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Contracting Participation Out of Union Culture:

Patterns of Modality and Interactional Moves in a Labour Contract Settlement

Maurice Norman Ward.

A Thesis

In the Discipline of Linguistics

Submitted to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Adelaide University
In fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

December 2004

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how language and power interact to construct relationships within a trade union setting and whether or not the union discourse structures promote the participation of members in the organisation. Power is reproduced instantially in systemic ways across social interactions so investigating discourse foregrounds power relationships and the points at which changes in them might be realised should that be desirable.

Four texts from a labour contract settlement within a bread factory make up the research data. One records a meeting between the union negotiators and their company counterparts, a second records a meeting of the union negotiators only to appraise a previous meeting with the company and plan their response. The third records a union delegate reporting back to a member of the union and preparing her for a meeting of the whole branch on the contract negotiations. The last records this meeting of the union negotiators and 43 members from the factory.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday 1994) is used to analyse the Modality and the social moves of the four texts. Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1989) and Code (Bernstein 1990a) paradigms provide complementary understandings of the data. Both qualitative and quantitative computational analysis of the four texts is undertaken. How lexical and grammatical resources are used to position other participants, how interactants initiate topics of conversation and respond to the initiatives of others, how offers and demands realises institutional relations are investigated.

The analysis suggests the union prioritises a discourse that is successful in its interaction with the company but because of weak coding boundaries this style of interaction flows into other union interactions, and constrains members' ability to contribute. Consequently settling the labour contract seems to conflict with the union goals of increasing membership participation in branch affairs. Some alternative interaction frames are offered here but remain to be tested by the union.

The results of this thesis have immediate implications for unions and community based groups that wish to improve membership participation as well as wider implications for linguists, educators, social activists and those interested in democratic processes.