What are We Going to "Talk About" in this Public Meeting?: An Examination of Talk about Communication in the North Omaha Development Project

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Abstract

The goal of this essay is to illustrate how the investigation of one communicative phenomenon, metacommunication or talk about communication, can be a resource for understanding and evaluating public meetings and public participation. Such talk about communication is ubiquitous in public discourse (Craig, 2005). Participants in public meetings sometimes talk at great length about what can be said, how it can be said and by whom. In the analysis of the North Omaha Development Project (NODP) public meeting, we chose to focus on two categories of metacommunication: linguistic action verbs or LAVs (Dirven, et al., 1982) and terms for talk (Carbaugh, 1989). In examining LAVs, we focus specifically on participant uses of the verbs "talk," "tell," and "say." The term for talk we examine is participant uses of the term "meeting". We believe that the examination of these two categories of metacommunication prove to be insightful about this particular public meeting and, taken together, provide a rich (if incomplete) picture of the ways in which the participants themselves framed, textured and judged the NODP public meeting.

Interest in public meetings from a communication perspective and as a focal point for research on public participation seems to be on the rise (see introductory essay in this special issue). What communication scholarship, particularly research from a Language and Social Interaction (LSI) perspective, contributes to this line of inquiry is the observation and description of the details of communicative action for the purpose of making claims about the interplay of citizens, school board members, political officials, community leaders, economic developers, technical experts and the like. Such observations are useful for making data-based interpretations and criticisms about what did, what can and what should occur, communicatively, in public and political discourse among and between such parties.

The goal of this essay is to illustrate how the investigation of one communicative phenomenon, metacommunication or talk about communication, can be a resource for understanding and evaluating public meetings and public participation. Such talk about communication is ubiquitous in public discourse (Craig, 2005). Participants in public meetings sometimes talk at great length about what can be said, how it can be said and by whom. Public meetings are often judged as effective or ineffective, legitimate or faulty in terms of the modes and forms of talk employed in the meetings: How the presenters of information did what they did, the tone or manner of discussion, the available opportunities for stakeholders to speak, whether and how community input is allowed and so on. This is not to say that public meetings are exclusively about such talk and not the topics for which they were convened (i.e., schools, sewers, public safety, economic development, conservation and the like). Rather, talk about communication in public meetings appears to be an integral and inseparable feature of such events for those who convene, facilitate, attend and participate in them.

Metacommunicative terms and phrases have become a central topic of concern in the ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1962, 1972; Philipsen and Coutu, 2005; see also Carbaugh, 1989 and 2005), the study of speech codes (Philipsen, 1992, 1997; Philipsen, Coutu, and Covarrubius, 2005) and metapragmatics (Dirven, Goossens, Putseys and Vorlat, 1982; Vershuren, 1987). In the analysis of the North Omaha Development Project (NODP) public meeting, we highlighttwo categories of metacommunication: linguistic action verbs or LAVs (Dirven, et al., 1982) and terms for talk (Carbaugh, 1989). In examining LAVs, we focus specifically on participant uses of the verbs "talk," "tell," and "say." The term for talk we

analyze is participant uses of the term "meeting". We concede that there are many ways to examine metacommunication in the NODP meeting and we by no means exhaust them all. Nevertheless, we believe that the examination of these two categories of metacommunication prove to be insightful about this particular public meeting and, taken together, provide a rich (if incomplete) picture of the ways in which the participants themselves framed, textured and judged the NODP public meeting.

LAVs in the NODP

Fillmore's (1977, 1982, 1985) scenes-and-frames semantics shows how the terms people use can frame a particular scene of action. Dirven, et al. (1982) explain Fillmore's approach saying "the scenes are related to our conceptual world and the frames to the linguistic means of evoking the concepts" (p. 1). In commenting on Dirven, et al.'s analysis, Philipsen and Leighter (2007) summarize the prototypical distinctions in the way the LAVs "speak", "talk", "say" and "tell" frame a particular linguistic scene. They write:

> "speak" and "talk" differ from "say" and "tell" in that the former two are more likely to perspectivize the linguistic action itself…to emphasize speaking or talking in its own right, whereas the latter two are more likely to focus on the topic or substance of the message…within the "speak"/"talk" pair, "speak" differs from "talk" in that the former is more likely to perspectivize linguistic action as a more unidirectional act…whereas "talk" is more likely to perspectivize the addressee as a potential interactor…within the "say"/"tell" pair, "say"…does not necessarily involve an addressee…whereas ["tell"] typically involves an act of a single speaker informing an explicitly designated addressee. (pp. 207-208)

In what follows, we examine the ways in which the participants' uses of "talk," "tell" and "say" in the NODP public meeting frame the communicative event they themselves are participating in. Our analysis pays special attention to ways in which audience members' and presenters' framings serve rhetorical (i.e., strategic) ends.

