

# Journal of Public Deliberation

---

Volume 5  
Issue 2 *The Practice of Public Meetings*  
(special issue of *International Journal of Public Participation*)

---

Article 7

2009

## Meetings that Evolve Interactively: Viewing a Town Hall Discussion with an LSI Perspective

Evelyn Plummer Ed.D.  
evelyn.plummer@shu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd>

---

### Recommended Citation

Plummer, Evelyn Ed.D. (2009) "Meetings that Evolve Interactively: Viewing a Town Hall Discussion with an LSI Perspective," *Journal of Public Deliberation*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.  
Available at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol5/iss2/art7>

This An Article is brought to you for free and open access by Public Deliberation. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Public Deliberation* by an authorized editor of Public Deliberation.

---

## Meetings that Evolve Interactively: Viewing a Town Hall Discussion with an LSI Perspective

### Abstract

This paper applies conversation analysis methods to a large public meeting. Examination of various pivotal speech acts and actions as performed by the presenters as well as the attendees suggested the enactment and sequencing of these different modes of interaction did not evolve randomly. As in any system, all elements within a group are interdependent and reciprocally influential; therefore, in this meeting, as the communication modes, communication goals, topic initiation, and agenda management roles shifted, individual parties and the group as a whole subtly coordinated to accommodate those shifts. One particular participant performed several implicit and explicit functions in the ongoing communication system of this meeting. Comparing his apparently spontaneous behaviors to the planned procedures of the program presenters revealed possible insights into how better to serve the diverse goals of presenters who want an orderly intake of information and attitudes and attendees who want a sense of involvement and empowerment.

### Keywords

conversation analysis (CA), forum, group communication, multiparty talk, public meetings, speech acts, systems

The use of language-based and/or interaction-driven research methodologies can inform the study of human communication and reveal patterns of coordinated action occurring on an extra-subtle level. Although such language and social interaction (LSI) approaches are most often associated with dyadic or triadic contexts, such practices also can enrich our understanding of the practice and processes of group communication. At first the specific, often micro-level investigation of locally managed behaviors as commonly found in LSI research may appear applicable only for post discussion analyses of the operational dynamics in a specific communication event. For example, I have previously utilized conversation analysis methods for the study small group interaction (Plummer, 1991). Although some group communication research does attempt to understand a single event, much of the work in the group communication research field strives for insights which can be applied in more general and prescriptive ways. Such measurement of effectiveness via behaviors and outputs (results) contributes to the development of prescribed procedures for accomplishing such group “tasks” as decision-making and other types of deliberation. This research perspective has yielded insights and many useful and tangible procedural tools (e.g. Gouran & Hirokawa, 1996) and the functional approach does acknowledge the influence of interaction processes in a working group. However, as summarized by Hollingshead, et al., “Because the functional perspective views group outcomes as the linear function of inputs and processes, it cannot explain cyclical, nonlinear group dynamics, or reverse causality (2005, p.48).

Because additional, influences exist far beyond any given meeting’s agenda inputs, a richer understanding of a specific meeting and of group communication in general is possible by utilizing micro-level investigative choices such as LSI and conversation analysis.

The town meeting currently under investigation may seem too complex for examination via such fine-grained approaches. However, the multimodal examination of patterns in any human communication event can help provide both a clearer understanding of the interaction as experienced by the participants themselves as well as generate insight that can enhance the body of knowledge in group communication of which public meetings are one context. This essay will address the application of conversation analysis methods (a form of LSI) to the analysis of a large public meeting.

## **Diverse Applications in the Study of Group Interaction**

Groups provide ample opportunities for varied analytical approaches, including such foci as operational processes, interaction patterns and dynamics, decision-making and problem solving functions, interpersonal influence, political activism, and social identity. The realm of possible investigative methodologies is equally diverse and useful concepts often are found outside of the discipline. For example, although it served as the theoretical base for the development of guided weapons, the application of a general systems framework (Bertalanffy, 1968) to the study of groups is useful not only for examining the behaviors of the interactants, but also for searching for the "rules" (i.e. organization) of the interaction; some of these rules are already known by the participants and others are locally co-constructed during the process of the interaction itself. The structural/systems/cybernetic coordination which characterizes all human interaction, whether dyadic or multiparty, exists in a relationship whereby each element (part) carries information which may affect and be affected by every other part.

To the observer outside the communication situation, a particular utterance could be variably interpreted on a variety of organizational perspectives. However, by considering the interaction with a structuralist perspective (studying acts vis-à-vis preceding and subsequent acts) , it becomes evident that the interactants, themselves, indicate (via verbal and nonverbal cues) the ways in which they are defining or interpreting a sequence of action by means of their own subsequent behaviors.

As Button and Lee said in their summary of Garfinkel's concept of ethnomethodology (a rationale underlying most LSI approaches), "... ordered interaction is best understood as the ongoing accomplishment of those who produce it in accordance with methods, roles, and structures which are employed and improvised in the very course of achieving it." (Button & Lee, 1987, p. 2).

