

COMMUNICATION LITERACY AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

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As everyone affected by the current global recession knows, we live in a time of profound change. More than ever before, what happens anywhere affects us everywhere and we must become accustomed to dealing with those whose customs are unlike our own. Organizations of all sorts are becoming flatter and more intricately linked with others; Friedman (2005) calls this state of affairs “Globalization 3.0.”

This vector of change favors public participation; the readers of this journal are both its vanguard and beneficiaries. But as practitioners, our work tends to be most needed at points of turbulence, where “old” and “new” ways of thinking and acting are jumbled. We cannot assume that all of those with whom we work value mutuality or have been convinced of the power of participatory processes. Many times key stakeholders feel a moral responsibility to wield power in a manner incompatible with public participation and cannot envision what participatory processes would look like or what good they would do. And they have good reason for this trained incapacity.

Both formal and informal social structures in the United States and many other countries are grounded in the perspective of the Enlightenment and embed certain assumptions about individuals, government, and communication that are inimical to collaboration and empowerment, described as preferred forms of public participation in the “IAP2 Spectrum of Participation” (IAP2, 2007). Members of our community have worked hard to identify and set aside the limitations imposed on our work by these concepts of the individual and of government. Most of us have personal stories about how we came to understand and support participatory processes, and our work is better when we hold clearly in mind the tensions between these “old” and “new” perspectives.

Although the importance of communication in our work is obvious, I believe that we have not done the equivalent work in rethinking the tensions between “old” and “new” concepts of communication. To the extent that the Enlightenment concept of communication surfaces in public participatory processes – or worse, functions as an unacknowledged taken-for-granted – it creates unproductive tensions with our purposes. In this paper, I offer the concept of “communication literacy” as a scaffold for making our understanding of communication explicit and articulating a concept of communication that is consistent with the ideas of deliberative democracy and group processes to which we aspire.

My colleagues and I have developed a way of thinking about communication that we call “the coordinated management of meaning,” or simply “CMM” (Pearce, 2004; 2007). While clearly unfinished, I believe that this work is sufficiently developed to offer something of value

to those who promote public participation. Specifically, I believe that “communication literacy” can:

- Help us deal with the tensions between old and new ways of working;
- Provide a vocabulary in which we can better name and describe what we are doing; and,
- Confer new abilities in our work.

COMMUNICATION LITERACY

“Literacy” is a well-known concept. A literate person has the ability to read and write and has done enough reading and writing to participate in the social life of a society in which documents are treated as important. “Communication literacy,” on the other hand, is not a commonly-used term. In the Enlightenment sense of communication, the phrase seems bizarre. However, I’m offering a new way of thinking about communication in which it makes sense to speak of “literacy.”

This is an argument by analogy that goes something like this. We know what “literacy” means in relation to novels or newspapers. If, as I will argue, “communication” is something more or different than the messages involved in it (regardless of the medium in which those messages might be inscribed), then “communication literacy” suggests that we can do to “communication” what a literate person does to written texts.

Arguments by analogy are notoriously slippery, so let me anchor this one with a specific reference. In the movie “The 13th Warrior,” an illiterate Viking chief asks a sophisticated Muslim “Is it true that you can draw speech?” Ahmad ibn Fadlan replies, “Yes, and then I can speak it again.” Picking up a convenient stick, he demonstrated by writing in the sand “There is no God but God, and Mohammad is his prophet.” Later in the movie, the now-fatally wounded Viking Buliwyf mused “A man could die happy if he knew that someone would write his deeds,” to which ibn Fadlan replied, “Yes, such a man would be happy.”

Ibn Fadlan’s literacy derived from his ability to use a phonetic alphabet. Apparently only invented once in human history (Ong, 1982), this is a system of writing in which symbols stand for sounds uttered in speech. It has been modified and widely used because it enables individuals and societies to do things that they otherwise could not.

But speech is not quite the same thing as communication. One way of describing the relationship is that communication is to speech as the act of “entering into a legal contract” is to the word “agree” or as the act of “making a promise” is to the word “promise.” Is it possible to develop “communication literacy?” And, if so, what new abilities and forms of consciousness would it enable?

For many years, my colleagues and I have been trying to develop concepts and tools that will “draw communication” in the same way that the phonetic alphabet enabled ibn Fadlan (and readers of this journal) to “draw speech.” The first step is to take what we call “the communication perspective.”

