

In Praise of Misunderstanding.

Or: on Obeying the House-Rules

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When *I* attained the age of sixty - not too long ago -
A colleague whom some readers doubtless know
Used the occasion to argue against me. Moreover, he sought
To make his point in rhyme. Who would have thought
It! But the deed's been done, his tale is told,
Establishing academic discourse in literary mode.¹

My reply to Widdowson (for indeed it was he)
I have not yet composed, but as you can see
Though I have ignored the what, I respond to the how,
In that I follow his example, aping poetic discourse now.
I shall seek then to rhyme in rhythm, be pithy and concise:
In this case imitation is the tribute that virtue pays to vice.

Enough of such meta-talk, I hear readers cry,
You tell us *how* you shall write, but don't tell us *why*.
It's all form instead of meaning - what of the latter?
Indeed. Let us move on to content, then, and subject matter.

My title refers to misunderstanding, if you please:
It is an issue on which JH and I share expertise ...
This shows in that according to House nineteen-ninety nine
Misunderstanding happens all the time.²
We are enjoined to accept forthwith
That mutual understanding is just a widespread myth.

Now what *does* she mean here? Or am I a bit thick?
Perhaps I haven't quite understood? Wrong end of the stick?
Oh dear! Fallen into the trap there, I admit,
As I simply reinforce her point by not getting it!
One is reminded of earlier hard-core feminist days,
When wily women stepped out of their stays,
And we were told: "Men always contradict women anyway",
Leaving us shrunken fools with not a thing to say.
Indeed at this point, too, one feels a bit of a clot,
Having tied oneself up in some paradoxical Gordian knot ...

So before chaos rules,
Before art wins out, and reason squirms,
Let us deal the rational card, and seek to analyse our terms.
What does it mean, first of all, to 'understand',
When talking for example to a Queen in Wonderland?
Gulp. A definition of understanding? And in rhyme?
Sorry. Don't think I can do it. I pass. I decline:

I understand,
You *overstand*,
He has not understood, though you said he would,
She *never* understands,
We sort of misunderstand each other.
Linguists tend to get quite out of hand, and
Their understanding is substandard.
In other words, they under-understand.

All right, okay. While that was going on I've thought a bit
About a definition, so now I'll have a shot at it.
Here we go.
I have a mental state - let's call it P,
And I encode it verbally, you see,
As a message - let's call that M - to be sent from me to you.
There may be white noise, of course, so it arrives as let us say M2.
If you can interpret M2, and its affective loading,
You derive a P2, after some nifty decoding.
Good. And now the acid test: if your P2 matches my P
You've understood! Well done! Q.E.D!
My words allow you to reconstruct my mental state.
A good mathematical model, this, but wrong, of course. I hate
To think of the much ado
If you were indeed able to construe
My mental states, my language reveals the naked truth!
Such an understanding might be a touch uncouth!
Understanding is a good thing as such,
But we don't want to go round understanding too much
Now, do we? If that really were how we signify,
It would be so hard to veil the truth, to falsify.
But it is not.

So this transposition of mental states seems naive,
Maybe understanding means accepting what I *want* you to believe?
When I mention the draught - indirect to the core,
For God's sake get up, and close the blasted door!
Accept that I protest my guilt as such,
No dark suspicions that maybe I protest too much.
So instead of transposing peas from mind to mind,
We are now playing façades, of a Sitwellian kind!
And as discourse is two-sided, this means you aspire
Merely to *say* something consistent with what I desire,
Whether you *mean* it or not I do not care -
Say it, and this means you've 'understood' - so there!
We obey the same conventions, we use the same tools,
We share understanding, we accept the House-Rules.
On this view, then, when we talk, it's a great mutual preen,
It's a contorted, usually supported, occasionally aborted routine.
Surely this is not the whole truth, either. It's hard
To see the whole business as simply a façade.

These two views - 'Transfer' and 'Routine' - both have a certain gumption
 But are based upon a rather dubious assumption:
 It's this P-thing, or illocutionary goal
 Lurking in your mind, or maybe hidden in your soul,
 Waiting to come out, covertly or otherwise,
 But giving up its secrets to a listener who really tries
 To understand it. This notion neglects one's ability to amaze
 Oneself - one is often surprised by what one says!
 One thinks afterwards, face flushed red:
 "That was brilliant! If only I could remember what it was I just said!"
 Do you really know what you yourself mean
 When you speak? And are you really that keen
 On your communicative plan? Be honest: don't you invent
 Something when asked about your perlocutionary intent?
 You find meanings for yourself you didn't suspect
 Till you studied linguistics, and learnt to introspect
 Creatively. And there's another point
 That throws encoding models out of joint:
 It's this: other people often understand what I say much better than do I:
 They get excited - students do this - and they cry
 "Is this what you mean? It is, isn't it! Tell me it is so!"
 "Of course", one says modestly, and means "I just don't know.
 I don't know what I *meant*, but you've told me what *I mean*".
 Thus this type of understanding allows me to preen
 My feathers, and praise your understanding - if I have the social grace,
 Such that we both agree, understand, win out, gain face.
 So I need your understanding: it helps me
 To understand what I have just said, you see.
 There is a danger here, of course. You may understand, I've said this before,
 More than I am willing to admit: you saw
 Deeper. My message on your reading is shattering:
 It goes *too* deep, it is not flattering.
 So I claim you missed the point, you misread the signs,
 You overdid the listening between the lines.
 As speaker I hold you in thrall:
 "No, that is not what I meant, that is not it at all!"

