

# Slippery politicians?

**P**OLITICIANS are often castigated for their evasiveness in political interviews as the sort of people who can never give a straight answer to a straight question. But are the questions in political interviews always so straight? To what extent is the evasiveness of politicians a response to the kinds of question they receive? Are slippery politicians simply forced down a conversational cul-de-sac by equally slippery political interviewers?

## The theory of equivocation

In this article political evasiveness is analysed in the context of the theory of equivocation, devised by Janet Bavelas and her colleagues (1990). Equivocation has been defined as 'nonstraightforward communication; it appears ambiguous, contradictory, tangential, obscure or even evasive' (Bavelas *et al.*, 1990, p.28), and more recently as the 'intentional use of imprecise language' (Hamilton & Mineo, 1998). Bavelas and her colleagues stress that although it is individuals who equivocate, such responses must always be understood in the situational context in which they occur. According to their theory, people typically equivocate when posed a question to which all of the possible replies have potentially negative



**PETER BULL** on the strategic use of evasive talk in the corridors of power.

consequences, but where nevertheless a reply is still expected. This situation they refer to as a communicative or 'avoidance-avoidance' conflict.

Many everyday situations can be seen to create this type of conflict. Perhaps the most common involves a choice between saying something false but kind and something true but hurtful. For example, a person receives a highly unsuitable gift from a well-liked friend, who then asks directly 'Did you like the gift?' In responding, the person has two negative choices: saying, falsely, that he likes the gift or saying, hurtfully, that he does not. According to equivocation theory, the person will if possible avoid both of these negative alternatives – especially when a hurtful truth serves no purpose. What they do instead is equivocate; for example, someone might say 'I appreciate your thoughtfulness' with no mention of what they thought of the actual gift.

Equivocation needs to be understood as a multidimensional concept: there are several ways to dodge the question. Bavelas *et al.* (1990) specify four main dimensions: sender, clarity, receiver and context (see box opposite). They state: 'All messages that would (intuitively or otherwise) be called equivocal are ambiguous in at least one of these four elements' (p.34). Bavelas *et al.* have conducted a series of experiments in which a number of conflictual situations (such as receiving an unsuitable gift) are described. Their results clearly showed that responses to communicative conflict questions were judged as significantly more equivocal on these four dimensions than responses to non-conflictual questions.

## Equivocation by politicians

One group of people with an unenviable reputation for equivocation is politicians. Often they are criticised for failing to give

direct answers to questions (what Bavelas *et al.* call the context dimension). Studies of broadcast interviews certainly support this stereotype (Bull, 2003). In an analysis of 33 televised interviews with political leaders (Margaret Thatcher, Neil Kinnock, John Major, Paddy Ashdown) politicians' responses were coded as replies (direct answers) only if they gave the information requested in the question. The term 'non-reply' was coined to refer to those responses in which the politician failed to provide any of the information requested in the question. 'Reply rate' (the proportion of questions which receive a direct answer) was then used as a measure of equivocation: the lower the reply rate, the more equivocal the politician.

Results showed a mean reply rate of just 46 per cent (Bull, 1994). In effect, the politicians replied to less than half of the questions. In an independent study of a completely different set of interviews (but again with Margaret Thatcher and Neil Kinnock), the politicians were found to give direct answers to only 39 per cent of questions (Harris, 1991).

In comparison, it is interesting to consider reply rates in televised interviews with people who are not politicians. The late Diana, Princess of Wales, in her celebrated interview with Martin Bashir, replied to 78 per cent of questions (Bull, 1997). In another Bashir interview Louise Woodward, the British au pair who was convicted of the manslaughter of eight-month-old Matthew Eappen, replied to 70 per cent of questions (Bull, 2000). Monica Lewinsky replied to 89 per cent of questions posed by Jon Snow in an interview concerning her affair with President Clinton (Bull, 2000). The mean reply rate of 79 per cent across the three interviews is significantly higher than the mean reply rate of 46 per cent for the 33 political interviews reported above.

### Why do politicians equivocate?

Politicians are frequently depicted as slippery and evasive, even downright deceitful. From this perspective, equivocation might be seen as an aspect of their personalities. Alternatively, equivocation by politicians might be understood as a response to the kinds of question they receive in political interviews. Thus, if politicians are posed a high proportion of communicative conflict questions, their responses are likely to be highly equivocal. Anyone would do the same faced with these sidewinder attacks.

An opportunity to test this alternative

## FOUR DIMENSIONS OF EQUIVOCATION

- *Sender*: the extent to which the response is the speaker's own opinion – for example, a politician is asked to give a personal opinion on a particular issue but responds in terms only of party policy.
- *Clarity*: refers to comprehensibility, an unclear statement being considered more equivocal.
- *Receiver*: the extent to which the message is addressed to the other person in the situation. The less so the more equivocal the message.
- *Context*: the extent to which the response is a direct answer to the question – the less the relevance, the more equivocal the message.

explanation was provided by a novel development in political broadcasting during the 2001 General Election. In the traditional interview, one politician is typically questioned by just one professional interviewer. Growing dissatisfaction with this arrangement has led broadcasters to experiment with different formats that allow for some form of audience participation. The 2001 election was the first in which both major television channels gave members of the general public the opportunity to put questions directly to the leaders of the three main political parties, alongside professional interviewers.