TAKING THE COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE

No one knows who invented the phonetic alphabet, but it was surely someone who saw things a bit differently than his or her fellows. It required the mental discipline or knack of looking at the sounds we make rather than only hearing words or attending to their meanings. Of all of the phones (sounds) in whatever language was first written, the inventor distinguished a smaller set of phonemes and developed an even smaller set of symbols that represented them. This was surely an inexact representation of oral speech, and modern alphabets have become even less accurate – as those who learn English as a second language or deal with various regional accents in spoken English know all too well – but it was good enough to enable the development of literate minds and written documents.

In much the same way, the first step in developing communication literacy is to look at communication itself rather than through it to what it is about. There is nothing particularly difficult or controversial in the communication perspective, except that it goes against the grain of conventional wisdom and requires unlearning certain habits of mind and action. For this reason, the “communication perspective” can be better shown than told.

Try some thought experiments: you see two people talking. Which of the following is the more common question: what are they talking about? Or, what pattern of communication are they making together? Probably the first, and we think about the topic (energy policy; economic policy; etc) rather than the form of communication itself. It seems odd to ask “are they making an argument or a dialogue? Are they making a trusting relationship or one of suspicion?” but that’s what we might do if we focus on communication itself (“process”) rather than the topic. I’ve had recurring experiences of talking to elected officials and public administrators about the value of public participation and being asked, with sincere puzzlement, “now, just what issue is this about?” The commonsense concept of communication carries with it a learned incapacity to see communication itself as substantive and consequential; it is always about something other than itself.

Another thought experiment: We want to engage members of an organization in a public participation process, but there is a long-standing organizational culture of mutual suspicion; antagonistic confrontation is the default option whenever there is a controversy. Even if the hour is late, the consequences of inaction are grave, and they know that doing more of the same will result in the same unwanted outcomes, if we propose a participatory process, they will think us naïve and that such a process has little chance of success. If we inquire about the stories that hold these patterns in place, they are likely to use “psychological” terms, perhaps describing themselves as principled and honorable and describing the others as ideologues and stubborn. What would happen if we were able to direct their attention to the actual back-and-forth pattern of the conversation? We might ask: What was the first turn in this pattern? What was the second? The third? Our experience shows that people have great difficulty describing the actual sequence of what specific people did and how those doings responded to and elicited what other people did. Typically, people jump from the sayings and doings to attributions of motives, personality traits, etc. This, too, reflects the commonsense concept of communication. However, if we succeed in inviting clients to look at communication patterns themselves, they see productive alternative ways of acting.

Yet another thought experiment: what rubrics should we use to judge that communication has gone well? The commonsense concept of communication leads to criteria such as whether persons express themselves clearly, whether their messages are factually correct, and whether others heard them accurately. I was part of a day-long exploration of “dialogue” in a country wracked by prolonged sectarian conflict. As the day went along, we all came to realize that many of the participants thought that “dialogue” meant saying what you think, clearly and forcefully, in the presence of the other. Full stop. From the perspective of the commonsense concept, this is “good communication,” people expressed themselves clearly. For those hoping that the event would enlist the wisdom of the group in finding a way to make peace, it falls short. But if these are not the appropriate criteria for evaluating communication, what is?

The commonsense view of communication is widely named “the transmission model.” In diagram form (see Figure 1), it shows the movement of messages from sources to receivers. Communication works, from this point of view, by encoding and decoding messages clearly and accurately and transmitting them from one place to another quickly, efficiently, and with as little “noise” as possible. That is, communication works best if it functions as a colorless, odorless, tasteless vehicle for expressing and sharing meanings.

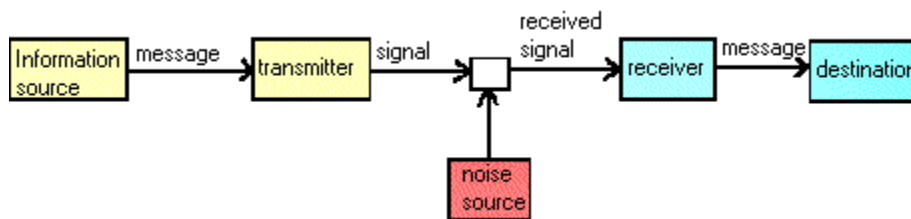


Figure 1.
Shannon and Weaver’s (1949) Model of Communication

The transmission model has a respectable history and has been developed in many ways (by adding “feedback,” including “encoding” and “decoding;” showing that “sources” become “receivers” and vice versa; etc.). It is embedded in the philosophy of the Enlightenment (particularly in the writings of John Locke and Thomas Hobbes) and fits all-too-well into (one might say that it produced) modern thought and practices (Penman, 2000).

