

Linguistic Evasion in Political Apologies A Pragmatic Approach

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التهرب اللغوي في الاعتذار السياسي : من منظور تداولي

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Abstract

The research paper is a thorough pragmatic discussion of linguistic evasion in political apologies and asserts that it is not a real contrition utterances in the highly stakes situation in the US presidential debates but it is a complex and strategic utterance performance aimed at maintaining the image in the society without accepting full responsibility. The research is based on the conceptual frameworks of Speech Act Theory by J.L. Austin, John Searle, Cooperative Principle by H.P. Grice, and Politeness Theory by Brown and Levinson. These theories assume that the analysis of talk fails to adhere to communicative principles according to the rules of politeness and graciousness and relies on a simulated form of apology established by the political leaders. The study is informed by three main questions: (1) what are the specific linguistic and pragmatic tools that are used to make such evasive apologies? (2) What are the ways these mechanisms are reflected in various political settings and rhetorical purposes? (3) What is the eventual communicative role of these non-apologies in the adversarial realm of a live argument? To provide answers to the above questions, the paper provides a granular, in-depth analysis of four critical situations of US presidential debates in the last 20 years. The 2004 flip-flop attack of George W. Bush on John Kerry, the 2012 binders full of women statement of Mitt Romney, the 2016 Access Hollywood tape response of Donald Trump, and the 2020 comment of Proud Boys. The analysis allows identifying some of the evasion strategies, such as preemptive assassination of character, minimization and justification, avoidance by leading a hollow performance, and avoiding making the apology speech act itself. Using the four-component model of a felicitous apology proposed by Scher (1997) and coding every utterance using Gricean flouts and the politeness strategies introduced by Brown and Levinson, the research shows that they generally adopt a similar approach to linguistic obfuscation. The results validate that this evasive maneuvering is not a failure of communication but is, in fact, a genius of a cynical pragmatic calculus, with far-reaching consequences, concerning the level of trust people would have with them and the truthfulness of democratic discourse. This study is useful to the areas of political linguistics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis in that it offers a solid methodological system that can be used to unravel the intricate relationships that exist between language, power, and accountability in the politics of today. **Keywords:** political apology, linguistic evasion, pragmatic analysis, Grice's Cooperative Principle, Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, speech act theory, presidential debates, accountability, strategic communication.

المستخلص

تقدّم هذه الورقة البحثية نقاشًا عمليًا معمقًا حول التهرب اللغوي في الاعتذارات السياسية، وتؤكد أنه ليس ندمًا حقيقيًا في المواقف الحرجة كالمناظرات الرئاسية الأمريكية، بل هو أداء كلامي معقد واستراتيجي يهدف إلى الحفاظ على الصورة العامة في المجتمع دون تحمل المسؤولية الكاملة. يستند البحث إلى الأطر المفاهيمية لنظرية أفعال الكلام لجون أوستن وجون سيرل، ومبدأ التعاون له. ب. غرايس، ونظرية التأديبية لبراون وليفينسون. تفترض هذه النظريات أن تحليل الكلام لا يلتزم بالمبادئ التواصلية وفقًا لقواعد الأدب والكياسة، ويعتمد على شكل مُصطنع من الاعتذار يضعه القادة السياسيون. وتستند الدراسة إلى ثلاثة أسئلة رئيسية: (1) ما هي الأدوات اللغوية والعملية المحددة المستخدمة لتقديم مثل هذه الاعتذارات

