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Critical Discourse Analysis of Withdrawal in Obama's political interviews

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Abstract

The present paper aims at examining the employment of evasion- one of the pragmatic strategies that are employed by politicians in the political interviews. The study investigates evasion from a pragmatic perspective, in relation to Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975) and Brown and Levinson's theory of Politeness (1987). The paper consists of two sections, the first section is a theoretical one. It gives a brief account of the circumstances in which politicians use evasion, the functions that evasion fulfill, and the tactics by which politicians do evasion. The second section is a practical one. It is comprised of the data in which the researcher investigates the employment of evasion in the political interview. The researcher downloaded the data from the website of CBS News channel. The results sum up the conclusions that the researcher has reached at. Among these conclusions is that evasion plays a pivotal role in the political interview, and politicians employ it to fulfill various pragmatic functions such as preserving face, keeping away from dilemmas, negative reactions, and blame.

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1.Introduction

The term “*political interview*” refers to “media interviews held with politicians with the intention of providing the wider audience with an idea of the interviewee’s views, policy statements and obviously, media presence” (Locher and Watts 85 ,2008). The political interview is essentially significant in political communication. It is regarded as an important element of the present public sphere. (Clayman and Heritage ,2002, pp.2-1).

Politicians exploit the political interview in order to show the programs and agendas of the political parties that they represent. In the same way, in political interviews, journalists prove their professional abilities through raising accurate questions as well as “critical follow up questions” (Fetzer and Bull 2013, p.85). In political interviews, politicians also try to do “core democratic function:

soliciting statements of official policy, holding officials accountable for their actions, and managing the parameters of public debate” (Clayman and Heritage 2002, p.3). Besides, one of the aims that politicians try to achieve in political interviews is convincing the immediate interviewers and the TV audience (Furo 2001, p.40). Furko and Abuzki state that politicians aim “to gain favour with the audience, influence their views, beliefs, decisions, and actions ... in a way that is beneficial to the organization represented” (2014, p. 46).

2.Research problem

the core problem of the study focuses adjacent to how politicians handle tricky or aggressive questioning in political interviews by using withdrawal or evasion. Specifically, the study addresses the following issues:

The Use of Evasion as a Pragmatic Strategy: Politicians

frequently encounter situations where they face face-threatening acts or difficult questions. The paper investigates how and why they choose to avoid answering these questions directly.

The Violation of Communication Norms: When evading, politicians deliberately fail to observe standard cooperative rules of conversation. The study explores how this behavior specifically breaches Grice's Cooperative Principle (violating conversational maxims like relevance and quantity) while trying to remain contextually cooperative.

The Management of "Face" and Politeness: Direct answers can often lead to a loss of public support, blame, or political dilemmas. The problem lies in understanding how politicians balance these interactions using evasion to manage their public self-image ("face") and navigate

politeness boundaries.

The Impact of Journalist Interaction: The study looks at how the dynamic between a lenient vs. an aggressive ("adversarial") journalist directly influences and triggers the level of evasion a politician uses. To solve this problem, the paper evaluates a real-world case study—analyzing the pragmatic functions and exact tactics used during CBS journalist Steve Kroft's 2015 interview with President Barack Obama

3. Research question

The present paper is conducted to find answers for the following questions:

- 1- What is evasion?
- 2- Why do politicians tend to use evasion in political interviews and what are major functions of evasion in political interviews?
- 3- What are the tactics through which evasion finds expression?
- 4- Is there a relation between evasion, politeness and Grice's cooperative

principle?

In order to find answers to the above questions, the paper is based on the following hypotheses:

- 1- Evasion plays a pivotal role in political interviews.
- 2- Gricean maxims are occasionally broken in political interviews by politicians.
- 3- Politicians take into consideration the notion of face when they make use of evasion in political interviews.
- 4- Politicians' employment of evasion is influenced by the journalists' way of asking politicians.

4.Literature Review

4.1.Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

CDA is a type of text analysis that aims to reveal the hidden ideas that are underlying rather than clearly articulated in texts. It aims to show how language is used to express and reproduce social and political inequality (Wooffitt, 2005, p.137). Critical discourse analysis is defined

by Van Dijk (2011, p. 466), one of the pioneers of CDA, as "discourse analytical research that primarily analyzes the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and contested via text and talk in the social and political context." Critical discourse analysis (CDA) looks into how language is used to reproduce the powerful' s perspective, values, and ideologies, which may or may not be beneficial to the less powerful. As a result, it focuses on the link between language, power, and ideology

.As far as Leeuwen (1993, p. 193) is concerned, CDA should be concerned with "discourse as a tool of power and control as well as with discourse as the instrument of the social construction of reality".

