The Use of Phrases Containing *misunderstanding* in German Discussion Forums

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Abstract   This article focuses on phrases which include the word *misunderstand* (*missverstehen*) in German discussion forums. The article shows that the word *misunderstanding* not only is bound to actual misunderstandings in conversation but also is used as face work in order to stabilize communication. It is not a sign of a disturbance or interruption in interaction. Rather, the aim of the use of *misunderstanding* is to stabilize interaction in the forum and construe <understanding>. Understanding occurs when the participants in the interaction can interpret the information in a message as relevant. This information is built on contextualisation cues, which make it possible for the receiver to connect an utterance to the context. Missing/irrelevant contextualization cues make the content of the message irrelevant and this causes a <misunderstanding>, since the interlocutors do not share the same understanding of the context. The <misunderstanding> is negotiated on a meta level in an interactional sequence, referred to as a *script* in this article. Each contribution in the forum sequence is considered to be a *slot* in this script. The verb *misunderstand* can be used in different slots in these scripts for specific purposes. This article shows that the distribution of specific components in the message defines these purposes.

Keywords   Pragmatics, Interaction Study, Internet, Discussion Forums, Misunderstanding, Relevance Theory, Scripts

1. Introduction

This pragmatic study[1] is based on a German language corpus with almost 600 phrases containing the word *missverstehen* in different grammatical structures (present tense, modal constructions, passive etc). They all stem from internet discussion forums with a variety of themes. The aim is to show that the phrases containing the word *misunderstanding* are used to stabilize communication in different *scripts* and are not a sign of a break or disturbance in the communication. It is shown how face saving and face threatening acts (FTAs), respectively, are handled in different kinds of scripts. This article does not deal with different kinds of misunderstandings or investigate the reasons why misunderstandings occur. It also does not attempt to show quantitatively how frequently different pragmatic functions of phrases containing the word *misunderstanding* appear in discussion forums. The article focuses on how the word *misunderstand/ing/* influences interaction in discussion forums.

Although the messages are mediated in written form, they have many of the features of spoken language. Hence, methodical perspectives are used from both text linguistics as well as CA. The development of texts and the management of contextualization cues (Gumperz 1982 [1]; Gumperz 2004 [2] Auer 1990 [3]) are very central, as is relevance theory (Sperber/Wilson 1995 [3]) which is used with the perspective that members of a discussion forum aim to develop relevance by interacting with each other. So relevance is constructed in the interaction. Within this pragmatic frame it will be shown which roles are played by theories on linguistic politeness in these conversation strategies. Therefore, this study should be regarded a contribution to the research within the field of linguistic (im)politeness and face work (Goffman 1972 [5]; 1959 [6]. The discussion forum is an excellent source for research on pragmatics in interaction, since recording and transcribing a corresponding amount of data to create a similar corpus on spoken German would be prohibitively time-consuming.

In the first section below, the medium is presented. In the second section, the function of orality, literacy and face work in the forums is demonstrated. The realization of politeness strategies follows, in order to show how they are mediated in the discussion forum. The third section deals with the difference between an <understanding>, a <misunderstanding> and a <non-understanding> in oral

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1 The article is a summary of my dissertation *Verbale Interaktion mit missverstehen. Eine empirische Untersuchung zu deutschsprachigen Diskussionsforen* (2011 [7]). The project was financed by Stockholm University.

conversation. Schegloff (1992) [8] has shown that a repair in conversation is bound to certain interaction structures. His theory is modified in order to show that a notified repair, the word *misunderstanding*, is, on the other hand not bound to a certain position in interaction, but can be used in different slots within a script, and thereby holds a pragmatic function. In the last part, the compositions of the different scripts in which *misunderstanding* can be used are presented. In this empirical section there are examples from the German corpus illustrating these scripts. The texts are translated in footnotes.

2. The Discussion Forum as Medium

Online interaction is maintained through platforms such as chats, blogs, websites, and discussion forums. This article concentrates on the discussion forum, an asynchronous form of communication. [2] There are discussion forums on all kinds of themes – horses, child care, cars, sport, politics, etc. – and the threads are organized thematically. They are stored indefinitely, which means that a conversation can go on for a long period of time. Members of a forum might want an answer to a question, to get in contact with people sharing the same problem, or to tell a story from their life:

In a virtual community we can go directly to the place where favorite subjects are being discussed, then get acquainted with people who share our passions or who use words in a way we find attractive. [...] You can't simply pick up a phone and ask to be connected with someone who wants to talk about Islamic art or California wine. [...] You can, however, join a computer correspondence with the previously unknown people you find there. (Rheingold 1995:27 [12])

Through these conversations, forum members develop a community where long time members as well as newcomers learn from the interaction (Kitade 2011:83 [13]). Since the writers are unfamiliar with each other from everyday life, they create their identities through language, and each member uses a pseudonym and can also add personal information about him/herself as age, place of residence, profession, sex, etc. Truthfulness is, of course, not obligatory, hence, such personal information always needs to be regarded as constructed. The members also need to agree to a *netiquette*, whereby they promise to act respectfully in the discussions. A member who makes improper contributions may be expelled by an administrator (see Bader 2002:69 [14]). In order to learn the norms and values of the forum, members are sometimes encouraged to act as *lurkers* before sending the first message (Sproull et al 2005:146 [15]). [3] Through this peripheral participation (Lave/Wenger 1991 [17]) they can learn the social rules and eventually become a member of this community of practice, which is vital in learning how to deal with (im)politeness in the forum (Graham 2007:758 [18]).

