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## Misunderstandings about understanding

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Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

*Jacek Juliusz Jadacki***MISUNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT UNDERSTANDING****I. ARGUMENTS OF THE RELATION OF UNDERSTANDING**

Two misunderstandings are connected with this matter.

The first misunderstanding is that the necessary condition of defining (and characterizing) 'understanding' is to indicate the field (*scil.* the domain and the counterdomain) of the relation of understanding. The second misunderstanding is that *i.a.* non-observable objects (e.g. intentional objects) belong to the counterdomain of this relation.

From another place it is the fact, that the domain of the relations of understanding contains people (**NB.** not all, certainly), animals, and perhaps computers. On the other hand the counterdomain (or one of the counterdomains at least) is created by observable objects.

**2. THE SEMANTIC CATEGORY OF 'UNDERSTANDING'**

The misunderstanding consists here in the view, that the word 'understand' – according to a given context – has one of the following categories:  $\frac{z}{n\ n}$ ,  $\frac{z}{n\ z}$ , or  $\frac{z}{n\ n\ n}$ . As a matter of fact these are categories of three various functors:

$\frac{z}{n\ n}$  – x understands y,

$\frac{z}{n\ z}$  – x understands that p.

$\frac{z}{nnn}$  – x understands z by y (i, e, x means y as z).

Each of these functors refers to a certain two- or three-argument-relation. It is the full list, apart from the metaphorical contexts (e.g. of the kind of Heidegger's declarations that the man ... is understanding).

### 3. POLYSEMY OF 'UNDERSTANDING'

'Understanding' is the double polysem. The polysemy peculiar to every mental predicate characterizes, firstly, this word. 'Understanding' as the mental predicate can refer either to a certain disposition (**habitual** understanding), to a certain act (**actual** understanding), or to a certain chain of acts (**processual** understanding). The specific polysemy of 'understand' can be call 'polysemy of four i-s'. For to understand is, secondly, either to feel (**intuitive** understanding), to be conscious (**identificative** understanding), to justify (**indulgentive** understanding), or to signify (**inscriptive** understanding).

It would be misunderstanding to believe that the habitual, actual, and processual understanding from the one hand, and that the intuitive, identificative, indulgentive, and inscriptive understanding from the other hand – creates the members of two logical classifications of the denotation of 'understanding'. These are various meanings of 'understanding', and not various subsets of one set of understandings.

Let us add, that intuitive understanding (**scil.** feeling) – containing the empathy into other's feelings, as well as the ideation into essences of things – is a kind of cognition. Being conscious of something can be described as identificative understanding, only if the object of consciousness is somehow hidden from our sight or at least hard to be the object of our consciousness on a certain account. Indulgentive understanding – motivative or motivative-behavioral one – is of various degrees: from approving and recognizing as right (motives or behaviours), throughout consenting and permitting, until non-damnation and excusing. Finally inscriptive understanding is the three-argument-predicate and can be connotative or referentive understanding according to what is signified by something: **connotatum** or a referent.

### 4. ELLIPTICITY OF 'UNDERSTANDING' IN THE IDENTIFICATIVE SENSE

The term 'identificative understanding' appears in various elliptic contexts. The phrase „x understand y” can mean that:

- a) x is conscious of the nature of y (**cardinal** understanding);

- b) x is conscious of the structure of y (**constitutional** understanding);
- c) x is conscious of the horizon of y (**contextual** understanding);
- d) x is conscious of the reason of y (**causal** understanding: **initial** one – of motives, or **effectual** one – of aims);
- e) x is conscious of the sense of y (**conceptual** understanding).

This ellipticity of six c's is probably the derivative of the polysemy of 'sense' *sensu largo* ('nature', 'structure', 'horizon', 'reason', and 'sense' *sensu stricto*).

However it would be misunderstanding to think that cardinal, constitutional (i.a. syntactical), contextual (i.a. psychocontextual and psychocontextual-behavioral), causal (i.a. psychocausal and psychocausal-behavioral), and conceptual (i.a. verbal) understandings – are types of understanding. For that reason, it is misunderstanding also speaking (literally) about ways or methods of understanding.