المراوغة؟ (٢) كيف تنعكس هذه الآليات في مختلف السياقات السياسية والأغراض البلاغية؟ (٣) ما هو الدور التواصلي النهائي لهذه الاعتذارات غير الصادقة في سياق المناظرة المباشرة؟ للإجابة على هذه الأسئلة، تقدم هذه الورقة تحليلاً دقيقاً ومتعمقاً لأربعة مواقف حاسمة في المناظرات الرئاسية الأمريكية خلال العشرين عاماً الماضية. وتشمل هذه المواقف: هجوم جورج دبليو بوش المتقلب على جون كيري عام ٢٠٠٤، وتصريح ميت رومني عام ٢٠١٢ بشأن الملفات المليئة بالنساء، ورد دونالد ترامب على تسجيل "أكسس هوليوود" عام ٢٠١٦، وتعليق جماعة "برود بوائز" عام ٢٠٢٠. ويتيح هذا التحليل تحديد بعض استراتيجيات التهرب، مثل الاغتيال الاستباقي للشخصية، والتقليل من شأن الموقف وتبريره، والتجنب من خلال أداء أجوف، وتجنب جعل خطاب الاعتذار نفسه حدثاً مؤثراً. باستخدام نموذج الاعتذار الموفق ذي المكونات الأربعة الذي اقترحه شير (١٩٩٧)، وتشغير كل عبارة باستخدام عبارات غرياس المضللة واستراتيجيات المجاملة التي قدمها براون وليفينسون، يُظهر البحث أنهم يتبنون عموماً نهجاً مشابهاً في التموه اللغوي. وتؤكد النتائج أن هذه المناورة المراوغة ليست فشلاً في التواصل، بل هي في الواقع براعة في حسابات براغماتية ساخرة، ذات عواقب وخيمة على مستوى ثقة الناس بهم ومصداقية الخطاب الديمقراطي. تُعد هذه الدراسة مفيدة لمجالات اللسانيات السياسية والبراغماتية وتحليل الخطاب، إذ تُقدم نظاماً منهجياً متيناً يُمكن استخدامه لكشف العلاقات المعقدة القائمة بين اللغة والسلطة والمساءلة في السياسة المعاصرة. الكلمات المفتاحية: الاعتذار السياسي، التهرب اللغوي، التحليل البراغماتي، مبدأ غرياس التعاوني، نظرية براون وليفينسون في الأدب، نظرية أفعال الكلام، المناظرات الرئاسية، تحليل الخطاب، المساءلة، التواصل الاستراتيجي.

I. Introduction

Language in the narrowly scheduled field of modern politics and politics can no longer be useful as a medium of exchange of information but it has become the most important tool of power, persuasion, and calculated ambiguity. The speech act of political apology, which is supposed to express remorse and take responsibility, has been re-assembled into a refined system of imagero-liability management. Its truth is a recurrent issue of controversy, as the discussion is held to tread the dangerous path of moral duty and utilitarian survival.

This paper performs an analytical dissection of the phenomenon, using two analytical prisms: Gricean pragmatics and the politeness theory by Brown and Levinson. It argues that the nature of the political apologies through the high stakes actions of presidential debates are in fact not genuine expressions of contrition. Instead, they are elaborate, political maneuvers that consciously violate conversational maxims and play with face-making processes in order to construct an illusionary feeling of responsibility and at the same time fail to take any substantive corrective measures. To support this assertion, this study has three main questions. To begin with, which particular linguistic and pragmatic processes do political figures use to create apologies that can, at once, perform social ritual of regret and at the same time, counteract its responsibility-creating power? Second, in what ways do these processes vary among various political situations and rhetorical goals, between deflection and minimization and downright denial? Third, what is the final communicative purpose of these evasive apologies in the adversarial and media saturated setting of live presidential debate? This paper argues towards its thesis that such non-apologies are not communication failures but rather, on the contrary, brilliant achievements of a cynical pragmatic calculus. They are crafted in such a way that they meet the need of the audience to have a performative sign of humility without concession or compromise on any of the grounds that might be utilized against the speaker on the stage of the court of opinion. As an attempt to create a solid and comparative analysis, the present study will focus on four separate instances of the U.S. presidential debates. Namely the 2004 accusation of George W. Bush to John Kerry of flip-flop, the 2012 remarks by Mitt Romney about binders full of women, the reaction of Donald Trump in 2016 to the leaked tape by the Access Hollywood, and his 2020 comment about the Proud Boys. Such an increased body of work gives a chance to study the evasion in a whole array of situations, including defensive counter-accusations and clumsy excuses to outright rejection of apologizing.

II. Theoretical Framework

In order to achieve a broad perception of linguistic evasion in political apologies, it is mandatory that a multilayered theoretical framework is adopted that brings together speech-act theory, conversational pragmatics and sociolinguistic models of politeness.

A. Speech Act Theory and the Deconstruction of the Apology

The pioneering works of J.L. Austin (1962) proved that utterances are not descriptive in nature but performative - they do things. Austin differentiated between the locutionary act (the utterance of a proposition with a certain sense and reference), the illocutionary act (the intention or force behind the utterance, e.g. giving a warning or a promise), and the perlocutionary act (the psychological effect caused in the interlocutor) (Austin, 1962). A

typical example of a complicated illocutionary act is an apology. This analytic framework was later refined by John Searle (1969) who identified speech acts as directives, commissives, and expresses, among others. In this taxonomy an apology is both commissive, a promise by the speaker that he will be in a future condition of regret, and expressive, a mental condition. To be felicitous or successful, an apology has to meet some conventional conditions. Scher and Darwall (1997) give an elaborate taxonomy of the elements that make up a sincere and effective apology speech act set, including:

- (1) a clear statement of remorse or regretting (e.g., I am sorry);
- (2) explicit acknowledgment of responsibility of the offense (e.g., It was my fault);
- (3) explicit offer of repairing or restitution (e.g. How can I make this right?); and
- (4) explicit pledging of not repeating the same (e.g. This will never happen again). An apology that is authentic commonly incorporates a number of these aspects merged in a story of responsibility.