Communicants' signals for these "improvised" acts, as well as their interpretations of meanings, are accomplished in both explicit and implicit ways, often within the same utterance. As in all human communication, evidence of such a ... "...metacommunicative system—the communications about the communication..." (Bateson, 1972, pp. 210-211) is seen to operate frequently throughout this North Omaha Development Project Meeting. The meaning and significance of a communication act is determined not by a sender's intention but rather by the impact and the reaction displayed by the receiver.

One particular metacommunicative message appeared increasingly as this meeting progressed. As will be discussed later, the content and communication acts of one particular speaker, Dick Davis, repeatedly presented a message that was not about the project being proposed, but rather was an attempt to communicate and solicit an underlying alignment of needs, goals, cooperation and commitment of all parties. Thus, Davis was advocating integrative negotiation (Fisher, 2000), an approach to managing conflict which overlaps with group communication principles of collaborative and transformative problem solving. Fisher states that both “Real Conflict Theory” (which emphasizes objective, tangible factors) and “Social Identity Theory” (which emphasizes subjective, personal factors) contribute to causing intergroup conflict. He also believes that, although the “real” factors (i.e. tangible, objective) are more causative, in reality both types of factors are involved in creating conflict situations. Such a multiplicity of conflict sources influenced the structural and topical flow of the meeting and as such, will be touched on briefly in this paper.

### **Addressing the Current Piece of Data**

Because the video recording of this public meeting (convened by the Omaha Chamber of Commerce [OCC] and the North Omaha Development Project [NODP] on April 23, 2007 at Salem Baptist Church) does not include every part of the interaction, the observations expressed in this current paper cannot be definitive.

This was a large group, communication event containing several different modes of interaction with all parts functioning within a larger system of interaction. The ostensible goal for this communication system that day appeared to vary depending upon the interaction mode being observed (the initial presentational/public speaking component, the question and answer sequence, the extended turn at talk by one individual, or the subsequent open discussion). It is the view of this paper that the enactment and sequencing of these different modes did not evolve randomly. Various pivotal speech acts and participant actions (i.e. critical events) were performed by the presenters as well as the attendees. In any system, all elements are interdependent and reciprocally influential; therefore, in this meeting, all parties subtly coordinated to effect the shifts in the interaction communication modes, communication goals, topic initiation, and performance roles.

The proposed project presented at this public meeting was advanced as an opportunity for “... *developing this area of North Omaha as an economic force ...*” The meeting’s agenda, as initiated by the presenters, was promoted as an attempt to solicit community input and consisted of several components: (1) Introductory comments, (2) PowerPoint-based presentation of the proposed project (segmented into “Assessment, Vision, Plan, and Implementation”), and (3) Question and Answer session via index cards. For current research purposes, the Question & Answer portion contained the largest instance of unscripted interaction and most of this paper will address events occurring in that segment.

Initially, the Question and Answer proceeds rather formally with the presenters engaging in presentation-style explication for questions which had been gathered from the attendees by means of submitted index cards. During this segment, most turns at talk, whether from an audience member or a presenter, were constructed as argumentation (i.e. advocating or supporting a particular position). Some of these turns also were structured as defensive responses. For example, an utterance by the OCC president, Dave Brown at 31:38 : “*Is there anybody else standing up in front of you saying they will lead a charge to improve North Omaha ...*” suggests that he interprets the immediately preceding comments by Charles (an attendee) as inviting a self-protective response. This is an interesting instance of the first segment of an adjacency pair language construction not resulting in the expected next pair part. Charles asks a series of questions. Brown offers back another question rather than an answer. In addition, the rhetorical question construction of Dave Brown’s response does not directly address the issue introduced by Charles but instead makes use of the implicative which refocuses the issue onto the presenters’ laudable actions and motives. This particular exchange will be cited again below as a pivotal moment in this overall communication event.

In an earlier project (Plummer, 2006), I referenced a variety of general communication dynamics that could be illuminated by the application of LSI methodologies to the study of groups. As I expected, each of the listed items is evident to some degree in this public meeting and in this paper’s discussion of pivotal moments within the Question and Answer segment. Although each issue contains enough complexity to serve as a primary research focus for this or any other such study, this current paper addresses the first three in reference to the observed pivotal moments. Nevertheless, all five are listed below to indicate the overlapping,

interdependent nature of communication events within a system. These five issues also can provide a useful framework for structuring investigations into larger group communication.

First, how do parties implicitly negotiate and subsequently co-construct the norms and patterns and procedures by which they will deliberate? (as applied to this current data: How did the attendees effect a change in the rules so that by 40 minutes into the meeting, attendees were controlling the agenda as well as having access to the microphone?)

Second, what are the influential, contextual (situation-based) factors that determined the structure of this particular interaction and are they facilitating or hindering the actions of deliberation? (as applied to this current data: What were the pivotal moments within the Question and Answer discussion that affected the topical progression? – particularly those utterances which deviated from the published agenda and the ostensible task yet were influential on the interpersonal maintenance/socio-emotional level?)

