

IDENTIFYING THE CAUSE AND IMPACT OF MISINTERPRETATION ON A MASS MEDIA INTERVIEW

Harnani

Email: justnanie@gmail.com
Program Studi Komputer Administrasi Bisnis,
Politeknik Komputer Niaga-STMIK LPKIA Bandung

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mencari tahu penyebab kesalahpahaman dalam wawancara di salah satu media cetak dan untuk menjawab apakah kesalahpahaman dalam wawancara ini telah melanggar teori Co-operative Principle dan Conversational Maxims dari Grice (1967), lalu menganalisa bagian dari wawancara yang telah menyebabkan kesalahpahaman tersebut. Lebih jauh lagi, penelitian ini juga bertujuan untuk mengetahui respon pembaca dan publik terhadap wawancara tersebut dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif. Subyek penelitian ini adalah wawancara antara Will Smith dan Siobhan Synnot yang terbit di media cetak Daily Records pada tanggal 22 Desember 2007. Bagian wawancara yang diteliti adalah komentar Smith mengenai Adolf Hitler dan pernyataan Synnot yang menyimpulkan komentar Smith tersebut. Hasil penelitian berdasarkan data yang sudah dianalisis menunjukkan bahwa pewawancara telah melanggar Maxim of Quality dan lawan bicara telah melanggar Maxim of Quantity dan Maxim of Manner. Pelanggaran-pelanggaran ini menyebabkan kesalahpahaman yang telah tersebar luas melalui media massa. Walaupun pada awalnya respon dari publik adalah negatif, namun setelah lawan bicara mengklarifikasi melalui pernyataannya, respon publik pun menjadi suportif. Sebagai simpulan, perkataan yang ingin disampaikan sebaiknya diutarakan dengan hati-hati agar tidak menyimpang dari arti sesungguhnya, dan sebaliknya perkataan yang terucap oleh orang lain sebaiknya diinterpretasikan dengan cermat agar arti sebenarnya dari kata-kata tersebut dapat dimaknai dengan tepat.

Kata kunci: *Conversational Maxims, Co-operative Principle, kesalahpahaman dalam wawancara, pelanggaran pada maksim.*

Abstract

This study investigated the misinterpretation on the newspaper interview. The aim of this study is to find out whether the misinterpretation that has violated the Co-operative Principle and Conversational Maxims proposed by Grice (1967) and to analyse part of the interview that causes misinterpretation. In addition, it is also aimed to find out the readers and public's responses towards the interview by applying a descriptive qualitative method. The object for this study is the interview between Will Smith and Siobhan Synnot published on Daily Records on 22 December 2007. The part of the interview used on this study is the one regarding Smith's comment on Adolf Hitler and Synnot's statement of inference regarding the comment. The result from the analysed data shows that the interviewer has violated the Maxim of Quality and the interviewee has violated the Maxim of Quantity and Manner. These violations lead to a wide misinterpretation. The public's response is formerly negative, but subsequently become supportive after the interviewee issues a statement of clarification. This study concludes with an annotation on how words should carefully be spoken to show the real meaning, and how spoken words should carefully be interpreted to achieve a true meaning of the words.

Keywords: Conversational Maxims, Co-operative Principle, misinterpreted interview, violation on maxims.

INTRODUCTION

Interviews on mass media can be very informative for those who need them. However, interviews can be misleading or cause misinterpretation to those who read or listen to them. Misinterpreted interviews often happen in this world, and to a certain extent, it may result to a highly serious problem. It shows how words can be very powerful and holds a highly significant role in our life. One of the examples of misinterpretation on an interview happened in April, 2008, where a tension rose between two countries, Indonesia and Timor Leste, caused by an interview. The interview was between the President of Timor Leste, Ramos Horta, and a reporter from *Metro TV*. The result of the interview had caused a great deal of problems. The interview itself had become the headlines in a number of media, one of which was *Koran Tempo*. As reported a couple of times in *Koran Tempo*, Horta had made an accusation towards Indonesia and *Metro TV* regarding the shooting incident that nearly caused him lose his life on February 11, 2008. This accusation made the former President of Indonesia, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, felt necessary to convey his objection towards the “false” accusation. Subsequently, Horta blamed the mass media for establishing “false” statements, whereas his accusation was audio and videotaped.

The above illustration shows that statements which already spoken and published are difficult to be withdrawn or corrected. Regardless of whose fault it is, an interview should be analysed from both parties, the interviewer and the interviewee. This analysis is important to ensure which part of the interview causes misinterpretation and most importantly whether the interview has resulted into a “co-operation” or what Grice (1967) points out as Cooperative Principle.

