderstandings as emerging at the interface of communication codes (that map stimuli with labels), our examples have illustrated the importance of the connection between these constructs to causal codes (which map actions or events with their consequences) and moral codes (which map actions or outcomes to an evaluation) (Koçak & Puranam, 2024). We see in the Hacı Bektaş example that divergent communication codes can help groups with distinct moral codes co-exist in truce. Similarly, in the postmodern architecture example, misunderstandings in communication can lead groups with distinct causal codes to engage in search. However, the more clashes that exist between the totality of codes, we might expect the potential benefits of misunderstanding to be more

tenuous, and the risk of conflict upon disambiguation of misunderstandings to be greater.

In inviting speculation about how misunderstandings can be cultivated or preserved rather than dispelled through disambiguation, our examination also contributes to studies of culture as a "toolkit" that skilled actors might use to further their ends (Swidler, 1986). As Stark (2009) notes, "whether in business, science, or finance — circuits of misunderstanding can facilitate 'circuits of commerce' " (p. 195). Actors who have knowledge of others' cultural codes and can thus identify opportunities to create truce, search, or resonance can use these to further their (personal or collective) goals.

In sum, our analysis helps to move productive misunderstandings from the category of lucky accidents to theoretically predictable phenomena.

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