What Are We Going to "Talk About" Tonight?: The NODP Meeting as Dialogue

The opening eleven minutes of the video show two members of the NODP consultant group giving PowerPoint aided presentations. From the talk of these presenters, it is clear that they each

intend to inform their audience about many of the parameters and assumptions of the NODP. In their talk, they are also doing something else, framing the communicative scene of the meeting as a dialogue between the audience and the NODP consultant group.

Each of the segments below features an expression of the LAV "talk" followed by the preposition "about". Before examining these segments, it is useful to consider the LAV "talk" and the generic and typical ways in which it frames communicative action. As a verb, "talk" is almost exclusively intransitive in nature, identifying only indirect objects (Dirven, et al., 1982). That is, "talk" does not typically identify a specific message from speaker to hearer. Thus, "talk" places special emphasis on the communicative action itself rather than the speakers, hearers or message of the talk. "Talk" also, typically, frames the scene as dialogic in nature though this is not always the case. For example, a speaker saying "let's talk" frames the scene as dialogic whereas a speaker who says "I'm going to talk," perhaps, frames the scene as what might be called one-way communication.

In the following segments, with the exception of Segment 1, both of the speakers from the consultant group frame the communicative scene as dialogic in nature. In addition to framing the scene as "talk" among the participants, these two speakers also express a series of potential topics of talk in the meeting.

The first consultant speaker says the following:

(Segment 1: 1:29)

→   At this point I'm gonna turn it over to Bob Peters to talk about

the physical layout an- and issues related to the Northside community.

In this segment, the speaker "turn(s) it over to Bob Peters" who will "talk about the physical layout" "and issues related to the Northside community." In so doing the speaker designates a topic of talk, the next speaker, and, perhaps, a mode of behavior for the audience. In this instance, the audience is framed as a hearer/receiver and not a speaker/sender. Thus, the speaker frames the communicative scene to come: "Bob" is going to "talk" and the audience is not.

In Segment 2, there are two metacommunicative phrases expressed by the speaker, one of which contains the LAV "talk". In Segment 2, Bob from the consultant group begins his talk by referencing a PowerPoint slide showing a map of North Omaha. He says:

(Segment 2: 2:18)

> this is an aerial shot of the neighborhood so it's not really the neighborhood on
>
> the ground but we're gonna get into that so not not surprisingly this is information
>
> that you and I have learned together
>
> over the past thirty years so anything that needs to be u- focused on
>
> u- please fill out your cards bring it forward and u- if its if it presents an
>
> opportunity or a gap in services or a threat to this community

→   let's talk about it tonight

In saying "we're gonna get into that," Bob seems to suggest there will be communicative interchange among the audience members and the consultant group on the matter of "the neighborhood on the ground." Bob suggests that the "information" is something "[the audience] and I have learned over the past thirty years." His suggestion is a premise from which he invites input about "anything that needs to be" "focused on." Bob reinforces his invitation by saying if there is an issue that "presents an opportunity or a gap in services or a threat" then "let's talk about it tonight."

As other essays in this special issue have suggested, at least one audience member takes issue with the consultant group's method of input from the audience. Nevertheless, Bob's talk here frames the scene of communicative action as dialogic when he says "let's talk about it tonight." Bob's use of the terms "let's" and "we're" accompany the metacommunicative phrases in Segment 2 and, thus, support the notion that Bob is framing the scene as dialogic among the audience members and consultants. Bob's utterance also designates potential topics for the audience to "talk about": things that are "an opportunity or a gap in services or a threat to this community."