##### 5. EXPLICATIONS OF CURRENT USES OF 'UNDERSTANDING'

Each of the current use of 'understanding' (and the derivatives of this word) can be paraphrased with the aid of the introduced here specialized terms. It would be, however, misunderstanding to require the paraphrase of every current use of 'understanding' with the aid of exactly one of these specialized terms.

Let us consider the following context:

We are not downhearted. The only trouble is, we cannot understand what is happening to our neighbours.

Joseph Chamberlain

The sense of 'understanding' oscillates here between the identificative and indulgentive ones. Analogically the controversy about the question, whether to understand music is to be conscious of the (formal) structure of a given work, or of the psychical composer's acts, accompanying the creation of this work, or of the motives of composing, or perhaps of something else (e.g. to react properly to this work in the emotional sphere) – is the purposeless controversy.

##### 6. CONTROVERSIES ABOUT UNDERSTANDING

The diversity of opinions in the matter of understanding either has its source in the confusion of meanings (i.e. some of these opinions are

misunderstandings), or these opinions are empirically testable (i.e. some of them are simply false).

A good example of the first situation is the SOPHISM OF THE HERMENEUTIC CIRCLE. To understand it is supposed to understand in advance. In detail: to know **why** somebody do something, one should know **that** somebody do this thing -- and these are to be the facts non-identifiable separately. The press of the button by a certain person is to be (causally) understood only by this man, who knows that this person wanted to press the button. In fact, it is understood by the man, who knows that this person wanted (e.g.) to ring. In general, it is not the case, that:

If we understand a given activity of a certain person, we know, that his person wanted to carry out just this activity.

The fact is, on the other hand, that:

If we understand a given activity of a certain person, we know, that this person wanted to carry out something different from this activity (something having this activity as its cause).

The good example of the second situation is to admit (with no found) to the QUESTION OF THE CONGENITALITY OF DISPOSITIONS TO UNDERSTANDING the status of the philosophical (and not empirical) problem.

## 7. RELATIONS BETWEEN NOTIONS OF 'UNDERSTANDING'

The main misunderstanding consists here, firstly, in the view, that certain objects can be understood only thanks to **intuitive** understanding. In fact, we do not know such a result of this intuitive understanding, which cannot be reached with the aid of «normal» methods, e.g. with the aid of reasoning. But is it arguable at all, that something does not exist?

It is misunderstanding, secondly, to consider the notion of '**identificative** understanding' – or more exactly of 'conceptual understanding' – as the generically primitive notion.

Third misunderstanding is the view, that the necessary condition of the identificative understanding of a certain object is the **indulgentive** understanding of this object. Let us compare the following declaration:

All. everything that I understand, I understand only because I love.

Leo Tolstoy

Analogically groundless conviction is the view, that the necessary condition of the psychocontextual understanding is to feel (or to have the ability to feel) the proper («understood») experiences. The more groundless conviction is the view that one can (conceptually) understand the utterance of a certain person better than this person her/himself. (It was said about Tadeusz Kotarbiński, that his summaries of other's papers showed him better understanding the utterances of the authors of summarized papers than the authors themselves).

In the extreme case the idea would be that it would be possible to understand (conceptually) an utterance incomprehensible to the sender. It should be add, of course, that the matter is here about the proper conceptual understanding (i.e. the reconstruction of the sense meant by the sender) and not about a ny understanding (i.e. ascribing any sense).

Finally, fourth misunderstanding is so-called THE PRINCIPLE OF HERMENEUTICS, according to which the necessary condition of *inscriptive* and conceptual understanding is to reach the full contextual understanding (of a given interpreted utterance). What is more, such a full understanding is simply unattainable.