What makes this situation so interesting is that members of the general public may

establish where a party stands on a particular issue. Consequently, if members of the public pose fewer communicative conflicts, then politicians might be expected to give them significantly more replies. To test these hypotheses, an analysis was conducted of six sessions in which the party leaders were questioned by both professional interviewers and members of the general public (Bull, 2003).

Results showed that politicians replied to 73 per cent of questions from members of the public, and to 47 per cent of questions from political interviewers – a significant difference. This latter figure is almost identical to the 46 per cent reply rate for the set of 33 political interviews reported above. Conversely, the reply rate of 73 per cent to members of the public is directly comparable to that of 79 per cent for interviews with people who are not politicians, also reported above.

So did the different responses stem from a different line of interrogation? Political interviewers did use a significantly higher proportion of communicative conflict questions than members of public (58 per cent vs. 19 per cent). Finally, a significant phi correlation of .76 ( $p < .05$ ) between questions and responses showed that equivocation by the politicians was associated with communicative conflict questions from the political interviewers. The comparable correlation for questions and responses from members of the audience just missed significance.

Thus, professional interviewers received significantly fewer replies from the politicians, and asked significantly more communicative conflict questions. A prime cause of these conflicts can be attributed to the way in which questions pose threats to face (Bull *et al.*, 1996). A response to a question is judged to pose a threat to face if it makes the politician or their political allies appear in a bad light. So, for example, if responding 'yes' to a particular question makes the politician

### Martin Bashir's interview with Louise Woodward – 70 per cent of questions received direct answers

differ from political interviewers in the kinds of question they ask. In particular, given the more complex structure of communicative conflict questions, members of the public might be expected to ask them less frequently. Through such questions interviewers might seek to highlight inconsistencies in policy, whereas voters may be more concerned simply to

look incompetent, then that particular response would be seen as face-threatening. When all the principal ways of responding to a question present potential face threats thereby creating a communicative conflict, politicians tend to favour equivocation as the least face-threatening option.

A good example of threats to face in questions which either do or do not pose communicative conflicts can be seen in the following extract. It was taken from the BBC1 *Question Time* programme in the 2001 General Election with Tony Blair and David Dimbleby (Bull, 2003):

*Audience member: Why is it that er after four years of office the railways are in a worse state than we've ever seen in this country given that the policy is to encourage us not to use our cars?*

*Blair: Because the railways have been er because the railways have been underinvested for a very long period of time, and if we don't get the money into the railways, then we will carry on with a second or third class service.*

*Dimbleby: Are you ashamed of British railways?*

*Blair: I'm not proud of the state of British railways no I mean I think you'd be pretty odd if you said that....*

The question from the audience member, although face-threatening, did not present Blair with a communicative conflict. This is because he could reply by drawing attention to the chronic long-term underinvestment in the railways which preceded his own government. However, the question from Dimbleby did place Blair in a communicative conflict. If Blair said yes, he was ashamed of British railways, it would be damaging both to his own personal face and that of his party, given that New Labour had already been in power for four years. To say no he was not ashamed of British railways would simply stretch credibility, given the problems of major train accidents, cancellations, and frequent delays in the years immediately preceding the 2001 General Election. Blair resolved this problem by equivocating, saying that he was 'not proud of the state of British railways'. This did not directly answer Dimbleby's question, but enabled Blair to provide a credible response which was less face-damaging than either of the two possible direct replies.

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One reason why political interviewers ask such a high proportion of communicative-conflict questions may be to create a tough and challenging interview. However, it also increases the tendency of politicians to equivocate. Softer questions might encourage a politician to talk more freely, especially if couched in such a way that not to reply is the most face-threatening option. Indeed, in the overall context of a gentler style of interviewing, a tough communicative-conflict question might have greater impact because the politician is not expecting it. Thus this analysis does have some interesting practical implications for the way in which political interviews are conducted.

### Skill in equivocation

Equivocation theory, as formulated by Bavelas *et al.* (1990), is essentially concerned with the causes of equivocation, with how it occurs in response to communicative conflicts. But equivocation also needs to be considered in terms of its consequences (Bull, 1997, 1998). This is because different forms of equivocation may have different interactional effects. For example, not replying to a question at all may have quite different consequences from giving an implicit reply (Bull, 1997). Again, there are many ways of not replying to a question. At least 35 different forms of non-reply have been distinguished (Bull, 2003; Bull & Mayer, 1993), which may vary from the highly skilled to the totally inept.