Third, how is the cultural dimension of interaction enacted via respective coding patterns (verbal and nonverbal) and are there ways by which these dimensions affect the local management of cross cultural communication contexts? (as applied to this current data: How did certain parties align themselves co-culturally and display culturally diverse perspectives such as insider vs. outsider, shareholder vs. stakeholder, moneyed vs. disenfranchised, as well as assertions of institutionalized racism?)

Fourth, what is the co-constructed process by which the interaction is occurring? In other words, since multi-party communication operates with give and take behaviors by all communicants, what such patterns are evident in this (deliberation) process? What specific sequencing of talk behaviors leads to competition, cooperation, and/or consensus? (as applied to this current data: What did certain parties, such as Dick Davis, do within the interaction that introduced techniques of conflict management, resolution, and cooperation?)

Fifth, how do parties communicate and negotiate conflict in order to satisfy such tangible and intangible commodities as their respective interests, values, needs, and power: both the objectively “real” and subjectively individual needs (e.g. Fisher, 2000) (as applied to this current data: How did the presenters react and adapt to the instances of ideological and procedural conflict—when the attendees began offering their own, alternate perceptions of the project, the meeting proceedings, and the relevant underlying issues?) The pivotal moments discussed below provide some insight to these investigative questions.

### **Discovering Pivotal Moments**

For this project, the ultra-detailed, micro-analytic technique of conversation analysis (a specific LSI methodology) was somewhat constrained due to the format of the data available: the video recording lasted 50 minutes or so and did not clearly capture all interaction, all angles or even all utterances. As an alternative to transcribing and then examining the layout of the transcript for significant (pivotal) moments in the juxtaposition of the language of the communicants, instead, the video was repeatedly viewed for moments of palpable shift in the communication patterns.

At approximately 11:32 into the footage, several shifts could be discerned. The linear progression of the topic, the passive, silent listener behavior, and the speaker-centered communication patterns evident during the initial, presentational portion of the meeting are affected not only by the overt structural shift to an interactive, question and answer communication mode, but also by the way the audience members implicitly and explicitly co-construct a new communication event that evolves to address new topics. Gradually, the attendees' direct participation opportunities increase; their utterances combine with the ongoing meeting agenda to synergistically create a new climate and goal for the public meeting. The meeting literally became "public." The original communication system that was promoted as a "town meeting" actually begins with a highly linear communication model which remains apparent even through the beginning of the Question and Answer segment. In these beginning segments, the flow of information is tightly controlled by the presenters and flows from senders to receivers. The planned, index card structure for receiving the audience's input would maintain that control and directional flow because, even with topics offered by attendees, they would first be filtered through the presenters. However, in the manner of systems, the meeting gradually adjusted itself as it was influenced at several pivotal points throughout the session. This co-construction is particularly interesting since the respective utterances clearly exhibited divergent communication goals as expressed on the part of the presenters and the attendees.

At about 11:32 into the video footage (at the beginning of the question and answer mode), the structure of the meeting explicitly does convert to a forum format in which the topic initiation ostensibly shifts to the attendees. This format is often referred to as the "town meeting." Initially, various presenters respond to these audience-initiated issues, perceptions, and

ideological conflicts by acknowledging the difficulties inherent in the project and then explaining their respective rationales for involvement with the project. For the most part, these utterances could be characterized as “I hear you” types of messages. This also means that, except for the portions enacted by one particular attendee, Dick Davis (to be discussed below), the presenters’ talk as offered during the Question and Answer segment contains less new information and less persuasive/marketing talk as compared to their utterances in the earlier part of the meeting.

From the data, one cannot determine whether the presenters simply had not anticipated the emergence of such shareholders’ concerns as race, mistrust, and disenfranchisement on the part of the community directly affected by the project. It is also possible the presenters expected to deflect such issues should they arise. However, a notable pattern soon becomes evident. Attendees continue to introduce such issues again and again despite the presenters’ seemingly acknowledging responses. As with any system, unresolved issues continue to reappear and behaviors in one part of the system (e.g. raising challenging questions) can influence behaviors in another part of the system (e.g. raising yet more challenging questions). The observable shifts in a system often are the results of a sequence several pivotal moments. Several such pivotal utterances are listed chronologically below.

### **Pivotal Moment: 11:32**

Bob Peters (NODP team member/presenter) reads, pauses, then answers an index card comment (“*Watching your PowerPoint presentation, you have al, you already have plans laid out...Before this meeting so youuu seem to tell us what you are going to do regardless of what the people think*” / Bob Peters’ response = *Wh, uhhhhhm ,there’s uh, (0.5) , Uh, , I don’t kn..., I don’t kn..., UM that obviously is is not what the message was tonight.*” (N.B.: Dick Davis (sitting in foreground with back to camera) exhibited increased body movement during the Peters’ response. This might or might not have coincided with the Bob Peters’ ongoing talk.)

This is a pivotal moment providing the first opportunity for the presenters to assess a distortion between the intention and the impact of their message. Here, in writing, is a metacommunicative speech act. Here is an opportunity to talk about, not the message contained within the PowerPoint slide show but the questioner’s interpretation of the message being given by the presenters via their slide show. However, Bob Peters’ response implies the

misunderstanding rests in the attendee, not in the presenters or the project or in even deeper issues.

