

## **When Does “Yes” Mean “Yes”? Determinacy of Communication in Union Organizing**

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### **1. Introduction**

Many unions within the American labor movement have recently renewed their emphasis on direct organizing over political and legal centered strategies. Direct organizing generally consists of one-to-one interactions between union organizers and workers, designed to build union membership, increase overall participation in labor actions, and assess worker support for unions. Although scholars in labor studies have recently focused on this new organizing movement, none have acknowledged the important role language use and language ideology plays in these one-to-one interactions. My paper contends that understanding the pragmatics of these interactions is critical to understanding how unions accomplish the interconnected goals of mobilizing membership, attaining political power, and protecting the economic interests of workers.

In order to understand these social interactions between workers and union organizers—which I label “organizing moments”—I borrow from Drew’s and Heritage’s (1992) notion of “institutional talk.” Similar to other kinds of institutional talk, labor union’s goals are accomplished predominantly through an organizer’s linguistic ability to convince a worker to join the union and participate in its actions. In organizing moments, organizers must use regularized and discrete language to efficiently communicate a union’s crafted message; they must also be flexible in mastering oral and aural skills to answer workers’ questions, allay their concerns, and persuade them to support the union. In addition, those being organized have their own conceptions of what constitutes an appropriate interaction. Workers equally determine the conditions under which organizing takes place, what questions the organizer can ask, and what personal information will be made public through the conversation. Thus, much of an organizer’s success, and consequently the success of an entire union drive, relies on what happens in organizing moments.

My paper examines organizing moments from union drives among Academic Student Employees (or ASEs) that I have participated in and observed at nine different universities. In all of these campaigns, organizers use organizing moments to persuade workers to vote for union representation in labor relation board elections and to assess a

worker's likelihood of voting. Synthesizing data collected from ethnographic observations of organizing moments and union planning/strategy meetings and interviews with organizers and workers, I will examine, first, how organizers and workers co-construct organizing moments, on both pragmatic and metapragmatic levels, and, second, some problems of indeterminacy of communication that hinder organizers' from fulfilling their campaign objectives.

## **2. Organizing Moments**

Due to work place pressures (such as the threat of termination or retaliation) and organizing responsibilities (such as the commitment to impart tangible social change) the organizing moment is fraught with complexity. An organizer's intentions are never fully transparent and a worker rarely makes an immediate and definitive decision about unionization. Conversations generally consist of many turns wherein an organizer and an employee talk in general about the benefits of a union and in specific about how it will affect the employee's working conditions. While workers' preconceptions of workplace issues vary widely, organizers thoroughly contemplate how to verbally represent labor relations in organizing moments. Professional and volunteer organizers also dedicate several hours a week to meta-discursive discussions strategizing about organizing moments: which organizers should talk to which workers, what exactly should be said to and asked of the workers, how should worker's responses be interpreted, and how should their concerns and fears be allayed.

It is in these meetings that organizers' language ideologies emerge and are expounded. The most prominent notion is the belief that organizing is most effective when conducted in one-on-one and face-to-face conversations. Union meetings and training sessions naturalize and institutionalize this notion as they teach volunteers how to talk to their co-workers on face-to-face basis. Equally, the more organizers actually do face-to-face organizers the more they all swear by it as the only effective strategy. This strategy is seen as an alternative to more passive kinds of organizing where unions wait for workers to show interest and come to the union or less direct strategies that force employers to recognize a union through legal or political pressure. I often heard organizers suggest that "organizing really only works if you go out and talk to each and every worker." This ideology of the best way to communicate the importance of a union to employees is supported by the two general goals of organizing "moving" and "assessing." I will now look closer at organizing moments through these two union objectives.