Segment 3 is similar to Segment 2 in that Bob is once again designating a topic of talk. He suggests "what we'll talk about to" "quite some length" "is this old northeast to southwest railroad belt line that was abandoned years ago." In Segment 3, as in 2, the speaker is framing the scene as dialogic with his use of the inclusive pronoun "we" in this metacommunicative phrase. He says:

(Segment 3: 3:07)

→   what we'll talk about to to quite some u- length probably tonight is this old
    northeast to southwest railroad belt line that was abandoned years ago and the
    industrial fabric that was aligned with that u- rail system is has deteriorated

Segment 4 is a little different from 1, 2 and 3 in that Bob, the speaker, is not framing the present scene but a communicative scene from the past. We include this segment here for three reasons. First, it occurs in the meeting in the same speech event as the others in the group: Bob's opening presentation to the audience. Second, Bob uses the same LAV that is the subject of the other segments, *talk*. Third, even though Bob is speaking about communicative activity that occurred before the NODP meeting, he seems to be doing so to suggest yet another potential topic of talk among the present participants, "the routes" "friends or visitors to North Omaha take." Bob says:

(Segment 4: 7:27)

→ Councilman Brown invi- and I have talked through a number for a number of years about the routes that y- that many of us friends or visitors to North Omaha take and how our first impressions aren't necessarily the best and how those thoroughfares east and west north and south

through the neighborhood should be enhanced

In saying what he does in Segment 4, and from our general impression of what Bob was doing in his presentation, it seems the purpose of this segment of talk is to introduce another potential topic of talk into the dialogue of the NODP meeting. In this way, Segment 4 seems to be congruent with Segments 1, 2, 3, and 5.

Segment 5 continues in a manner that is consistent with the others. In this instance, Bob frames the scene as dialogic among the participants in the meeting with the phrase "what we'll talk about." In this instance, Bob adds another element to the communicative scene he is framing, when "talk about" this topic will occur. Bob says he's "sure" this will occur "in our question and answer and" "in the upcoming" "months." Bob says:

(Segment 5: 8:18)

→ Not surprisingly and what we'll talk about I'm sure tonight in our question and answer and then in the upcoming u- months is we need to provide increased op- economic opportunities u- within the community and also engage our youth

In summary, these segments each demonstrate how the consultants of the NODP frame the communicative scene of the NODP meeting in which they are participating. The scene, for them, is a dialogue in which the audience members and consultants will "talk about" a series of topics. These topics fall under the broad heading of "issues related to the Northside community" and

include "physical layout," any issue that "presents an opportunity or a gap in services or a threat to this community," the "old northeast to southwest railroad belt line," "the routes" "friends or visitors to North Omaha take" and "how those thoroughfares" "should be enhanced," the "need to provide increase" "economic opportunities within the community," and "engag[ing] our youth."

To frame the scene this way is to 1) focus on the talk in its own right, putting specific messages and specific speakers in the background of the scene, 2) frame the communicative scene as primarily dialogic in nature, 3) suggest inclusiveness among all participants in the scene and 4) give the impression that there will be somewhat equitable opportunity for all participants in the meeting to speak. In only one instance, Segment 1, there is the suggestion that a member of the consultant group, Bob, will be the exclusive speaker. Bob himself, however, quickly reframes the scene as dialogic in nature, one in which the audience and the consultant group alike will engage in "talk about" the "issues."

"If you're talking" "If you're telling": Framing the Scene as One-Way Communication

Segments 6 and 7 illustrate two instances in which some audience members frame the communicative scene of the NODP in a way that is different from the consultant group's framing. The audience members who speak in these segments frame the scene as one-way communication in which the consultant group is doing the speaking.

Segment 6 occurs immediately after the opening presentations in the meeting are complete. It marks the beginning of a new speech event in the overall speech situation: the question and answer period. As the consultants had planned, the audience members submitted questions on cards that were to be read by the consultant group and responded to. Bob, a member of the consultant group, reads the first question taken from the audience. Below, we analyze Bob's turn in two parts. The first part includes Bob's reading of the first question posed by an audience member to the consultant group. Bob says:

> (Segment 6: 11:26)
>
> it says this "watching your PowerPoint presentation you have al- you al-
>
> → already have plans laid out before this meeting so <u>you</u> seemed to tell us what you were going to do regardless what the people think" What um u-

(approx. 7 second pause)

Dirven, et al. (1982) explain that the LAV "tell" frames the scene as a speaker acting directly on an addressee as the direct object of linguistic action. As Dirven, et al. put it, "tell" "does not imply interaction; the subject is as a rule a source/transmitter, not a sender/interactor, and the receiver is a mere receptor, not a receptor/interactor" (p. 169). They add a prototypical use of "tell" is as INFORM-tell[1]. In such a telling, a speaker tells an addressee the message. As was noted above, "tell" "typically involves an act of a single speaker informing an explicitly designated addressee" (Philipsen & Leighter, p. 208, 2007).

