

TOWARDS AN APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF MISCOMMUNICATION

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to study miscommunication which it considers to be a fact of life, indeed a part of the human condition. The paper benefits from some insight on the subject from ancient Indian semanticists and Milan Kundera on the one hand and Noam Chomsky on the other. From the point of view of this paper, miscommunication is basically about the lack, in a conversation, of the sharing of content on the part of the participants, in some comprehensive sense of the term “content” that would include even the attitude of the participants to it. The paper maintains that a conversation between two participants, which is the simplest instance of conversation, can lead to either miscommunication or communication and it is just accidental if it leads to the latter rather than the former. It also maintains that rather than miscommunication, it is communication indeed that needs an explanation and it posits for the purpose a certain principle that governs interaction. The data for the study are from day-to-day interaction and from representations of the same in two works of fiction.

KEY WORDS: meaning, miscommunication, communication, communication intention, principle of altruism.

This paper aims to develop an approach to the study of miscommunication in conversation based on some insight into the human condition in not a very friendly world as articulated by Milan Kundera, Gabriela Marquez and Kazuo Ishiguro and it makes use of ideas, such as

some of Chomsky's, generally not used in the study of communication (including miscommunication). It is organized in two parts. The first attempts to conceptualize miscommunication and suggests that communication and miscommunication are both accidental consequences of a conversation and that if still humans have been able to interact for mutual benefit, it may be because they are naturally helpful and cooperative towards one another (see Rand, David G., Joshua Greene and Martin Nowak (2012)). It is this natural helpful attitude that this paper has tried to capture in the form of what it tentatively calls the "principle of altruism". The second part of the paper analyses some conversations in two works of fiction as illustrative examples.

I

In his story "Edward and God", Milan Kundera says the following which can be taken as an observation on human condition: "But this is how life goes: a man imagines that he is playing a role in a particular play, and he does not suspect that in the meantime they have changed the scenery without his noticing, and he unknowingly finds himself in the middle of a rather different performance (p.271)". In other words, it is part of the human situation that one comes face to face with the unexpected and is destined to have to negotiate with it, completely unprepared. For example, the members of the court of Emperor Caligula in Albert Camus's play *Caligula* found themselves in an entirely unexpected situation and did not know how to deal with him when they found him a completely changed and totally unpredictable person when he returned to the capital after an unexplained absence. Marquez and Ishiguro, a few conversations from whose works we deal with here, add a further dimension of unpredictability to Kundera's vision of the human predicament, making miscommunication even more expected. Here the characters realize their situation not in the beginning, but only later, which makes coping with it very difficult for them. It is this view of the human situation that emerges from a selection of the works of these authors that constitutes the context for our discussion of miscommunication in a conversation.

It is well known that language is not the only mode of communication; it is also well known that when people communicate in language, they use other devices of communication together with it too, although cultures differ with respect to the extent the latter are used. In face-to-face conversation one uses gestures, facial expressions and space for examples. In this paper we abstract from real life conversation and study it as a linguistic act, and make here no

more than a passing reference to non-linguistically oriented miscommunication. In any act of linguistic exchange, of which conversation is only one instantiation, what essentially takes place is exchange of meaning in the most comprehensive sense of “meaning”. Conversation can be viewed basically as exchange of utterances and assignment of meaning to the same by the participants. Humans are by nature meaning-creating beings; therefore assignment of meaning to their experiences, including the linguistic ones, is an unavoidable act by them. Communication involves sharing to an extent, the precise specification of which is beyond this paper, and miscommunication involves lack of it. Miscommunication is different from “non-communication” or “communication failure”, where assignment of meaning in the familiar sense to utterances (which would exclude an interpretation such as “this is gibberish”) for example, would be almost impossible or at least immensely difficult, the reasons of which could be many: the nature of the utterance (for example, it may be in a language that the participants do not share or it may be excessively jargon-ridden), physical problems with the channel (too much noise around) or with the physical limitations of the participants concerned (the hearer may be hard of hearing, etc.), among others.