Once this concept of communication is called to our attention, few of us would endorse it. (Do you see what I mean?) But that’s just the point. (How can I say this clearly?) This concept of communication is most powerful when invisible, embedded in our habits of thought and expressions, sedimented into our institutions and folkways, and, alas, firmly grasped by the most difficult of those whom we would include as participants in creative processes of deliberation and dialogue. (Did I get my point across?)

The three parenthetical phrases in the preceding paragraph are examples of the transmission model at work behind our backs when we use ordinary language. The first (“see my point”) explicitly names what Richard Rorty (1979) called the “ocular metaphor” of knowledge, a major thread in Western intellectual history that Enlightenment thinkers carried to an extreme.

Like any metaphor, this one both reveals and conceals; in this case, it limits our thinking about communication to vision-like properties (e.g., “clarity” rather than pitch, tempo, proximity, tone, voice quality, etc.) The second assumes a correspondence between the content of my message and my clear and distinct ideas – this is right out of Book III of John Locke’s (1690) *An essay concerning human understanding*. The third assumes that communication is about transmitting something “across” some space between us – this maps neatly onto Shannon and Weaver’s (1949) model.

Once we’ve developed the knack of seeing communication itself, we are ready for the second step: seeing communication as the process in which we make the events and objects of our social worlds. That is, the work that communication does is not only to name things that exist or to express our thoughts and feelings, but to call into being those things that populate the space of human action and social relationships. There is nothing mysterious about this; it just seems strange because it runs so contrary to the philosophy embedded in our conventional language and in our social institutions.

Of course communication is the process by which we make our social worlds! Every parent who has named a baby (“her name is Mary”) and every entrepreneur who has founded a company (“Communication Explorer announces its IPO at a price of \$85 per share”) is a maker of social reality ... and so are the rest of us. We are all engaged in the continual process of making such things as compliments and insults, threats and promises, instructions and hints, questions and answers, etc. Technically, these are called “speech acts” (for a fuller discussion of speech acts, see “Doing things in communication: Speech acts,” chapter 5 of Pearce, 2007).

The quotations from the film “The 13th Warrior” aren’t best understood as statements describing a category of people (those whose deeds are recorded). Rather, Buliwyf is requesting a “favor” without making it an “unrefusable demand” (the last request of a dying man). In his reply, ibn Fadlan “promises” to perform that favor while carefully joining Buliwyf in avoiding reference to the circumstances in which it was requested, thus making his writing of the epic a gift freely given rather than an act of obligation. Even the audience of a film so panned by critics is supposed to have sufficient communication literacy to understand what was “done” by the indirect speech acts in this exchange and to appreciate their relational artistry.

Speech acts don’t occur in isolation. It’s useful to think of communication as a coordinated dance or game we play with other people. As shown in Figure 2, communication occurs over a sequence of turns, in which each turn responds to the one(s) before it and elicits the one(s) that follow. We know that the “same” statement means something quite different if it is the “first” turn in a sequence than if it is the “second.” As shown in the top line of the Figure, unsought advice (offered in the first turn of a conversation) is not nearly so likely to be welcome and adopted as that same advice offered (as shown in the bottom line in the Figure) following a request.