CDA is defined as "critical" in the sense that it addresses concerns such as power abuse, domination, and inequality .A shared perspective on undertaking linguistic, semiotic, or discourse analysis can be classified as critical or critique (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 131). According to Wodak (2001, p.9), "critical" means "having distance from the data, embedding the data in the social, overtly taking a political stance, and a concentration on self-reflection as researchers .According to Wodak's (2001, p. 265) Discourse-Historical Approach " Critique" can greatly contribute to answering the question of what "good reasons" are, because such an approach provides criteria that enable one to distinguish between manipulative and suggestive persuasion procedures and discursive procedures of convincing argumentation,". Fowler (1996) discusses the influence of contemporary Marxist, post-

structuralist, and deconstructionist criticism, as well as the Frankfurt School's influence on the term "critique" as denoting a realization for a humane system of constraints: "distorting pressures to which individuals, a group of individuals, or the human race as a whole succumb in their process of self-formation " (p.4). The term ' **discourse** ' might be a nightmare for the newcomers of this field for there are various definitions from different perspectives. Some of these definitions are produced by Bloor and Bloor (2007) who made these distinctions:

- Discourse is the highest linguistic unit; below it are phonemes, morphemes, words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and texts;
- Discourse is a sample of language usage, usually written to be spoken, i.e. a speech;
- Discourse refers to communication that is required in a single situation context, as well as a single field and

register, such as legal or medical discourse;

- Discourse is any type. of human interaction, whether verbal and nonverbal;
- Discourse is solely a verbal exchange;
- Discourse refers to the entire communications process. (Bloor & Bloor, pp. 6-7, 2007)

5. Withdrawal (Evasion)

When politicians are asked by interviewers, they tend to reply in a direct way. However, in some situations, they make use of withdrawal in their replies (Clayman ,1993, p.159). Evasion “ involves circumvention or avoiding answering directly or avoiding facing up to real difficult or tricky communicative or discourse issues” (Agyekum ,2008, p.82). In other words, evasion is a way politicians make use of in order to steer away from giving honest and significant information (Galasinski , 2000, p.55). Politicians use evasion when the only choice that they have is to respond verbally to the topics that

cause face threatening acts. Evasion takes place when politicians try to make resistance to the questions that they receive. In short, to evade questions is to reject to answer them (Obeng , 1997, p. 54), as in the following exchange between a journalist and President G. Bush:

(1) *Interviewer: ...you weren't this circumspect when you were talking to reporters yesterday about the economy.*

The President: I think I pretty much said the same thing yesterday, in all due respect.

In the above exchange, the journalist raises a question and instead of answering the journalist's question, G. Bush implies that he has already answered the question. As a result of the occurrence of evasion, two Gricean maxims are breached by G. Bush, quantity and relevance (Fraser, 2010, p.210).

Obeng (2002. P. 13) states that the

determination of the occurrence of evasion in political language is influenced by the way politicians respond to the questions of the questioners as well as the questioners' reaction towards politicians' responses. The evasion level is also influenced by the way that journalists follow to question politicians. That is, whether they appear to be aggressive or lenient in questioning politicians. Politicians utilize evasion when they have the opportunity to do so. To be precise, when the journalists are "slack". In such case, politicians leave the subject of the question and start conveying certain "pre-packed politics". In addition, politicians tend to be evasive when they are obliged. Specifically, when they are interviewed by rough journalists who ask aggressive questions. Therefore, both "adversarialness" and "leniency" lead to evasion (Vukovic, 2013 , pp. 22-21) Evasion

serves many functions such as: shunning dilemmas in interaction (Lauerbach , 2001, p.198), keeping away from problems, preserving face (Obeng , 2002, p.12), reducing reactions that are not positive, and avoiding blame, and keeping away from talking about issues that might be overstated and then lead to create certain arguments in the media (Bhatia, 2006, pp.191,195).

Vukovic (2013) believes that context is the main trigger of evasion in political interviews. He does not support the assumption that says that evasion is one of the stable features of politician's personality. The same politician is not fixed in using evasion; in some interviews he/she may use a high degree of evasion, whereas in others, he/she may decrease his/her use of evasion (pp. 16-17).