In Segment 6 displayed above, Bob directly quotes the question card from which he is reading. The audience member who poses the question on the card frames the communicative scene using the LAV "tell" in a prototypical way: The speaker is telling the addressee(s) a message. Thus, this speaker (the audience member who wrote the question) frames the scene as one-way communication from the consultant group to the audience. Moreover, in a manner that is consistent with Dirven, et al.'s (1982) description of "tell", this audience member frames the communicative scene as one in which the speaker (the consultant group) is acting directly on an addressee (the audience): "you seemed to tell us what you were going to do regardless of what the people think." Such usage of the LAV "tell" foregrounds the telling of the particular message and not the potential interaction between the consultant group and the audience.

The question on the card causes obvious consternation for Bob. His stilted speech, ("what uhm u-") and long pause (approximately 7 seconds) indicate as much. The second part of Bob's turn that we analyze here includes his verbal response to the audience member's question. He says:

(continuing Segment 6)

I don't th- I don't know u- there's that obviously is is not what the

→ message was tonight we're here to hear from you we have no preconceived u- ideas we hav- we think we've identified some gaps in services and u- we've identified some opportunities we've find we've identified resources but at this point in time we're still in in the information and data gathering phase we have a

---

[1] NARRATE-tell is a much less frequent usage and typically implies an imaginative telling (Dirven, et al., 1982). We argue that the expressions of "tell" examined are consistent with INFORM-tell usage.

survey of both those individu- u- a statistical survey of people that live in this neighborhood

who who work in this neighborhood who shop in this neighborhood and other neighborhoods that will be completed over the next several week

→ and we have we are asking for your input tonight and at the community meetings that will not only be neighborhood based but the forthcoming

u- community wide meetings so that we're able to frame what those opportunities and solutions could be

In the second part of Segment 6, Bob continues with more stilted speech and, then, disagrees that the consultant group was "tell[ing]" the audience anything when he says "that obviously is" "not what the message was tonight." Instead, Bob reframes the communicative scene emphasizing the consultant group's role in the meeting as receivers: "we're here to hear from you." Bob adds "we're asking for your input tonight," further suggesting that the audience members are, in his view, speakers in this scene. It should be noted that Bob is suggesting this particular linguistic scene not only for the present NODP meeting, but also meetings in the future as well. The consultants "are asking for your input" "at the community meetings" and "community wide meetings."

Finally, it is important to emphasize where this question from the audience appears in the sequence of activity in the meeting. The question Bob reads is the first in the question and answer period and is posed immediately after the opening presentations in which the two presenters suggest a wide range of "issues" to "talk about." It is clear, at least from the point of view of this audience member, the way in which the consultant group framed the communicative scene is not the way this speaker, in fact, framed it.

Later in the meeting, there is further evidence suggesting the audience does not share the consultant group's view of the communicative scene. Another audience member refers to "the very first question that was asked" (in Segment 6) in order to comment on Bob's response to the question. In her words, the "question" "was summarily dismissed." She says:

(Segment 7: 24:36)

→ I want to go back to the very first question that was asked. U- someone was talking about the perception that there was already a plan in place

→ and it was summarily dismissed as being obviously not the intent of this meeting.

I would just caution you to say that perception is important

so I think I would take a step back and think about why that perception is there

maybe what you would do to address that particularly if you want all of our input

and support in this endeavor. Just a suggestion.

In this segment, an audience member characterizes Bob's response to the first question in a negative way. She says "the very first question that was asked," the subject of which she characterizes as "someone was talking about the perception that there was already a plan in place," "was summarily dismissed." We include discussion of this segment here because it supports the notion that the NODP, at least from the point of view of the audience, is not an event in which dialogue between the consultants and the audience is the primary communicative mode. In Segment 6, an audience member raises a potential topic ("plans laid out") and the consultants decline an opportunity to "talk about" it. In Segment 7, another audience member suggests that the topic of "a plan in place" "was summarily dismissed."