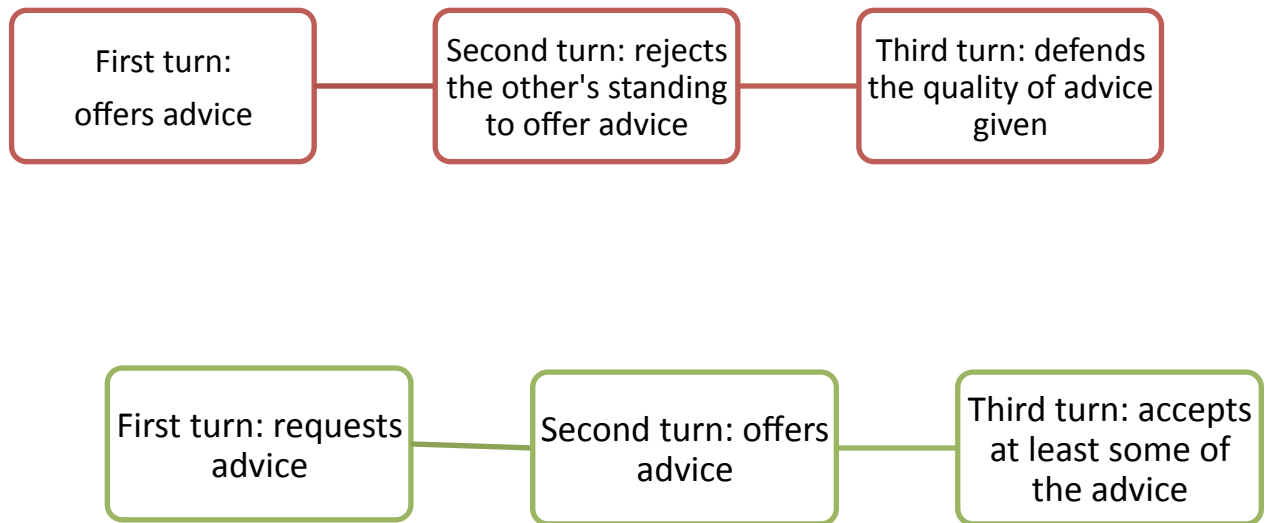


Figure 2

Two sequences of turns, showing how different social worlds are made when the “same” speech act “advice” occurs at different places in the sequence

This simple example can be enriched by imagining the fourth (and following) turns in each conversation. CMM researchers have found that important differences in patterns of communication sometimes hinge on something so apparently trivial as who speaks first, or whether what is said is in the first or second turn of a conversation (Pearce, 2007, pp. 89-93).

In addition to coordinating our actions with each other, we are constantly making and managing meanings. Human beings are incorrigible storytellers; we will construct stories to make sense out of any situation we encounter and we will revise those stories based on what happens in those situations. Sometimes we sort those stories out, differentiating those that are most important from those less important; at other times, we get caught in knots. CMM’s hierarchy model functions to remind us to ask “what’s the context?” and “what’s the highest/higher level of context?” in specific situations (for more on the hierarchy model, see Pearce, 2004).

We punctuate our experience into chunks called episodes: a sequence of speech acts with a marked beginning and end, connected by a story. Episodes are the answer to the question “what are you doing together?” Possible answers include having dinner, leading a workshop, having an argument or engaging in dialogue, making a friend or an enemy, starting a project or completing a task, composing a life, starting a company, or serving a cause. Our stories guide our behavior and enable us to perform episodes and the episodes we perform reinforce or change our stories (for more about this, see “Episodes and patterns of communication,” chapter 5 in Pearce, 2007).

These concepts – speech acts, coordination, making/managing meaning, and episodes – are part of CMM’s vocabulary for helping us look at communication itself. The terms seem strange because they counter the learned incapacity to take the communication perspective. Once these (or any other comparable set of) terms are learned, we have the basis of communication literacy; we can “draw communication.”

NAMING AND DESCRIBING WHAT WE ARE DOING

One benefit of taking the communication perspective is that it enables us to get closer to the action as we name and describe what we are doing. I believe that this is of value to our community because “public participation” itself is a contested term; our community has developed to the point where we are having serious and sometimes passionate discussions among ourselves about what we mean by “public participation” and about which forms of public participation are legitimate and authentic.

The meaning of public participation was contested on the NCDD listserv. On November 25, 2008, the Obama transition team launched an online discussion at www.change.gov about “What worries you most about the healthcare system in our country?” Tim Bonnemann initiated a spirited discussion by asking members of the NCDD listserv “How would you rate this in terms of process quality?” He raised “a number of issues (overwhelming amounts of content, poor signal-to-noise ratio, lack of focus, lack of good listening etc.)” and invited “recommendations for the incoming administration.” This discussion was stimulated even more on December 5, 2008, when Janet Fiero posted a letter from Carolyn Lukensmeyer (*AmericaSpeaks*), Martha McCoy (*Everyday Democracy*) and Miles Rapoport (*Dēmos*), asking members of our community to endorse the “Agenda to Strengthen America.” I was struck by how much of the discussion of both issues dealt with questions of the appropriate criteria for assessing and/or supporting particular public participation projects.

