

Working Misunderstandings

The first part of this work showed how Advice Company is structured as a social system aligned with the guiding difference client centricity/ground reality. This second part focuses on working misunderstandings in the context of this organisational system. Chapter 2 (Section 2.4.2) illustrated how misunderstandings can be regarded from a systems-theoretical perspective as inevitable components of communication and thus important building blocks of a social system. When communication occurs across the boundaries of social systems, the different selection processes in each system are likely to result in misunderstandings. Therefore, misunderstandings can be regarded as a communicative symptom of system differentiation, through which the boundaries between a social system and its environment become salient.

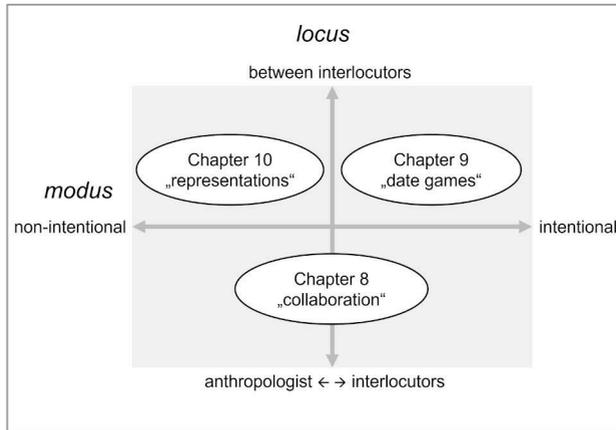
The hypothesis here is that interaction across social systems functions not only *despite*, but also *as a result of* these misunderstandings, which arise from the different selections at play in each system. In the following, I will show how a sending system selects information and an utterance and how the receiving system selects its understanding in order to reproduce the information (and therefore recontextualise it) within its own boundaries (Gershon 2005: 103).

Part II commences in Chapter 7 with a review of anthropologists' and other scholars' use of the concept of working misunderstanding¹. Based on this literature review, I will propose a framework of analytical categories that differentiates between the *locus* (involved parties) and *modus* (level of intentionality) of a working misunderstanding: the "L/M quadrant". This framework will then be applied in an analysis of the various working misunderstandings in the organisational system of Advice Company, drawing on several case studies. The case studies relate to the central service commodity of Advice Company: the client project. This main service commodity ensures the survival of the organisation; hence, it must be processed by all of the organisational sub-systems. For this reason, the client project constitutes the main communication operation that reinforces the structures it enables to exist. Section 7.2 introduces the client project as an analytical entity and explores its development across the organisation.

1 Parts of chapter 7 and 8 are from a paper previously published by the author (Mörike 2016)

Chapters 8, 9 and 10 are aligned with the L/M quadrant and illustrate how the four categories of working misunderstandings are encountered in connection with the client project (Figure 13).

Figure 13: L/M quadrant and chapter outline of Part II



Chapter 8 explores a working misunderstanding between the employees and myself around the notion of “collaboration” (*locus* interlocutor ↔ anthropologist). It describes how my understanding of project collaboration – despite differing substantially from the concept as practiced by the employees – initially invoked no dissonance and retraces the point at which the working misunderstanding became salient. Furthermore, it shows how I consequently reshaped both the data collection focus and my actions to comply with the notions of collaboration at play in the organisation. In Section 8.1, I illustrate the transformation of this working misunderstanding from a non-intentional *modus* to an intentional *modus* over the course of fieldwork, re-shaping my strategy for knowledge management. This case is positioned within the suggested framework under the *modus* of intentional working misunderstandings – a seemingly marginalised and/or underreflected category in ethnographic accounts (Section 8.2).

Chapters 9 and 10 focus on the working misunderstandings between my interlocutors. Chapter 9 is located within the *modus* of intentional working misunderstandings and describes a working misunderstanding I call the “date games”. It refers to the project planning phase, during which the

different sub-systems seek to optimise intersystem collaboration by re-interpreting delivery dates. This “bargaining game”, as project coordinator Asif called it, assumes that information about delivery dates has the purpose of ensuring timely project completion. In this game, however, it is not necessarily the actual delivery dates that are communicated between teams, but those that are assumed to provoke the desired reaction within the other sub-system. This situation of double contingency can be connected to intentional working misunderstandings.

Chapter 10 suggests that a client project may give rise to an unintentional working misunderstanding, and traces different views on a project as it moves along the project development process. The cases show that a project changes in form and status, from a client’s strategic need for decision-making to executable work tasks, detailed presentations and, ultimately, a final strategy. Hence, each project can be seen as a working misunderstanding in its unique “working” quality, which allows each sub-system to attach system-specific meaning to it. As I will demonstrate, this underlying “working” substance of a project gives opacity to the guiding difference of client centrality to which all communication within Advice Company connects its project understanding.