Conversely, the political apology tends to omit these elements or distort them, thus, producing a mere flim that resembles an apology, but does not possess the moral content of an apology. Political apologies, as Harris, Grainger, and Mullany (2006) suggest, are a specific form of discourse, as they are open and often a consequence of conflict, which makes them highly susceptible to manipulation in the form of strategy accordingly.

B. Grice's Cooperative Principle and the Art of Flouting

The Cooperative Principle, which asserts that rational communication is governed through some form of an unspoken agreement between interlocutors, was formulated by H.P. Grice (1975). This is the principle that is implemented by four maximial constraints, which include **Quality** (not to say what one thinks is false or to which he/she has no evidence), **Quantity** (saying as much as one needs to say and no more), **Relation** (being relevant) and **Manner** (not obscure, ambiguous, and messy) (Grice, 1975). One of the most significant things that Grice introduced was that speakers do not always comply with these maxims; they can also deliberately break them. A flout of the kind is a deliberate and flauntous norm violation of a maxim that is supposed to be picked up by the hearer creating a conversational implicature, an implied meaning that exists between the literal text. In the political context, the intentional violation of a maxim does not imply incompetence but is one of the key evasive strategies. By issuing an apology that is ambiguous and full of information, even though it is a Quantity violation (Mistakes were made). A politician can evade the process of defining his or her own wrongdoing. Also the politician can violate the principle of Relation by refocusing on the non-compliant actions of a competitor thus putting the topic in a different perspective altogether. The resulting implicature is often presented in the form of plausible deniability: the speaker has presented enough content to seem cooperative and negative enough content to seem not accountable. Such a tactical use of implicature is what Chovanec (2020) terms metalingual accountability, or in other words, when politicians use language to regulate their perceived accountability instead of providing genuine explanations of their actions.

C. Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory and the Management of Face

Building on the works of Grice, Brown and Levinson (1987) develop a Politeness Theory that explains the social reasons behind such strategic options. They argue that each person has a face, a social image of self which is maintained as a result of communication. This face has two dimensions, such as **positive face**, which refers to the need to be liked, admired and approved of, and **negative face**, which refers to the need to be autonomous, free of imposition. Many speech acts, such as apologies, are inherently Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) since admitting something that was not successful is a threat to the positive face of the speaker. In an attempt to mitigate this threat, speakers use redressive actions, which could be positive, strengthening the positive face of the hearer, or negative, minimizing the demand on the negative face of the hearer. These tactics are usually reversed in the political arena. The main aim does not aim at pacifying the interlocutor but to preserve the face of the speaker who is in front of a mass audience. This inversion allows the employment of the so-called off-record strategies, i.e. where the speaker hints at an apology without stating it, or even of so-called bald on-record FTAs, where the speaker insists on not doing the expected action by stating it, thus exerting power and control over the narrative. As such, the political apology is a very delicate endeavor of face management, which balances the need to seem humble against the need to be strong and remain invulnerable. This is one of the dynamics that enabled Obeng (1997) to coin the concept of the obliqueness of political communication, an aspect that is often realized via evasion and circumlocution

III. Methodology

The qualitative, discourse-analytic research methodology used in this study is based on linguistic pragmatics. The corpus of data is the verbatim transcripts of four presidential debates of the United States where an instance where a candidate is likely to apologize or where a candidate is involved in a confrontation that involves an implicit or explicit request to be accountable is found. The selected moments are: The 2004 controversy, in which President George 2. W. Bush charges Senator John 3. Kerry with being a flip-flopper over the Iraq War. The 2012 controversy, when Governor Mitt Romney in his defense of the record of hiring women, mentions that he received binders full of women. Evidence of this is the 2016 debate in which, candidate Donald responds to the Access Hollywood tape controversy. In the 2020 debate, President Trump is being questioned to denounce white supremacist groups and he answers the question by mentioning the Proud Boys. In both cases, a multi-stage analysis was performed on the corresponding excerpt. To start with, the utterance was evaluated in terms of its superficial propositional content and its illocutionary force. Second, it was compared to the four Gricean maxims to determine willful violations and the subsequent implicatures. Third, the utterance was considered through the prism of the theory that Brown and Levinson applied to define face-work that was being done. Lastly, the apology (or non-apology) was checked against the four-component model of Scher in order to evaluate the level of felicity. This triple-faceted methodology makes it possible to divide the linguistic structure of evasion in a granular manner.