Another conversation contesting the term “public participation” occurred in the December, 2008 issue of this journal. The topic was the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation, and it received mixed reviews. Lyn Carson, who convened the discussion, expressed reservations about the Spectrum although she said that, in general, she found it useful; her primary interlocutor, Larry Susskind, said that he did not find it useful (Carson, 2008, p. 68) and that he and his colleagues had developed a revised “Spectrum of Processes for Collaboration and Consensus-building in Public Decisions” because “We don’t feel that the phrase public participation adequately portrays what most of us are seeking when we help to engage the public in efforts to promote deliberative democracy” (p. 83).

At stake is far more than the words we use. To be sure, as Shakespeare wrote in *Romeo and Juliet*, “that which we call a rose/ By any other name would smell as sweet;” but the rose’s future prospects differ if named a weed in a wheat field or a flower in a garden. How we think and act when promoting public participation is at issue in conversations such as these. And, in my opinion, we are not likely to resolve these issues productively if we continue contesting them in the same vocabulary.

I believe that the vocabulary introduced above (and the rest of CMM) is useful because it helps us describe what we actually say and do in public participation. At present, much of the

discussion of legitimate public participation uses terms such as how many people are involved, how they were selected, when they get involved, etc. The middle row of the IAP2 Spectrum comes closer to communication literacy by using language quite similar to speech acts in comparing the promises various forms of public participation make to the public:

- Inform: “keep you informed;”
- Consult: “keep you informed; listen and acknowledge; provide feedback;”
- Involve: “work with you to ensure...;”
- Collaborate: “look to you for advice and innovation; incorporate your advice and recommendations;”
- Empower: “implement what you decide.”

If we took on board “communication literacy,” we would pay even more attention to speech acts like those named in the Spectrum, and utilize our ability to “draw communication” to bring them even further into discourse. Please understand the following as a very serious invitation to play with this idea.

The exercise of communication literacy might begin by inscribing, more completely than we have to this point, the list of speech acts that occur in public participation. For example, the speech acts named in the middle row of the IAP2 Spectrum are framed as somebody’s (whose?) “Promise to the public.” Staying within that frame, I note that the promises do not include:

- To facilitate conversations so that you have the opportunity to speak and to listen;
- To insure that all stakeholders have been included in the process;
- To transform the pattern of communication so that it has the possibility of generating creative new perspectives; and,
- To record what you say fairly.

Are these additions controversial? If we continued to add speech acts which the conveners of public participation promise to participants, would we discover some about which members of our community disagree? What interesting conversations would be generated by those disagreements?

We could add another row to the Spectrum, titled “What members of the public should promise us and each other.” We should resist the temptation to use demographic or psychological language in naming these promises; as an exercise in communication literacy, let’s name the speech acts that should be performed. Here are a few that come to mind:

- To listen to each other, particularly to those with whom you disagree;
- To ask each other questions that will help you understanding them;
- To suspend your assumptions and be open to new ideas and information; and,
- To do “choice-work” among options.

Let me repeat: this is a deliberately incomplete list and I’m not suggesting a new theory of what should go on in public participation. Rather, I’m recommending an exercise in communication literacy as a way of better naming and describing what we are already doing. I believe that this literacy will provide a more useful language, will expose commonalities and differences among us and among our forms of practice, and will provide the scaffolding for the continued evolution of our knowledge about public participation. That said, the resulting row in the Spectrum would provide the basis for the “informed consent” of participants, letting them know clearly what to expect.

We might then sort the speech acts we've listed into the categories that name the columns of the Spectrum. That is, which speech acts do we promise and which do we expect participants to do in processes that "inform" the public? Do we expect the public:

- To read documents provided by the conveners?
- To listen to presentations by the conveners?
- To ask for clarification or additional information?
- To challenge presentations on the basis of missing or inconsistent information?
- To put their own cherished assumptions and beliefs "at risk" by engaging in interaction with those who are not like them?
- To work through the trade-offs required by having to choose among options?
- To accept the responsibility for developing plans to meet needs?

From the communication perspective, "power" is defined in terms of who is required or allowed to perform specific speech acts. Meetings designed to "inform" encourage participants to do only a very small range of speech acts; meetings to "consult" or "involve" allow and enable them to do more; and meetings designed to "empower" require them to perform the largest range of speech acts. By identifying which speech acts we require/encourage from the participants, we can better clarify what we are doing in specific instances of public participation.

