

What research on equivocation for our



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Politicians are roundly derided by the media for their use of equivocation. In some instances, it can become a defining characteristic of their rhetoric – giving them a reputation for deceitful doublespeak that can shadow them for their whole political career. For those not in the political spotlight however, equivocation can be viewed merely as a method used to evade a potentially awkward situation (Bavelas et al. , 1990). Defined as: “[The use of] ambiguous language..

. o conceal the truth or avoid committing oneself (with direct speech)” (Abate, 1999), equivocation has remained a central area of interest in research on political communication, shedding light on the complex relationship between interviewer and politician. Bavelas et al’s (1988, 1990) equivocation theory makes the fundamental assumption that when faced with two or more unappealing options (an avoidance-avoidance conflict) in response to a posed question, we will equivocate. Put simply, “ equivocation is a good solution to a bad situation” (Bavelas et al, 1990, pp. 60) An ‘ avoidance-avoidance conflict’ is used to describe the psychological conflict of approaching a question, only to find that every potential answer would result in similarly compromising consequences.

Bavelas et al (1990) argue that equivocation is not a characteristic of a particular type of personality, but of a particular type of discourse, and that the pressures of a political interview lend themselves to these conflicts (Bull, 1998). Bull and Mayer’s 1993 microanalysis of eight interviews with Margaret Thatcher and eight with Neil Kinnock showed the two politicians to have directly answered only 41 and 44 per cent of questions posed, respectively. This supported Harris’ (1991) earlier research, in which the same politicians

answered 39 per cent of the time, suggesting that certainly in terms of interviews with these politicians, equivocation is prevalent. In order to illustrate why equivocation is such a distinctive feature of political discourse, many researchers have offered examples of avoidance-avoidance conflicts, focusing specifically on its relevance to politicians. Bavelas et al (1998, 1990) outline factors that may house these conflicts, such as controversy, divided loyalty, time limits, and lack of knowledge. Politicians are often questioned on highly controversial issues where any given answer is likely to offend a proportion of voters; this can ultimately lower the politician's popularity, leaving equivocation to appear to be the lesser of several evils.

A divide between constituency and party is another instance in which politicians may feel pressure from several groups. If the politician's party is backing a policy that would impact negatively on the politician's own constituency, this would result in an incredibly difficult role conflict. In situations such as these, a politician could well feel that equivocating is the only way they could resolve the dilemma without offending either party or constituency. This loyalty is admirable, and in stark contrast to the stereotype so often portrayed of politicians; it suggests that the motivation for equivocal language is important, even when limited to an avoidance-avoidance conflict, and can be the difference between a politician avoiding being unnecessarily cruel, and one trying to escape blame for irresponsible behaviour. Time restrictions can add further pressure, leaving the politician either to give a partial answer that will leave their audience dissatisfied, or to try to answer fully in the given time, and risk appearing " long-winded, circuitous and evasive" (Bull, 1998, pp. 9).

Perhaps one of the most obvious needs for equivocation is a lack of knowledge. If a politician has to battle with the conflict of admitting ignorance on a particular subject matter or concocting an answer to a question he knows nothing about, avoiding a direct answer completely may seem to be the safest option available. Bavelas et al (1990) created a model of equivocation, concerning how equivocation affects one or more of the four dimensions of a message – 1) its sender, 2) its content, 3) the receiver or 4) its context. In other terms; the representation of the speaker's own opinion; the coherence of what is being said; whom it is directed at; and whether it is a direct answer.

Avoidance-avoidance conflicts can affect the clarity of these four aspects of a question or response. As part of Bull ; Mayer's (1993) microanalysis of Thatcher and Kinnock's rhetoric, a typology of non-replies composed of 11 super-ordinate categories, separated into 30 subcategories, was created. The super-ordinate categories showed the two politicians to: “ ignore the question...

acknowledge the question without answering it... , question the question.

.. , attack the question... , attack the interviewer.

.. , decline to answer..

. , make a political point...

, [give an] incomplete answer... , repeat the answer to a previous question..

. , state or imply that [they have] already answered the question...

