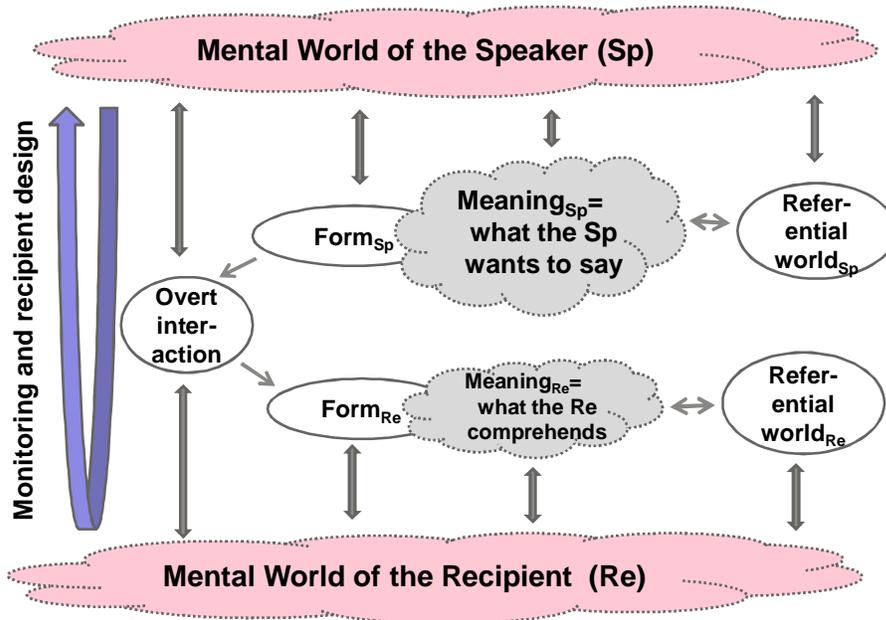


## Different levels of explaining causes of miscommunication

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The following figure shows the three strata that can be used in explaining misunderstandings and other forms of miscommunication (Mustajoki 2008, 2012).



The figure demonstrates three approaches to communication, focusing respectively on the process of producing and comprehending speech (the inner circle), the mental worlds of communicants, and the recipient design factor. The following examples may serve as an illustration:

1. John studies Chinese language and literature.
2. John studies Chinese language and biology.
3. John studies Chinese language and philosophy.

From the purely linguistic point of view, all three phrases are ambiguous: it is not clear from their syntactic structure whether the second noun is within the scope of the adjective. However, there are differences between these phrases in the context of a real conversation. In (1) and (2), people usually arrive at similar interpretations because the mental worlds of communicants yield the same outcome (*Chinese literature* but not *Chinese biology*).

The interpretation of the third phrase is more problematic. No problems occur if the interlocutors' mental worlds give the same interpretation of the scope of the adjective, but it is as likely that one of them may think of *Chinese philosophy*, while the other will be thinking of *general philosophy*.

At this point the role of recipient design comes in. If the Speaker realizes that phrase (3) may generate different interpretations, (s)he can ensure correct understanding by disambiguating the phrase, i.e. saying *general philosophy* or *Chinese philosophy*. Recipient design is thus the key to successful interaction. One could even argue that if we were always able to conduct appropriate recipient design, we would be able to avoid all misunderstandings. The aim of the presentation is to consider why people often fail to conduct recipient design.