Miscommunication is viewed here as different from misinformation in that in the typical instance, the latter is a deliberate act on the speaker’s part (although “speaker-hearer” is the more appropriate term, for the sake of convenience of presentation we will continue to use the terms “speaker” and “hearer” in this paper). Unlike misinformation, miscommunication is not; it is hearer-oriented; it is he who does not assign the intended interpretation to the speaker’s utterance, a matter to which we will return. One might argue that sometimes miscommunication might be the result of deliberate action on the speaker’s part in that he would make his utterance such that it would lead to confusion in the hearer’s mind; for instance, he might make his contribution deliberately unclear and ambiguous. But that does not guarantee that he would succeed. The hearer may see through his trick (without making him aware of it). There is no persuasive argument to show that miscommunication is due, solely, to the failure of the speaker to convey his meaning. It is worth noting that “he tried to miscommunicate” is odd from the point of view of meaning (irrespective of its grammatical status) in contrast to “he tried to misinform”, which is well formed from the same point of view.

Incidentally, one might distinguish between communication at the local and the global levels in a conversation of some length. The domain of the former may be restricted to a

particular exchange between the speaker and the hearer and the one immediately preceding it. The domain of the latter is the part of the exchange that has a single theme; thus sometimes the entire exchange may come within this domain. Real life communication often shows that at least local level miscommunication, unless offence is caused, does not affect the continuation of a conversation. The reason may be that miscommunication has often no immediate external indications and that often the speaker has no idea that miscommunication had taken place. For one reason or the other hearer, such as his generosity, goodwill for the speaker or his rather formal relationship with him or his fear of displeasing him, the hearer might not like to do anything that would suggest to the speaker that some miscommunication has taken place. If the speaker is sensitive, he might realize later that something was not right between him and the hearer, and might attribute it to some miscommunication between them at some point in time. This is one important reason why miscommunication data from real life verbal exchange is very difficult to get. Reliable data can be obtained from fiction or drama because of the omniscient author who is the third person observer in the conversation. There is no need to be apologetic about such data; where the data are from need not concern us, what should be that the same must satisfy the criterion of native speaker judgement about their well formedness. That is, he must recognize the data as well formed in his language. For instance, if the same is a chunk of conversation, then the speaker must evaluate it as sounding natural and not contrived.

At least ever since the work on meaning, embodied mainly in the theory of *avidha*, *laksana* and *vyanjana*, by ancient Indian scholars of pragmatics and rhetoric centuries ago, the crucial role of intention for interpretation of the meaning of an utterance is well known (see Matilal (1990)). More recently, Grice (1975) in his seminal work on conversation has reaffirmed this idea. These scholars have maintained that the incongruity of meaning of an utterance during a conversation can be resolved and a coherent meaning assigned to it by relating it to the intention of the speaker. These days, in at least some parts of India, when one asks another, especially someone who is neither an outsider to him anymore nor an insider as yet, on their first meeting during the day, whether he has had food, the hearer would not know from the linguistic material alone what precisely the speaker meant since it could be interpreted as an information-seeking question or a greeting, corresponding roughly to “hello”. In order to disambiguate the utterance, the hearer would need to exploit the contextual clues and make use of the speaker’s intentions, as he figures it out, going by his knowledge of the speaker, his

understanding of the nature of their relationship and of the situation of their interaction, among others. When the hearer works out that there could be no reasons for the speaker to have the slightest doubt that he might not have had his food and that in his culture using the language of food is an acceptable form of greeting, he would infer that the speaker's intention was to be polite and cordial to him. Incidentally, the speaker's real intentions do not matter at all for the purpose of assignment of meaning by the hearer to his utterance since the hearer would never know it for certain.