### **Pivotal Moment: 24:40**

Woman speaker explicitly “cautions” the presenters to return to that earlier, “*summarily dismissed*” index card observation some 13 minutes prior (at 11:32). She suggests that the presenters remember “*Perception is important*” and that addressing the source of such a perception is as important as soliciting this input from the community. As cited above, that card expresses a perception that the whole project was already in place and receives a response from the reader/presenter (Bob Peters) implying the questioner was in error. Interestingly, this time, the issue is not dropped for several minutes and several turns at talk. This theme of perceptual dissonance appears as part of several subsequent attendee exchanges.

This is another metacommunicative speech act. This woman is not responding to the presenters’ assertion about what the meetings message really is. She is alluding to the communication message sent by the presenters via their downplaying of the original message on the index card at 11:32. This woman’s talk sequence is also pivotal from a systems perspective. Rather than proceeding topically, she influences the construction of the ongoing talk to return to earlier unresolved interpersonal/socio-emotional dynamics present within the system.

### **Pivotal Moment: 28:58**

Man: “*Does anybody want to look at racism?*” The OCC president, Dave Brown’s response to this utterance could be characterized as very “low context” (Hall, 1976) in that he responds to the speaker’s words at face value without acknowledging any possible implications of the race of the respective speaker or the racial history of this locale under development. Dave Brown asserts that racism is only notable in the degree it will impact this economic redevelopment plan, [*“ ..to the extent that it is a a deterrent to economic growth I’d say certainly. A\_, as a subcommittee that says we’re going to look at racism, I say no.”*]. This answer, while possibly accurate from Dave Brown’s perspective can have a very different impact on the audience's perceptions of the racial attitudes of Dave Brown, the OCC, and the NODP. He is a task-focused stakeholder and therefore invested in a project for an expected return. However, by promoting a racially neutral stance, his response could be interpreted as racially unaware or insensitive. Perhaps his fellow

presenters are aware of this implication; directly following his utterance are alternate offerings by Frank Brown (Councilman) and Bob Peters (NODP team member) who both assure the audience that racism must and will be addressed.

This attendee questioner asks about an unexpressed topical issue, yet this exchange can still be considered as a form of metacommunication because it does serve a communicate-about-the-communication function in that it requests information about the (unspoken) presenter's message rather than asking about the expressed message. This speech exchange is also pivotal because it reinforces a shift in topical direction by maintaining a focus on issues and concerns generated by the attendees rather than on the project details as given by the presenters.

### **Pivotal Moment: 30:50**

Bob Peters recognizes and calls on the next speaker. This man (Charles) is the first questioner to actively solicit opinion from the rest of the attendees: *“How many in this room actually live in the target area? Raise your hands”* and *“... why would I ever trust the Chamber of Commerce...”*

This utterance plays a pivotal role as an instance of communicator role shift in this system as well as for its continued control of the topic by an attendee. This turn at talk is directed as much to the attendees as to the presenters or to the meeting in general. The perception checking role of metacommunication is not seen here as it was in the previous examples; this speaker is definitively performing as the sender, not the receiver of (or reactor to) the current message on the floor. By soliciting response from the audience, this speaker does send a metacommunicative message that he cannot be ignored. He has engaged the support of many other attendees by establishing common ground with other residents of the target area.

### **Pivotal Moment: 31:38**

This exchange was cited earlier as a communication event signaling the beginning of an overtly adversarial dynamic within the communication at this meeting. Up until this point, the presenters had been responding to differing perceptions or topics from the attendees with confirming acknowledgments and attempts to move on topically. In this case, however, Dave Brown (OCC President) offers a “defensive” response to Charles's overt “skepticism” as expressed in his turn at talk described above (beginning at 30:50). Brown's utterance: *“Is there*

*any body else standing in front of you saying they will lead a charge to improve North Omaha ...*” suggests he interprets Charles’s comments as a challenge inviting a response-in-kind. Note that Brown’s utterance does not answer the question being asked, but rather offers questions of his own. Some of these questions result in simultaneous talk overlapping with other attendees who are attempting to respond to Brown’s challenges. His continued turn at talk includes a reference to Dick Davis who becomes the next selected speaker.

This moment is highly pivotal in the way it shifts the roles of the presenters from being presenters of a proposal to defenders of a proposal. Dave Brown is clearly metacommunicative in that he has put into a question sentence structure a message that is actually an assertion about how his preceding communication should be perceived (i.e. communication about the communication.) In terms of the ongoing communication system, the presenters are about to invite (or perhaps allow or perhaps relinquish) alternate speaker control. The footage is unclear.

### **Pivotal Moment: 32:11**

One of the most influential of these pivotal, system self-adjusting moments begins when the microphone is handed to Dick Davis at 32:11. The camera angle does not allow for verification that he self-selected as the next speaker. However, at a moment when Dave Brown is just completing that earlier referenced series of utterances starting at 31:38 (e.g. “*...Is there anybody else doing it ?... Is there anybody else willing to go out and raise money... “Irrespective of what’s happened in the past...”*”), Bob Peters steps to transfer the microphone to Davis. The hand-off of the microphone appears to be accompanied by a slightly extended eye-to-eye exchange (0.2) between Davis and Peters. After a few additional brief turns by attendees, Davis begins speaking (at 32:56) and engages in a notably extended period of uninterrupted talk which lasts from 32:58 until 38:14 (approximately 5:16 long).