IV. Analysis and Discussion

Case Study 1:

The 2004 Debate. The Flip-Flop Accusation of Preemptive evasion.

During the 2004 presidential campaign, the major ploy adopted by President Bush against the candidate, John Kerry was to portray the opponent as an unsteady and unreliable candidate especially by branding him a flip-flopper. In the first debate, Bush claimed that his opponent claimed that he would make a great Commander in Chief, and he has shown that he is a great second-guesser... He has been a wavering Iraq personage. Although this is not an apology on the part of Bush, it serves as a strong kind of preemptive evasion. The whole accountability frame is moved by Bush when he frames Kerry as the slippery and untrustworthy individual. In declining to address the substantive substance of the policy criticisms made by Kerry and instead concentrating on character attacks, he breaks the principle of Relation and commits a traditional ad hominem fallacy. Pragmatically this move creates an implicature that anything later Kerry may say in his defense will merely be another flip-flop and thus, would be inherently unreliable. Bush, as far as face-work is concerned, is performing an open- records FTA on the positive face of Kerry, struggling to destroy the latter credibility before it can be determined (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This is an instance of how evasion does not have to be only through one speaker but can also be an attack on the ability of another to be seen as a trusted apologist. The strategy is consistent with Galston and Kamarck (1989) concept of the politics of evasion, in which the core goal is to prevent the discussion of his or her own performance through the focus on the perceived weaknesses of the other candidate to the office.

Case Study 2:

Debate 2012. Minimization and the Binder Full of Women.

At the 2012 town-hall debate, a question about the pay equity of women made Mitt Romney describe the actions he took as Massachusetts governor in finding qualified women to hold the position of cabinet member. His comment in saying that he had visited several women groups, and told them, Can you find us folks, and they brought us all these binders of women, was widely construed as patronizing and insensitive. The next efforts of Romney to make clarifications were not apologies but just an explanation that downplayed the offense. By using a clumsy and dehumanizing metaphor of binders full of Women, he broke the maxim of Manner by suggesting an idea of women as a replaceable commodity that could be packed in filing cabinets. His self-defense that focused on his positive intentions failed to adhere to the quality maxim by ignoring the real effect of the words. He did not even show his regrets about the offense committed and did not accept any responsibility of the ill choice of words. Rather, his face-work was all aimed at maintaining his own positive face as a well-intended problem-solver, and at completely disregarding the negative aspect of the women in his audience whose dignity had been implicitly insulted. This situation is an example of evasion that minimizes and does not acknowledge the FTA of his own speech that is a general strategy of what Anchimbe (2024) describes as linguistic avoidance as a political face-saving strategy.

Case Study 3:

The 2016 Debate. Wow, Really? Apology-lite

The 2016 debate example may be the best example of an apology void of substance. Regarding the Access Hollywood tape, Trump simply said “I said it, I was wrong, and I apologize”. At face value, he includes the most critical ingredient of an apology expression. Yet when we pragmatically unpack this expression, it is completely devoid of substance. He blatantly violates the maxim of Quantity by offering no insight into what he was wrong about or why what he said was wrong. He offers no acknowledgment of responsibility past simply saying the words he spoke were his words, offers no repair, nor any promise that he will not do it again. Finally, he breaks the maxim of Relation immediately after apologizing by mentioning Bill Clinton: “But we have a gentleman who’s been married three times, who’s had a number of affairs” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2004). This is nothing short of brilliant redirection as an excuse. He takes the topic at hand, his overtly vulgar and predatory comments, and redirects the audience to an unrelated event about his opponent’s husband decades ago. The implicature drawn from this comparison is that what he said about women is no different than the private life of Bill and Hillary Clinton, normalizing his actions. His face-work in this sentence is done by using an off-record tactic (his apology is so vague we can’t be sure what he’s apologizing for) as well as positive politeness by stating we are all human and making a direct attack on his opponent’s face.