Clayman and Heritage (2002) notice that interviewers are able to respond

to politicians' use of evasion in political interviews. They argue that being able to respond to politicians' evasion is one of the crucial features of skilled interviewers. However, sometimes interviewers "let it [evasion] pass", in spite of the fact that they notice it. Interviewers do so in order not to interrupt the flow of the political interview. In the same way, a number of the audience members may observe the interviewees' use of evasion, while other members may not. When the audience recognizes that the interviewees make use of evasion in their responding to interviewers' questions, they begin to produce conclusions. They may conclude that interviewees have a certain purpose behind their use of evasion. They may deduce that there is a certain thing in the possession of the interviewees but they do not want to reveal (pp. 240-242).

Bull (2003, p.114) suggests the

following tactics that politicians employ to evade questions:

1. To pay no attention to the interviewer's question. That is, the political actor disregards the interviewer's question and does not try to give it an answer. In some situations, he does not admit that he receives a question.
2. To admit the interviewer's question without giving any answer to it.
3. To question the interviewer's question. There are two methods to do so: to ask the interviewer to simplify the question, and to ask the journalist the same question.
4. To criticize the interviewer's question. Politicians do so for eight reasons: "the question fails to tackle the important issue", "the question is hypothetical or speculative ", "the question is based on a false premise", "the question is factually inaccurate", "the question includes a misquotation", "the question

includes a quotation taken out of context”, “the ”question is objectionable”, and “the question is based on a false alternative

5. To criticize the journalist him/herself.

6. To refuse to give an answer to the interviewer’s question. There are five methods in the hands of politicians that enable them to do that: “refusal on grounds of inability”, “unwillingness to answer”, “ I can’t speak for someone else”, “ deferred answer”, “it is not possible to answer the question for the time being”, and “pleads ignorance”

7. To present certain political ideas. Politicians can make political points through a variety of methods such as: making certain external attacks (attacking those who oppose them), introducing certain policies, reassuring certain matters, appealing to nationalism, analyzing particular political issues, justifying

themselves, and speaking about their own side.

8. To provide incomplete responses.

There are various structures of incomplete responses in political interviews like: starting answering the interviewer’s question without finishing it the politicians may commit “self-interruption”), giving answers that are “partial”, presenting “half” answers, and giving replies that are “fractional”.

9. To repeat an answer that he/she has already given to answer interviewer’s question.

10. To say or suggests that the politician has already given an answer to the interviewer’s question

11. To apologize.

12. Literalism. Bull emphasizes that “the literal aspect of a question which was not intended to be taken literally is answered”. In some situations, politicians appear to be direct in evading difficult questions.

That is, they may use the expression “I do not intend to comment on that” to express the fact that they do not want to answer a journalist’s question (Obeng , 2002, p.13).

6.Methodology

The data under analysis is an interview that was held with Obama on 11 October 2015. The host is one of CBS journalists, Steve Kroft. Its main issues are the intervention (or the challenge) of Russia in Syria, the Islamic State (ISIS), the 2016 American presidential election. Two pragmatic theories are adopted by the researcher as models of analysis, namely Grice’s (1975) Cooperative Principle and Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory of face and politeness. The connection between these theories and evasion is the basic motivation behind choosing them as models of analysis.

7. Cooperative Principle

Grice (1975, p.45) condenses his theory of Cooperative Principle in

these words: “make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.” Grice proposes the following four conversational maxims in order to affect cooperation. He highlights that individuals tend to follow them when they interact with others. He states that such maxims enable interlocutors to be cooperative, when they are engaged in their conversations.

Quantity

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required.
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Quality.

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Relation.

1. Be relevant.

Manner.

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
4. Be orderly. (Grice, 46-45 ,1975).

Grice (1975) mentions that the interactants sometimes fail to observe the four maxims. However, depending on implicature, they remain cooperative. Implicature refers to the meanings that senders do not express in a clear way (in the words or the expressions that they say, however receivers are able to conclude them (Darighoftar and Ghaffari ,2012, p. 269). Levinson (1983, p.97) admits that “implicature provides some explicit account of how it is possible to mean more than what is actually said.”

