"Slipperiness, evasion and ambiguity": the psychology of political equivocation

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INTRODUCTION

Definitions of equivocation

• “...nonstraightforward communication; it appears ambiguous, contradictory, tangential, obscure or even evasive” (Bavelas et al., 1990, p.28),

• “intentional use of imprecise language” (Hamilton & Mineo, 1998).

• “calculated ambivalence” (Wodak et al., 2009)
THEORY OF EQUIVOCATION
(Bavelas et al., 1990)

Situational Theory of Communicative Conflict (STCC)

• Equivocation occurs in response to a communicative conflict (CC).
• All possible responses to a question may have negative consequences.
• A response is still expected.
• Equivocation the result of a communicative situation.
EVERYDAY SITUATIONS

1. Unwelcome gifts
2. Personal appearance – disastrous hairdo, body odour
3. Food – awful meal at an invited dinner
4. Public performance – terrible karaoke singing
5. Relationships (e.g., dislike of friend’s romantic partner)
DO POLITICIANS EQUIVOCATE?

33 interviews with leaders of the 3 main parties (1987-1992) - mean reply rate 46% (Bull, 1994)

Different set of interviews - mean reply rate 39% (Harris, 1991).

Theresa May:

– 2 interviews with Andrew Marr as PM (28%) (Bull, 2016)

– PMQs since appointment as PM – reply rate to Corbyn (10%)

Corbyn’s first 20 PMQs with Cameron (20%)
EQUIVOCATION TYPOLOGY

Based on interviews & Prime Minister’s Questions) – 35 ways of not replying to a question (Bull, 2003):

New categories for Theresa May:

• “You’ve asked me that question before” (subtext – I didn’t answer it then, and I’m not going to answer it now)
Non-specific answer to a specific question

AM: And we now get stories, again from the RCN [Royal College of Nursing] of lots of ordinary nurses by the end of the week having to use food banks because they can’t afford to pay for food. That is not the kind of country that you want to run is it?

TM: I want a country that works for everyone, not just the privileged few.
WHY DO POLITICIANS EQUIVOCATE?

Equivocation might be seen as:

- An aspect of politicians’ personalities.
- Types of questions:
  - Politicians likely to equivocate if posed a high proportion of conflictual questions (Bavelas et al., 1990).
POLARIS SUBMARINE INCIDENT (June 2016)

- Polaris nuclear submarine fired a test missile off the coast of Florida.
- It misfired and headed towards the USA.
- When loaded, these missiles can kill millions.
- Fortunately, it was not loaded - self destructed.
In July, Theresa May made her first major speech to the House of Commons. Asked for approval for £40 billion to purchase new Trident submarines. Made no mention of the misfire. Andrew Marr asked May 4 times: Did she know about it? May equivocated 4 times.
MAY’S 4\textsuperscript{TH} RESPONSE

AM-4: Prime Minister, did you know?
TM-4: There are tests that take place all the time for our nuclear deterrent. What we were talking about in that debate that took place was about the future.
AM-5: Well it’s not an answer, OK I’m not going to get an answer to this.

(NB Trident missiles only tested 5 times in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century - each test costs £17m)
COMMUNICATIVE CONFLICT IN POLARIS QUESTION

- If May didn’t know - would appear grossly incompetent.
- If she did know - would appear highly deceitful

Can be understood in terms of what we call “threats to face”.
FACE-THREATS IN QUESTIONS (BULL et al., 1996)

• Questions pose “threats to face.”
  – Politician and/or his/her political allies appear in a bad light.
  – Threaten future freedom of action.

• If all principal responses present “threats to face” – creates communicative conflict.

• “Threats to face” a prime cause of political equivocation.
1992 GENERAL ELECTION
(BULL et al., 1996)

Analysed face-threats in 18 political interviews (557 question-response sequences):

• New typology of questions.

• 19 types of face-threat distinguished, grouped into 3 main categories:
  – Personal face.
  – Face of the party they represent.
  – Face of significant others.

• Two types of question:
  – Conflictual questions.
  – Non-conflictual questions.
RESULTS

• Conflictual questions (41%).
  – Equivocation the modal response (64% of questions).

• Non-conflictual questions (59%):
  – Replies the modal response (60% of questions).
INTERVIEWER RESPONSES

How can political interviewers tackle equivocation by politicians?

1. Just repeat the question – Paxman famously asked Michael Howard the same question 12 times.

2. Make it clear that the politician is not answering the question

3. Re-formulate the politician’s non-reply (cf Brian Walden)
[Andrew Marr poses question about nurses’ use of food banks 4 times, then responds:]

“Under the Conservatives, under your government, the record number of food parcels last year has been handed out .... And I’ve asked you, under your government if people vote Conservative again is that going to carry on? And the answer seems to be yes”
WIDER IMPLICATIONS  
(BULL, 2008)

Concept of face used to explain:
• Why communicative conflicts occur in political interviews.
• Prevalence of equivocation by politicians.
• Why politicians do answer some questions:
  – e.g., “Let’s look at the UK in 10 years time. Where’s Tim Farron and where would you like us to be apart from back in the European Union?” (Julie Etchingham – 8 May, 2017)

Whether politicians reply or equivocate can be understood in terms of the face-threatening structure of questions.
SUMMARY

1. We all equivocate when posed conflictual questions.
2. Politicians receive many such questions – creates pressures to equivocate.
3. Important role of threats to face.
4. Non-replies & answers can both be understood in terms of the “face-threatening structure of questions”.

REFERENCES