### *2.1. Moving*

"Moving" is the persuasive work of the organizing moment as organizers attempt to convince workers of the union's merits. By making persuasive arguments organizers strive to move workers from negative or apathetic positions to one of support for the union's goals. Organizers call the primary vehicle for moving employees "the rap." The rap is a scripted outline that organizers follow to control conversational flow in the organizing moment. It is akin to what Jane Hill (2000) describes as "message" in political campaigns. Both the message and the rap are, in their respective contexts, key components in what Hill calls "the discourse of theater" wherein the poetic function of language equals, if not surpasses, the referential as means of enacting political agendas. As Hill explains of presidential campaigns:

message gains its power not by the density of information it delivers and the rational evaluation of this by the electorate, but by ‘penetration’..., familiarity gained through constant repetition that sets up a complex performance-based resonance with critical groups of voters, a resonance that is at least as much aesthetic and affective as it is referential. (Hill, 2000:264)

At the beginning of each campaign, the rap is composed by primary organizers who refine it in the field and at weekly meeting based on its practical efficacy. It is designed to perform a set of themes that are strategically chosen for each kind of organizing moment. For the representation election campaigns, the rap generally stresses workers’ democratic rights to have a say in their working conditions and the importance of solidarity of employees. Each of an organizer’s utterances is designed to convince the worker to support the union by highlighting democracy and solidarity.

Generally, the rap is bipartite: part one, an information and propaganda piece, remains consistent from organizing moment to organizing moment while part two, a question/answer section, varies based on the concerns and responses of the worker. This is an example of the first part of the representation election campaign’s rap (*italics indicate standard workers response and option statements*):

Excuse me are you a TA, Tutor, or Reader? *Yes*. My name is David, I am in the Anthropology department and I 'm an organizer with [X union]. Do you know about [X union]? (if *yes*, then: proceed; if *no*, then: We are a union of TAs, Tutors, and Readers and we are trying to get collective bargaining rights here at [Y university]. So they ordered an election in which we get to vote as to whether or not we want a union. If we vote for [X union] in this election we get collective bargaining rights. Collective bargaining means we have a real say in our working conditions and we get to negotiate things like our pay and workload.

Although this part of the rap may vary slightly from organizer to organizer it is the primary means for communicating the campaign’s objectives coherently, consistently, and potently. It collectively defines a group of people as workers with the common democratic right and interest in their social and economic environment.

In the weekly training meetings organizers participate in role-playing exercises to rehearse the rap and the organizing moment. Ease of delivery is, an important consideration in creating the rap. The organizer must be comfortable with what s/he is saying in the organizing moment or else risk comprising his/her credibility or appearance of conviction. Another key to maintaining composure in the organizing moment is “keeping it simple.” Both of these tenets of the rap speak to the performative importance the organizing moment. Precision and conciseness are seen to reflect confidence and the merit of the union. They also are meant to defray detailed and lengthy debates over the minutiae of collective bargaining that tends hinder workers’ decisiveness in support of the union.

Precision and conciseness are accomplished by always returning to the basic theme of democracy. The rap establishes this theme at the beginning of the organizing moment. The first part evokes the authority of a legal court decision declaring, that collective

bargaining is a “right” that belongs to ASEs and which a court has “ordered” an election to sustain. Organizers emphasize the support of a judicial body—an official arm of American democracy. The rap foregrounds the representation election and collective bargaining as democratic practices.