#### 8. UNDERSTANDING AND ANOTHER MENTAL FUNCTIONS

We have the following dependences:

1. If somebody understands something identically (in the actual sense), he THINKS.

2. If somebody understands conceptually (in the actual sense) the utterance of a certain person, he PERCEIVES this utterance. Of course, the thing is here of the «understanding» perception, and not of the empty «gaping».

3. If somebody has the ability of SPEAKING, he has also the ability of conceptual understanding. The thing is here, also, of speaking, and not of «babbling».

4. If somebody INFORMS a certain person of something with the aids of a certain utterance, both of them understand conceptually this utterance.

5. If somebody understands conceptually the utterance of a certain person, this person EXPRESSES something with the aid of this utterance. NP, it happens that the thing expressed differs principally from the thing understood. Here we have the source of the remark:

Speech was given to man to disguise his thought.  
Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand

6. If somebody REACTS EMOTIONALLY to a certain work of art in the proper way, he understands it conceptually. This dependence should be, certainly, limited to the domain of the works of literary art.

7. If somebody understands inscriptively by a certain expression something determined, he CONCEDES the statement that this determined thing is the sense of this expression.

8. If a certain person understands inscriptively (in the habitual sense) by a certain sign a certain object, the presentation of this object with this person is ASSOCIATED with the presentation of this sign.

On the other hand, it is misunderstanding to consider understanding as a kind of REASONING. The source of this misunderstanding is probably the confusion of understanding with the INTERPRETATION, i.e. coming at understanding. There are many techniques of achieving this state: expressive, aesthetic, symbolic, hermeneutic, psychologic, humanistic, imaginative, teleologic, psychoanalytic, and – last but not least – logic interpretation. In opposite to the interpretation understanding (the intuitive understanding excepted) is either only a certain (potential or actual) state or a chain of cognitive states.

It is misunderstanding also to think that we can consider something (i.e. a certain sentence) as true, and to not understand it at the same time. It was put in a nutshell:

The ignorant man always adores what he cannot understand.  
Cesare Lombroso

Let us add that it is hard to imagine the more essential misunderstanding than questioning the dependence:

If somebody understands something conceptually, the thing understood is the SENSEFUL expression.

On the other hand, it is an open question, whether one can say about conceptual understanding internally contradictory utterances.

## 9. DEGREES OF IDENTIFICATIVE UNDERSTANDING

Many facts speak for the view, that identificative understanding (scil. being conscious) is gradual. I think the following dependences take place:

1. The more detail structure, the more wide horizon, and the more distant reasons of an understood object are conscious by a given person, the **better** this person **understands** identificatively this object.

2. The more elements of the compound expression is understood conceptually, the **better** this person **understands** this expression.

3. Let us suppose that:

a) somebody understands **selectively** a certain expression, if he is conscious only of a part of the denotation of this expression;

b) somebody understands **clearly** a certain expression, if he is conscious of the whole denotation of this expression;

c) somebody understands **distinctly** a certain expression, if he is conscious of any connotation of this expression;

d) somebody understands **accurately** a certain expression, if he is conscious of the lexical connotation of this expression;

e) somebody understands **exactly** a certain expression, if he is conscious of the essential connotation of this expression.

Now, the more somebody's conceptual understanding a given expression on the scale from (a) to (e) draws to the end (i.e. to exact understanding), the **better** he understands this expression.

4. The more detail presentation is being conscious of the sense of a given expression, the **better** the understanding person **understands** (conceptually) this expression.

On the other hand it is misunderstanding to claim that the more distance is between the literary sense of a given expression and the sense being conscious by a certain person, the **better** this person understands (conceptually) this expression.

#### 10. DEFINITION OF 'CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING'

It would be misunderstanding to require the reconstruction of the normal, equivalent definition of „proper conceptual understanding” (scil. ‘proper comprehending’). We have only:

If it is understood inscriptively by the sign *y* the object *z*, then the person *x* **understands properly** *y*, if and only if *x* understands inscriptively by *y* (the object) *z*.