Another important feature of the discussion forum is that the messages can be quoted. In oral interaction an utterance must be remembered, stored and reformulated (Günthner 2000:2 [19]), which means that not all utterances are perfectly reconstructed, except well-known quotes. In the discussion forum, the members can quote a message and thereby concentrate on exactly the most relevant or irrelevant contextualisation cues in an utterance. This keeps the communication coherent.

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2 The chat may be considered a synchronous form of communication, but some researchers (Dürscheid 2006 [9]; Thaler 2003 [10]; 2007 [11]) say that this cannot be the case since the production and the reception of the message is not simultaneous. A synchronous communication would therefore, strictly seen, be oral conversation through video chats.

3 As much as 90% of the members in a discussion forum act as "lurkers" and never write one single message (Preece/Nonnecke/Andrews 2004:202 [16]).

Figure 1. An example of a forum message

There is commonly no limit to the length of the contributions – as there is in a chat – which makes the length vary significantly. Normally the forum is open to everyone who wants to read the messages, but in order to post a message, membership is obligatory. Some forums are closed to everyone except, for example, employees of a company or members of an association. In this article, only forums with open access have been used. Figure 1 shows a message from a discussion forum about Spain.

Within this conversation there is some information that is important for the other contributors. The date indicates when the message was posted. The status *senior member* not only indicates that the pseudonym "bil" has written many messages (in this case 6277), but also that he is a central member of the forum. This gives him a social power that might influence how the other writers react to his posts.

3. Orality and Literacy

Communication in discussion forums takes place at the border between written and oral conversation; that is, it is medially written but conceptually written or spoken (Koch/Oesterreicher 2007 [20]; Dürscheid 2006 [9]). The texts are created through cooperation between members, with the goal of keeping the conversation going rather than interrupting it. As traditional oral and written discourse needs to be seen on a continuum (Gee 2012:71 [21]), so do internet conversations. The texts contain characteristics of both oral and written discourse; they sometimes consist of language which sounds like chat and other times like newspaper articles or formal letters. Play with the use of capital letters, abbreviations, emoticons, action words, code-switching, etc. is an obvious feature (Zaehmah/Maros/Hamid 2012 [22]). Figure 2 illustrates the typical characteristics of orality and literacy, respectively:

Orality	Literacy
Private	Public
Familiarity	Foreignness
strong emotional involvement	Weak emotional involvement
Integration of situation and action	Parting of situation and action
Referential intimacy	Referential distance
Closeness in time and space (face-to-face)	Distance of time and space
Communicative cooperation	No communicative cooperation
Dialogue	Monologue
Spontaneity	Reflection
Free development of themes	Fixed themes

Figure 2. Characteristics of orality and literacy respectively (Koch/Oesterreicher 2007, 351 [17])

Orality and literacy are the linguistic tools by which a member can post a message and communicate informality and formality: "Informality increases the use of informal speech style" (Park 2008:2204 [23]). The use of orality gives an informal character to the message, which, in turn, is closely connected to social intimacy between the interlocutors. On the other hand, the use of written language may be used to create social distance. Since the messages are heterogeneous, they are never designed to be solely formal or informal, but instead contain more or fewer features of informality or formality, respectively:

Informality	Formality
Social intimacy	Social distance
Emoticons	No emoticons
Contracted forms of subject and predicate *hast du → haste*	Complete form of subject and predicate
Abbreviations *habe → hab*	Complete form of subject and predicate
Clustered punctuation marks *!!!, ???*	Punctuation according to written norm
Acronyms, rebus words *4ever*	Full German sentences
Lexical marked with slang, "youth language"	Higher linguistic style
T-Pronoun	V-Pronoun
action words	Complete sentences
Dialect, regionalisms	Standard German

Figure 3. Characteristics of formality/informality

These characteristics are *typical* in messages and presuppose formality/informality. Since the linguistic expressions may differ a great deal between the messages, even within the same thread, their use can be a sign of face work and politeness strategies.

4. Politeness in Discussion Forums

Politeness is important in discussion forums, since perceptions of (im)politeness correlate with the development of conflicts, and the medium plays a big role in determining polite behaviour (Graham 2007:757 [18]). A crucial thesis in this research is that communication may be seen as consisting of two aspects – relationship and content (Watzlawick/Beavin/Jackson 1967 [24]). The interlocutors do not only interact on a specific topic, but also construct relations to each other with their communication. This does not mean that the relations need to be verbally negotiated, but they are always present in communication. Park (2008 [23]) has shown evidence for *on record*, *off record*, *positive* and *negative* politeness in his data on students in a mathematics course, as well as how those students use direct and indirect speech acts to effect linguistic politeness in chats.

Brown/Levinsons (1987:74) [25] three main variables of politeness, *social distance, power* and *ranking of impositions,* cannot be used unmodified on internet communication, since social distance, power and ranking of impositions are handled differently in written conversation. In the forum, the interlocutors normally do not know each other in everyday life; instead, they construct *social distance,* for example, through the frequency and/or length of posted messages, and also the use of formality/informality in the forum. Positive politeness influences the whole group, not only the writer and recipient, in reducing social distance (Harrison/Barlow 2009:108 [26]). In German, the use of the *T*-pronoun[4] is conventionalized in the forums; hence, the *V*-pronoun marks social distance, and, thereby, can be considered impolite, since this creates too much social distance. Also, intensifying markers, such as *really* or angry emoticons, create social distance or a higher social position for the author[5], whereas smiling emoticons or softening adverbs, such as *maybe*, may be used as hedges to shorten social distance. In that way, participants orientate "to their co-participant's face and support social solidarity" (Golato/Taleghani-Nikazm 2006:318 [30]). In conversation, specific linguistic items can be regarded as 'polite':