## 2.2. *Assessing*

The second part of the rap is a question/answer section. This section is equally important to assessing workers as it is to moving them. It generally begins by immediately calling the question of the worker’s support: “Can we count on you to vote in favor of [X union] in this upcoming election?” An affirmative response leads the organizer to record the worker’s support and possibly recruit them to help with the organizing. With an overly negative response, the organizer generally leaves the worker be. However, most responses can be categorized as “undecided.” This includes workers leaning positive but not ready to commit, those unsure and ambivalent, those somewhat negative yet interested in the benefits of union rights, and those who say they haven’t thought about it or they currently don’t have time to talk about it. The undecideds almost always prompt the organizer to move into the core of the question/answer section. In some instances this begins when the worker offers their opinion on unionization. But many times the organizer has to draw opinions out of the worker by asking pointed questions. These questions vary from neutral to agitational based on the level of the worker’s participation in the conversation, and they often follow an order pre-determined at planning meetings. They often proceed as follows: “what do you think about collective bargaining rights?”; “have you ever been in a union before?”; “do you know how collective bargaining works?”; “do you know how the union would work here?”; “do you know that ASEs at [Z University] get paid more than us because they have a union?” Irrespective of the content of the answers, these questions engage the worker in conversation. Drawing the worker into a conversation, the organizer increases the penetration of union’s message of democracy. The early questions in this part of the rap focus directly on the mechanics of collective bargaining. Questions like, “do you know how collective bargaining works?,” give the organizer an opening to explain the democratic processes involved in choosing a negotiating team, surveying workers, and voting on contracts. Other questions highlight financial gains and causally link benefits to unionization by reminding that these benefits are enjoyed “because of” the existence of a union and collective bargaining. Despite workers’ complicated questions about the union’s political structure, concerns over the minutiae of the union’s past strategies, and both rational and irrational speculations about how unionization will transform the academic workplace, organizers will continually return to the most basic question: “but, do you think we deserve a democratic say in our working conditions?” This conversational maneuver allows the organizers to “stay on message” and construct unionization as unequivocally positive.

Worker’s expressions of concern also allow the organizer to assess support. Assessing is critical to a union’s ability to map its support and then strategize a successful campaign. Assessing is an acquired skill. Training meetings and communication among organizers help establish some level of uniformity in determining a worker’s support. Still, assessing is inherently inexact. Organizers continually try to develop tactics to overcome its ambiguity. One tactic is to employ same questions used to move workers to assess them. Each question helps reveal why a worker did not definitively say “yes” to supporting the union. For example the questions “have you ever been in a union before?”; “do you know how collective bargaining works?”; “do you know how the union would work here?” help

the organizer determine if the employee is merely uninformed about or inexperienced with unions. “What do you think about collective bargaining rights?” can let the organizer know if a worker is just politically opposed to unions or whether s/he even think of her/himself as a worker (in the campaigns I study, the university administration’s main argument against unionization is that ASEs are not employees, and thus are not entitled to collective bargaining rights). With a question like, “do you know that ASEs at [Z University] get paid more than us because they have a union?” organizers can determine if the worker can be motivated to support the union for personal financial reasons, irrespective of ideologies of democracy or self-perception of his/her employment status.

Moving and assessing impact each other dialectically. During each organizing moment organizers constantly make linguistic maneuvers to maximize their persuasiveness and to minimize the ambiguity of the worker support. In fact, even determining someone’s anti-union feeling has value because it allows organizers to make efficient use of time that could be spent persuading an undecided voter. Undecided voters are key because they almost always constitute the largest group of workers and are always the people the union and management struggle to win over in representation elections. Moreover, undecideds are crucial because their votes are unpredictable or undeterminable. The demarcation of undecided signifies workers whom organizers were both not able to move and not able to assess. This category is produced by indeterminacy of communication.

Organizers’ language ideology can be read in direct relation to the determinacy of communication in organizing moments. Organizers believe that conducting organizing through face-to-face conversations is crucial because it is thought to give the organizers the best opportunity to move and assess workers. Face-to-face conversations are believed to better index the similarity and solidarity between worker and organizer. Visual contact allows employees to see that organizers are their co-workers. Furthermore, organizers rely on face-to-face conversations to communicate the union’s message because unlike other forms of media (poster, literature, e-mails, websites), interlocutors can answer people’s questions and concerns and can employ linguistic strategies (such as the rap questions) to increase workers’ levels of engagement with unionization. Equally, organizers feel they can make nuanced and accurate assessments of worker support if they interact face-to-face with workers. This is based on a folk belief that it is harder for people to lie to someone’s face than in other forms of communication. Stan (who has over ten years organizing experience) emphasizes this ideology as he discusses with me the difference between organizing face-to-face or over the phone. He remarks: “I’m better on the phone, but I’m too good. I can get anyone to say what I want them to say.” Stan recognizes that he can construct the organizing moment so well that a worker has no other choice than to concede Stan’s point of view. But Stan believes without engaging this person in a face-to-face conversation he cannot be sure whether or not he has convinced a worker. Stan’s confession of the relative value of his mastery of phone conversations also highlights the import of being able to accurately determine worker support in unionization drives.