After viewing Dick Davis’s turn at talk, some additional investigative inquiries become relevant about turn taking and ways by which multiparty contexts use negotiation techniques to get and maintain the floor. These supplement the earlier questions proposed. For example: (1) Why is Dick Davis, in particular, able to speak for so long without interruption? In other words, how was such a long turn-at-talk co-constructed with the cooperation of the other parties? (2) Did his talk have any influence on the topical focus of the public meeting? By this juncture in the Question and Answer segment, a new norm has emerged in that the presenters could and would

be interrupted and challenged with issues not explicitly contained within their prepared presentation. Davis could choose to continue with that norm or could shift the system back to the original agenda and topics. (3) What effect does his extended talk sequence have on the overt, task/agenda level and also on the socio-emotional/maintenance level of the larger system that is the town meeting format?

For all of these reasons, this is the most pivotal moment encountered thus far. It is also highly metacommunicative in its topical message. I began by focusing on the five minute segment mentioned above which I identified as “The Dick Davis Show”. Similarly, in the footage, the participants on both sides of the lectern cooperate with Davis’s turn by offering few challenges to take the floor, and even those who do signal a desire to speak do so without aggressiveness and address him by name when they are allowed to take a turn. For these five or so minutes, the room belongs to Dick Davis.

Thematically, Davis’s extended talk is bracketed by two “pivotal” speech events – both of which explicitly address a previous speaker’s perception that the actions and choices of the OCC and the NODP suggest influences of insensitivity, at best, and, at worst, racism.

Davis maintains (and is allowed to maintain) this first turn at talk until he finally relinquishes the floor at 38:13. At that point he recognizes one of the attendees who addresses him directly (“Mr. Davis”). That person offers a comment (“*You’re hearing the voice of frustration, that’s what you’re hearing...*”) to which Davis responds briefly. Similar to the initial answering mode exhibited by the previous presenters, Davis does not overtly refute the questioner’s point. His construction differs in that, rather than proceeding on to the next point or question, he stays with the implication of the question and advocates a refocusing of the attendees’ viewpoints from their current, problem-based perspectives to a solution-based perspective.

Davis invites another audience comment at 39:23, and once again, he is addressed by name. The questioner prefaces her comments with an expression of her respect for him. Similar to the turn taken by Charles (at 30:50), this attendee also solicits audience input and then offers a multi-part commentary and question, throughout which Davis tries to respond, agrees to wait for her completion of turn, and ultimately addresses her by name (Lydia) as he launches into his second extended turn at talk (41:15 to 44:57). During this 3:42 turn, he answers each of her expressed concerns in sequence. He explicitly discusses his past and current connections to the locale under

discussion, now using such language as *“I have family in the area”*, *“I am fully committed to this situation.”*

Overall, his talk continues to differ from that of the preceding presenters in several ways. Davis does not assert his own accomplishments for and/or via the project. Instead he expresses his personal commitment going forward and suggests similar cooperation and forward commitment for all parties involved. He ends this turn-at-talk with an acknowledgement of past administrator abuses of the community. *“We have to be honest and straightforward and stop jacking you around.”* This leads to another pivotal moment when the aforementioned Lydia inserts an utterance: *“I don’t believe you are going to jack us around”* (44:58). This is followed with an episode of group laughing together with Davis engaging in the laughter so much as to relinquish the microphone, as another attendee is heard to utter (as backchannel) a call and response-type of phrase: *“Preach it in the church, sister.”* “Backchannel” refers to the socio-linguistic concept for sounds and utterances uttered by a listener that serve as rhythmic participation in the conversational flow but are not responded to by the communicants as signals for taking a full turn at talk. “Call and response” represents a communication behavior common among oral cultures such as those of African descent (Smitherman, 1977).

The speech events of this last exchange (the joke, the repetition of the “jacked up” phraseology, the church reference, and Davis’s alignment with the attendees via his exaggerated laughter and voluntary ending of his second extended turn) all serve to reinforce Davis’s topical theme of common ground: *“I am with you, and we are all together.”* Also, from the group-as-a-system perspective, laughing together episodes often accomplish a maintenance level “repair” to troubled group communication climates (Plummer, 1991). In addition, a speaker who coordinates his/her talk in reference to others’ laughter can project (even out-of-awareness) an empathic relationship with the hearers (Jefferson, et al., 1987, p. 156).