The use of terms of address, honorifics, ritualised expressions, and speech events, indirect speech acts, etc., all of which have been considered as examples of linguistic politeness, will only be interpretable as polite forms if they go beyond their normal usage as socio-culturally constrained forms of politic behavior. (Watts 2005:52 [31])

The second parameter, *power,* is also communicated differently on the internet than in oral conversation, especially in discussion forums. Writers may gain power over other writers if they are considered to know more about a topic than the other writers in the group. The third parameter, *ranking of impositions,* is also bound to the cultural context within the forum. In order to be able to show the link between face work and the use of *misunderstanding*, the definition of a <MISUNDERSTANDING>, and how it can be separated from <understanding> and <non-understanding>, must be clear.

Understanding, Misunderstanding or non-understanding?

<UNDERSTANDING> in interaction is the result of a mostly identical interpretation of a message. This is possible in a contextualization process, where the participants arrange the contextualization cues and cohesive ties equally:

The contextualizing processes […] are achieved through links between language and participants' knowledge of situation. Language provides connections to context through contextualization cues. […] Contextualization cues (in "text") signal contextual presuppositions (knowledge about "situation") that allow the inferencing of a speaker's meaning. (Schiffrin 1994:381f [32])

This, in turn, is a product of the construction of a relevant message – the contextualization cues are relevant, and they also assemble relevance. An utterance is relevant to its hearer if it can be connected to the context the hearer has created for him/herself:

What makes an input worth attending to, is not just the cognitive effects it achieves. In different circumstances, the same stimulus may be more or less salient, the same contextual assumptions more or less accessible, and the same cognitive effects easier or harder to derive. Intuitively, the greater the effort of perception, memory, and inference inquired, the less rewarding the input will be to process, and hence the less deserving of attention. (Sperber/Wilson 2006:609 [33])

The context is a subjective aspect of communication and can never be taken for something that exists objectively, but rather, is created by language. This would, in terms of misunderstanding, mean that an utterance is seen as irrelevant if it cannot completely be connected to a constructed context – the misunderstanding self is therefore (socially) constructed in the context[6]. Though the dichotomy between a <misunderstanding> and a <non-understanding> is not clear:

Total absence of understanding is relatively rare; partial understanding seems to be more usual. It makes perfect sense to state, for instance: "I understand what you say, but I don't know what you mean by it". In actual cases of

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4 T=*Tu* informal, V=*Vois* formal addressing. (Brown/Gilman 1970 [27])
5 In this work, the theory on social positioning is not equivalent to taking a position about a specific issue, as in the positioning theory (Davies/Harré 1991 [28]), but rather concerns how people create asymmetrical relationships within that conversational situation. See Wolf (1999 [29]).

6 "Context" in this sense should be widely understood, i.e. it corresponds to both the content information bound to the discussion thread but also to face work.

misunderstanding there are only some aspects of the message that the hearer fails to recover completely, while others may be transmitted intact. (Schlesinger/Hurvitz 2008:579 [34])

According to this view, there is no such thing as <non-understanding> in communication, since interlocutors share at least some understanding about the context. To say that someone has *mis*understood something is, however, less face threatening, since this implies that most of the contextualization cues were relevant. To use *not understand* in this case implies that almost all of the contextualization cues in a message were interpreted as irrelevant. If (almost) all contextualization cues can be connected to a subjectively created context, there is a socially constructed <understanding> in the forum, whereas a <misunderstanding> is the result of a partly mutual contextualization between the participants.

<understanding> proceeds unmarked in conversation, since the interlocutors share common ground and thereby believe that they understand each other. On the other hand, <misunderstanding> and <non-understanding> are marked in conversation in a repair sequence. Schegloff (1992:1302 [8]) has shown how this is formed in sequences of oral conversation (T=*turn*):

T1	*Trouble source.* Utterance of A
T2	Incoherent utterance of B.
T3	Repair

Figure 4. Repair of a misunderstanding (Schegloff 1992 [8])

It is important to note that the second turn contains a part where the speaker cannot connect the whole utterance to its surrounding context. The contextualization is not completely wrong, but a part of it does not correlate with the utterance in the first turn. This causes incoherence and premises the repair in the third (or later[7]) turn. These sequences take place on a meta level in interaction, with the goal of enabling a transition back to the object level of language. Therefore it is important that the repair serves to construct a common context. In other sequences, where contextualization is impossible, no contextualization cues can be interpreted or arranged. This causes another sequence:

T1	*Trouble source.*[8] Utterance of A
T2	Impossible interpretation causes an immediate counter reaction: *I don't understand. What do you mean?*
T3	Repair, commonly through a reformulation or a repetition of T1

Figure 5. Non-understanding in communication

In this sequence, the non-interpreted contextualization cues are marked immediately after the troublesome utterance in T1. Schlesinger/Hurvitz (2008:570 [34]) interpret these sequences as a <misunderstanding>, but since there is no contextualization taking place in T3 this cannot be anything but a <non-understanding>. None or very few of the contextualization cues could be arranged in a context. As shown in figure 4 and 5, <understanding> is negotiated in interactional sequences. These sequences could be related to as *scripts,* which always are proceeded by the same structure. So is the case for the use of phrases with the word *misunderstanding,* and in the following section, it will be shown how *misunderstanding* in certain scripts is used in order to construct <understanding>.

