

Why Politicians Evade?

Nur Zahraa Binti Hanafe
Siti Rohana Binti Mohd Thani

ABSTRACT: This article aims to explore the practice of evasion and its strategies between the local and international politicians in political news interviews. The data consists of six interviews with Malaysian and U.S politicians, both equally denoting three interviews each. Using the conversational analysis approach, this study attempts to analyze how politicians evade from answering the questions and what are the strategies used, whether it is covert or overt in nature. The Clayman's (2001) work of evasion in news interview and its sub-genre is adapted as a framework of analysis. The findings are discussed in light of speech act theory (Searle, 1969) and face theory (Goffman, 1955) to explain how they evade and why they do it.

Key words: evasion; strategies; political news interviews; covert; overt

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Nur Zahraa Binti Hanafe
Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya
zaarahanafe@siswa.um.edu.my

Siti Rohana Binti Mohd Thani
Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya
srohana@um.edu.my

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This article aims to explore the practice of evasion and its strategies between the local and international politicians in political news interviews. The data consists of six interviews with Malaysian and U.S politicians, both equally denoting three interviews each. Using the conversational analysis approach, this study attempts to analyze how politicians evade from answering the questions and what are the strategies used, whether it is covert or overt in nature. The Clayman's (2001) work of evasion in news interview and its sub-genre is adapted as a framework of analysis. The findings are discussed in light of speech act theory (Searle, 1969) and face theory (Goffman, 1955) to explain how they evade and why they do it.

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1.0 Introduction

The research is a comparison study of political news interviews based on local and international contexts. It aims to explore the evasion practices and to what extent they evade in the domain of question-answer format in news interviews between both local and international politicians. As far as the news interview is concerned, the interaction between the politicians and journalist are built up through the exchange of questions and answers (Clayman and Heritage, 2002a) while both the participants abiding the specific features of news interview (see Chapter 2). Most politicians are regarded as being ambiguous or evasive in their speeches for various reasons. One of the main reason is the design of the questions posed to them which are adversarial in nature (Clayman & Heritage, 2002a; 2002b; Heritage, 2002; Gnisci and Bonaiuto, 2003; Emmertsen, 2007; Rendle-Short, 2007; Kantara, 2012; Heritage & Clayman, 2013 and more), thus resorting to evasion. Evasion is seen as very common with political discourse (Clayman, 2001; Bull, 2003; 2008; Bhatia, 2006; Vukovic, 2013) but the evasion practices still need for further research in various contexts – Malaysian context.

News interview discourse is commonly known as a genre of broadcast talk (Clayman & Heritage, 2002a; Montgomery, 2008). According to Clayman and Heritage (2002a), "The emergence of news interview was a product of changes in newspapers in the middle of the nineteenth century when factual reporting became a more important feature of newspaper content than partisan commentary, and was associated with the professionalization of journalists that accompanied this development" (p. 27).

The news interview is set to be different from an ordinary conversation (or even slightly different from talk shows, panel discussions, debates, audience participation programs) as it is fundamentally understood as an interaction process between a journalist who acts as an interviewer and one or more persons who have authorities in societies in the domain of questions and answers (Clayman & Heritage, 2002a). Based on this definition, the interviewer is known as someone who is professional in journalism rather than a partisan advocate or merely a celebrity entertainer. Likely, the interviewee is known as someone who held authority as a public figure such as politicians, party leader or certified experts and has relation to the current news event. In spite of these two main participants in the news interview, the audience plays no active role in the interaction. They plainly act as an “overhearing audience”.

Furthermore, as what the definition suggests, the interaction in the news interview is the product of question and answer which normally focus on matters related to recent news event (Heritage, 1984; 2010; Clayman & Heritage, 2002a; Heritage & Clayman, 2010). It is a social interaction constructed on the structures of questions and answers (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984) as both of them are important strategic elements in news interviews (Gnisci & Bonaiuto, 2003). As opposed to an ordinary conversation, news interview is regarded as an institutional talk in which few important differences may be discerned in terms of turn-taking, closing, opening, and its content (Heritage, 1984; Clayman & Heritage, 2002a). As a whole, news interview is normally restricted to only questions and answers as it is conducted formally through face to face. Besides that, the interview participants relatively act under the token of institutional roles – interviewer and interviewee. Also, Clayman and Heritage (2002a) identified that, “news interview encounters have been prearranged for the benefits of the media audience” (p. 67), which means that the interviewee is already invited earlier before the interview gets started on air.

The term of evasion has been variably described by previous researchers in lights of question-answer domain of news interviews. Noted for example, Dillon (1990), Wilson (1990) and Harris (1991) in their previous researches on evasion used the word “evasion” or “evasive response” to describe the responses or answers that do not answer the questions asked by interviewers. Harris (1991) in her book about broadcast talk, stated that politicians appear to be more evasive in news interview compared to other participants in other institutional context such as police interrogation. In another notion, such responses or answers are regarded as “non-replies” or “equivocation” in line with the research on political news interview and courtroom examination (Bavelas, Black, Chovil & Mullett, 1990; Bull & Mayer, 1993; Bull, 1994; 2000; 2003; Gnisci & Bonaiuto, 2003). Bavelas, Black, Chovil and Mullett (1990, p. 28) defined equivocation as “nonstraightforward communication, it appears ambiguous, contradictory, tangential, obscure or even evasive”. Similarly, Bavelas et al. (1998) defined the term as “non-straightforward communication which includes speech acts such as: self-contradictions, inconsistencies, subject switches, tangentialisations, incomplete sentences, misunderstandings, obscure style or mannerisms in speech... and so forth” (p. 137). More recently, Bull (2003) advocates that equivocation is deemed as “the strategic and intentional use of imprecise language” (p. 4).

It is interesting to see that evasive responses have been empirically and theoretically researched from a variety of perspectives (Bull & Mayer, 1993; Bull, 1994; Bull, Elliot, Palmer & Walker, 1996; Bavelas, Black, Bryson & Mullet, 1988; Bavelas, Black, Chovil & Mullet, 1990; Bull, 2008; Clayman, 2001; 2010; Gnisci & Bonaiuto, 2003; Bhatia, 2006; Mehdipour & Nabifar, 2011; Vukovic. 2013). Inherently, these past studies give some highlights to readers on an understanding of evasions in a communicative context, such as news interviews.

2.0 Statement of problem

Politicians are known to be ambiguous in their speeches for the purpose of hiding true agenda from the public (Bull, 2003). Evasion recurrently occurs in a context of political the broadcast audiences. In fact, most interviewers attempt to pose hostile question in order to make the interview session more challenging and adversarial in nature (Clayman & Heritage, 2002a).

Apart from that, the broadcast audiences or general public are always misguided by the information given by politicians in the news interview. The information might not be true to the public when evasion strategies are applied by politicians due to their lack of awareness of this phenomenon. Hence, it is important for both politicians and general public to know what makes the answers evasive to them as it will benefit them equally.

Other than that, there has been no studies been done in Malaysian context regarding to the evasion practices among politicians. Most of the evasion studies have been intensively conducted on the Britain politicians such as Margaret Thatcher, Pat Buchanan, and so forth. Therefore, it would be insightful to see the pattern of how Malaysian politician evade from answering the question in the news interview.

3.0 Literature review

Based on the study done by Clayman's (2001) on evasion, he showed the dynamics of resisting or evading the questions in broadcast news interview among the US politicians. According to Clayman (2001), most US politicians evade from answering the interview questions variably using different strategies. He concluded that politicians may resist or evade questions in light of the negative and positive dimension. Negative dimension deals with the degree that the politicians do not answer or decline to answer the question in the interview. On the other hand, positive dimension can be manifested to the three different degree of resistance. Firstly, the politician tends to move away from the topic of the question requirement. Secondly, the politician may perform a different task than the question called for even though the response given is still within the parameter of the topic itself. Lastly, the politician may resist the question to the degree that he slightly changes the terms of the question so that it may appear that he answered the question. Other than that, Clayman (2001) also shows the various kinds of strategies politicians use when they evade. For example, the strategies include token request for permission, minimizing the divergence, and justifying shifts. These three strategies are mainly used when politicians attempt to evade the questions overtly. The other strategies include subversive word repeats, anaphoric pronouns, and operating on the question. These are the strategies used when they practise evasion overtly in answering the questions. In reference to this study, our study adapted the framework of evasion developed by Clayman (2001).

In a similar study done by Rasiah (2007), she aimed to see whether evasion occurs in Australian's Question Time or not. Using an adapted framework from Clayman (2001), she revised it by using different terms for both negative and positive dimension of resistance. She addressed the negative dimension as a full evasion. Meanwhile for positive dimension, she divided the different degrees mentioned above into substantial evasion, medium evasion, and subtle evasion. Her findings showed that evasion also occurs in the parliamentary discourse where the question-answer session is conducted between government politicians and opposition members in parliament. Moreover, she found another two covert evasion strategies used by politicians in that context which are the use of 'similar words' and 'vague, general terms'.

In a similar study by Mehdipour and Nabifar (2011), they investigated the evasion techniques in 20 samples of American political interviews. Their findings show that politicians tend to evade from answering the question by using "topic shift" in a positive dimension of resistance and "incomplete answers or providing short answers" in a negative dimension of resistance proposed by Clayman (2001). Notwithstanding the results obtained, the researchers (Mehdipour & Nabifar, 2011) did not explore the ways politicians evade and the strategies used extremely on the spoken data. Instead, they merely presented the result descriptively in tables. Moreover, as far as the dimension of resistance is concerned, Mehdipour and Nabifar (2011) alternatively used the term of the strong and weak version for explaining the ways politicians resist the questions. Thus, it leaves a door of an obscure understanding for readers to understand probably the level of evasion.

4.0 Research method

The data of the political news interview were collected from the online YouTube videos. The data were comprised of political news interviews with both local and international politicians. There were two news interviews for each local and international politician. The local politician chosen was Dato Sri Najib Abdul Razak, while for the international politician, President Barrack Obama from the United States (US) was chosen. Dato Sri Najib Abdul Razak was primarily chosen because he is the Prime Minister of Malaysia which has top priority in the country's government. Moreover, the research in evasion practices has not yet been done in context of Malaysian politicians. Similarly, President Barrack Obama was chosen for the top position he holds as the president of United States, thus, may probably bring a meaningful finding to this study in comparison. Besides that, this choice was also based on the use of English language in the news interviews which is very crucial for analysing the English data.

The duration for each of the selected videos was not more than one hour. The local interview videos lasted for 43 minutes. As for the international interview videos, the total time was 67 minutes. Hence, the total hours of the interview data for this study was about 110 minutes approximately. The interview videos with the local and international politicians were both from Al-Jazeera and CNN channels respectively. The videos were selected based on the conflicts and issues they discussing upon and also the availability of the video on line as well.

The topics discussed in news interviews with both the politicians were vary due to their different national and international issues they were dealing with. For example, in the news

interview with Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak, the topics discussed included policies of manifestoes, criticism about his own UMNO party, religious issue, racism, and oppositions' threats to UMNO party. Unlikely, in news interview with President Barrack Obama, the journalist discussed both the national and international issues with him. For example, the issues of National Security Agency (NSA), Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), United States Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (FISA), immigration policy and politics in general. As a whole, the issues raised in both interviews reflect the importance of their roles and responsibilities as a president, thus make the interview meaningful for the public to get the current info.

In regard of this research, only one-on-one news interviews were chosen as its setting provides more room for evasions to occur (Clayman, 2001). The data of news interview were chosen in a range of 2005 – 2013 because it is argued that news journalism had become more adversarial and attempts to attack the politician's actions since year 2000.

The research procedure for this research involves six steps including preliminary study, downloading the video, transcribing the video, analysing the transcripts, and analysis and findings. The research began the actual research with a small pilot study. Pilot study was done to analyse evasive answers, its practices and strategies in one interview with local politician. Then, the researcher selected the interview videos and downloaded them into a portable format to keep the data tangible for references. The interview videos were then transcribed using a conversation analysis proposed by Atkinson and Heritage (1984). The researcher then started doing the data analysis and findings based on the transcribed video transcripts. The Clayman's (2001) framework of evasion was used to analyse the practice of evasion and its strategies. These steps of the research procedure were shown below in Figure 4.1.

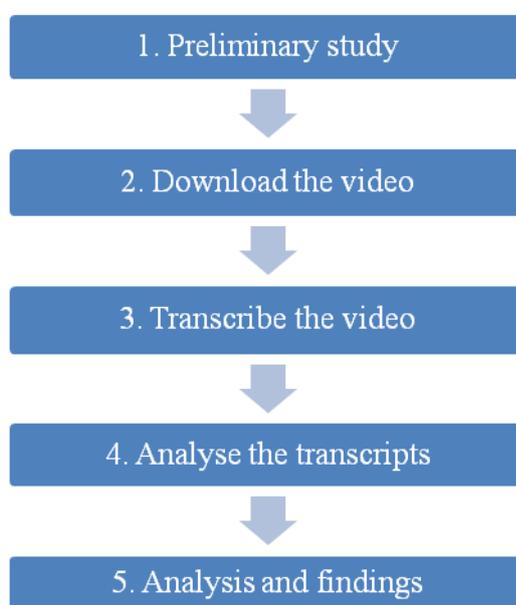


Figure 4.1: Research procedure flow chart

In our study, similar to other studies on evasion, we will use conversation analysis method as our approach. Conversation analysis is deemed relevant for analysing an institutional talk

such as news interview (Heritage, 1998) as it focuses more on how the participants interact with each other in conversation so that shared and specific understanding between them are socially constructed in that particular domain.

5.0 Discussion and analysis

The findings showed that both local and international politicians – Prime Minister Najib Razak and President Barack Obama – practised evasion in the selected news interviews. Based on the analysis of the selected data, it is revealed that President Barack Obama evaded from answering the questions at all levels including substantial, medium-level, subtle and full evasion. On the other hand, Prime Minister Najib Razak only applied substantial and medium-level evasions. However, both the politicians deployed various strategies when they evaded the questions from interviewer either in a covert or overt manner. The findings are presented in the Table 5.1 below.

Table 5.1: Overall findings of the study

	Local politician (Prime Minister Najib Razak)			International politician (President Barack Obama)			
Excerpt	Levels of evasion	Evasion strategies	Type of evasion practice	Excerpt	Levels of evasion	Evasion strategies	Type of evasion practice
L1E1	Substantial	Anaphoric pronoun	covert	I1E1	Substantial	Justifying shift	overt
L1E2	Substantial	Operating on the question	covert	I1E2	Substantial	Minimizing the divergence	overt
L1E3	Medium-level	Justifying shift	overt	I1E3	Medium-level	Token request for permission and justifying shift	overt
L1E4	Medium-level	Justifying shift	overt	I1E4	Full evasion	Willful choice “token”	overt
L2E1	Medium-level	Subversive word repeat	covert	I1E5	Medium-level	Anaphoric pronoun	covert
L2E2	Medium-level	Operating on the question	covert	I1E1	Subtle evasion	Operating on the question	covert
L2E3	Medium-level	Operating on the question	covert	I2E2	Substantial	Minimizing the divergence	overt
L2E4	Medium-level	Operating on the question and	covert	I2E3	Full evasion	Token request for permission	overt

		subversive word repeat					
				I2E4	Medium- level	Justifying shift	overt

Although the research on the evasion in US context has been done since a decade ago, however it is still scarce in a local context. Based on the table above, we can say that President Barack Obama more frequently evaded the questions in news interview in an overt manner compared to Prime Minister Najib Razak. In other words, the international politician is more upright in an attempt to evade the questions from the interviewer. He made his evasive actions open to both the interviewer and publics. This type of evasion practice is seen with the use of justifying shift, minimizing the divergence, justifying shift, token request for permission, and a willful choice “token” (eg. ‘I will not...’) strategies. On the other hand, the local politician seemed more comfortable to evade the questions from the interviewer in a covert nature. In other words, he chose to keep his evasive action hidden from both the interviewer and publics.

These findings are in line with Clayman’s (2001), Rasiah’s (2007), and Nabifar and Mehdipour’s (2011) studies of evasion. Our study managed to explain more on how the politicians evade the question, thus expanding Nabifar and Mehdipour’s (2011) study previously as they only presented the descriptive findings of evasion in their empirical research. Even though our research is done in US context, but it is still meaningful to see the differences of evasion practice between the local politician in Malaysia in reference to Clayman’s (2001) study. In another context, Rasiah (2007) also illustrated the practice of evasion in a parliamentary discourse and thus showed similar findings to this research.

6.0 Conclusions

The illustrations of examples on evasion practices among both local and international politicians are probably motivated by few factors. Evasion does occur due to the adversarial nature of questioning practised by the interviewer himself. When the interviewer posed an adversarial or a hostile question to the interviewee, it will probably cause face-threatening to him. As a result, the interviewer may be in dilemma to answer the question when he knows that by answering it, he will lose his face. Instead of it, he may lack credibility and trust from publics if he chooses to refuse answering it. The root of the evasive action is likely linked to the adversarial questioning in the news interview itself. Therefore, this issue can be one of the reasons why politicians evade in news interview.

As discussed above, the US politician is more overt in evading the questions compared to the Malaysian politician who is more covert in practice. This may be due to the cultural factor. US and Malaysia both are practising different cultures; US practise low-context culture while Malaysia practise high-context culture. This cultural difference can explain that the Malaysian politician is more polite than US politician. Therefore, politicians evade due to cultural difference they have their own societies.

Apart from that, evasion may also occur as a result of different political system and what both politicians up to in their government respectively. For example, the US politician has welcomed openness in his own government where internal decisions can be shared with the publics. In fact, he has upheld the freedom of speech among the society and thus, entertaining any interviews in media to share opinions and ideas with US citizens. Unlikely, the Malaysian politician has set a restriction on the media as the contents appeared in media are fully controlled by the government.

In order to analyse the information presented accurately especially through the media, ones should know how these evasion practices may manipulate the truth of the information delivered. We, as society, should be aware of this evasion practice as misunderstanding of information may lead to misconception, thus it may be prone to making a wrong decision. For example, the politicians will use their tactics to attract the voters especially during the election campaign. Despite it gives benefits to the politicians, publics may know how to make judgment and filter the pledges made when they know how evasion is applied and the strategies used. After all, this knowledge can be a great tool for both the politician and public to enhance the greatness and quality of communication so that no one can be misled or misguided.

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