Now whereas it is not necessary to know the speaker's real intention to assign a meaning to his utterance, failure to figure it out might lead to miscommunication in some situations. The speaker in the example above might have invited the hearer to join him for breakfast by saying what he did. The polite hearer would try to give him the impression that he had interpreted his utterance as just a greeting; in some cultures, such as ours, it is impolite, at least quite odd, to accept an invitation to food as soon as it is offered. However if the speaker's invitation was genuine (if he did not repeat it for some reason, such as that he thought that the hearer and he were close enough not to be concerned about such formalities, in order to convey that it was indeed a sincere invitation), by refusing it, the hearer would run the risk of being rude to the speaker. If one tells his classmate, with whom he is on friendly terms, that he is giving his birthday party the following evening, it is perfectly legitimate for the latter to treat it as an invitation, despite the fact that certain details were missing in the invitation, such as where the party is going to be held, and at what time precisely, etc. Why would his classmate mention the party to him if he did not intend to invite him, he would reason out, treat the gaps in the information as unintended and would take the utterance as invitation. He would ask his friend about the exact time, venue, etc. But it is possible that the speaker, who is somewhat insensitive or a bit irresponsible and careless in both his language use and attitudes, really did not mean to invite him and had mentioned about his birthday party just casually. There could be other reasons, which would lead to different and more uncharitable interpretations, but we ignore them here. The hearer's interpreting his utterance as invitation would then qualify to be a case of miscommunication. It might be noted that even a cautious hearer would probably have failed to realize that the utterance was not an invitation for him. There would be no point in asking the speaker about his real intention behind his utterance. It would be rude, as it might be viewed by the speaker as the hearer's confronting him. Besides, he may not tell, and even when he did, there is no reason to be

certain that what he told was indeed the truth. In the absence of any clear external manifestation of intentions, the speaker's intention would always remain a hypothesis for the hearer. Besides, the change of intention on the part of the speaker and the hearer can change the context of each exchange in the course of a conversation, a good example of which can be found in the exchanges between the principal characters in Milan Kundera's story "The Hitchhiking Game". In short, the above shows that the sharing of meaning between the speaker and the hearer in an interaction is as much an accident as not sharing of the same – communication and miscommunication are in principle both possible and whichever of these happens, is accidental.

Language may have contributed to this to some extent. It is known for centuries that the most frequently used and even the best mode of communication among humans, namely language, is a rather imperfect mode of communication. More recently, Chomsky (1965) has drawn our attention to some features of language that have hardly ever figured in a discourse on this theme. Language is ambiguous in many ways and it has resources that are almost never put to use: self-embedding, multiple branching, left and right branching constructions, etc. We know that it is not very efficient in expressing intensely felt experiences, for example, deep feelings of joy, distress and pain, etc., which are better expressed non-verbally and that when it comes to matters such as giving directions to locations, etc., maps and sketches turn out to be more exact and efficient. Then language use tends to be imprecise. In conversation, generally speaking, lexical, syntactic and semantic ambiguity (interpretation of quantifiers, antecedents of pronouns, etc.) pose fewer problems of understanding than does the ambiguity at the pragmatic level. The examples given above draw attention to real difficulties in real life interactions: should the hearer treat the speaker's utterance about his birthday party as an invitation or as a mere statement of a future event? The hearer can hardly ever be certain even in a close relationship whether the speaker's "I may need some money this evening" is a request to the hearer to lend him some money or merely a casual observation, more in the spirit of sharing one's problem with a friend. "I have heard you cook very well" by an elderly male friend or relative can be viewed by the hearer in our culture as a compliment or an attempt to get oneself invited for a meal at her home. In the Parliamentary debate on the Lokpal Bill in 2011, Lalu Prasad Yadav, Member of the Parliament, seems to have observed to the effect that since the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is a good and honest person, he should become the Lokpal. Now did he pay a

compliment to Singh or did he make a veiled criticism of his functioning as the Prime Minister? *The Times of India* on 15 October 12 carried the following quote from Jose Mourinho, the manager of Real Madrid football team: “If Cristiano (Ronaldo) doesn’t win the Ballon d’Or this year, it is because he’s not nice.” Now, what was he affirming: Ronaldo’s football talents or his failure at the human level?

Among the resources of language that are hardly put to use in oral communication are very long sentences (in view of the fact that theoretically there is no limit to the length of a sentence) and the so-called garden path sentences (e.g., “The horse raced past the barn fell.”), among others. Even in written communication, very long sentences, ambiguous ones and garden path sentences, etc. all of which require more effort to be understood than short and clear and unambiguous sentences, are ordinarily only sparingly used. Similarly although there is no grammatical constraint on a pronoun having its antecedent at a long distance, beyond, say, four or five sentences prior to the one in which it occurs, in actual language use, it is hardly the case, for reasons of limitations of memory. After all, even written material has a clear communicative purpose, irrespective of what their authors might say (for instance, one writes for self-expression and has no reader in mind), except of course the shopping lists, as Umberto Eco once famously observed.