### **Davis’s key behaviors and techniques.**

In his first period of extended talk (32:58 - 38:14), Davis uses inclusive personal pronouns and phrases (*“we as folks have been meeting...”*, *“we as folks in this community”*, *“This is what I’m going to do”*, *“ We are a smart people”*). At the same time he is speaking in general terms about how all parties involved should work together for the betterment of all. In particular, he uses both common ground and refocusing--techniques similar to the integrative conflict

resolution approach (Fisher, 2000). Davis's talk focuses the topic under discussion, not on the specifics of the proposal/project, but rather onto the goals and benefits of the project as a commonality that parties shared. The integrative approach to resolving conflicts stresses just such refocusing. Disputing parties often share the same general goals but differ concerning the best methods to achieve those goals and needs. Motivating and moving the parties to focus on their collective interests facilitates the kind of collaboration needed to approach the transformation of intractable conflict.

Davis maximizes the use of the word, "we"--variably using it to allude to the NODP, the African American attendees, the shareholders living/working in the area, and/or the business community at large. The credible way he in which addresses the meeting as well as the deference shown to him by the attendees ("*Mr. Davis*"), as well as his strategic use of inclusive language all help Davis accomplish this role of the multiple "we". He communicates his alliance with the local insiders (attendees) as well as his sharing of the goals of the outsiders (the NODP).

Davis's demonstrable participation in the laughing together episode at 44:58, along with the accompanying church-referenced call and response communication pattern (common in many contexts derived from Africana cultures) support the position that Davis's two extended turns at talk prove pivotal partly because he enacts a tangible connection with the attendees rather than simply verbally asserting it. His speech acts demonstrate that, although he could be considered rich, professional, and a "stakeholder", he is still part of the public at large. Consequently, the attendees might infer that with his endorsement of the project, the interests of the "common people" would not be ignored as they had been in the past.

### **The "Dick Davis Show" and its influences on group operation.**

In considering the earlier question of how Dick Davis is able to maintain such long turns at talk relative to the utterances of the other speakers, one must also note his other turn taking behaviors. He exhibits some influential body movements such as continually using his right hand for emphatic, representational, and some deictic gestures while holding the microphone in his left. As the seminal research in turn taking and kinesics would predict (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974 and Ekman & Friesen, 1969), Davis's hand usually appears to be positioned in a more upward/open position when pausing and any pauses were brief (most lasting no longer than 0.1). For the most part Davis's gaze is not clearly visible in the footage, but the views of the

audience indicate few hands being raised during most of his talk. In other words, only a few explicit requests for the floor or the next turn-at-talk are offered during his turns. According to the footage, Davis generally appears to make brief eye contact with these potential next speakers and then shifts away—with the effect that he is not yet yielding his turn at talk. Thus several factors combine to allow Dick Davis these uninterrupted turns at talk. His topical rapport with the audience, his physical and vocal turn maintaining skills, and the cooperation and acquiescence of the attendees and the other presenters all contribute to this extended pivotal moment.

Did his talk have any influence on the topical focus of the public meeting? Dick Davis's content diverges from that of the original question respondents/presenters. Prior to his two extended episodes of talk, the NODP presenters' responses to questions continue with "selling the project idea and telling the attendees what they needed to do to get on board (i.e. the same kind of advocacy for the proposal that was evident in the public speaking portion of the meeting). Although the respondents (presenters) seem to answer the questions being asked (initially via index card and ultimately via direct address), certain unanswered themes continually re-surface: racism, lack of Black representation, past history of agency ineffectiveness. Even when the attendees explicitly express their skepticism for the proposed project, the presenters frequently respond with refutation or alternate themes (e.g.: "*UM that obviously is is not what the message was tonight.*"- Bob Peters at 11:54). Significantly, Davis does not explicitly defend the project nor try to refute attendees' perceptions; he encodes a new thematic message in which posits the goals of the project as mutual and desirable. Thus, Davis promotes the potential shareholder relationship that the residents of this challenged locale (particularly the Black Attendees) could have with this project.

And finally, when considering the effect this episode had on the task/agenda level and the socio-emotional, maintenance level of the larger system of the town meeting, another systems concept becomes relevant. In theory, all systems at any given moment are devolving into inevitable chaos (entropy). At the same time, all systems contain mechanisms to resist and counteract the destructive influences (negative entropy). The various pivotal moments beginning at 11:32 all indicate that the communication system of the meeting was unraveling, or at least evolving into a different structure. Dick Davis's talk appears to function as a force for *negative entropy* for this juncture in the system by trying to reverse the impending "chaos". At this point

in the lifecycle of this meeting, the community attendees' questions and responses increasingly are affecting the presenters' plans for topic, focus, and procedure. While the topic of Davis's two turns at talk do not return to the task/agenda details of the proposed project, the communication climate at least temporarily changes to accomplishing work on the interpersonal/maintenance level. Also, particularly notable is the fact that he is the only speaker to address the attendees' stated as well as implicit concerns rather than just addressing their questions. In that sense, all of Davis's utterances were metacommunicative in effect.