A good example of skilful equivocation can be seen in an analysis of five televised interviews with Tony Blair, broadcast

during the 1997 General Election (Bull, 2000). The study was conducted in the context of the dramatic policy changes in the British Labour Party between 1983 and 1997, widely referred to as 'modernisation'. It was hypothesised that questions about modernisation would create a communicative conflict for Blair. This is because dramatic changes in policy typically pose political parties with a major problem of presentation. A complete about-turn inevitably reflects badly on what has gone before: there is a clear implication that the previous policies were ill-judged and inappropriate. Presenting the new policies also creates a problem: they may be depicted as cynical, opportunist and unprincipled, simply a means of currying favour with the electorate. Nowhere is this problem of presentation more pronounced than in the context of a political interview, where interviewers can ask repeated questions, challenge equivocal responses, and draw attention to contradictions in policy.

All questions about modernisation were identified, and in the majority of instances, it was considered that they created a communicative conflict. A highly significant correlation (.87) was found between type of question and type of response: Blair typically equivocated to questions judged as creating a communicative conflict, and replied to those judged as not creating such a conflict.

However, Blair's equivocal 'rhetoric of modernisation' did much more than simply enable him to avoid answering difficult questions, it also had other important and

expressed about Blair's continued premiership were voiced in response to a pro-war stance which was so uncharacteristically unequivocal.

### It's all about face

Politicians are often criticised for their evasiveness in responding to questions. However, the theory devised by Bavelas *et al.* (1990) shows how equivocation by politicians can be understood in the broader context of equivocation as it occurs in daily life. When people are confronted with a communicative conflict, they typically equivocate, whether or not they are politicians (Bavelas *et al.*, 1990; Bull *et al.*, 1996). But politics by its very nature continually confronts its practitioners with hard choices, creating exactly the kind of situational context which Bavelas *et al.* regard as creating pressures towards equivocation.

In the theory put forward by Bavelas *et al.* a communicative conflict is said to occur when someone is posed a question to which all of the possible replies have potentially negative consequences, but a reply is nevertheless expected. In this article, it has been argued that an important source of these negative consequences is the way in which questions pose threats to face. Thus, the concept of face is not intended as an alternative to that of the communicative conflict, rather as an explanation of why such conflicts are so prevalent in political interviews. Indeed, not only can equivocation be understood in terms of face, so too can instances of when politicians *do* reply to questions. For example, if a politician is asked to justify a specific policy, failure to reply by offering some kind of rationale may raise doubts either about the politician's professional competence or about the validity of the policy, or both. In this instance it is equivocation which poses a greater threat to face than giving a reply.

How well politicians handle communicative conflicts can also be understood in terms of face management. For example, Blair's equivocal rhetoric of modernisation in the 1997 General Election enabled him not only to avoid awkward face threats in questions about the dramatic policy changes in the Labour Party between 1983 and 1997, but also to project a highly inclusive social identity of New Labour, thereby presenting a positive image both for himself and for the party which he represented (Bull, 2000). It is not obvious how these positive strategic advantages could be represented in the existing theory

of Bavelas *et al.*, which focuses on equivocation essentially as a negative phenomenon, a means of not giving replies to awkward questions. In contrast, the analysis of equivocation as face management can be applied not only to the causes of Blair's rhetoric of modernisation (a means of evading difficult questions), but also to its intended consequences (a means of presenting an inclusive identity for New Labour, thereby attracting the widest possible electoral support).

In this article equivocation has been shown to be a readily understandable response to communicative conflicts, as well as a way of minimising the face threats which these conflicts present. Indeed, for a skilled communicator, equivocation can be a highly effective means of self-presentation. In short, communication does not always need to be clear, concise or to the point as Grice (1989) recommended, it is sometimes advantageous if it is ambiguous or even evasive. As such, equivocation can be understood as the strategic and intentional use of imprecise language.

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significant political advantages. Thus, for those members of the electorate who would never have voted for the old Labour Party, modernisation emphasised that the party had changed. Furthermore, the changes could be presented as principled, a process of applying the traditional values of the Labour Party to the modern world, just as the Conservative Party also had to change. At the same time, change could be acknowledged without condemning or criticising the old Labour Party, in order to minimise the risk of alienating traditional Labour support. Although Blair was often invited to criticise or condemn old Labour, it is noteworthy that he never did this. Thus, through this particular form of equivocation, Blair was able not just to avoid answering difficult questions, but also to present the best face both for himself and his party, in particular through promoting a highly inclusive social identity for New Labour.

Blair's mastery of the arts of equivocation is arguably an important element of his political skill, a point not lost on his political opponents. It was discussed in some detail by the former leader of the Conservative opposition, William Hague, writing in *The Guardian* (26 April 2002), five years on from Blair's landslide victory in the 1997 General Election. He singled out what he called Blair's 'skill for ambiguity' as one of his key political strengths, as one of the features which both helped him into power and helped keep him there. In contrast, Blair's stance over the Iraq War has been untypically unambiguous. It is interesting that the first serious doubts to be publicly