The question posed to the consultant group, Bob's response and a second audience member's characterization of Bob's response placed in sequence with one another illumines how at least some audience members have framed the scene of the NODP meeting in a way that is contrary to the way the consultant group did. Perhaps this distinction is obvious to those who attended the meeting and perhaps it is not. The point of this analysis is to demonstrate 1) how participants participate in the construction of the communicative scene as one thing or another and 2) how the participants in such meetings may frame the scene in radically different ways. In this case, in spite of all of the work done by the presenters to frame the scene as a dialogue among and between audience members and consultants, at least two vocal audience members framed the scene as one-way communication from the consultant group to the audience.

"Why not the Chamber of Commerce to stand up and say" "we'll help you do this"?: Linguistic Action as an (In)effective Rhetorical Resource

Juxtaposing expressions of "talk" and "tell" in the NODP meeting shows how the consultant group and some audience members framed the communicative scene in different ways. Our examination of expressions of "say" by one participant in the NODP meeting, Omaha Chamber of Commerce President Dave Brown, shows yet another framing of the communicative scene.

This examination of Dave's use of "say" also shows how his framing of the scene was an ineffective rhetorical resource for him in the meeting.

As is evidenced in several essays in this special issue, what we have labeled Segment 8 is a rich source from which to interpret some of the overarching sentiments of the NODP meeting. This segment begins with Charles, a member of the audience, speaking. What follows is an exchange involving Dave Brown and several members of the audience. Charles begins:

(Segment 8: 31:05)

Charles:	Why would I ever trust the Chamber of Commerce to do this? A- anybody that has answer please give me one
Dave:	Why not?
Charles:	Why not? Because you guys have a history You have a history
Dave:	((wel-))
Charles:	of destroying this here community. The Chamber of Commerce has participated over the years I've lived in Omaha sixty-three of 'em in destroying this community. Why would I now think why would I now think
Dave:	((Do you have a choice))
Charles:	that the Chamber of Commerce is going to support something that happens in North Omaha
Dave: →	Is there anybody else standing up in front of you saying that they will lead the charge to improve North Omaha? Is there anybody else doing it?
Aud. 1:	Yes
Aud. 2:	Yes
Aud. 3:	Yes
Aud. 4:	Yeah there are
Dave:	Who? Who is?
Aud. 3:	I write all the time to any entity that is not in this city.
Dave:	Well I appreciate that has anybody been willing to go out to raise money to hire a consultant to hire implementation to make this thing move forward? Has any other business group

→   stood up and said "we'll help you do this"

Unknown: ((why can't-))

Dave: irrespective of what's happened in the past is anybody today doing that? Now Dick Davis has got a group that's working on on economic sufficiency in North Omaha. There are several others.

→   But why not the Chamber of Commerce to stand up and say "we can cause economic development to happen here." Why not?

Charles: The Chamber of Commerce can. My question is why would we trust you after your history of what you've don- allowed to happen in this city to North Omaha?

Each of Dave's responses to Charles' question "why ever would I trust the Chamber of Commerce to do this?" is increasingly more elaborate. Dave's first response, "why not?", is quickly answered by Charles: "because you have a history." The second response from Dave, "do you have a choice?", receives sneers from the audience that are hearable in the audio record (link). Dave elaborates on the notion that the residents of North Omaha do not have a "choice" by asking if there is "anybody else doing it?", meaning is there anyone else doing what the Chamber is doing in the NODP? It is this response and the subsequent exchange that include metacommunicative terms and phrases and the LAV "say". Dave asks 1) "is there anybody else standing up in front of you saying that they will lead the charge to improve North Omaha?", 2) "has any other business group stood up and said 'we'll help you do this'," and 3) "why not the Chamber of Commerce to stand up and say 'we can cause economic development to happen here?'".

Ignoring for moment the interactional qualities of this segment including Dave's perhaps flippant first responses and his talk over Audience member 3, it is important to note Dave's characterization of the communicative action of the Chamber of Commerce. Dave's responses to Charles' question about "trust" are characterizations of what the Chamber of Commerce is *saying* in the NODP. That is, Dave is characterizing the Chamber's actions as *linguistic and communicative action*. In Dave's words, the Chamber is communicating nonverbally by "stand[ing] up" and by "saying" "we'll help you do this" and "we can cause economic development to happen here."