Concerning the imprecision of language use mentioned above, consider now the following interaction: A: Where is the city hospital? B: Right there! Walking distance!” In India we cannot fail to recognize it as an entirely realistic exchange. We have asked this question in our language or in English in many places in our country and have received this answer in the relevant language. And some must have had the experience of walking for five minutes in the indicated direction and asking someone else the same question and getting the same answer as received earlier. Now, suppose B had told A “it is at a distance of 205 meters from here” instead. The answer would have been far more specific and precise, but the hearer is all likelihood would have felt surprised by the unexpectedness of it. It would have struck him as rather academic, pedantic and unnatural. Consider another example showing how sometimes an exact and precise answer might surprise, and might even be considered hilarious; for instance, when B answers A’s question “Since how long have you been waiting?” by saying, “Thirty-nine minutes twenty seconds”. “For quite some time” or “About half an hour”, which in contrast are clearly less precise, would have been considered more normal responses in all likelihood. But if A is buying a pair of trousers and the shopkeeper wants to know his waist

size, the most helpful answer from him would be in terms of inches. Answers such as “normal” or “a little more than the normal”, etc. would be inadequate. This shows that language use in many day-to-day situations is somewhat vague and imprecise, but in some, it is quite the reverse. Failure to respond appropriately can sometimes lead to avoidable inconveniences, as, arguably, in the first of the above three examples, where a more specific answer might have been helpful, but the imprecise answers in that context for speakers of some languages are far more natural. This is one rather curious aspect of language use - we somehow successfully negotiate with a not-always-very intelligible world with language, which itself is a system with quite a few imperfections, but at the same time, language use seems to resist getting rid of these very imperfections by choosing exact and mathematically precise material in their place. Thus independent of the context of language use, miscommunication should not come as a surprise, when language is not a very efficient system of communication and is used so extensively in interaction.

Cross cultural conversation requires the participants to be aware of the cultural nuances of language use in the relevant communities when they interact in a language which is the second or a foreign language for at least one of them. This is necessary in order to avoid possible miscommunication. In a cross cultural conversational situation a response which would appear wordy to the hearer would be perfectly normal for the speaker. To take a well known example, treating an English speaker’s “how do you do?” as not just a formulaic greeting, but an information question requiring an answer is quite normal for an Indian hearer unacquainted with the English ways of greeting. The equivalent of it in Odia (perhaps in many Indian languages as well) is indeed an information question.

Considering the question of wordiness, we in India sometimes appear to be too lavish with words. Even our greetings verbally expressed are elaborate, as our leave-takings, our invitations and apologies. However, sometimes this “lavishness” would be preferable to a succinct, precise and informative contribution in a conversation. To give an example of a real life interaction, an Indian professor of English (X) of an Indian university who was in a position of authority and was authoritarian in his ways once asked a junior colleague (Y), also an Indian, who had hurt himself and had a bandage on his arm, what had happened. Y said, “I had an accident and have a fracture”. “Simple or compound?” was what X asked. As Y, conscious of his subordinate status with respect to X almost reverentially started telling him how he met with the accident and what all he did after that, X cut him short and repeated his

question: “Simple or compound?” Almost everyone present there later observed that he considered Y’s response to X’s question polite and normal, and X’s response insensitive, arrogant and rude. Clearly Y’s response was neither precise in terms of content nor was the bulk of it relevant nor even satisfactorily informative; it was too wordy for any of those. Now if people found nothing wrong with that, it is because in certain situations, especially those which involve discomfort and pain, precision in language use may not always be in order. Besides, what counts as sufficiently informative and therefore precise in one context may not be so in a different context. “That’s Ronaldinho” would be an adequate introduction of the great contemporary footballer in one gathering, but quite inadequate in another, for instance, of cardiologists or lawyers. All of these show that quantity must not be viewed as simply a matter of information value of the content and also that fuller articulation of Grice’s maxim of quantity would contain a set of culturally and situationally determined parameters, the precise articulation of which would hardly be an easy task.