As we develop communication literacy, we will be able to perceive the terrain of social reality. The equivalents of height and breadth in physical space are the range and ratios of speech acts that occur, and the symmetry of who is allowed/required to perform them. In "consultations," for example, we might find that there is a limited range of speech acts. For the purpose of illustration, say that there are three:

- Lecturing;
- Listening; and,
- Asking questions.

In this hypothetical event, the ratios are: lecturing, 40%; listening 50% and asking questions 10%. If we add the dimension of symmetry, we get a fuller picture of the meeting:

- Convener: Lecturing 40%; listening 10%;
- Members of the public: Listening 40%; asking questions 10%.

(The speech acts of conveners plus those of members of the public = 100%).

This gives us a portrait of a typical "forum" in which a lecture is followed by a question-and-answer session, in which the range, ratio and symmetry of speech acts provide the metric.

I think this kind of analysis is useful, but I suspect that we would quickly become impatient with the totalizing representations that it produces. Among other things, we would realize that the sequences in which speech acts occur matters. We would find it useful to inscribe these techniques as sequences of turns, and then to punctuate (identify the "beginning" and "end") them as episodes.

If we add sequence to our communication literacy, we gain new tools for "drawing communication." For example, passing out a "fact sheet" involves very few turns (preparation, distribution, reading) in a single episode. Deliberative polling, on the other hand, involves many more turns (initial interview, distribution of factual information, taking a pre-test opinion poll,

presentations, facilitated small group discussions, questioning experts, more small group discussions, more questions for experts, more small group discussions, taking a post-test opinion poll, getting a summary of the findings) in several episodes.

As we begin to inscribe episodes, it will be necessary for us to identify the stories that make the sequence of speech acts coherent. Those of us who have been working with these ideas find it useful to start with these assumptions:

- there will always be multiple stories, some of which are more important than others (this is CMM's hierarchy model of meanings);
- there will always be inconsistency between the stories that people tell about what they are participating in and the actual sequence of what they and others do;
- there will always be untold, unheard, unknown, and untellable stories about what is going on; and
- the manner of storytelling will be important (this is CMM's LUUUUTT model; see Pearce, 2007, p. 212).

These descriptions begin to move us from the “see Spot run” level of literacy to more nuanced ways of “drawing communication.”

I began this section by talking about how “public participation” remains – at this stage in the evolution of our community – a contested term. Communication literacy does not tell us which of the various concepts and techniques should emerge as the preferred one(s), but it does enable us to hold those discussions with a new degree of specificity. If we were to conduct the kind of analysis described toward the end of this section, our conversations among ourselves and between us and our clients could be quite different. Would they be improved? I think so, but it should be noted that “taking the communication perspective” is not neutral; it has a bias toward looking at what we actually say and do. I believe that this is consistent with the work that our community has already done in conceptualizing persons and power relationships, but this might be a fruitful theme in our ongoing conversation. However...

NEW ABILITIES AND FORMS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

I believe that communication literacy -- “drawing communication” – is fateful. Just as literacy changes our relationship to words, communication literacy changes our relationship to the process in which we are engaged, and those processes make the events and objects of our social worlds. I believe that communication literacy confers new abilities and forms of consciousness.

Let's start with new abilities. I've talked about some useful things that might happen by describing the speech acts that occur in the techniques of public participation. But those of us in this community are not satisfied just describing these techniques; we want to affect them. Communication literacy can enhance our ability to manage the range and ratio of speech acts.

In the discussion of speech acts in the previous section, I've named them as if they were done by one person, for example, by the convener or a participant in a meeting. But we know that speech acts are social events; they are “co-constructed” in a sequence of turns by two or more

people, and that this curious structure provides opportunities for facilitators and designers of public participatory processes.

Figure 3 shows the ideal structure of the speech act “promise.”