Turning to extant analyses of the LAV *say,* there are two qualities of *say* that are useful for forming an interpretation of this exchange. First, *say* almost exclusively designates the active subject of *say* utterances as the originator of the message (Goossens, 1982). As was discussed above, "say" is "more likely to focus on the topic or substance of the message" and "does not necessarily involve an addressee" (Philipsen and Leighter, pp. 207-208, 2007). In this exchange, the originator of the message is the Chamber of Commerce. Dave is the speaker and not the originator of the message in this instance. As President, Dave may, however, speak for the Chamber and "say" these things on the Chamber's behalf. Thus, by framing the communicative scene with the LAV "say," Dave is emphasizing the Chamber's (and his) significance in the scene. He is emphasizing what "the Chamber" is "saying" and not, for example, what "the Chamber" is hearing or what the audience is saying.

Second, there are three ways to frame a particular message with an LAV: direct enunciation, indirect enunciation and synthesis (Dirven, et al., 1982). Of Dave's three uses of "say", the first is indirect enunciation and the latter two are direct enunciation. When the direct object of "say" is direct enunciation, as in the latter two instances, there is no limit to the types of speech acts that can be interpreted for the expression of "say". In other words, "say can be paraphrased as 'state'/'assert', 'order'/'advise'/'request' etc., though *say* does not mean 'assert'/'state', 'order', etc.: "say" is merely a cover term that can contextually imply any of these" (Dirven, et al., 1982). Thus, Dave's final two uses of "say" in this exchange leave open the interpretation of what he may be doing in "saying" these things.

The openness of possible interpretations of Dave's speech act proves to be ineffective in convincing Charles' that he should "trust the Chamber of Commerce." Dave says "why not the Chamber of Commerce to stand up and say 'we can cause economic development to happen here'." To which Charles responds, "The Chamber of Commerce can my question is why would we trust you." In other words, "The Chamber of Commerce can" "say" what they want but it doing so does not instill "trust." Dave's framing of the communicative scene in this interchange was an ineffective rhetorical resource for answering Charles' question and instilling "trust." Perhaps Charles would have taken Dave's speech act differently if he had *promised* "we can cause economic development to happen here."

"This is just the first of many many meetings": "Meeting" as a Significant Term for Talk in the NODP

The analytic framework proposed by Carbaugh (1989) suggests that terms for talk label communicative enactments on three levels: acts, events, and styles. Specifically, terms for talk refer to events when they are "used to identify interactive dialogic accomplishments" and these expressions identify "co-enactments of communication" (p. 99). In the instances we examine below, each speaker uses the term "meeting" to identify an episode that will or has occurred. The significance of terms for talk is not just that they are words that name communicative action but rather they are used "to speak directly and literally about words" (p. 113).

Terms for talk relay messages about communication on four levels: mode, relative degree of the structuring of the code, tone, and efficacy (see Carbaugh, 1989). From our investigation, we suggest that uses of the term "meeting" in the course of the NODP are primarily regarding the latter: efficacy. Here, we propose a tentative claim about uses of the term "meeting" by those who convened the NODP to bolster the relationship between the frequency and number of public meetings and the perceived legitimacy of public process. The claim is as follows:

> *Whereas citizens and community members may find frustration in the frequency and use of public meetings for community decision making, city officials and community leaders often argue there is a direct relationship between the number of public meetings and the legitimacy of a given public process. The more the better.*

This notion is not new to those who study and participate in public meetings. It has been well-documented that citizens hold generally negative attitudes toward public meetings particularly with respect to their number. Our purpose here is to point out a few instances in the NODP meeting in which the consultants made mention of how the present public meeting, the meeting convened in April of 2007, was situated in the context of many meetings before and many meetings after. In so doing, they appear to be providing evidence of the legitimacy, value and overall quality of the process.

Near the end of the meeting and after it is clear that the legitimacy of the NODP is in question, Dick Davis suggests "this is just the first of many many" "meetings." He says:

> (Segment 9: 37:04)
>
> What we want to do is change those millions of dollars to tens of millions of dollars. But you have to do that in a collaborative- in a collaborative

→ way. So this is just the first of many many many u- meetings

→ we've had so many meetings already u- Saturdays aft- evenings et cetera

→ u- with a variety of community and u- this won't be the la- last meeting

Shortly thereafter, Dick suggests what the "talk" in these meetings will be "about": "solutions." He says:

(Segment 10: 39:04)

we're not gonna be talking about u- u- the issues of what is what what the

→ problems were what we want to here to talk about the solutions

Segments 9 and 10 seem to support the legitimacy of the NODP by suggesting 1) that there have been and will be "many meetings," and 2) that the meetings will center on "talk about the solutions." An audience member picks up on these points and suggests that these comments by Dick do not lend to the legitimacy of the NODP.