8. Brown and Levinson's Theory of Politeness

Face is one of the vital elements of Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness. They borrow their view of face from Goffman's (1967, p.5) who defines face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self-delineated in terms of approved social attributes.” Brown and Levinson define face as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself.” They add that face is “emotionally invested and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced and must be constantly attended to in interaction “ (1987, p.61).

Brown and Levinson distinguish between **negative face** and **positive face**. Negative face refers to “the want of every ‘competent adult member’ that his actions be unimpeded by others”, whereas positive face is “the want of every

member that his wants be desirable to at least some others”(1987, p. 62). They claim that speech acts by which face is threatened are referred to as face-threatening acts. Face-threatening acts have the ability to threaten the face of the speaker as well as that of the hearer (1987, pp. 62, 65). For example, they occur when a person tends to express a disagreement, raise a request or present an advice. They are among the essential factors that are required to understand the association between politeness and face (Curtone, 2011, p.52). Brown and Levinson differentiate between **positive** and **negative** face-threatening acts. Negative face-threatening acts are those acts that tend to hinder freedom of action of interactants. Positive face-threatening acts are those acts that point out that people are careless about the “feelings” and “wants” of others or that they don’t want

other’s “wants” (1987, pp. 65-66).

Brown and Levinson admit that people tend to make use of a variety of tactics for keeping away from face threatening acts and reducing potential threats. These tactics are **off- record, on-record, without redressive action baldly, and with redressive**. There are two forms of doing actions with redressive: **positive politeness**, and **negative politeness**.

9. Data Analysis

The analysis of the data will explain how evasion contravenes Grice’s maxims, quantity, quality, manner, and relevance to arrive at an assortment of pragmatic rationales. Politeness is among such rationales. It also will show how politeness is accomplished through appreciating positive and negative face. Below is the analysis of this interview1:

Text 1 :

Steve Kroft: The last time we talked

was this time last year, and the situation in Syria and Iraq had begun to worsen vis- à-vis ISIS. You had just unveiled a plan to provide air support for troops in Iraq, and also some air strikes in Syria, and the training and equipping of a moderate Syrian force. You said that this would degrade and eventually destroy ISIS.

Obama: over time.

Kroft: Over time. It's been a year, and--

Obama: I didn't say it was going to be done in a year.

Kroft implies that Obama and his government have failed to damage and stop ISIS in Iraq and Syria, though Obama had promised to do a variety of things to stop ISIS in one year. In response to Kroft's question, Obama utilizes evasion. The evasive tactic that he uses is criticizing the question. Obama says that the question contains a "misquotation", this "misquotation"

is represented by this sentence: ***"I didn't say it was going to be done in a year."*** In fact, Obama violates the relevance maxim, as the reply given by him is irrelevant to the question. Obama sees that elaborating on kroft's question might trigger the public or other politicians (his opposition) to blame him or react negatively towards him. Moreover, answering the question might activate damage to his face and to that of his government. For these reasons, Obama resorts to evasion.

Text: 2

Kroft: If you were skeptical of the program to find and identify, train and equip moderate Syrians, why did you go through the program?

Obama: Well, because part of what we have to do here, Steve, is to try different things. Because we also have partners on the ground that are invested and interested in seeing some sort resolution to this

problem. And--

Kroft: And they wanted you to do it.

*Obama: well, no. **That's not what I said.** I think it is important for us to make sure that we explore all the various options that are available.*

*Kroft: **I know you don't want talk about this.***

Obama: No, I'm happy to talk about it.

Obama Keeps utilizing evasion in responding to Kroft's questions, since Kroft seems to be aggressive in questioning Obama. Most of his questions are aggressive. This confirms the fact that politicians' employment of evasion is resulted from the journalist's "adversarialness" (in terms of Vukovic 2013). As a result, in the above exchange, Obama makes use of a number of evasive tactics to avoid answering the questions. First of all, Obama rationalizes the policies of his administration concerning the training and equipping program, **Because we also have partners on the ground that are invested and interested in**

seeing some sort resolution to this problem. And--. He also gives an incomplete answer. Obama starts answering Kroft's question without finishing it. Pragmatically speaking, Obama does not observe the quantity maxim, since the information that he provides is less than required. Obama does not complete his reply. He commits a self-interruption. Moreover, Obama uses another evasive tactic. He criticizes Kroft's question. Obama states that there is a "misquotation" in it, *"That's not what I said."* Here, Obama breaches the maxim of relevance. Answering the question honestly might pose a threat to face of his administration and his own one. That is why Obama employs evasion to protect face. Besides, Obama tries to shun talking about the failure of the program.