In an interview between an actor and singer, Will Smith, and *Daily Records*, there

was a comment that caused a commotion among mass media and public. Smith claimed that his comment was misinterpreted by the interviewer, and to a certain extent, the misinterpretation made the public believe that Smith considered a certain person who had committed many atrocities to be a good person. To identify and investigate the cause of the controversial interview, this paper will analyse part of the content of the interview which had caused a problem. The interview will be analyzed based on Grice’s Co-operative Principle and Conversational Maxims and it is aimed to find out whether the interviewee and the interviewer had broken the principle by violating some maxims. The study is expected to provide some insights towards the misinterpretation and the public responses towards the interview.

This research is attempted to find out whether the misinterpreted interview between Will Smith and *Daily Records* violate the Co-operative Principle and Conversational Maxims proposed by Grice (1967) and analyse part of the interview that caused misinterpretation. In addition, the present study is also aimed to find out the readers’ and public’s responses towards the interview.

The interview which is analysed on this study is the interview between Will Smith and Siobhan Synnot from *Daily Records* on December 22, 2007. The part of the interview which is analysed is the one on Smith’s comment regarding Adolf Hitler, and Synnot’s hypothesis statement regarding Smith’s comment. The transcript of the interview was taken from www.dailyrecords.co.uk.

The study entitled “Identifying the Cause and Impact of Misinterpretation on a Mass Media Interview” is expected to throw lights on the causes and effects of misinterpreted interview. Knowing the causes and effects of misinterpreted interview shall provide

information to people about the importance of implicit meaning behind the explicit words.

METHODOLOGY

This research was a descriptive study and used a qualitative method. The qualitative research involves fieldwork and it is also descriptive in that the researcher is interested in process, meaning, and understanding gained through the words or pictures. The process of qualitative research is inductive in that the researcher builds abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, and theories from details. (Merriam, 1988, cited by Creswell, 1994).

The object of this study is the interview between Will Smith and Siobhan Synnot published on *Daily Records* on December 22, 2007, particularly regarding Smith's comment on Adolf Hitler and Synnot's statement of inference regarding the comment. The subject was chosen because it was the misinterpreted interview which drew public attention and had also provoked some negative responses from particular community.

1. Data Collection

The data were collected after some other interviews had been selected in an attempt of finding the misinterpreted interview that had caused some problems and attracted responses from public.

2. Data Analysis

The data of this study was analysed by using Grice's Theory of Implicature as a foundation. The data analysis would undergo some stages. First, the data was identified and analysed as to whether or not it violates the Cooperative Principle. If so, then, the data were classified into Grice's Theory of Conversational Maxims. This stage was taken because Co-operative Principle is realized

through Conversational Maxims. Afterwards, the data were analysed to identify what causes the misinterpretation. It was analysed from the interviewee's utterance and the interviewer's statement of his inference by observing the maxims. Lastly, the analysed data was explained in order to find the coherence with the readers' response.

3. The Co-operative Principle

Co-operative Principle was first introduced by H. P. Grice. According to Levinson (1983) Grice's theory of meaning is construed as a theory of communication. It has the interesting consequence that it gives an account of how communication might be achieved in the absence of any conventional means for expressing the intended message. The co-operative principle proposed by Grice as cited by Yule (1996) is as follow:

“Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.”

Grice, then, proposed four maxims of conversation underlying the efficient co-operative use of language. The maxims are as follow:

1. Maxim of Quality; meaning one should not say what one believes to be false, and one should say based on good evidence.
2. Maxim of Quantity; meaning a cooperative speaker should provide as much information as needed given the conversation's goal, and no more information than what is needed
3. Maxim of Relevance; meaning one should make relevant contribution in the context of utterance
4. Maxim of Manner; meaning one should avoid obscurity and ambiguity. One also should be brief in conveying any information.

As cited by Levinson (1983), these maxims specify what participants have to do in order to converse in a maximally efficient, rational, co-operative way; they should speak sincerely, relevantly and clearly, while providing sufficient information. Grundy (1999) points out that what is conveyed in an utterance will typically consist of what is said or entailed on the one hand and what is implied on the other.

For example:

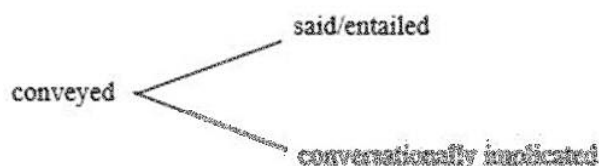
(i) *I have a child.*

(i) entails at least one child and implies not more than one, while

(ii) *I have a child, in fact I have two.*

is a valid inference, because (i) may be cancelled if an additional premise inconsistent with the inference is added as shown in (ii).