5. Misunderstanding in Scripts

Misunderstanding presupposes that only a part of the utterance in T1 was understandable and is used together with replaced or extended contextualization cues in order to construct <understanding>. This is dealt with in homogenous scripts. A script is a structure that describes appropriate sequences of events in a particular context. […] A script is a predetermined stereotyped sequence of actions that defines a well-known situation. (Schank/Abelson 1977:41 [37])

A script consists of different slots represented by a message in the discussion thread. Even though Schegloff doesn't use script theory in his work on what he calls *repair after next turn*, he discovered that the turn of the repair consists of four different components (Schegloff 1992:1304 ff. [8]):

[A]   Initiator   *Oh no.*
[B]   Agreement/acceptance   *OK,*
[C]   Rejection component   *I didn't mean p,*
[D]   The repair proper   *I meant q.*

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7 Hansen/Novick/Sutton (1996 [35]) have discovered repairs of this type as late as in the 31st turn. The interlocutors then do not notice that they actually are conversing in two different contexts.

8 Bazzanella/Damiano (1999 [36]) use the term *trigger* instead of *trouble source* and focus thereby on the undetermined function of T1 as a negative influence on the following conversation. It can also have positive causes, as this article shows below. Schegloff, [8] on the other hand, focuses on a <MISUNDERSTANDING> as a problem in interaction, in that it causes problems between the speakers. This article shows, on the other hand, that the constructed repair can stabilize the communication since the phrase with the word *misunderstand* helps the interlocutors to create an intersubjective context.

These components can occur in inverted order, but they are present in repairs of actual <misunderstandings>. So, a <misunderstanding> is marked by other linguistic items than the word *misunderstand.* This article focuses instead on those phrases and what they mean, if not 'to misunderstand', which means that Schegloff's theory cannot be applied to the forum messages without adjustments, for three particular reasons:

1. Schegloff does not focus on one verbal realization of a misunderstanding. For that reason the phrase *there is a misunderstanding* is ignored as a component.
2. These phrases are almost always modified in the forum messages. The corpus shows that this has an important communicative function.
3. The acceptance/agreement marker is not used routinely in the forum messages, as Schegloff implicates in his article on repair after next turn. Instead, an agreement carries a certain function in the forum.

Since these differences cannot be covered up by the composition structure that Schegloff argues for, the forum messages are composed differently. The following components can be identified[9] in the forum message where the word *misunderstand/ing/* occurs:

[A]   Initiator   *Oh no*
[B]   Face work marker   *I think*
[C]   Phrase containing *misunderstanding   you have misunderstood me.*
[D]   Rejection   *I didn't mean p,*
[E]   Completing contextualization cues   *I meant q.*
[F]   Agreement marker   *So we agree at last.*

These components do not need to be represented by words; a [B]-component can, for example, be verbalized through an emoticon. Important is that quotes always have the function of a [D]-component, since the writer thereby emphasizes exactly those contextualization cues that are not relevant in the discussion. These components can be used in an inverted order and not all of them are used in each message, i.e. the [D]-component correlates badly with the [F]-component since the rejection of the written information in a message can be interpreted as a face threat, whereas the [F]-component, on the other hand, is used in order to avoid face threat.

The [B]-component is certainly important since it communicates face work in the messages. It can either be formulated as face-saving [B_1] or face-threatening [B_2]. It also can be left out if the interlocutors find that no face work is needed. This [B]-component in either form communicates positive or negative politeness, depending on whether social relations need to be *constructed* (negative politeness) or *constituted* (positive politeness)[10]. The composition of the

[B]-component is crucial in the definition of the three existing scripts, in which a phrase with the word *misunderstand* is being used:

Script I: Identical with Schegloff's typology. No face work in the [B]-component is necessary since the relations and social hierarchies between the communicating writers in the forum are stable.

Script II: Face saving act. The [B]-component is formulated in a friendly way in order to save the other writer's face. This script serves to enable an easy transit back to the object level of communication.

Script III: FTA. The [B]-component is formulated as face-threatened which leads to a delayed transit to the object level of language.

These scripts all serve the same function: to stabilize the communication in the thread and to enable a turn to the object level so that communication can continue, now with processed interpersonal structures. The following section shows in detail how these scripts are being used and which speech acts can be connected to a particular distribution of these components. This will be illustrated with examples from the corpus of German discussion forums. The German language is translated only in cases where it is necessary in order to follow the argumentation.

Script I: *Misunderstanding* as a marker for a repair of a true <misunderstanding>

As shown above, Schegloff's typology illustrates how a phrase containing the word *misunderstanding* is used in order to signal that a repair of an actual <misunderstanding> is necessary. This script contains three slots, where $Slot_3$ contains the word *misunderstanding*:

$Slot_1$	Utterance p of A.
$Slot_2$	B understands p as q, different contextualization. Unexpected answer.
$Slot_3$	Repair. Understands p as p and q as q and corrects p. *Misunderstanding* is bound to this position in the script.