(Segment 11: 39:25)

Ok with all due respect Mr. Davis and I do respect you the issue is that

→ I've sat in I don't know how many o- these <u>same</u> <u>type</u> of meetings

→ and it's <u>always</u> solution oriented.

At approximately 40:20 on the video recording, this same audience member continues her turn and ends with a final concluding statement that ultimately undermines the notion that "many many meetings" leads to legitimacy. Here, the overlapping speech is that of Dick Davis. The audience member says:

(contintuing Segment 11)

Well let me finish

((Alright))

That's the first problem

((Alright))

We got what five people maybe so this is not the community input

The very fact that you had cards rather than having people stand up and raise their hands so you can screen the the the questions

((But we're we're))

And why you know t- the gentleman's point about why we don't trust?

→ This goes on every year. Every year we have a meeting

According to this audience member, the meetings have taken on a repetitive characteristic which, rather than marking change, mark a continuation of past problems and barriers to change. These comments mark a difference between the practice of public meetings from the point of view of the audience and normative ideals of public meetings from the point of view of the consultant group (see Tracy, 2005). As an ideal, meetings should be a forum for input from the community and associated with positive change. In practice, the meetings do not accomplish actual change. For at least one audience member, meetings have not and will not change the conditions in North Omaha: "This goes on every year. Every year we have a meeting."

Perhaps legitimacy is not the right term in the interpretation of Segments 9 through 11. The claim posed at the top of this section is a hunch about the NODP meeting specifically as well as public meetings in general. These segments suggest when the legitimacy of a public process is in question, the officials of that process may employ a rhetorical strategy suggesting that there have been, are, and/or will be lots of public meetings. Doing so seems to be a common way of bolstering the ethos of a given public process. For the audience members in the NODP meeting, this rhetorical strategy was ineffective.

Discussion

The goal of this essay was to illustrate how the investigation of one communicative phenomenon, metacommunication or talk about communication, can be a resource for understanding and evaluating public meetings and public participation. We chose to limit our investigation to three LAVs and one term for talk because we believe they shed light on some of the difficulties the conveners of the meeting, the NODP consultant team, experienced in the meeting. There is much more to be said about metacommunication in this meeting. Nevertheless, our analysis shows how participants 1) co-construct the communicative scene they are participating with expressions of the LAVs "talk", "tell" and "say"; and 2) do so toward contrasting strategic and rhetorical ends. We also demonstrate how conveners of public "meetings" can operate from a premise about the legitimacy of public processes based on the number and frequency of "meetings". This premise is not shared by all who participate in public meetings as is demonstrated by at least one speaker from the NODP audience.

It is probably an overstatement to say that the NODP meeting analyzed here was a complete failure. Rather, we view the NODP as an instance in which the conveners of a public meeting

were unprepared for what they might encounter. One way we believe the consultant team was unprepared is grounded in the consultant team's framing of the communicative scene and unwillingness to talk openly about this framing. Here we turn to one data-based claim we can build from our analysis.

The presentations in the opening of the meeting framed the scene of communication as one in which any topic put on the table by the audience would be treated as worthy of discussion. When the first question asked called into question the nature of this communicative scene, when the audience member framed the scene as "tell"ing instead of "talking", the presenter chose to respond with a denial (Segment 6). Later, this denial was challenged by a second audience member (Segment 7). One option available to the presenter could have been to open the floor and allow for "talk about" the "presentation" in its own right. Doing so might have provided more transparency about the aims and purposes of the presentation in the context of the meeting and, thus, diffused some of the suspicion aimed at the consultant group. Instead, the presenter "summarily dismissed" (Segment 7) the question leading to further mistrust on the part of the audience.

Taking our two primary findings together, one additional conclusion may be drawn. If the members of the public who attended this meeting did not trust the conveners, were skeptical about the initial direction of the project and were questioning the modes of interaction set forth by the presenters, it is no wonder that the promise of more "meetings" did not satisfy the displeasure in the room.

In no way are we suggesting that the consultant team did not put thought into the design and construction of the meeting as a communicative event. We are quite certain they did. What we are suggesting, instead, is that they could have adopted a willingness to call that design and construction of the meeting into question for the purpose of making plain their objectives. In short, we are suggesting that the consultant team develop a sensitivity toward noticing and responding to metacommunicative terms and phrases in the course of future public meetings.

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