,” and “ apologise” (Bull ; Mayer, 1993, pp. 13-22). The results showed that Thatcher and Kinnock displayed very similar patterns to their non-replies (both politicians used ‘ making political points’ more than any other), yet they demonstrated differences in style. For example, Margaret Thatcher used ‘ attacking the interviewer’ 13 per cent of the time, whereas Neil Kinnock did not use it at all. Overall, Thatcher’s strategy was by far the more aggressive, and Kinnock’s the more defensive. This research is particularly useful for showing effective ways of equivocating; Kinnock’s frequent use of “ you tell me” (Bull & Mayer, 1993, pp.

31) had a zero per cent effectiveness rate, as every time he avoided answering in this manner, the interviewer would simply ask him again, and answering negatively provoked similarly consistent repetitions. Through the identification of a clear typology of non-replies, politicians can be aided in more effective ways of communication. Bull et al (1996) have extended a popular explanation that accounts for each instance of equivocation, that implies why politicians use doublespeak so frequently, and that underlies Bavelas et al’s (1998, 1990) entire concept for the phenomenon. The concept of ‘ threat to face’ has been widely considered to be of central importance in interviews, and its significance within political communication has been investigated by many. Brown and Levinson (1978) emphasised the importance of preserving what they called ‘ positive face’ – approval and respect from peers and public – and Jucker (1986) regarded it to be the primary concern for those in news interviews.

Bull et al (1996) state that threats to face are the cause of avoidance-avoidance conflicts, and if a politician risks their public image, party or close

friends being viewed negatively, they will seek to avoid this at all costs – frequently through equivocation. Bull (1996) describes equivocation as a form of self-preservation not distinct from Bavelas et al's (1998, 1990) original theory. Through this fundamental assumption, it seems possible that others, not just politicians, will equivocate for the same reasons. However, Bull's (1997, 2000) studies of high-profile individuals in the media spotlight reveal this not to be the case. Martin Bashir's interviews with Princess Diana and Louise Woodward were found to have received replies to 78 and 70 per cent of questions posed, respectively, and Jon Snow's interview with Monica Lewinsky received replies to 89 per cent. This is vastly different from Harris (1991) and Bull's (1993) results of 39, 41 and 44 per cent from politicians.

This can be explained in terms of the type of question they are asked, the number of interviews they are expected to participate in, and the added pressures of representing not only themselves, but a party, and sometimes a constituency. Possible explanations for equivocation evident in politicians' rhetoric provide reasons why they evade direct answers so often, yet offer few implications as to the significance of these examples in terms of political communication as a whole. Bull (2003) evaluates previous research by illustrating its particular significance as a means of establishing how skilled a politician is at answering difficult questions, and how an interviewer is at posing them, providing an insight into how they survive under pressure. He also argues that through previous research, it is possible to predict what questions politicians are likely to answer.

Using this information, interviewers have the potential to design a highly productive interview, without the simple aim of pushing politicians into

unanswerable questions, producing nothing but a frustrating interview, and a politician's damaged reputation. Political communication, however, does not consist simply of equivocation from politicians; studies of applause, interruptions and speech patterns have contributed greatly to our understanding of the way in which politicians communicate. Nor does political communication consist only of communication from politicians. It is important to consider the influence of the receiver, as outlined in Bavelas et al's (1990) four dimensions of equivocation.

They propose that avoidance-avoidance conflicts can affect the interviewer as well as the interviewee; facing similar pressures in terms of expected performance, high competition for jobs, and strict time limits, reporters can deviate from clarity within these four dimensions in similar ways. Through sender, they often refuse to reveal their source; through content, they readily use jargon and acronyms; through receiver, they ask inappropriate questions to which the receiver is not qualified to answer; and through context, they will digress from the original topic, and interrupt suddenly throughout the dialogue (Bavelas et al, 1990) Bavelas et al's (1988, 1990) research emphasises, and Bull's (1993, 1994, 1996, 2003) later studies confirm that it is the situational effects, not the politicians themselves that create the avoidance-avoidance conflicts: " The higher the proportion of avoidance-avoidance questions, the more likely politicians are to equivocate" (Bull, pp. 152). It is possible to draw the conclusion that the questions typically posed to politicians can seem almost impossible to answer, and this is the reason for such frequent equivocation. It is unreasonable, perhaps, to expect politicians to answer questions that could

end in political suicide, particularly given their fragile reputations, the substantial pressure from numerous sources and an electorate that expects so much.