The explanation is represented in the following figure:



(Figure 1, Grundy: 1999, p.109)

However, Sperber and Wilson (1995, cited by Grundy 1999) argued that a single principle of relevance is insufficient to explain the process of utterance understanding. They want a theory which goes beyond the probabilistic and enables addressees to be sure that they have recovered the most relevant of a potentially infinite set of inferences. Sperber and Wilson proposed a two-stage process in which the addressee recovers first an explicature – an inference of series or series of inferences which enrich the under-determined form of the utterance to a full propositional form, and an implicature – an inference which provides the addressee with the most relevant interpretation of the

utterance. In line with Sperber and Wilson, Levinson (1983) says:

Grice has provided little more than a sketch of the large area and the numerous separate issues that might be illuminated by a fully worked out theory of conversational implicature. So if use is to be made of these ideas in a systematic way within linguistic theory, much has to be done to tighten up the concepts employed and to work out exactly how they apply to particular cases.

Despite the pros and cons towards Grice’s theory, the aims of the overall perspectives remain intact; that a conversation should be conducted in an effective and efficient way in order to avoid general misunderstandings, hence fail in achieving the aims of the conversation. This study will use Grice’s theory as a foundation in analyzing the interview.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

As stated earlier, the analysed data on this study is the interview between Will Smith and Siobhan Synnot from *Daily Records*. The part of the interview analysed is the one on Smith’s comment regarding Adolf Hitler and Synnot’s inference towards the comment. The first finding is an inference from Synnot: *Remarkably, Will believes everyone is basically good*. This statement is an inference from a statement from Will Smith:

“Even Hitler didn’t wake up going, ‘let me do the most evil thing I can do today’, said Will. “I think he woke up in the morning and using a twisted, backwards logic, he set out to do what he thought was ‘good’. Stuff like that just needs reprogramming.”

Smith as the interviewee has failed to observe the Maxim of Manner and Maxim of Quantity. Smith could have said his statement briefer and clearer as Grice points out that in

Maxim of Manner the speaker should avoid unnecessary prolixity/be brief. He could have just said that Hitler being a bad person went through a process. The Maxim of Quantity is violated because the statement gives more information than is required. It overlaps the necessary information.

The statement of inference as established on *Daily Records* from Synnot violates a Maxim Quality. The interviewer fails to observe the Maxim of Quality because he has drawn a false and untrue inference. From the statement, the interviewer tries to astonish and ensure the public that Smith believes *everyone* is basically good, including Hitler. This statement results in an unwanted consequence which we, as readers, draw an inference that Smith sees Hitler as a good person, whereas, most people, particularly Jewish, see otherwise, because for them, Hitler was responsible for the holocaust in World War II. From the analysis, then the next research question can be answered.

The misinterpreted interview happened because of the wrong inference drawn by the interviewer. He drew the false inference and stated on the newspaper based on his own belief. In addition, he jumps into a conclusion that misleads the readers' interpretation and forces the readers to look for another plausible interpretation (Yule: 1995). However, despite the wrong inference drawn by the interviewer, the misinterpreted interview also happens because of the violations that the interviewee made. The interviewee makes an inefficient statement that may "attract" people's attention and cause the listener/readers draw the wrong conclusion.

The third research question is to find out the readers' response towards the misinterpreted interview. The following discussion is the answer to the question. Smith's remark and Synnot's statement of inference drew public attention and caused negative responses from the readers and other

communities, one of which was The Jewish Defense League who strongly objected and was very upset. As cited on www.tnzm.com, The Jewish Defense League was calling on Barrack Obama to repudiate Will Smith's comments and wanted theatres to pull Smith's new movie *I Am Legend* from their screens. Furthermore, they would boycott Smith after his comment about Hitler. It is widely known that Hitler was not a good person at all.

Noticing the firestorm over his remark, two days after *Daily Records* published the interview, Smith clarifies and explains what he meant on his statement about Hitler. His explanation is soon published on a number of media. As established on *Daily Mail*, Smith says, "It is an awful and disgusting lie. It speaks to the dangerous power of an ignorant person with a pen. I am incensed and infuriated to have to respond to such ludicrous misinterpretation." Furthermore, Smith says, "Adolf Hitler was a vile, heinous vicious killer responsible for one of the greatest acts of evil committed on this planet." This follow-up statement is expected to put his previous statement into the right track and into the right interpretation, thus the misinterpretation does not go further.