Figure 6.   *Misunderstanding* in script I

$Slot_3$ in this script is comprised of the components [A, C, D, E]. The difference from Schegloff's analysis is that the acceptance/agreement marker is not present in the same way as in face-to-face-communication. The [B]-component is also redundant in these messages since they focus on the topic, not on the social relations between the writers in the forum. It is rather important that the repair consists of an explicit [D]-component, where these contextualization cues are rejected, and an explicit [E]-component, where these cues are replaced by other, relevant ones. In this script,

misunderstanding actually has the meaning 'misunderstanding', as the following example illustrates. The message is from the German *forum-hilfe.de*, the focus of which is the making of private web sites, and illustrates the findings of Burke/Krauts (2008 [39]) study that technical forums generally are more polite than many other types of forums, such as those that focus on political topics. Here "Muubi" and "Hoppel" discuss modems and internet connections:

> Muubi:
>
> [E] Ich würde die Fritzkarte bevorzugen, weil diese keine zusätzlich Stromversorgung benötigt und dir auch die Netzwerkkarte erspart. Und falls mal DSL ausfällt, kannst du schnell auf ISDN umsteigen, wenn es mal sein muss und du musst neues konfigurieren. Es ist doch die Fritzcard mit ISDN und LAN-Eingang oder? Wenn nicht [C] **dann hab ich dich missverstanden**.
> So far...
> CUU Muubi

Message 1[11.]

This example contains neutrally formulated language that contains no form of explicit face work. The face work is dealt with implicitly, since the writers focus on the main purpose: getting an answer to a question. The message is introduced *in medias res* with a context bound explanation in the [E]-component. In this message, there is a close relationship between the verb *misunderstand* and a <misunderstanding> since the content is focused. In the corpus there are also other examples in which face work is not totally ignored, as in the following message. The example is from *Gofeminin*, a forum to all kinds of themes. In this thread eating disorders are being discussed:

> Lucy:
>
> [E] Du solltest regelmäßig und normal essen, 1x am Tag warm, insgesamt 4 Mahlzeiten: um 8:00, 12:00,16:00 und 20:00 Uhr. Das beruhigt dein Körper, und er hört mit dem Fresserei auf. Ihn fehlen wahrscheinlich nur einige Lieferersteinen (Mineralien, Vitaminen, Proteinen, Kohlenhydrate) und er verlangt nach essen. [C] Du **missverstehst** es, und isst komische Sachen.
> [E] Regelmässiges essen ist der SCHLÜSSEL. [B₁] 🙂
> Lucy

Message 2[12]

In this example, Lucy implicates the [D]-component by giving thorough explanations what s/he thinks is a better way of solving the problem with the eating disorder. She focuses on communicating relevant contextualization cues in the [E]-component. There is a small amount of face work by the

emoticon [13] in the end, though it is not formulated in immediate connection to the phrase [C]. Face work is not very prominent in the text, and the message, therefore, is classified as Script I. In Script II face work is more explicit.

Script II and III: Face work, face threat and *misunderstanding*

The following examples will show how the context can define the meaning of *misunderstanding* when the context contains more information about the function of the word *misunderstanding* than the word itself: it takes the form of a context-bound utterance [14] (Kecskés 2000 [41]). These conversational routines (Coulmas 1981 [42]) are more or less semantically empty and are bound to a certain context. *Misunderstanding* is used within the C-component, which creates a contrast between the relevant and the irrelevant contextualization cues in the [E]- and the [D]-components respectively. This is done in a script that has two possibilities – a face-saving or a face-threatening act. The aim of these scripts is not only to create <understanding> in the interaction, by convincing the other participant of what is relevant in the discussion. The face-saving act is shown in Figure 7:

Slot₁	Pre-phase. Utterance p of A.
Slot₂	B understands p as irrelevant q and reacts with a dispute. Face saving act with a friendly formulated [B₁]-component
Slot₃	A creates relevance with an adjustment (q becomes p).
Slot₄	Agreement. B accepts the constructed relevance. Invites to an object level.

Figure 7. Script II: Model of stabilized relations containing misunderstanding

In Script II the second slot is formulated to save face and causes a frictionless turn into the object level of communication. In Script III this slot is formulated with an FTA, which in turn causes a repetition of Slot₂. The receiver answers with a contra dispute, which can be repeated optionally many times:

Slot₁	Pre-phase. Utterance p of A contains an FTA.
Slot₂	B disputes p as irrelevant q with marked face threat in the [B₂]-Component.
Slot₂ᵦ	Repetition of Slot₂.
Slot₃	Underpositioning. Relevance (q becomes p) and face work is created with an adjustment.
Slot₄	Agreement. Acceptance of the relevance and turn into an object level of language.

Figure 8. Script III: Model of face threat with misunderstanding

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11 [E] I would prefer the FRITZ-card since it doesn't demand any extra power support and also saves you the network card. And if the DSL shuts off it is possible to switch to the ISDN quickly, if you have to and you don't need to configure anything new. It must be the Fritz-card with ISDN and LAN-input or what? If not, then I have misunderstood you. So far... CUU Muubi

12 [E] You should eat regularly and normal, 1x a day warm, in all 4 meals: at 8:00, 12:00,16:00 and at 20:00 CET. That makes your body calm and he stops his gormandizing. He misses obviously only some essentials, Minerals, Vitamina Protein, Carbohydrates) and he longs for food. [C] You misunderstand it and eat strange things. [E] Regular eating is the KEY. 🙂 Lucy

13 For the use of emoticons in speech acts, see Eli/Herring (2010 [40]). See also Golato/Taleghani-Nikazm (2006 [30[) for the use of emoticons as hedges for dispreferred acts in chats.

14 Situation-bound utterance (Kiefer 1996 [39]; Kecskés 2000 [41]). "SBUs are pragmatic units whose literal meaning often differs from their communicative function" (Kecskés 2000:619 [41]). Similar utterances can be found in situations that always are formulated in the same way; for example, opening of a speech with dear ladies and gentlemen, where the audience sets the situational frame (Coulmas 1981:88 [42]).