In short, there's negotiation - it's not all do-it-yourself:
 I may need your understanding to understand myself.
 Interaction matters. Meaning is not just offered from the speaker's cup
 Poured out for a tasting top-down: it also works bottom-up.

Let me elaborate, using symbols - P and co - for a while.
 This is not only delightfully pretentious, but might also make you smile.
 We start now with S and H. Do you want that clearer?
 It might be Sam and Heidi, or simply speaker and hearer.
 Well, Sam says something - probably not a lot -
 And Heidi has either understood, or she has not

From her perspective. Heidi though cannot think, "Sam's meaning is pretty good,
But I know I've really misunderstood".
However if Sam continues, as male wafflers sometimes do,
She may revise her understanding, and after a new take or two
Decide, if pushed, her original understanding was awry
(He expressed himself so badly, but she did give it a try).
Eventually then Heidi responds, and now Sam may use the dreadful term,
It's a speaker prerogative to say "You've misunderstood, you worm!"
But suppose he doesn't? He's not so crass -
It's ELF talk anyway, and so he lets it pass -
Can *you* now say, with your transcript and your brilliant brain:
"Ah! A misunderstanding there, my friend! What a shame!"
I'm think not. I don't think that's fair.
If it's not on record, the misunderstanding's not there.
Beware of that disease, worse than hepatitis
Familiarly known as researcher's Perspectivitis!
So Sam's perspective and Heidi's are not the same
And the researcher's is different once again.
In this sense the glass of understanding shatters:
Location is relevant: perspective matters.

There is more to it than this, much more,
So I shall have to hold the floor
For a little longer, to complete my revels,
For besides perspectives, we need to mention levels
Of understanding, of perception,
Of detection, of reception.
In other words, what is it that one claims to have understood?
An innuendo? An intonational crescendo?
A modal verb like CAN or COULD?
Some lines ago we had an M, and a P.
To these I now add number three!
So in this extenuated version
We may understand the words, the message, and/or the person!
The idea may be banal, but it might also be true:
First I get the meaning, then the message, and then I get you.
This is comprehension con brío
The taking-in trio.

So in the beginning was the Word
And - assuming that I heard
It - this is what I get hold of first.
Of course I might not. The accursed
White noise may buzz and boil away
Such that sad to say your words are lost,
Tossed out for ever, not subject to repair.
But I can get the message anyway, so there!
I don't need a re-cast, I can already figure
What you mean. The words are a trigger

To meaning, that's all.
 All that's gold may not glisten,
 To get the message, you don't have to listen.
 So I can get your sense, having lost your sound,
 And the same is true, of course, the other way round:
 The fact that you admire my surface structure's patina
 Doesn't mean you've understood me as a meaner.
 You may decipher my diction, the words are well-known
 But the message escapes you: it remains my own.
 The third level is interpersonal, relates to me and you
 And it's independent of the other levels, too.
 "I understand" one says, and if one tries
 To paraphrase, "I sympathize"
 Is a rough approximation,
 Or simply "I like you": it's a celebration
 Of sharing, maybe in circumstances of pain or confusion -
 Nothing to do with syntax, or abstruse conative allusion.
 It may emerge from a situation, a silence, a shake of the head -
 Such understanding is often born out of what is left unsaid.

So there we are, confused and confusing -
 Behind these poetic forms that aspire to be amusing.
 But maybe there's a salient point or two
 One can make, passing these pages in review.
 We found pure decoding a trifle obscene,
 Looked then for social comfort, but did not accept routine.
 Evaluating understanding - this was my next modest task -
 I ventured the conclusion: it depends on who you ask
 And whether in seeking to understand what you hear or see
 You go for the words, the message, or the person, the he or the she.

As I said at first, my topic strikes House, and strikes home -
 It is an issue of moment for Juliane, and in this she is not alone.
 Thus, she misunderstands me - the instances are ample -
 So in modest mimicry I simply follow her example
 By failing to understand *her* - or so she says: a symbiotic reciprocation,
 Mutual, interpersonal mystification.
 Yes, misunderstanding *is* part of communication -
 And this indeed, it seems to me, is cause for celebration.

¹ See H. Widdowson. 2000. Essay on Literature and Language Teaching. An Epistle to Dr. Edmondson. In C. Riemer. (ed), *Kognitive Aspekte des Lehrens und Lernens von Fremdsprachen*. Tübingen: Narr, 387-394.

² See J. House. 1999. Misunderstanding in intercultural communication. Interactions in English as lingua franca and the myth of mutual intelligibility. In C. Gnutzmann. (ed), *Teaching and Learning English as a Global Language*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 72-88.

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Verfügbar: <http://www.ualberta.ca/~german/ejournal/Edmondson.pdf>.