The subsequent response from the public turns out to be positive for Smith. As reported on several mass media, Smith has some supports from Jewish group. They welcome and accept Smith's statement that Hitler was a 'vicious killer' and they understand that Smith did not mean for his remarks about the Nazi leader to be mistaken as praise. The national director of the Anti-Defamation League, Abraham H. Foxman (2007), gave Smith some praise for taking "immediate steps to clarify his words and unequivocally condemn Hitler as an evil person. We would have expected no less from a celebrity of his standing in the strata of Hollywood stardom."

Based on the findings, it is clear that the misinterpreted interview between the

movie actor, Will Smith, and Siobhan Synnot from *Daily Records* happens because of the violations towards the maxims that they both have done which result in public's unwanted interpretations. Despite the subsequent positive response from the public, this unfortunate event has provided a valuable lesson on not only conveying concise and appropriate words, but also interpreting the meaning behind the spoken words.

This study is not meant to be a barrier for readers to speak, listen, and interpret as there seem too many "rules" in a conversation. However, let the misinterpretations, errors, or even violations be the enrichments to nurture and widen our knowledge in Pragmatics.

CONCLUSION

Words can be very powerful. On an interview, one should be very careful in saying what he means, otherwise it will lead to misinterpretation problem. Interview is conducted in order to gather information, however there should be a good "co-operation" between the speaker and the interlocutor. Based on the findings, violations on the Conversational Maxim happen on Maxim of Quality, Quantity, and Manner. These violations lead to misinterpretation, which subsequently results in widely negative reaction from the public, particularly from a certain community. However, the subsequent clarification from the interviewee has generated a positive response from the public.

The writer cites a good closing remark from Foxman (2007) about how powerful words can be. He says that this episode serves as a reminder of the power of words, and how words can be twisted by those with hate and bigotry in their hearts to suit their own world view.

Considering the importance of an interview analysis, much further research should be done to complete the gaps on this

study. Further research can be conducted to compare an interview between two different languages, such as Indonesian and English. Researchers can analyse the similarities and dissimilarities of both languages in applying the Cooperative Principle and Conversational Maxims. Next, further research can be conducted to investigate and analyse the violation of the Maxims of an interview in a deep and thorough research. This study gives some annotations about the explicit words and implicit meaning; it is difficult to withdraw what has been said, hence we should carefully convey what we mean, otherwise what we say may be the opposite of what we mean.

REFERENCES

- ABC News. (2007). *Will Smith Takes Hits for Hitler Quote*. Retrieved from <https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/story?id=4052017>
- Administrator. (2008). *Horta: Pendukung Reinado Ada di Indonesia*. Retrieved from <https://koran.tempo.co/read/128528/horta-pendukung-reinado-ada-di-indonesia>.
- Administrator. (2008). *Horta Salahkan Media*. Retrieved from <https://koran.tempo.co/read/128670/horta-salahkan-media>
- Associated Press. (2007). *Smith Says Hitler Comment Misinterpreted*. Retrieved from <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3486486,00.html>
- Ferrer, Richard. (2007). *Will Smith 'Incensed' Over Claims He Praised Hitler*. Retrieved from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-504735/Will-Smith-incensed-claims-praised-Hitler.html>

- Grundy, Peter. (1999). *Doing Pragmatics 2nd Edition*. London: Edward Arnold.
- History.com Staff. (2009). *The Holocaust*. Retrieved from <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/the-holocaust>
- Holmwood, Leigh. (2007). *Will Smith Wins Hitler Slur Apology*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2008/feb/22/medialaw.pressandpublishing>
- Hough, Andrew. (2008). *Will Smith Wins Damages Over Hitler Claim*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-smith/actor-will-smith-wins-damages-over-hitler-claim-idUSL2280321920080222>
- Levinson, S.C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Salkin, Karen. (2007). *Will Smith Explains Hitler Quote*. Retrieved from <https://people.com/celebrity/will-smith-explains-hitler-quote/>
- Synnot, Siobhan. (2007). *Will Smith: My Work Ethic Will Make Me a Legend*. Retrieved from <https://www.dailyrecords.co.uk/entertainment/celebrity-interview>
- Thomas, Jenny. (1995). *Meaning in Interaction: An Introduction to Pragmatics*. New York: Longman Group Limited
- TMZ.com. (2007). *Will Smith -- Hitler, Schmitler; He Wasn't That Bad*. Retrieved from : <http://www.tMZ.com/2007/12/24/jews-not-jiggy-with-fresh-putz-of-bel-air/>
- Yule, George. (2000). *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.