As figures 7 and 8 show, the main structure of these scripts is similar. They both aim to reach an adjustment so that the interaction can turn back to the object level via an agreement (Slot$_4$). The phrase with the word *misunderstanding* can be used in Slot$_{2-4}$, either once or repeated. In that case, *misunderstanding* also functions as a cohesive tie. Through the repetition, the turn to the object level is prevented, which makes a restart from Slot$_2$ necessary. The interlocutors need to stabilize the social relations, which is done in the adjustment slot, Slot3, through either of the speech acts <excuse> or <justification>. In Slot$_4$ these relations and the discussed theme are agreed upon, and in order to get back on the object level, this is simply marked with an agreement. Next, some excerpts from the corpus will illustrate these different kinds of scripts.

Script II slot$_{2a}$: Face saving acts with *misunderstanding*

The second slot in Script II contains the components [A, B$_1$, C, D, E]. Though each of these components is not present in each message that can be classified as a face-saving act, the [B$_1$]-component, combined with the contrasting of the irrelevant and the relevant contextualization cues, is obligatory in defining a message as a Slot$_2$ in Script II. The following message can, without a doubt, be identified as a function of a face-saving act, but with the purpose of contrasting the earlier message. The message is from a computer forum about the Jana server, and "help me" clarifies some questions s/he had earlier in the thread:

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help me:
@ katho80
[B$_1$] Ich glaube [C] **wir haben uns Mißverstanden**.
[E] Ich komme mit dem Browser online und kann über AOL.de meine Emails abrufen usw.
Mir ging es nur darum ebenfalls mit der AOL Software online zugehen.
[D] Das ist es, was nicht funzt. [E] <u>Mit dem Jana bin ich sehr zufrieden</u>. Ebenfalls meine Kinder, da sie endlich Surfen und Chatten können.
[D]In deinem Link geht es leider darum, ohne AOL Software online zu gehen.
[B$_1$] Danke

Message 3[15]

This message contains some face-saving strategies, most clearly interacted by the connections to the addressed receiver "katho80", both in the beginning with the modalisation *ich glaube* as well in the end with the farewell *Danke*. In the previous message, "katho80" has been really face threatening by only directing to the search function of the forum, instead of delivering a suiting answer to the question. Therefore "help me" needs to maintain the relations between the interlocutors, and that is what the phrase in this case serves in order to get help with the problem.

Here also positive politeness is shown by the sharing of the misunderstanding by the formulation of the pronoun *we*. By this use it is more likely that the communication continues and that "help me" really receives the answer that s/he needs in order to solve the problem. Even though the sentence *mit dem Jana bin ich sehr zufrieden* is closely related to the content, it also has an impact on the relations since it also shows that not the whole content is being refused. If the [B]-component is face threatening, this will be delayed, because of the repetition of Slot$_2$.

Script III slot$_{2b}$: Face threatening acts with *misunderstanding*

Even though face-threatening strategies are verbalized in a forum message, combined with *misunderstanding*, there is an aim both of stabilizing relations between the writers in the forum and constructing a common context and an understanding in the communication. In this script, the purpose of the writer is to save his/her face in the interaction by reacting to the controversy in Slot$_{2a}$ with a face threat. The slot contains the possible components [A, B$_2$, C, D, E], as in the following message. The example is from a forum about children's medicine:

Carola:

[B$_1$] Hallo Dr. Behrmann,
[C] **Sie haben mich völlig missverstanden**.
[E] Ich sprach von den Ursachen, die meines Erachtens solchen "Scharlatanen" einen immensen Zulauf gewährt, und davon, was engagierte Mediziner statt empört - aber letztlich erfolglos!!! - dagegen wettern, tun könnten. [B$_2$, D] Dass Sie mir deshalb gleich "Pseudo-Gutmenschentum" unterstellen und zudem, dass ich übersehen würde, dass natürlich auch Schaden mit sog. Alternativen Methoden angerichtet werden kann, lenkt vollkommen von den Themen ab, die ich eigentlich in meinem Tread angeschnitten hatte.
[E] Bitte gehen Sie sachlich auf meinen Beitrag ein, statt etwas in ihn hinein zu interpretieren, was gar gar nicht drin steht und verbal ausfällig persönlich grob beleidigend zu werden.

Carola
[B$_2$] P.S. Für Ihre verbale Entgleisung mir gegenüber <u>erwarte ich eine Entschuldigung</u>.

Message 4[16]

In this excerpt, the phrase is immediately modified with an intensifying marker, *völlig* [totally] and social distance is also communicated by the use of the *V*-pronoun. A face threat in the previous message results in this post with several face threats within, rather as a defense than an interest of maintaining good relations. "Carola" only wants an excuse for being offended. Though, the use of a phrase

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15 @ katho80 [B$_1$] I think [C] we have missunderstood each other. [E] I come with the browser online and can download emails etc. via AOL.de. I rather meant how to go online with the AOL software. [D] That is what doesn't work out. [E] <u>I am really happy with the Jana</u>. Even my kids since they finally can surf and chat online.[D]In this link it's more about going online without AOL.

16 [B$_1$] Hello Dr. Behrmann, [C] You have totally misunderstood me. [E] I was talking about the reasons which according to me such "Scharlatans" concede as an immense approach, and what dedicated medical scientists could do in stead of shocking – but still unsuccessful!!! – fulminating. [B$_2$, D] That You accuse me of being a "Pseudo-do-gooder" and that I should have missed that of course also damage could be done with alternative medicine is totally deviated from the themes that I rather wanted to discuss in my thread. [E] Please read my post objectively in stead of interpreting something that it doesn't say at all and then abuse me personally .
Carola
[B$_2$] P.S. I expect an apology for your verbal derail.

containing the word *misunderstand* is interesting, since it on the other hand is less face threatening than saying Dr Behrmann would not have understood at all. In the [E]-components "Carola" defines the face threatening passages and clarifies them, which together with the imperative at the end, where she demands an apology, construes relations between the interlocutors.