It is essential to indicate that Kroft is aware of Obama's employment of evasion. Kroft does not "let it

[Obama's use of evasion] pass", but he responds to it. Kroft confronts it. Kroft's response to Obama's employment of evasion in the above exchange is shown when

Kroft saying *"I know you don't want talk about this."*

Text: 3

Steve Kroft ... You said a year ago that the United States-- America leads. We're the indispensable nation. Mr. Putin seems to be challenging that leadership.

Obama: in what way? Let-- let's think about this-- let--let--

In his questions, Kroft threatens Obama's self-image as well as that of his country, since he says that Mr. Putin (Obama's opponent) seems to be challenging that (Obama's) leadership. That is why, Obama employs evasion for maintaining face. In his reply, Obama questions Kroft's question. That is, Obama asks Kroft to clarify or simplify his

question, *in what way?* Here Obama breaks the maxim of quality as he does not present sufficient information. Instead of answering the question, he poses a question. He also breaches the relevance maxim since he replies irrelevantly to Kroft's question.

Text: 4

Kroft: Well, he's moved troops into Syria, for one. He's got people on the ground. Two, the Russians are conducting military operations in the Middle East for the first time since World War II--

Obama: So that's--

Kroft: -- bombing the people—that we are supporting.

*Obama: So that's leading. Steve? Let me ask you this question. When I came into office, **Ukraine was governed by a corrupt ruler who was a stooge of Mr. Putin.***

*Syria was Russia's only ally in the region. And today, rather than being able to count on their support and maintain the base they had in Syria, which they've had for a long time, Mr. Putin now is devoting his own troops, his own military, just to barely hold together by a thread his ally. And in Ukraine-Kroft starts clarifying his question, that is, he clarifies how Mr. Putin challenges Obama's leadership. Obama, on the other hand, keeps using evasion. In this reply, Obama presents a political point. To be more clear, Obama makes "external attack". He attacks the ruler of Ukraine and describes him as a **"corrupt ruler who was a stooge of Mr. Putin."** Obama flouts quantity, relevance and manner maxim. He breaks the quantity maxim as he fails to answer the question. He flouts the maxim of relevance as he includes irrelevant matters such as talking about the ruler of Ukraine, and he flouts the*

manner maxim since he is vague. Actually, Obama exploits these strategies to maintain the face of his country as well as his personal one.

Text: 5

Kroft: Do you think the world is a safer place?

*Obama: **America is a safer place.** I think that there are places, obviously, like Syria that are not safer than when I came into office. But, in terms of us protecting ourselves against terrorism, in terms of us making sure that we are strengthening our alliances, in terms of our reputation around the world, absolutely we're stronger.*

Kroft asks Obama a yes-no question. Instead of answering with yes or no, Obama evades answering the question. Again, presenting a political point is the evasive tactic that he uses to achieve evasion. To be exact, he starts presenting a "reassurance". He intends to say

that the Americans need not to be worried or frightened, since ***"America is a safer place."*** He flouts the relevance maxim, because he begins talking about an irrelevant matter. That is to say, rather than speaking about the safety of the world, Obama talks about the security of America.

Conclusions

The present paper has arrived at the following conclusions:

1. Evasion occupies a huge place in political interviews. Politicians exploit evasion for achieving a variety of pragmatic functions like preserving face, keeping away from dilemmas, negative reactions and blame. This validates to the first hypothesis, *evasion plays a pivotal role in political interviews.*

2. Politicians tend to infringe Maxims of Grice when they use evasion. They flout nearly all the maxims, quantity, quality, manner,

and relevance. Sometimes, they simultaneously flout more than one maxim. This confirms to the second hypothesis which is, *Gricean maxims are occasionally broken in political interviews by politicians.*

3. Politicians exploit evasion in order to appreciate face and politeness. In fact, they take into consideration their personal face, the political domains they represent, the immediate interviewee, as well as the public. This confirms the third hypothesis in the paper, *politicians take into consideration the notion of face when they make use of evasion in political interviews.*

4. Interviewers' way of questioning affect Politicians' employment of evasion. To be precise, politicians tend to be evasive when interviewees' questions are aggressive, dangerous and problematic. This corresponds to the fourth hypothesis

which is, *politicians' employment of evasion is influenced by the journalists' way of asking politicians.*

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