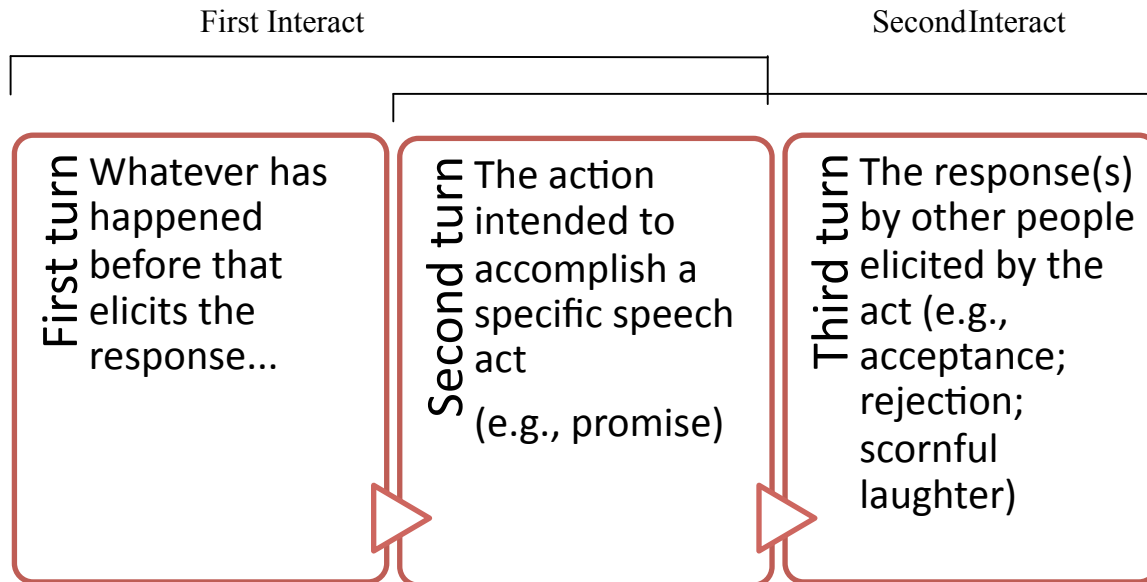


Figure 3: The double-interact model of speech acts

In the figure, a participant intended to perform the speech act “promise.” But what actually occurs is not as strongly related to that intention as it is to the placement of this act between things that other people have already done (the first turn) and what they do following (the third turn).

The model in Figure 3 is sometimes called the “conversational triplet,” and having it in mind enhances our ability to affect the range, ratio and symmetry of speech acts in a given situation.

For us to be able to bring off the speech act “promise,” we need to say or do something appropriate in the second turn of the conversational triplet, but things are not always as simple as they seem. As the example of ibn Faldan shows, the verbal content of this turn may or may not look like the speech act that it performs (the literal content of what he said appears to be an agreement with an observation; we understand, however, that the speech act was his promise to undertake a project). We often answer questions with another question, fully expecting the other person to hear our answer as saying something that it clearly does not say: for instance, “Are you going to the concert tonight?” “Is the Pope Catholic?” In addition to the obvious implication that we need to hear what is being done by what is being said, this flexibility between performance and verbal content creates openings for us to affect the speech acts that other people can perform. I’ve developed a training demonstration that -- if I can keep my wits about me -- proves that the participants cannot insult me. That is, I can do something as the first and third turn that disables any of the terrible things they say in the second turn from performing a speech act they intended (Pearce, 2007, pp. 125-126).

We can use these principles in our work. Assume that you are planning a public participatory meeting in which there will be some participants who – for whatever reasons – are likely to engage in actions that normally create speech acts that you do not want to occur. These may be public administrators who can't resist lecturing the public about how little they know about policy, or advocates who you suspect will say polarizing things that detract from the group's ability to work together.

Frame these anticipated actions as the “second turn” in the three-turn sequence. Since none of us can perform a speech act alone, you have two opportunities to constrain and redirect these problematic actions.

What “first turns” can you do that would make these actions less likely or, if performed, change their meanings? If you anticipate that someone is going to criticize the convening authority, you might take a “first turn” and say “we know that there are many people here who criticize those who have convened this meeting, and those criticisms are important. Let's generate a list of them so that we can all assess how we should think about them. Who wants to go first?” The effect of this turn is to convert the criticism in the second turn into “cooperating with the group” rather than “disrupting the process.”

If you find yourself responding to one of these anticipated disruptive actions, visualize yourself in the third turn position. What can you say or do to change, e.g., a criticism of the mayor from a disruptive beginning of an attack-defend sequence to something more positive? One example is to postpone the mayor's response and, as the facilitator, do an appreciative reframe of the criticism (from “you are...” to “I would like a mayor who...”) and ask the person speaking to tell their personal experience when they first realized that they wanted a mayor with these characteristics.