### **3. When “Yes” Does Mean “Yes”?**

Union representation election results are tangible ways for unions to measure their support. In campaigns leading up these elections, organizers must preliminarily estimate the level of support for the union. Thus, they try to concretize their assessments, by asking workers the pointed question “Can we count on you to vote yes for the union?”. Many who answer “yes” to this question can be assessed as supporters of the union and be

counted on to vote for the union; however, a significant number of people say they will vote for the union and don't end up voting in favor or voting at all. Folk explanations for this reality allege that people forget to vote, change their mind, or lie to organizers. Any of one of the explanations impedes organizers' ability to interpret a "yes" as a positive assessment of a workers support and ultimately can cause a union to lose a representation election.

One union I have worked with has consistently found that only about 1/3 of the workers who commit to a pro-union action, do not actually follow through with the action. One way to understand this discrepancy is by turning to Harvey Sack's (1975) notion of lying. For Sacks lying does not necessarily indicate moral vacancy. He describe it this way:

In circumstances in which alternative answers to a question are known, and the alternative answers have alternative consequences for that conversation or for other events, the one way in which people are known to attempt to control those alternative consequences is to select answers by reference to their intended selection of consequence. (Sacks, 1975:75)

We can see this sort of strategic action is one explanation for the discrepancy between verbal support for a union and acting on that support. Many workers who have no interest in talking to union organizers will choose to placate rather than ignore or debate the organizer. This strategy allows the worker to quickly move on his/her way. Others might not want to appear to be unprogressive and thus they agree with the organizers in such a way that limits their commitment but protects them from detraction or shame. In both cases the worker is using language to select an action with a favorable consequence—a consequence that keeps their worldview intact and protects them from having to publicly defend their ideas.

This strategic method of guarding access to one's opinions is frequently seen with "undecideds" as well. These workers will repeatedly tell an organizer that "they are still thinking about it [unionization]." This limits interaction with the organizer by suggesting that unionization is already on the worker's mind and the organizer need not discuss it with him/her. This strategy plays on norms of politeness by threatening the organizer's positive face (Brown & Levinson, 1978). "Undecideds" manipulate the organizer's "want...that his wants be desirable to at least some others" (Brown & Levinson, 1978:62). In this case the organizer wants others to join the union and can only achieve this through collegial and positive organizing moments with other workers. The worker banks on the organizer's desire not to upset prospective supporters or seem too pushy, and thus the undecided selects a route which provides an unrepachable avoidance.

In concluding, I want to briefly talk about the ways in which organizers have attempted to increase the determinacy of communication in organizing moments. Organizers have developed methods for materializing workers' commitments to vote. The most successful of which has been getting workers to sign membership cards or commitment sheets. Membership cards signify a formal commitment in the eyes of the law while commitment sheets do not have as much authority they ask a worker to sign a sheet next to a public declaration of support for the union. This act of getting an employee to lend their signatures helps to clarify that a worker's "yes" is jointly understood as indexing that the worker supports the union. To use Silverstein's (1996) terms organizers

use of signed commitments clarifies the “presupposition” of the worker’s agreement such that the agreement “entails” an understood commitment on the part of the worker to support the union.

Of course there will always be the problem of those that are unwilling to sign but at the same time will not go so far as to say that they are against unionization. These workers often make comments like “I’m not ready to make that commitment yet,” or “I don’t think I am going to sign right now.” Again these comments frustrate both the ‘moving” and “assessing” of the organizing moment by effectively limiting progress of a conversation about unionization. Ultimately, unions must constantly develop strategies to overcome these limits to communication determinacy and discursive development for it is their political goals that demand communicative certainty. In the face of management that has huge financial resources and institutionalized authority to make claims about unionization, the strongest asset that a union will have is its organizers’ skill to communicate with workers one-on-one about the benefits and protections of unionization.

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