It is another matter that the initial condition of this definition is not precision. Does „it is understood” mean: „everybody understands”, „the most people understand”, „somebodies understands”, or „(each of, the most of, a certain of) proficient users understand”?

The normal definition can be given only for „any understanding”:

The person *x* **understands somehow** the sign *y* if and only if *x* understands inscriptively anything by *y*.



But it would be misunderstanding to identify proper comprehending with any comprehending (i.e. with **instrumental** comprehending). And the view, that instrumental comprehending a certain object is identical with being conscious of the fact that this object is a sign – is still greater misunderstanding.

## 11. CRITERIA OF CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING

The basic misunderstanding is the faith in existing the universal criterion of comprehending and understanding in general – such a criterion which could be the necessary as well sufficient condition. The misunderstanding equal to the former is to look for any criterion *sensu stricto*, an absolute criterion. In fact we dispose of criteria *sensu largo*, i.e. partial criteria. They look like these:

- a) **feeling** correct understanding a given utterance;
- b) correct **reproducing** (i.e. quoting) a given utterance;
- c) correct **explaining** (the sense of) a given expression;
- d) correct **summarizing** a given utterance.

The source of feeling of **misunderstanding** a given utterance can be disturbances of the attention or the complexity of the object described in this utterance. The source of **mistakes** and difficulties in reproducing, explaining, and summarizing, can be defects of intellectual dispositions other than understanding-dispositions (e.g. troubles with the memory, mistakes in reasoning), or even purely articulative defects. The source of **improper**, reaction to take a hoped-for stand (e.g. in the case of lying answer).

On the other hand the correctness of the respective behaviours can be result of the incidental coexistence. One can find the proper definiens without understanding it. It is very hard to make sure, whether a given utterance is the answer for the question brought up, and whether this utterance bears witness to understanding this – and not another – element of the formulated question.

## 12. LINGUAL COMPETENCE

What does mean to have the lingual competence?

Two abilities create it: the ability of conceptual **understanding** utterances already heard, and the ability of **producing** (or complementing) utterance – i.a. (composed) utterances never heard before.

What we genuinely understand, we can do.

Raymond Williams

The main misunderstanding here is the view, that the necessary and sufficient condition of such an ability is understanding the structure and the sense of elements of such utterances. The existence of idioms (understood *en bloc*) and of the ability of creating complex expression with the aid of syncategoremata (non-understood very often in isolation) speaks for the faultiness of the mentioned view.

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#### NIEPOROZUMIENIA WOKÓŁ ROZUMIENIA

Punktem wyjścia rozważań są cztery hipotezy: dwie leksykalne, gramatyczna i historyczna:

1. Wyrażenie „rozumieć” jest polisemem i to podwójnie:

a) wieloznacznością właściwą wielu predykatom mentalnym (tj. może mieć w szczególności sens aktualny, habitualny, sekwencyjny lub procesualny);

b) wieloznacznością swoistą (tj. może w szczególności mieć sens intuicyjny, identyfikacyjny, indulgencyjny lub inskrypcyjny).

2. Wyrażenie „rozumieć” w sensie identyfikacyjnym występuje w kontekstach eliptycznych (może mieć wówczas sens esencjalny, strukturalny, funkcjonalny, kauzalny, kategoriałny lub konceptualny).

3. Wszelkie (niemetaforyczne) konteksty i derywaty wyrażenia „rozumieć” dadzą się sparafrazować za pomocą wprowadzonych rozróżnień.

4. Różnice zdań w sprawie rozumienia albo biorą się z pomieszania znaczeń, albo są empirycznie testowalne.

Przedstawione hipotezy pozwalają usunąć nieporozumienia, dotyczące kolejno: argumentów relacji rozumienia, kategorii semantycznej „rozumienia”, relacji między poszczególnymi pojęciami „rozumienia” oraz między rozumieniem a innymi funkcjami mentalnymi, warunkami poprawności definicji „rozumienia konceptualnego”, na koniec kryteriów kompetencji językowej.