### Conclusion

On the surface, the respective research foci for LSI and for public groups and deliberation are divergent yet serve complementary scholarly goals. LSI can contribute to understanding the group decision-making and deliberation process by providing a post-event lens with which to consider why certain practices may or may not work under certain contextual factors. With its micro-level investigative approaches, LSI exposes the "how" aspects of a given group's interaction patterns, some of which may be conducive to accomplishing the deliberation, negotiation, decision-making, and mobilization of public meetings. As Bateson observed, "From what little we know of the relationship between the fine details of human interaction and the longer cycles of the career lines, there is reason to expect that the longer cycles will always be enlarged repetitions or repeated reflections of pattern contained in the fine detail. Indeed, this assumption that the microscopic will reflect the macroscopic is a major justification of most of our test procedures" (Bateson, 1971, p. 16 of MS).

However, in addition to such post-meeting, analytical insights, LSI also can have a real time operational effect. Although many influential communication acts are subtle and operate out of the communicants' conscious awareness, "...this is not to say a given participant who is empowered with an LSI, micro-level competence and is skilled in extra-subtle interaction techniques couldn't consciously apply them toward personal performance in the group as well as to exert implicit leadership/management in the Decision Making and/or Deliberative process." (Plummer, 2006). From the data available, the actions of Dick Davis suggest he was performing such subtle techniques although the degree to which his behaviors and interjections were carried out with awareness cannot be determined.

Earlier I asked, “How did the attendees effect a change in the rules so that by 40 minutes into the meeting, attendees were controlling the agenda as well as having access to the microphone?” This shift occurred by means of several pivotal moments that affected the ongoing structure of the meeting. These moments, constructed both verbally or nonverbally, shifted the direction of communicator power and credibility. Dick Davis, the first non-presenter to handle the microphone was also the first speaker in the video recording to be positioned literally and figuratively, between the presenters and the attendees. However, the presenters’ grip on controlling the floor (and the microphone - a metaphorical “speaking stick”) began to loosen much earlier at the pivotal moment at 11:32 when the index card question expressed a perception at odds with the presenters’ plans. The subsequent pivotal moments continued to reinforce a new norm of challenging the presenters’ messages. Ultimately, this handoff to another, more credible speaker became desirable—particularly one who was favorably inclined toward the project but was not formally a part of the project. Subsequent to Davis’s turns at talk, the microphone eventually passed into the audience area and other community attendees also had access.

The next investigative question addressed the effect of the pivotal moments on the meeting’s topical progression— particularly those utterances which deviated from the published agenda and the ostensible task yet influenced the interpersonal and maintenance/socio-emotional level of interaction. Evidence indicating that these moments were significant markers in the progression of this meeting has already been outlined. Referring to the presenters’ reactions as indicators of interpreted meaning, these pivotal moments did little to advance the original task goal of motivating the attendees to support this proposed redevelopment project. In fact these moments ultimately opened the opportunity for a spontaneous deviation from the planned agenda (e.g. The Dick Davis Show). However, these moments did facilitate the interpersonal/socio-emotional climate of the group by allowing several underlying personal concerns to be exposed. Perhaps an awareness of that evolutionary shift in focus will lead to greater insight and sensitivity in framing the goals for any subsequent town meetings on this project.

How did certain parties align themselves co-culturally and display culturally diverse perspectives such as insider vs. outsider, shareholder vs. stakeholder, moneyed vs. disenfranchised, as well as institutionalized racism? Culture involves more than race, ethnicity and/or nationality. People’s cultural identities are shaped by whatever groupings with which they choose to align. Within the assembly constituted at Salem Church, the goals, identities, and

demographics of several distinct groupings were in opposition. Through his verbal content, his nonverbal behaviors, and the details of his own multiple roles within that locale, Dick Davis was able to create an identity potentially aligning himself with virtually everyone there. Being of Africana descent, Davis could enact such cultural markers such as “jacked” phraseology, the church reference and the “we as family” phraseology with authenticity. He was also a local business man with an equally valid alignment with the developers. I characterize Dick Davis as enacting racial/cultural unity in both of his extended talk sequences.

Another earlier question asked: “What did certain parties, such as Dick Davis, do within the interaction that introduced techniques of conflict management, resolution, and cooperation?” As outlined above, Dick Davis’s behavior and utterances were distinguished in the way he concretely validated the attendees’ concerns of past disenfranchisement and their current desire for power and influence. His topical theme of collaborative problem solving (again, comparable to the integrative negotiation techniques of true group deliberation) appears to strive for consensus building with an emphasis on communication, collaboration, reframing, and transforming.

“How did the presenters react and adapt to the instances of ideological and procedural conflict—when the attendees offered their own, differing perceptions of the project, the meeting proceedings, and the relevant underlying issues?” Not very well. Observing the presenters’ reactions to these conflicts, one might well wonder if they ever anticipated receiving the procedural and ideological challenges. The conflicts expressed by the attendees were complex and subtle and grounded in fundamental issues of value, respect and empowerment. These many alternate perceptions from the attendees appeared seemed to surprise the presenters, then confuse them and ultimately induce defensive utterances. In the case of the attendees at this public meeting, each pivotal moment referenced a perceived state of conflict between the subjective needs of the attendees and the objective goals of the presenters.

