"That's the Work": Reframing Talk during Meetings

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Conversation analysts often examine everyday interaction for the micro-features that comprise talk. Often, these micro-features are labeled and transcend any one instance. Some genres of talk have been examined to see if patterned speech occurs within that genre. For instance, a typical business event, such as a meeting or strategic planning process, may indicate particular ways of speaking. In Drew and Heritage's (1992) edited volume, *Talk at Work*, each chapter employs CA to detail features of talk in a variety of institutional settings. Schwartzman's (1989) work on the business meeting illustrates clearly the boundaries of what counts as a meeting, and how the participants and their various roles work to create this demarcation. Finally, in *The Business of Talk*, Boden (1994) uses CA to closely examine the turns that members take that influence the outcome of meetings.

I have followed the road that these scholars have paved in order to understand how individual utterances contribute to a sense of the work being achieved within the current conversation (from a micro-perspective) as well as what may be perceived as larger organizational goals (from a macro-perspective). Within this paper, I examine a segment of talk that occurred during a strategic planning process. Since the publication of Porter's (1980) foundational work on competitive strategy, senior administrators in all kinds of business institutions undertake strategic planning at intervals within an organization's lifecycle.

Strategic planning is a method whereby organizational members work to map out a plan for their future. By the end of the process, a five to ten-year plan is written. This plan can be general, or it can include specific tactics, timelines, budgets, and accountable personnel. Within a typical strategic planning process, organizational members collaborate to create plans for the organization. This typically occurs over the course of several meetings. The excerpt below occurred in the second meeting of a strategic planning process for a new nonprofit charter school foundation. This meeting was convened as a "special" meeting; its stated aim was to flesh out the details about the committees that would be conducting the work outlined in the newly evolving strategic plan (during the previous meeting). Therefore, the purpose was to create a committee structure, and then to determine the work of each committee. The overall mission of the organization is ultimately to attract donors to the charter school foundation. Just prior to this spate of talk, the group was discussing the possibility of using architectural rendering in a newsletter, in order to illustrate to potential donors what the school might look like if they achieve their financial goal. At this point, Chris mentions that two-way mirrors for observation might be a welcome addition to the building structure:

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01     Chris:        Well one of those could be, the ideas behind a new facility on campus is
02                   that it has, (unintelligible)
03                   It's close to student teachers and teachers of the student teachers
04                   observation (.) set ups
05     Olive:        It's a two-way mirror, two way walls, that kind of stuff
06                   where you can see in and they can't see you
07→    Bev:          Ok let's, let's, tha:t's the work of this committee.
08     Tina:         Exactly.
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09	Bev:	Once we get, what the, the actual things people are going to be doing
10		and that becomes a part of the action plan.
11		(.)
12	Bev:	Is there anything else you can see especially on this action piece
13		(0.7)

(continues)

During this sequence, one may conclude that the participants seemed to be "doing the work of the committee" rather than "doing the work of planning the committees." Without CA, we could assume that everyone at the meeting shares a purpose. However, when we examine the turn-by-turn talk that is produced during the meeting, we may find that not everyone shares the purpose, or, at least what they appear to be doing may answer some other question. This is why we typically ask, "why (say) that now?"

In line 7, Bev says, "that's the work of this committee." After several participants have contributed conversational turns (Chris and Olive), how can we understand what Bev is doing? Topically, the conversation has focused on how to position the school in a newsletter. The additional ideas that are posed seem to be in response to the question, "how do we attract donors?" which is the stated mission of the organization. Member contributions are made in what some group communication scholars describe as *brainstorming*, adding ideas one after the other (or, what CA may describe as latching on and completing turns). This style of talk is changed when Bev speaks. Bev takes two attempts to change the pattern. She uses a small agreement token "ok" and then emphasizes "let's" (line 7). She reiterates or repeats her "let's" (line 7), but rather than say what the group should do collaboratively, which one might expect when issuing a "let's" command, she gains attention and makes a statement about what should NOT be done. What should not be done, Bev makes clear, is the talk that has just been done. Bev redirects that talk as the proper realm for the committee to be set up. In these two utterances (lines 7 and 9), Bev asserts herself as the leader and succeeds to table the discussion on building specifics, as illustrated by the pause in line 13.

A variety of interpretations can be made about this brief sequence. Some may refer to Bev's style as *going meta*. Rather than continuing the conversation about ways to encourage donations, she steps out of the conversation to frame that kind of talk as work that properly belongs to a different group, namely the "this committee" (line 7) that this group is supposed to create. Another possible interpretation is that Bev is employing a teacherly way of speaking by using the term, "let's." We have seen in other data[1] instances where an instructor gently encourages the student to direct his or her attention to a task by using the term, "let's.' The fact that Bev was formerly a teacher may be important to know from an ethnographic perspective. Yet, what is more important from a CA perspective is, how do these utterances fit together in this segment? The conversation is reframed as part of the *things people are going to be doing*, or the more aptly labeled *action plan*. Even if all of the same people are ultimately assembled on this subcommittee, this meeting is not for doing that work.

The strategic planning process is often seen as working best if it can be inclusive of more organizational members than just senior administrators. Those who are invited to attend and contribute to the plans are recognized as playing a role in the organization's future. Often what is captured or recorded after such meetings are the broad organizational goals as well as the tactics for achieving those goals. Not often captured are the turn-by-turn utterances participants make to

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[1] This data was presented by C. Box and S. Creider at a LANSI data session.

directly contribute to what those plans look like. This brief analysis demonstrates the need for continued CA work to help us more clearly understand how organizational plans are made, who is included and silenced, as well as how the outcomes can be influenced or shaped by seemingly small things that are said.

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