Then there is the problem of bias, from which none is free. Bias may be viewed as at least a major cause of what Chomsky calls “Orwell’s Problem” (1986), the essence of which can be stated as follows: there is plenty of evidence all around us, and yet we fail to learn from them and acquire the right understanding of things and take right decisions in our social and political life. Often of course the evidence itself is corrupt, having been badly manipulated and distorted by interested parties. Besides, one sees or is rather condemned to see things in a prejudicial manner. Thus even when someone exposes the manipulation and uncovers the hidden agendas of the manipulators persuasively, one may not necessarily feel very enlightened and accept the truth as uncovered by this effort, for how can one be certain that the exposition itself is not motivated by hidden agendas of manipulators? As we look for sinister motives everywhere, we lose our ability to be trustful at all; we cannot be certain about the integrity of any individual or the reliability of anything. As a consequence, an activist or a public intellectual comes to be viewed as a power centre not very different from the traditional power centres, and becomes as much an object of mistrust and scrutiny. For reasons we need not go into here, each individual is positively inclined towards certain persons, ideas and objects and negatively inclined towards others. If one likes someone, one trusts him, often tends to ignore the possibility that he might be dishonest and assigns the best intentions to him and positive interpretations to his actions and speech. One sometimes suffers as a consequence. If one dislikes someone, then one comes to have a jaundiced view

of his words and actions, and his considerateness and generosity are viewed as mischief motivated by some hidden agenda. And it is not often that one's prejudices can be corrected through facts and arguments, and confidence building measures may take too long a time to yield the desired results.

In sum, we note that we need to make use of speaker intention to arrive at the meaning of an utterance, but it has to be an ascribed intention, constructed by the hearer, rather than the real one. We note that the mode of communication that we predominantly use to negotiate in an imperfect world is one that is imperfect as a communication device, and that we ourselves are prejudiced in many ways and can perceive the reality only through the mediation of our prejudices and interact with one another burdened with our biases. The context of interaction itself often affects understanding of the situation by the participants. There are other hurdles too. These apart, sometimes an interaction may have a manipulative purpose; one of the participants might be dishonest and the other might be ignorant of it. Now given these, it appears that both communication and miscommunication are accidental and that miscommunication must not be seen as an aberration. In fact, it may indeed appear that since the ground is so richly fertile for miscommunication, what needs to be accounted for is communication! For thousands of years people have lived together, interacted among themselves for mutual benefit, empathized with and understood one another, and all these have been partly due to successful communication.

We might postulate a principle, to be tentatively called "principle of altruism", in order to account for the above. Grice's cooperative principle, which in a way states how conversation takes place at all, may be viewed as part of this principle, as also the directive "be polite". In the context of social education, it seems to take the form of an ethical directive that is projected as the governing principle with respect to human action. Humans tend to be cooperative towards other humans and to trust one another, because of which the hearer ordinarily tends to assign a positive attitude to the speaker. Since the vast majority of the contexts of interaction require cooperation, helpful behaviour becomes necessary. Even when the hearer discovers that he has been rather naive in assigning such positive intention to the speaker, he often tends to let things pass on account of a number of considerations. Sometimes the basic generosity would be seriously undermined by negative feelings and attitudes such as suspicion, antagonism and hatred, and then the hearer tends to think that the speaker is unreliable, mischievous and manipulative, and assigns a negative intention to him.

II

Where miscommunication could end – whether pleasantly or unpleasantly or even catastrophically - depends on a number of factors, including the situation of the interaction itself and the relation between the participants, and the goals of their interaction, among others. We consider two examples below, one of which shows how miscommunication results in disaster, and the other, how things end pleasantly. These examples are from literary texts and the relevant communicative contexts are realistic.