### **Implications for Future Study of Public Meeting**

The increasingly ubiquitous “Town Hall Meeting” format is a contemporary manifestation of a classic group discussion structure known as “forum”. With its procedural norm of driving the agenda via questions from the audience, this meeting format clearly is conducive to the democratic and participatory nature of our governmental structures. Similarly, it is useful for

entities endeavoring to solicit ideas from a larger public (or at least the illusion of same). However, in the community meeting examined in this paper, several indicators suggest that the “democratic and participatory” free flow of public ideas did not occur in the way that the presenters intended -- nor in the way the attendees expected. In the course of the footage a perception becomes expressed that the goal of the presentation had been to persuade the attendees about a project, rather than to solicit ideas and collaborative participation.

Some approaches to studying group operations might attribute the audience’s continual referencing of certain themes and expressed resistance to the presenters’ persuasive objectives as the result of such functional errors as: speaker-centered organization or non-strategic meeting planning and/or not presenting the topic via the “right” agenda. These elements likely can have some effect, but don’t address all issues. For example, the LSI analysis of this meeting helps demonstrate the operational reality that the agenda alone does not ultimately shape a group discussion – particularly during a forum. An LSI analysis alone cannot definitively assist the real time, decision-making goals of this or any discussion. Nor can it provide instant answers about how to solve the underlying problems of skepticism, distrust, past abuses, and current negative perceptions. However, in the current situation, having a clearer understanding of the implication of their speech acts, wording choices, and framing of utterances could help these presenters realize the operational disconnect of their “slick team” approach vis-à-vis their stated goals vis-à-vis the optimum usage of a forum’s openness. Perhaps they would appreciate that communication is not linear or even simply transactional but rather is systems-based and that they are interdependent to the entire group and context. Perhaps the presenters should have conducted intake meetings at the very beginning of the project process. Perhaps they should have actually drawn more on inherent grassroots leadership (which Dick Davis seems to represent). Perhaps they should have had less of a stakeholder (investor) and more of a shareholder (participant) standpoint in the material presented on the slides. Perhaps they should have realized the “done deal” implicative nature of such wording as “...*We pretty much want people to be abreast of what’s happening...*” Gary (NODP Project Manager) at 11:06.

The events of this community meeting, as well as my other observations of troubled forums, have led me to believe such a functional, operational incongruity in this context is not uncommon. Presenters have a project-in-progress and are seeking shareholder input. However, the shareholders in attendance are expecting to be able to react to what is heard. The presenters

are caught off guard at having to defend actions that are only partially developed, yet the audience performs as if reacting to a finished plan. In many ways this town meeting was another forum by presenters who don't really want a forum--or at least who don't understand the communication dynamics of a forum. Collecting comment cards, maintaining a speaker's list, or even having a line up at the microphone does not necessarily serve the needs of the presenters who want an orderly intake of information and attitudes. Similarly such practices do not serve the needs of the attendees who want a real sense of involvement and empowerment.

## References

- Bateson, G. (1971). Communication. In "Introduction" in *The Natural History of an Interview*. University of Chicago Manuscripts in Cultural Anthropology, Series 15, Nos. 95-98.
- Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Bertalanffy, L. von (1968). *General Systems Theory: Foundations, developments, applications*. New York: George Braziller.
- Button, G. & Lee, J. R. E. (1987). *Talk and social organisation*. Clevedon, Avon, England: Multilingual Matters Limited.
- Byers, P. (1990). Personal conversation at Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Ekman, P. & Friesen, W. (1969). The repertoire of nonverbal behavior categories: origins, usage, and coding. *Semiotica*, 1, 49-98.
- Fisher, R. (2000). Intergroup conflict. In Deutsch, M. and Coleman, P.T. (Eds.) *The handbook of conflict resolution* (pp. 166-184). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Gouran, D.S., & Hirokawa, R.Y. (1996). Functional theory and communication in decision making and problem-solving groups: An expanded view. In R.Y. Hirokawa & M.S. Poole (Eds.), *Communication and group decision-making* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp.55-80). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hall, E.T. (1976). *Beyond culture*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Hollingshead, A. B. ,Wittenbaum, G.M., Paulus, P. B., Hirokawa, R.Y., Ancona, D.G. , Peterson, R.S., Jehn, K.A., & Yoon, K. (2005). A look at groups from the functional perspective. In M.S. Poole and A.B. Hollingshead (Eds.) *Theories of Small Groups: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (pp. 21-62). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Jefferson, G., Sacks, H., & Schegloff, E. (1987). Notes on laughter in the pursuit of intimacy. In G. Button & J. R. E. Lee (Eds.), *Talk and Social Organisation* (pp. 152-205). Clevedon, Avon, England: Multilingual Matters Limited.
- Plummer, E. (1991). *We're not laughing at you, we're laughing with you: an examination of interactive laughter in five small group conversations*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Columbia University-Teachers College.
- Plummer, E. (2006). *The LSI / Group Decision Making Connection (or what can LSI do for you?)*. Unpublished Position Paper presented at the National Communication Association Annual Conference, San Antonio, TX.

Sacks, H., Schegloff, E., & Jefferson, G. (1974). A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language*, 50, 696-735.

Smitherman, G. (1977). *Talkin' and testifyin': The language of Black America*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin