

# The Politics of Evasion: A Sociopragmatic Analysis

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## تحليل التداولية الاجتماعية لسياسة التملص

الباحثة

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**Abstract:-**

This paper examines the issue of using evasion in political discourse from a sociopragmatic perspective. Politicians tend to use deceptive tools to save the face of their countries and to avoid raising misunderstandings that would result in conflicts and wars between two or more countries. Therefore, this study aims to define the term evasion from a sociopragmatic perspective to investigate the conditions that help in achieving evasion. The analysis of this study is based on an eclectic model, in which the qualitative part is mainly concerned with the reflections of the two samples out of the 352 questions of American and British political interviews and remarks on the Russian-Ukrainian War, while the quantitative part has described the data as a whole. Therefore, it was concluded that those politicians tend to use "Rhetorical Mode" and "Make a Political Point" mostly in their replies to evade certain questions rather than ignoring or refusing to provide an answer overtly.

**Keywords:** Evasion, Sociopragmatics, Russian-Ukrainian war, Political Discourse, Evasion Strategies.

**المخلص:-**

تتحرى هذه الدراسة المشاكل الناتجة عن استخدام التملص في الحوارات السياسية من مبدأ التداولية الاجتماعية وعليه فإن السياسيون يميلون إلى استخدام أدوات الخداع ليحفظوا صورة "كرامة" بلدانهم أو تجنب سوء التفاهم الذي قد يتسبب في صراعات وحروب بين البلدان. لذا فإن هذه الدراسة تهدف إلى توضيح مبدأ التملص في التداولية الاجتماعية من خلال التحري عن الشروط التي تساهم في حدوث التملص حيث أن تحليل هذه الدراسة مبني على مودل مختلط، الجزء النوعي يختص بتحليل ردة الفعل لسياسي أمريكا وبريطانيا تجاه الحرب الروسية-الأوكرانية لنموذجين من أصل ٣٥٢ نموذج لمقابلات و مؤتمرات سياسية بينما الجزء الكمي فإنه يهتم بكافة المعطيات. لذا فقد استنتج بأن السياسيون يميلون إلى استخدام أسلوب (Rhetorical Mode) و (Make a Political Point) عامة أثناء الإجابة عن أسئلة معينة بعيداً عن الإجابة بالرغرض أو تجاهل السؤال كوسيلة للتملص بشكل علني.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التملص، التداولية الاجتماعية، الحرب الروسية - الأوكرانية، الحوارات السياسية، أساليب التملص.

## 1. Introduction:

Newman (1913: 449-450, cited in Griffiths, 2010: 206) differentiates between the term evasion as “morally dangerous, especially to the clever”, which means that it will attract the clever because of its easiness (i.e., fairly stating some truth while realizing that the hearer will likely draw an illogical or untrue conclusion), and the term equivocation as a “kind of verbal misleading” (i.e., a play on words made while asserting, which is morally impermissible), which are identical in intention and effect. Though he may allow equivocation with remorse and reservation, he completely rejects evasion. Following Bavelas et al. (1990) and Turner et al. (1975) perspective, Dou and Zhang (2007: 3) conclude that evasion is the intended use of unclear messages, that is, vague, ambiguous, or non-straightforward communication, frequently occurring in response to a difficult topic in many disciplines like broadcasting, language, and diplomatic science.

Harris (1991: 78-9) states that a response is evasive if it either does not answer the question directly, or it challenges the question. There is a widespread perception that politicians are frequently evasive under questioning from members of the news media, and this perception is not without merit (Clayman, 2001:403). Therefore, evasion “involves circumvention or avoiding answering directly or avoiding facing up a difficult or tricky communicative or discourse issues” (Agyekum, 2008: 82). According to Galasinski (2000) evasion means a tool for politicians to make use of to avoid giving direct information. Politicians use evasion when the only choice that they have is to respond verbally to the topics that cause face-threatening acts (Obeng, 1997:54).

Dillon (1990: 54) sees evasion as non-answer responses, those that relate coherently to the act of questioning yet not to the question sentence. According to him, an evasive message is an interactional move, rather than a sentence. Therefore, studying evasion in political discourse from a sociopragmatic perspective could explain the effects that social and cultural environments have on political language. Taking into consideration, how by evading a question there are certain aspects are violated to result in ambiguous utterances, unfinished sentences, and misunderstanding of various

discourses from the point of view of people and some cases interviewers, or opposite nations. Regarding that, sociopragmatics plays an important role to remove the ambiguity of such utterances and trying to reach the intended meaning behind the use of evasion by politicians in certain circumstances.

This study seeks to provide an outlined definition of the term evasion, explain the effects of sociopragmatics on the intended meaning, and which strategies are mainly used in the political discourse and why. Then, it will try to prove the drawn hypotheses such as evasion is a tool for politicians to avoid answering questions concerning the confidentiality of a country, avoid showing personal affairs in the public, avoid conflicts, and preserve their face from threats. This paper is structured into two sections. First, the theoretical framework of the analysis of the relationship between evasion and sociopragmatics is outlined. Second, the analysis of the political discourse of the 2 samples of American and British politicians' reflections on the Russian-Ukrainian war is collected and then analyzed into four steps method: the Flouting of the Cooperative Principles of Grice, Face Theory of Brown and Levinson, Politeness Theory of Brown and Levinson and the model of evasion strategies. Then, the quantitative 'statistical' analysis was drawn.

## 2. Sociopragmatics:

Leech (1983:10-11) defines sociopragmatics as a term that belongs to the more specific 'local' conditions on language use that affects the way the Cooperative Principle and the Politeness Principle operate in different cultures or communities, and even in different social situations, and among different people classes, and so on. Therefore, sociopragmatics is related to the sociological interface of pragmatics, in which observations of sociopragmatics consider its studies to be culture-specific rather than language-specific.

Leech (1983:80) adds that one of the main purposes of sociopragmatics is to find out how different societies operate maxims in different ways, for instance by prioritizing politeness over cooperation in certain situations, or by highlighting the use of one maxim other than another. Crystal (2008:441) defines sociopragmatics as a term that is related to pragmatic studies to

identify the conditions that affect language use which are social ones. Culpeper (2021: 27) defines sociopragmatics as a term that is more related to social pragmatics notion rather than to the linguistics side, which is more focused on the construction and understanding of the meaning that arises from interactions between language (or other semiotic resources) and the social-cultural phenomena. Moreover, sociopragmatics is “centrally concerned with situated interaction, especially local, meso-level contexts such as frames, activity types, and genres.” Therefore, it frequently regards norms emerging in such contexts, and how they lead to evaluations of (in) appropriateness.

All in all, the operational definition of this study considers sociopragmatics as an intersection of sociolinguistics and pragmatics, which combines the norms of society with the behavioural aspects of pragmatics. For instance, in terms of politeness, the social judgements of politeness depend not only on words used and their meanings but also on the context in which they are used and who uses them.

### **2.1. Evasion as a Sociopragmatic Phenomenon:**

Obeng (1997:50-51) argues that nearly all human communication encounters politeness and cooperation principles. Thus, in Grice’s (1975) theory of Cooperative Principles, he states that there is a set of assumptions by interactants that guide the conduct of conversation. These assumptions arise from basic rational considerations and help in guiding the effective as well as the efficient use of language in discourse to further cooperative ends. Despite that, interactants are in no way slaves to these conversational maxims, and they “make use” of the basic principles according to their own contextual and individual needs. For example, politicians may opt-out [unwillingness to participate], violate [deceives other participants] or flout [being uncooperative] some of these maxims in their political discourse. Flouting a maxim refers to not following a maxim overtly to exploit it for such communicative purposes as face-work, seeking to further one’s political career, protecting his/her political party, government or country, and settling ‘delicate’ personal scores. These floutings generate many indirectness strategies such as evasion, metaphor, circumlocution, innuendo, proverb and so on. These strategies help the politicians to communicate the difficulty and also face-saving.

According to Agyekum (2008:82) interactants refrain from directness to avoid crisis, conflicts and being offensive, which resulted in the use of verbal indirection that is consistent with face and politeness. Therefore, some of the strategies that are used to achieve indirectness are evasion, circumlocution, innuendo and metaphor. Language evasiveness provides meanings only from a pragmatic perspective, especially in language use and understanding (Zhang, 2021:3). Therefore, the less information the answer provides, the higher degree of evasion is used. According to He (2019:190-191), the evasive answer utilized by politicians in an interview is a strategy to create harmonious and successful communication, since the interaction among people can be seen as social interaction to produce meaning. For instance, in the case of keeping information, the basic function of questioning behaviour is to seek information, while politicians tend to hold that information according to their preferences and “keep the secret” to avoid conflicts.

## 2.2. Evasion in Political Discourse:

According to Galston and Kamarck (1989: 2) in the politics of evasion, the central purpose is the avoidance of meaningful change, which reflects the convictions of groups who believed that it is somehow immoral for a political party to pay attention to public opinion. Thus, it reflects the interests of those who would rather be the majority in a minority party than risk being the minority in a majority party. Politicians tend to communicate in vague and oblique ways to protect and further their careers and to gain both political and interactional advantages over their political opponents (Obeng, 1997:49). Therefore, this behaviour of politicians is goal-oriented and instrumental in nature.

Obeng (1997:58) argues that political discourse is a matter of rivalry, alliances, debates and consents, praises and offences, and most of all criticism and unmitigated support. Therefore, politicians tend to communicate in an obscure, semantically dense, vague, oblique and rather ‘cautious’ manner sometimes. In other words, they tend to communicate indirectly. Vukovic (2013:21) argues that depending on Clayman’s (2003) strategies of evasion - i.e., positive/negative dimension of resistance – in political interviews, there are several levels on which evading a question can be

analyzed depending on the context and the style of questions and the way the interviewers behave. She (ibid) claims that the degree of evasion subjects to specific cultural patterns.

Therefore, evasion means an art of resistance and manipulation, either to avoid losing face in front of others or being deceptive to mask their real intentions. Therefore, the evasive person can be either overt or covert while answering a question according to the more preferable way to him/her.

### 2.3. Function of Evasion in Political Discourse:

Harris (1991:93) states that evasiveness tends to emerge in response to questions that seek to expose contradictions in a position and draw attention to intra-party conflicts or the deficiencies of unpopular policies. Moreover, a response is evasive if it either does not answer the question directly or challenges the question. Obeng (1997:52) states that politicians operate all the affordable verbal strategies to protect and maintain their political interests and face from being marred or defiled. Politicians present their faces not only to the interviewer(s) and their nation but to the whole world at large. Evasion is thought to be a strategy to avoid a communicative dilemma and thus, most of the time is evaluated negatively i.e., made responsible for widespread alienation with politics, for cynical resignation, even leading to low turn-out at elections as a consequence (Lauerbach, 2001:198).

Using language as a way of concealing reality such as hidden implications, use of standard expressions, statements, and veiled expressions of caution, to disguise some of their ideological differences, minimize negative reactions by the press and public, prioritize and lessen the crisis element of a certain event, deflect moral and political blame, and assert control over laymen and journalists, is what constitutes the importance of evasion (Bhatia, 2006). Politicians try to avoid certain issues or avoid giving direct answers when they are in conflictual situations, especially when the journalist is being aggressive, which leads them to be more evasive in their answers (Vukovic, 2013:16-22). Therefore, Vukovic (2013) believes that context is the main trigger of evasion in political interviews, but he does not support the assumption that evasion is one of the stables features of a politician's personality.

**2.4. Model of Analysis:**

**2.4.1. Evasion Strategies:**

Twelve strategies are employed by Bull and Mayer (1993) “The Functional Approach”; Galasinski (2000) “The Semantic-Structural Approach; Clayman (2003) Strategies; and Partington (2003) evasion strategies. These strategies are as follows:

Table 1: Evasion Strategies	
1	Challenging the Question, Questioner, Source
2	Attacks the Question
3	Declines to Answer
4	Make a Political Point
5	Apologizes
6	Covert Evasion
7	Covert Practices
8	Overt Practices
9	Refusal to Answer
10	Humour
11	Rhetorical Mode
12	Claiming Incompetence

**2.4.2. Grice’s (1975) Cooperative Maxims:**

Thomas (1995:64) states that there are two ways people tend to use during conversations, either to be cooperative by observing those four maxims or to be uncooperative by being non-observing of those four maxims. The non-observance of the maxims can be represented according to Grice (1975:49) in the following ways:

Table 2: Flouting of CPs of Grice (1975)	
1	Violating a Maxim
2	Opting-out a Maxim
3	Infringing a Maxim
4	Suspending a Maxim

**2.4.3. Brown and Levinson’s (1987) Face Theory:**

The meaning of ‘face’ has extended from physical objects to signify the whole human being, including physical and non-physical aspects (Sifianou&Tzanne, 2021:250). Face is a concept that is intuitively meaningful to people, but one that is difficult to define precisely, in which it is concerned with people’s sense of worth,



dignity, and identity (Spencer-Oatey, 2000:12). Moreover, it is associated with issues such as respect, honour, status, reputation and competence.

	Table 3: Brown & Levinson's Face Theory
1	Positive Face
2	Negative Face
3	FTAs
4	FSAs

#### 2.4.4. Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory:

Politeness, like formal diplomatic protocol, presupposes the potential for aggression as it seeks to disarm it and makes possible communication between potentially aggressive parties (Br&Lev,1987:1). They (ibid:5) assume that Grice's Cooperative Principles are of quite a different status from that of Politeness Principles. The Cooperative Principle defines an 'unmarked' or socially neutral presumptive framework for communication, in which the assumption is no deviation from rational efficiency without a reason. While Politeness Principle is just such a principled reason for the deviation. Therefore, politeness has to be communicated, and the absence of communicated politeness may be taken as an absence of a polite attitude. In other words, Politeness is a major source of deviation from such rational efficiency and is communicated precisely by that deviation (Br&Lev, 1987:95).

Brown and Levinson (1987:94-266) provide four strategies to the Politeness theory, these strategies are as follows:

	Table 4: Brown & Levinson's Politeness strategies
1	Bald-on Record
2	Positive Politeness
3	Negative Politeness
4	Off-record (Indirect)

### 3. Data and Analysis:

The data of this paper are 352 questions from different English political discourses (Newspapers and Podcast) which fall into two sectors: the American Political Discourse and the British Political Discourse. Those data are taken from different official websites on the internet such as (BBC ONE and No Lie Podcast). This study tries to shed light on the recent issue of the Russian-Ukrainian war in

2022 and how it affects the chosen sectors, especially how the chosen politicians reflect on this issue.

The following are two samples from the data of the American Political Discourse of Pres. Joe Biden and the British Political Discourse of PM Boris Johnson:

**1) IR:** “[...] Looking overseas, obviously, we’re seeing now that Russia has invaded Ukraine in defiance of not only Ukraine sovereignty, but also warnings from the international community, and yet, at the same time, we have someone like Donald Trump who’s come out and praised Putin’s savvy and genius just in advance of him attacking Ukraine. And other Republicans have rallied to Putin’s side as well. What’s your message to Trump and others in light of Putin’s attacks?” (See Appendix, B<sup>US</sup>. 3)

**IE:** “Well, I think I put as much stock in Trump saying that Putin's a genius as I do when he called himself a stable genius.”

#### **a) Flouting of Grice’s (1975) Maxims:**

Pres. Biden flouted the CPs of Grice by violating the maxim of manner, by providing an ambiguous expression to hint at something to avoid raising unpleasant consequences. Therefore, he commented on Pres. Putin and Trump’s geniuses in a mockery way as in “birds of a feather flock together.”

#### **b) Brown and Levinson’s (1987) Face & Politeness Theories:**

Pres. Biden used FTAs by using ridicule expressions and indirect insults to which he expresses that he does not care about the mentioned faces. Thus, he could not make a direct insult to Pres. Putin’s face to save the US social face from being threatened. Therefore, he applied the Off-record strategy to give hints, use indirect contradictions, be ironic and use metaphors by using a vague expression which it carries more than one interpretation.

#### **c) Evasion Strategies:**

Pres. Biden employed the above strategies to achieve evasion. Therefore, he used Humour and Rhetorical mode to speak with vague language to arise a double-meaning message that indirectly attacked two figures. He could have used a direct answer but that would arise a social threat to the US.

**2) IR:** “A bloody conflict you say, but the message to the Ukrainians is that if he does invade, they will be on their own. President Zelensky has accused the West today of appeasement.” (See Appendix, A<sup>UK</sup>. 8)

**IE:** “I don’t think that that’s fair. I think that what we’re trying to do is offer every possible support to Ukraine and to make sure that we hit Russia with the hardest possible package of economic sanctions. That we continue to offer support, as we have to Ukraine and to Ukrainians, massive package of economic support that we’ve given, [...] So, I think in Putin’s imagination a lot of his anxiety is about – about NATO and what he sees as the encroachment of NATO since the end of the Cold War. And I think what he wants to see is NATO pushed back. He’s going to see the exact opposite [.....] He’s going to get more NATO.”

#### **a) Flouting of Grice’s (1975) Maxims:**

PM Johnson flouted the CPs of Grice by Opting-out the maxim of quality by withholding some information to avoid generating a false implicature or raising misunderstandings that would affect the UK’s face. moreover, he expressed his opinions on how Pres. Putin’s imagination is something he lacks adequacy to it. He also made a statement about something that is yet to happen.

#### **b) Brown and Levinson’s (1987) Face & Politeness Theories:**

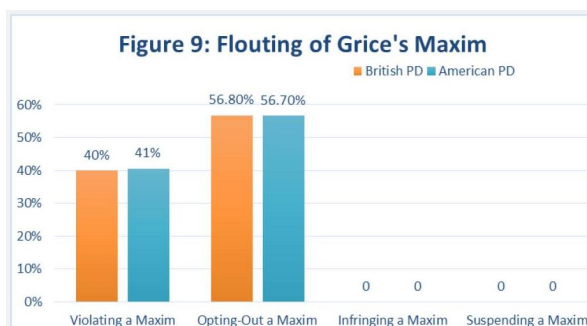
PM Johnson used FTAs to express his disapproval of what Pres. Zelensky has said and tried to predicate some future plans. Therefore, he applied Negative politeness to state directly that they are doing their best to support Ukraine and will continue offering their support to them, and they would not coerce Putin’s wishes to push NATO back to continue his invasion, but the UK and NATO will stand against him fully armed against whoever ignite a 3rd World War. He could have used a direct answer to express his disapproval of Pres. Zelensky’s statement, but that would arise some misunderstandings, that is why he preferred to use evasion to convey his points in a less threatening way.

#### **c) Evasion Strategies:**

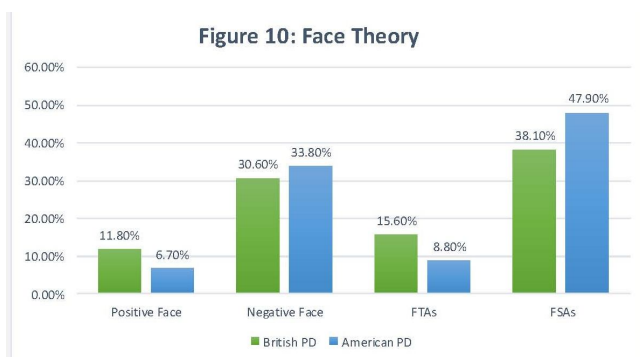
PM Johnson employed the above strategies to achieve evasion. Therefore, he used Make a political point to justify what Pres.

Zelensky said is not adequate since the UK and their allies are doing their best to support Ukraine, and then justifies the policy that they are following to which he used Rhetorical mode to respond by raising a safe topic, then he used Covert evasion to change the focus of attention towards NATO's support and how Putin wishes the NATO would step back. Finally, he made a self-justification to give reassurances to Ukraine and the World that NATO would not step back, which was considered an external attack on a political figure which is Putin and his plans.

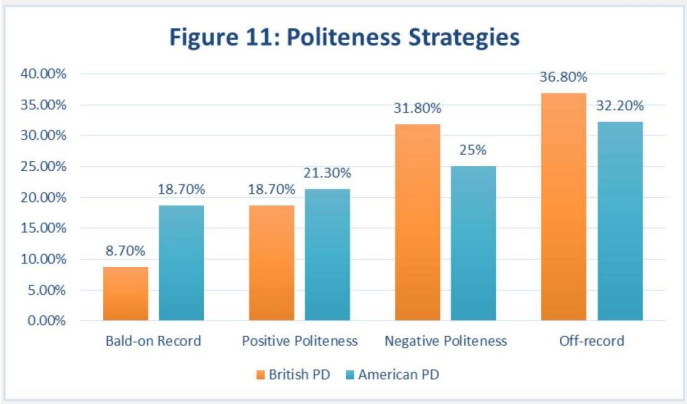
The following is the quantitative "statistical" analysis of the whole data, which shows the usage of each American and British politician to the sociopragmatic factors and how they affected the use of the evasion strategies:



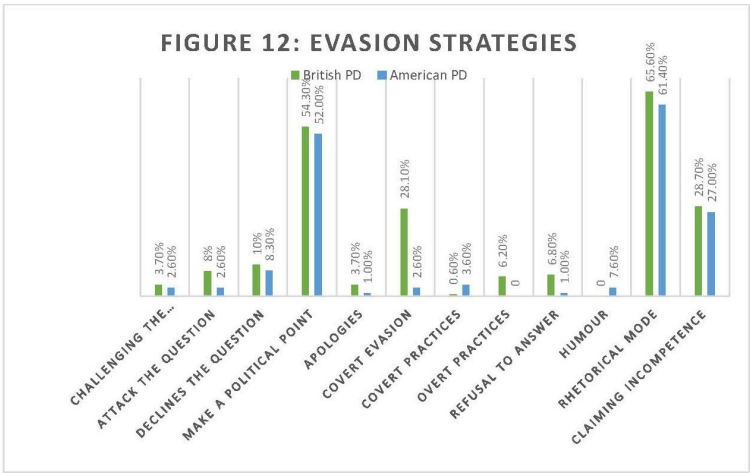
It was found that both US politicians and UK politicians tend to use Violating a Maxim and Opting-out a Maxim in the same way, while the other two methods were rarely used in both cases as shown in figure 9 above.



It was revealed that both US politicians and UK politicians tend to use the Face Theory in the same way to achieve evasion, as shown in figure 10 above. Moreover, they tend to preserve the social face of their government more than their Positive Face.



It was inferred both politicians of the US and the UK tend to use the Off-record strategy and the Negative Politeness strategy more than the other strategies. Moreover, they tend to speak indirectly by using the Off-record strategy rather than giving direct and clear answers to the interviewer’s questions.



It was found that both US and UK politicians tend to use Evasion Strategies according to the type of facts they want to perceive or state to the interviewer’s question. Moreover, they tend to use the

Rhetorical Mode strategy and Make a Political Point strategy more than the other strategies.

#### 4. Conclusions:

In terms of all the above results, it was found that to achieve Evasion, the politicians need to identify whether the question should or should not be answered. Then, if answered would it be a face-threatening to his social image or not. Next, it should be recognized whether to answer it with polite or impolite manners depending on the Face theory results. Finally, the final decision would be made on which evasive strategy should be acknowledged and used depending on the resulted type of situation the politicians reach after hearing the question.

This paper achieved the following results:

- 1) Evasion is defined as an art of resistance and manipulation, either to avoid losing face in front of others or being deceptive to mask their real intentions. Which can be either implicit (covert) or explicit (overt), which verifies the first hypothesis.
- 2) Sociopragmatics is defined as an intersection of sociolinguistics and pragmatics, which combines the norms of society with the behavioural aspects of pragmatics. Therefore, it works as a bridge to connect politeness, face, and cooperative principles with people's perspectives to each of them, which verifies the second hypothesis.

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