There are two possible reactions to this message: either the receiver understands the reason for the interpreted face threat and composes a message with an essential face-saving act within it, as in Slot$_2$ in script II, which enables a direct turn into the adjustment phase in order to stabilize the communication immediately. Or the receiver does not see a reason for "Carola's" reaction and responds with a message of the same character – Slot$_{2b}$ is repeated. In that case, the sequence will expand and the turn to the object level will be further delayed. The use of *misunderstanding* should enable the possibility of leading the communication over to an adjustment phase, but this can only succeed if the message is modified by face-saving strategies.

Slot$_3$ and Slot$_4$: Excuse, justification and agreement

According to the theory on accounts (Benoit 1995 [43]; Scott/Lyman 1968 [44]) a <justification> and an <excuse>[17] are negotiated in sequences. According to Scott/Lyman [44] (1968), an <excuse> is present when the speaker realizes the negativity of an action but will not take any responsibility for it – *sorry I'm late, but I missed the bus.* On the other hand, a <justification> appears when the speaker does not realize any negativity in an action but takes responsibility for it – *Yes you are late, but it's not that bad.*

According to the analysis of the distribution of the components within a forum message, speech acts (at least those represented by the word *misunderstanding*) do not need to be characterized by semantic values. A <justification> and an <excuse> respectively can be defined through a) position in script, b) grammatical person as subject and c) distribution of the components [A, B$_1$, C, E]. Pragmatic rules on politeness restrict the possible grammatical person as subject of an <excuse> or a <justification>. 1st ps. can say *sorry I'm late, but I missed the bus*, whereas it is not possible to say *sorry you are late, but you missed the bus.* An <excuse> must consequently be uttered by the 1st ps sg/pl. Similarly, it is possible for a person to justify another person's actions: *Oh you're late, but it's not that bad* is a possible utterance, but it is, in many contexts, arrogant to say *oh I'm late but it's not that bad.* An <excuse> uttered with a phrase containing *misunderstanding* is realized as follows in this excerpt[18]:

Unknown:
[A] oh ruben, [C] **ich missverstand dich** [E] und interpretierte willkürlich deine aussage falsch

Message 5[19]

Here the interlocutor takes the whole responsibility for the lack of understanding and takes also a lower social position. The excuse is clear since there is an explanation to the misunderstanding in the [E]-component, which mediates the reason for the <misunderstanding> and thereby saves the face of the author. This functions slightly differently in a <justification>, only with the difference that one person is labelling the action of another speaker. Below in a forum about Computer, "Rambo" justifies the action of "MACaerer":

Rambo:
Zitat von MACaerer: *System-SSD, du meinst wohl HDD? **Oder habe ich da was missverstanden.** Kontrolliere das mal sicherheitshalber ob der Zugriffspfad auf das Benutzerverrzeichenis der SSD oder der HDD zeigt (System-Einstellung "Benutzer"). Die von dir gepostete Liste ist ja von der SSD*   *Der Trash wird automatisch angelegt und zwar auf dem aktiven Benutzerverzeichnis, selber kannst du da nichts anlegen, bzw. der selber angelegte Trash wird nicht als solcher akzeptiert. /MACaerer*   [D] **Dann hast du was missverstanden**, [B$_1$] aber ist ja nicht schlimm! [E]Auf der eingebauten SSD befindet sich das System inklusive Benutzer.   Auf der HDD befinden sich nur Daten, wie Fotos, Musik, etc. Und das löschen von der HDD funktioniert nicht mehr gescheit. Der Benutzerordner liegt definitiv auf der SSD: /Volumes/SSD/Users/"Benutzername"

Message 6[20]

In this example, the justifying marker is labelled within the [B$_1$]-component since it formulates a face-saving act. The writer justifies the action of the receiver in the interaction, who could not arrange the information in the same way as the intended receiver of this message. The phrase *aber ist ja nicht schlimm* [but it's not that bad] neutralizes the negativity of the action and thereby emphasizes face work.

An <agreement>[21], on the other hand, differs in structure from these two speech acts. Firstly, it takes place in Slot$_4$ and concludes the script before the communication reaches the

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17 In German both excuse and apology are translated with *entschuldigung*. With the criteria of Scott/Lyman [44] an <APOLOGY> should be an action where the negativity is realized and the speaker takes responsibility for it. The social positions are defined and there is an accepted hierarchy between the interlocutors, but apology badly illustrates the accepted relations in this phase after the negotiating in slot$_{2-3}$. Hence the term agreement will be used as label for slot$_4$.

18 Unfortunately no context can be given to it since the forum has been deleted from the internet by the time this article was written.

19 *[A] oh ruben, [C] I missunderstood you [E] and interpreted your message randomly wrong*

20 Quote from MACaerer: System-SSD, you mean HDD or what? Or have I misunderstood something? Check it just in case if the access path shows it in the user index of the SSD or the HDD (system approach "user"). The list you've posted is from the SSD. The trash is automatically applied, the active user index indeed, you can't apply anything of it yourself and the applied trash will not be accepted respectively. MACaerer.