Marquez's story "I Only Came to Use the Phone" is a good example of miscommunication that could have ended without much fuss, and with nothing more than an apology, but ended in a catastrophe. When one is not in control of the situation and is controlled by it instead, what can happen to one is unpredictable. All Maria, the principal character in the story, had wanted was a telephone but ended up in a sanatorium. She had to inform her husband that she was in a difficult situation and would not be able to assist her magician husband that evening in his show. Her car had broken down and she was stranded close to a desert area and it had started raining and there was no phone nearby, and no passing vehicle gave her a lift. She finally got a lift in a bus and landed up in a sanatorium for mentally challenged women. In her anxiety to grab a phone, she didn't realize where she had reached, and was highly excited when she told the matron there that all she needed was a phone: "But I only came to use the phone". "Sure, honey, the supervisor told her, escorting her to her bed with a sweetness that was too patent to be real, "if you're good you can call anybody you want. But not now, tomorrow (pp. 74-75)." With her own construction of the situation concerning Maria, she made sense of her words as those of a mentally unstable person. After all, she had come in the bus that brought mentally ill persons, and was shouting excitedly like one who was mentally sick. An ordinary woman, unsympathetic and violent by temperament and with little sense of discrimination, who had been hardened having to work with mental patients, was well-acquainted with such behaviour and she concluded that Maria was a patient, and dealt with her in the manner she had with other patients. The context of the interaction was such that no sharing between Maria and her was possible and miscommunication can hardly be seen as rather unexpected in that context.

The following day the doctor examined her. He was very pleasant to her and allowed her to pour her heart out and listened to her patiently. Maria felt comforted, hoping that he understood her and that her ordeal would come to an end. In the excitement of hope she did not understand that the doctor was only being professional in his dealing with her. When she requested him to allow her to use the phone, “Not yet, princess,” he said, patting her cheek with more tenderness than she had ever felt before, “Everything in due course. (pp.76-77)”. The doctor diagnosed her as a patient who was “agitated” and had an obsession with phone. He knew it was rather odd, but this fact did not make him consider whether there was some error in his diagnosis, and whether the girl was actually speaking the truth. He was the expert and had the overconfidence of a professional. In being nice to her, he had played as a professional. He had done so when he assigned the interpretation to Maria’s flow of words as an indication of her sickness, just as Maria had interpreted his encouraging words and overall demeanour as his understanding of her situation.

Maria suffered a lot of pain and indignity in the sanatorium before she managed to reach a phone and inform her husband about her situation. Soon Saturno, her husband, arrived to take her home but he had to meet the doctor before having access to her. The doctor told her that she was indeed a patient and needed to spend some more time at the sanatorium: “All in all, it is fortunate she happened to come here, because we specialize in cases requiring a firm hand (p.88)”. This time there was no miscommunication on account of language, miscommunication was on account of the situation of language use. He did not find the words of the doctor surprising, which is surprising. He had heard from his wife herself about her situation and she had known her for a sufficiently long time to reject the view that she was mentally so sick that she needed treatment. The expert prevailed. The naive man that he was he did not even ask the doctor further questions, let alone protest. When his wife was brought to his presence and he told her with genuine concern that it would be better if she spent a little more time in the sanatorium, she was totally devastated.

In contrast to the above, there is an interesting conversation in Ishiguro’s novel *The Remains of the Day* that provides an example of miscommunication that does not have an unpleasant ending, despite having the potential for it. Butler Stevens’s big car, which his employer Farraday had generously allowed him to use during his vacation in the English countryside, ran out of petrol one evening in the hills and it was getting foggy and he knew he had to leave the car on the road and look for shelter in a nearby village for the night. He

got it in the village Moscombe where the inhabitants were mainly agricultural workers. He became the guest in the house of the Taylors. Because of his language, dress and sophistication, the villagers took him to be a man of very high standing, perhaps a lord. Some of them came to meet him later that evening. Stevens was honest and intelligent and he knew how he was being taken. Because he saw it as a harmless act and also because he knew he was not going to meet those people again, he chose to pretend that he was indeed what he was mistaken to be. So he kept saying things that were neither false nor true; he knew they were false and at the same time knew that they were taken to be true by his listeners. He knew that the villagers were taking his words to be true. This was how a conversational situation arose in which only one party knew the identity of the other and there was no malice and evil intention in the concealment of his identity by Stevens.

Andrew's asked him whether he had "much to with politics", Stevens said, "Not directly as such. And particularly not these days. More before the war perhaps. (p.196)." His earlier employer was a lord of considerable power and influence and there was a time when many important national and international leaders visited him, and discussed matters of state with him. Stevens had attended on them and had heard their deliberations in the process. Responding to another question he said, "I tended to concern myself with international affairs more than domestic ones. Foreign policy, that is to say (p.197)." This was true, but completely false considering how it was going to be interpreted by the villagers, which he was aware of.

As regards whether he had met Mr. Churchill, he said "He did come to the house on a number of occasions. But to be quite frank, Mrs. Taylor, during the time I was most involved with great affairs, Mr. Churchill was not such a key figure and was not expected to become one. The likes of Mr. Eden and Lord Halifax were more frequent visitors in those days (p.197)". He used his words carefully to avoid telling a lie – he used the definite article "the" as the qualifier of "house" rather than the possessive adjective "our". "It has been my good fortune after all, to have consorted not just with Mr. Churchill", he continued on the same subject, "but with many other great leaders and men of influence – from America and from Europe ... it was my good fortune to have their ear on many great issues of the day ... It's a great privilege, after all, to be given a part, however small, on the world's stage (p. 198)." He did play a part, but only as a butler, serving them food and drink. This, however, was by no means a trivial job. He had to make the guests comfortable and to ensure that they were in the

right mood to discuss such important matters of state. It was thus that he, the butler, had played a small role in world affairs. Nothing that Stevens had said was downright false, although nothing that he said was true. He was aware that his hearers, under the mistaken assumption about who he was, would treat all he said as true.

There was a doctor living in that village who was from the city. The villagers had requested him to come to the Taylors' to meet Stevens, but Stevens did not want to meet him since he knew the doctor would easily figure out the truth about his identity and expose him. He said that he was tired and needed rest but the villagers pleaded with him to wait for the doctor a little longer as he was seeing his patients. For the second time that evening Stevens found himself in a situation he had not anticipated. When he found himself being mistaken as a man of status and stature and decided not to reveal his identity, he did not know that there was a doctor in that village who knew the city life and city ways and that he might have to face him. His response to that situation seemed to be adequate and also safe, but in the new situation it threatened to be dangerous.

When the doctor arrived, he was told by the excited villagers that the guest in the village was the one who had known many eminent persons including Churchill and Eden, etc. The doctor was sceptical, but he had chosen to keep his scepticism to himself. Only Stevens was aware of it. This was a situation that could have led to a very unpleasant conclusion, but it didn't.

The doctor figured out what was happening but being generous, he did not want to expose the butler. He suggested that the guest was tired and should retire early. A generous man, he arranged petrol for his car and as he was driving him to his car the following morning, he asked Stevens in a manner that would not embarrass him in the least whether he was not a butler. Greatly relieved, Stevens said, "I am indeed, Sir. In fact, I am the butler of Darlington Hall, near Oxford. (p. 218)". Most apologetically he told the doctor that he did not mean to deceive, and the understanding doctor assured him that there was no need for any explanation because he believed his intentions to be entirely honest.

The conversations discussed above sensitize us to the fact that one is not always in control over one's situation and that one does not always find oneself in a situation of his liking or choice. On the contrary, one sometimes does find oneself in a strange set-up, completely unexpected. Interaction in such contexts always carries the risk of miscommunication, the

consequences of which for one or more of the participants can even be devastating. What can help is a participant's understanding of human weaknesses, consideration and generosity. The doctor in Ishiguro's work was considerate and generous; so Stevens was saved from a potentially very humiliating situation. Maria's world was shattered since there was no such character in Marquez's story. One insight concerning conversation that the texts discussed above seems to be that whereas the speaker can sometimes never be sure that miscommunication has or has not taken place, he could work towards avoiding the possibility of it by being considerate and empathetic to the hearer, by remaining alert and sensitive to any discordant note in the conversation, and by asking for and providing clarifications voluntarily at such points and the like.

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