In one sense, this is what the best facilitators already do. Communication literacy doesn't tell us how to be better facilitators, but it does help us describe, rehearse, and be more precise in our reflections about our experiences. That's not an inconsiderable benefit. In the same way that a list helps us when shopping for groceries, inscribing what we want to do helps us plan and facilitate public participation events. But there is more.

Taking the communication perspective moves us into a different form of consciousness than the commonsense view of communication. It moves us from the grammars of action prefigured by the verbs “to be” and “to have” into the grammars of action prefigured by the verbs “to make” and “to do.” These differences are better felt than said, so feel with me through these illustrations.

If I think you “are” an authoritarian and I want to call into being a meaningful public participatory event, I have few options except to avoid you, overpower you, or somehow persuade you to join my side. But if I think that you are “doing” authoritarianism, I am in a different grammar and have many more possible ways to act. I might ask “in what contexts do you act this way, and in what contexts do you not?” I might explore what events elicit authoritarianism from you and which do not. I might ask “what stories make this form of behavior seem appropriate or necessary?” I might invite you into an exploration with me of what

we are making together and what role your “authoritarianism” (and whatever I/we are doing as well, of course) plays in making the pattern and the outcomes we are experiencing.

In addition, the communication perspective takes us into a social world in which things are made, not just found, and in which the ways things have always been does not necessarily predict the future. It is a world whose physics is quite different from the Newtonian mechanism that fit the Enlightenment so well, and whose dimensions are still not fully known.

Consider the form of consciousness that sees the past not only as prologue but as predictor of an inevitable future. This form of consciousness was on display in the editorial section of the *New York Times* on February 17, 2009. Reflecting on the Republican rebuff of President Obama’s unprecedented bipartisan outreach in crafting the economic stimulus bill, political scientist James Morone wrote:

Roosevelt and Reagan reveal the dirty rotten secret of bipartisanship. It happens only when one side is cowed, beaten or frightened. More competitive elections mean more ardent debates.

And so it should be. Our government is designed that way. In the Federalist Papers, James Madison offered his bold solution to the problem of clashing interests: more clashing interests. “Ambition must be made to counteract ambition,” he declared.

In that way, our partisan debates are no shame. The clash and bluster may not sound pretty, but they are how we choose between great principles.

President Obama looked generous in reaching out to Senator Gregg. But in the end, Mr. Gregg has it right: kind words and good intentions cannot build a bridge between competing political philosophies. History, not to mention the Republican rejection of his stimulus package, offers Mr. Obama a clear guide: Pay less attention to the other party and spend more time — much more — persuading America to embrace what you believe.

The Enlightenment concept of communication undergirds Madison and Morone, who see power in no form of communication except “clash and bluster” because all communication does is to express “interests” and “principles.” The best for which we can hope is to make our opponents “cowed, beaten or frightened” and persuade the uncommitted.

I believe that Morone’s prescription is a recipe for gridlock and more-of-the-same political campaigns of distraction (“palling around with terrorists;” wedge-issues; etc.) and is deeply contrary to the commitments of those who believe in the necessity of deliberative democracy and public participation. But Morone is correct that we have to look hard to find clear cases of patterns of communication in which “kind words and good intentions” and the hard work of members of our community can “build a bridge between competing political parties.” I believe that we need to nourish an alternative form of consciousness if we have any chance of success, and that reveling in communication literacy is a means to develop and sustain that form of consciousness.

CONCLUSION

I've offered the concept of "communication literacy" as having value to the community organized by our interest in public participation. The theory of the coordinated management of meaning (CMM) provides one set of tools for "drawing communication," but there are other ways of formulating what we do and say in making the social worlds in which we live. More important than the specific tools (equivalent to the alphabet) are the abilities and form of consciousness (equivalent to literacy) which they confer. I've offered several examples of specific abilities that are better described, developed and practiced in a literate manner and suggested some characteristics of the form of consciousness that emerges from their use.

As a diagnostic of whether one is "doing" this form of consciousness (we would not say that one "is" or "has" it), I suggest writing a rebuttal to Morone's claim that there can be no other form of communication than "clash and bluster" and that partisanship is both inevitable and desirable.

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