Then you have misunderstood something, but it's not that bad. The system and the user are in the embedded SSD. In the HDD there are any data such as photos, music etc.. And formatting the HDD doesn't work so simple anymore. The user folder is definitely on the SSD: Volumes/SSD/Users/"Benutzername"

21 This agreement is not comparable with Schegloff's (1992 [8]) agreement component, since that component rather is used as a CBU. In this script the agreement component has a semantic value and cannot be regarded a CBU, since it modifies the phrase containing misunderstanding.

object level. Secondly, it uses other components, namely [A, B_1, C, F]. There is no contrasting element of relevant and irrelevant contextualization cues in this slot, since any FTA has a communicative function in order to avoid a restart in $Slot_2$. An agreement can be formulated in a forum message containing *misunderstanding* as in Message 7. The message is from the *Spiegel*-forum and the interlocutors discuss travelling by train:

Robert_Rostock
n jetzt:hördochauf *... Ich hab auch nirgendwo Gewalt gegen Bedienstete der Bahn befürwortet. Lesen will gelernt sein (mal so als Hinweis an einen anderen Beitragsschreiber)* [F] Stimmt. [C] **Das hatte ich bei Ihnen etwas missverstanden**. [B_1] Tut mir leid, dass ich den Falschen erwischt habe.

Message 7[22]

The quote contains the contrasting elements that were communicated in the previous message and therefore serves as a [D]-component. In this case it communicates a (contra) dispute in order to explain the point of position in the discussion. This is accepted by "Robert.Rostock" and in order to quit this meta level and go back to the object level in the discussion, s/he formulates an agreement, which also introduces the answer. The phrase with *misunderstanding* is then accompanied by face work. In an agreement it may be necessary to mention the irrelevant contextualization cues, but it can be a face threat to accentuate one's own opinion. The missing [E]-component is, therefore, an important feature of the agreement slot.

Although this study should under no circumstances be seen as a quantitative study, it should be mentioned that *misunderstanding* as agreement is very rare. Of the almost 600 examples, only 4 contain this distribution of these components. The most common variants are the face-saving acts in $Slot_2$ as well as the neutral use as an actual <misunderstanding>. Face threats are not as common as one might think, which shows that people really try to create a respectful writing climate in these forums. Due to interpretation variation, no numbers for these different types can be presented, since such results only would be misleading.

For future research, it could be of interest to investigate which kind of topics might influence a specific use of the word *misunderstanding*. The research of Burke/Kraut (2008 [38]) has shown that some topics, for instance technical ones, are discussed more politely than others, so it would be interesting to investigate how people deal with linguistic politeness in these threads. Since this study is done only on German discussion forums, it could also be of interest to do a

cross-cultural study with the same method in other languages. Another interesting subject of research is to make a diachronic study of the use of emoticons together with these phrases.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this article was to concentrate on some possible functions of the word *missverstehen* (misunderstand) in German discussion forums. The main point was that the word *missverstehen* does not directly correlate with a real <misunderstanding>; however, misunderstandings were not the primary focus. So this was not a study about communication breakdowns in general, but rather how interaction in discussion forums can be managed with the support of phrases containing the word *missverstehen*. A theoretical point of departure was that complete understanding does not exist, since this is socially constructed in communication. Hence *misunderstand* can serve social purposes, for example to constitute or construct social relations.

Since understanding is a condition of computed information, relevance theory was used in order to describe how a <misunderstanding> can be separated from a <non-understanding> and an <understanding> respectively. Relevance consists of information, regarded in this article as contextualization cues that need to be processed and connected to both given and new information in the thread. If most of the contextualization cues can be bound to given information, the interlocutors have created an <understanding>. If some are not compatible with the conversation, the unexpected answer will lead to a <misunderstanding>. On the other hand, if none or almost none of the contextualization cues can be connected to the given information, a <non-understanding> has occurred.

The phrase containing *misunderstanding* can be used to construe a misunderstanding in interaction in order to turn the communication back toward its intended direction; i.e., for face work purposes to create a common understanding that is built on specific contextualization cues. It could also be shown that different purposes were bound to specific scripts, consisting of different slots, each of which carry a certain function in the interaction. With these scripts, specific speech acts could be represented by phrases containing *misunderstanding*.

Acknowledgements

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[22] Quote from jetzt:hördochauf
…I have never supported violence against train servants anywhere. Reading will be learnt (only a recommendation for another poster)
[F] True. [C] I have misunderstood something of You. [B_1] I'm sorry that I caught the wrong one.

Source

Figure1:
http://britishexpats.com/forum/showthread.php?t=709435&
page=5 10.8 2011

Message1:
http://forum.chip.de/dsl-provider/fritzdsl-card-teledat-300-a
-141147.html   17. 7. 2008.

Message2:
http://forum.gofeminin.de/forum/fitness3/__f2913_fitness3-
Hilfe-Ich-glaube-ich-habe-die-FRESSSUCHT.html 10. 7.
2008.

Message3:
http://www.janaforum.de/jana_forum/archive/12703/thread.
html 27.2. 2008.

Message4:
http://www.kidmed.de/forum/showtopic.php?threadid=2857
17. 7. 2008.

Message5:
http://sehtest.perfecthosting2.de/viewtopic.php?t=105&sid=
e06181356b515d 749d4bf56a52aaac67 17. 7. 2008.

Message6:
https://www.macwelt-forum.de/threads/papierkorb-dokume
nte-werden-sofort-geloescht.698070/page-2 23.05.2016.

Message7:
http://www.spiegel.de/forum/karriere/aggressive-bahn-fahrg
aeste-zielscheibe-zugbegleiter-thread-75116-23.html
23.05.2016.

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