Case Study 4:

The 2020 Debate. The Evasion of the Speech Act Itself. The most severe kind of avoidance is the total rejection to deliver the requested speech act: the 2020 exchange. Trump asked for a name as moderator Chris Wallace questioned him whether he would condemn white supremacists and Joe Biden chimed in saying, "Say it! Do it!," He answered, "Proud Boys, stand back and stand by," upon receiving "Proud Boys." (Al Jazeera, 2020). This is a really shocking abandonment of the principle of Relation. The question called for a repudiation, a speech act of alienation and rejection. Trump instead spoke directly to the gathering and gave a fresh, vague order. He also ignores the rule of Manner by being very obscure. The phrase "stand back and stand by" is purposefully ambiguous so that it can be understood in different ways. It can mean anything from a call to do nothing to a secret message of future support. This deliberate uncertainty turned into the story itself, eclipsing the initial inquiry and ruling headlines. Regarding face-work, this is a straightforward on-record rejection to do an FTA that would compromise his own good face with a vital constituency group. He gives his relationship with his followers above his responsibility to the general public to denounce hate groups. This case illustrates that evasion may be so complete that even the idea of an apology becomes meaningless; Chovanec (2020) relates this to the more general problem of accountability avoidance in political scandal discourse. These four examples point to a classification of evasive tactics, each tuned for a particular political goal, see table 1.

Table 1:

A Practical Taxonomy of Evasive Methods in Presidential Debates

Case	Core Evasion Strategy	Flouted Gricean Maxim(s)	Politeness Strategy (B&L)	Scher’s Components Present
2004 (Bush)	Preemptive Character Assassination	Relation (deflection to opponent's character)	Bald on-record FTA (against opponent's face)	N/A (Not an apology)
2012 (Romney)	Minimization & Justification	Manner (awkward, dehumanizing metaphor), Quality (ignoring impact)	Positive politeness (focus on own good intentions)	Expression of Regret (none), Responsibility (none)
2016 (Trump)	Deflection & Hollow Performance	Quantity (insufficient detail), Relation (pivot to Bill Clinton)	Off-record + Positive politeness (shared imperfection)	Expression of Regret (vague), Responsibility (minimal)
2020 (Trump)	Complete Speech Act Avoidance	Relation (irrelevant response), Manner (strategic ambiguity)	Bald on-record FTA avoidance (refusing to condemn)	None

V. Conclusion:

Four different points in US presidential debate history are examined more closely here, therefore verifying and deepening the main claim of this work. Political apologies' linguistic avoidance is a complicated, multifarious technique firmly rooted in the practical fabric of the language itself. From the subtle character assassination of 2004 to the complete abandonment of the apology speech act in 2020, the cases of Bush, Romney, and Trump show a definite growth and variety in these techniques. Though all aim to control the speaker's public image while reducing actual accountability, each approach is a deliberate reaction to a particular political pressure.

For the quality of democratic dialogue, this widespread avoidance has significant consequences. The public's capacity to trust political leaders and to hold them to account is significantly undermined when the language of responsibility is so often hollowed out. These discussions go beyond just policy disagreements; they are performative venues where the real significance of truth, responsibility, and contrition is discussed and sometimes purposely perverted. This research offers a strong systematic approach for analyzing these complicated verbal moves. Further research may profitably use this framework to cover a larger spectrum of political situations, including international relations, business crisis communication, and social media discussion, to clarify the complex and often disturbing link between language, power, and truth in the 21st century.

VI. References

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VII. Appendix:

Full Transcript Excerpts

2004 Debate (Bush on Kerry):

BUSH: My opponent says he's going to be a great commander in chief, but he's been a great second-guesser... And when it came to voting, he voted for the \$87 billion, then he voted against it. That's a flip-flop .
<https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/september-30-2004-debate-transcript/>

2012 Debate (Romney on women):

ROMNEY: I went to a number of women's groups and said, "Can you help us find folks?" and they brought us all these binders full of women.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Binders_full_of_women

2016 Debate (Trump on Access Hollywood):

TRUMP: I said it, I was wrong, and I apologize... But I'll tell you what, I've never said that I'm a perfect person... But we have a gentleman who's been married three times, who's had a number of affairs
<https://www.wvlrtv.com/article/news/politics/video-trump-issues-apology-i-pledge-to-be-a-better-man/289-330527350#:~:text=Here%20is%20the%20entire%20text%20of%20Trump's%20statement:&text=Anyone%20who%20knows%20me%2C%20knows,at%20the%20debate%20on%20Sunday.%22>

2020 Debate (Trump on Proud Boys):

WALLACE: Are you willing tonight to condemn white supremacists and militia groups...?

BIDEN: Say it! Do it! Say it!

TRUMP: —What do you want to call them? Give me a name. Go ahead.

WALLACE: Proud Boys.

TRUMP: Proud Boys, stand back and stand by

<https://www.rev.com/transcripts/donald-trump-says-proud-boys-should-stand-down-after-debate-transcript-september->