EVASION STRATEGIES BY POLITICIANS IN NEWS INTERVIEWS

Nur Zahraa Hanafe and Siti Rohana Mohd Thani
University of Malaya

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, 1995) to explain how they evade and why they do it.

KEYWORDS: STRATEGIES, EVASION, COVERT, OVERT, INTERVIEWS

Introduction

News interviews have been greatly studied by researchers around the world over the last half of the 20th century in areas of questioning and answering (Heritage, 1985; Bavelas et al., 1988; Bull & Mayer, 1993; Montgomery, 2008; Clayman, 2001; Clayman & Heritage, 2002a; 2002b; Heritage & Clayman, 2013; Emmertsen, 2007; Rendle-Short, 2007; Gnisci, 2008; Kantara, 2012; Heritage, 2002; Alfahad, 2005; Vukovic, 2013; Mehdipour & Nabifar, 2011; Li, 2006; Bhatia, 2006). Clayman and Heritage (2002a, p. 13) describe the news interview as “a course of interaction to which the participants contribute on a turn-by-turn basis, for the most part by asking and answering questions. In other words, it can be understood that the news interview is a mediated platform for journalists and politicians to produce news through the exchange of question-answer between them.

Montgomery (2008) described three types of broadcast news interviews that serve different purposes, namely accountability interviews, experiential interviews, and expert interviews. However, the present study takes only accountability interviews into consideration as they are related to the purpose of the study – to explore the evasion practices among the politicians. Montgomery (2008) explained that the accountability interview emphasizes the responsibility of a public figure to justify the issue or event either for the sake of his own deeds, words, or actions/statements of the institution with which he is associated. Therefore, it is notable for this study as the journalist will ask questions that are designed to seek justifications for the politicians’ lines of action and also to challenge them.

The Political System in Malaysia and the United States (U.S.)

In view of media and politics in Malaysia, the endless communication platforms such as Internet, provides a forum for Malaysians to criticize the government easily (Knirsch & Kratzenstein, 2010). This is due to an exposure of wide information for different parties in the Malaysian political regime. However, the media in Malaysia still concerns to censor any critical voices online (Weiss, 2012). The president Weiss (2012) also mentioned in her book that the government ruled by Prime Minister,
Dato’ Seri Najib Abdul Razak, has received a lot of criticism from Malaysian citizens through media such as blogs. As a result, the Prime Minister chose to increase the openness and accountability of the government through the media forms of Twitter, Facebook and perhaps, news interviews are being held purposely to inform the public of what the government is doing as well (Leong, 2015). These media platforms help to inform public about current political events of the day and new plans published to readers (Knirsch & Kratzenstein, 2010). Nevertheless, media freedom in Malaysia is still restricted to the extent that “the media in Malaysia is fully controlled by the government and media companies associated with government leaders for political survivability of ruling government party and leaders to hold the power” (Mohd Aizuddin, 2005, p. 341). This sort of control in media freedom may probably shore up the government’s reputation in terms of upgrading national security and political stability through the words of the Prime Minister as the leader of the government.

On the other hand, President Barack Obama has surprisingly brought new ideas and values to his administration as he has called for the transparency and openness of his government. Coglianese (2009) asserts that these open government reforms are deemed as politically appealing in the short term as it can attract many voters and supporters from the U.S. communities. However in the long run, this strategy is quite risky to the extent that it may create distrust or suspicion among the public, thus disappointing them as well. It may in fact, disrupt the internal deliberation and increase the criticisms of government officials.

Based on these backgrounds of the political systems and their regimes in Malaysia and the U.S., it is thus insightful to study the way President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Najib Razak answer the questions posed by interviewers in the political news interviews, as what is inherently linked to their concepts of government and media. As mentioned above, Prime Minister Dato’ Seri Najib Abdul Razak celebrates the openness of his government but at the same time, he still sets restrictions on the media to reveal anything about his government’s decisions. On the other hand, President Barack Obama upholds the idea of transparency in government and welcomes interviews or conferences to talk about the government’s policies. So, these ideas of two politicians contrast in terms of the openness of the government.

**Statement of Problem**

Politicians are known to be ambiguous in their speeches for the purpose of hiding their true agenda from the public (Bull, 2008). Evasion occurs recurrently in the context of political news interviews where the broadcast audiences are not present when the interview is being held. As discussed earlier, most interviewers attempt to pose hostile questions in order to make the interview session more challenging and adversarial in nature (Clayman & Heritage, 2002a). In turn, the politicians are required to answer the hostile questions despite the challenges involved. Therefore, it can be said that politicians are expected to respond to every question asked by the interviewers in news interviews.

Apart from that, the broadcast audiences or general public are easily misled by the information given by politicians in news interviews. The information given by the politicians in news interviews might be misleading when they use evasion strategies. Due to the public’s lack of awareness of this phenomenon, people might treat every politician’s answers as true and reliable. Hence, it is important for the general public to know what makes answers evasive as it will benefit them in choosing and supporting the right leader.

Other than that, only a few studies have been conducted in Malaysia about the evasion practices among politicians. Most of the evasion studies have been conducted on British politicians, American politicians, Chinese, and Montenegrin politicians (Clayman, 1993; 2001; Bull, 2008; Li, 2006;
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Vukovic, 2013). Therefore, there are insights to be gained from a study of how Malaysian politician evades the questions in news interviews.

Research Objectives and Research Questions

This study examines the practices of evasion among Prime Minister Najib Razak and President Barack Obama in political news interviews. More specifically, this study aims to:

1. Explore the levels of evasion among Prime Minister Najib Razak and President Barack Obama in news interviews.
2. Examine how Prime Minister Najib Razak and President Barack Obama evade the questions in news interviews.

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the levels of evasion among Prime Minister Najib Razak and President Barack Obama in news interviews?
2. How do Prime Minister Najib Razak and President Barack Obama evade the questions in news interviews?

Literature Review

Evasion practices and the reasons they occur in political interviews are discussed in Bavelas et al. (1988). They argued that politicians are not intrinsically evasive, rather evasion occurs due to the nature of the political interview itself. According to Bavelas et al. (1988), politicians usually evade when asked a question to which all of the possible replies lead to negative outcomes, but a reply is still expected. Bavelas et al. (1988) called this situation as avoidance-avoidance conflict in which politicians are placed in the situation where all of the possible replies are deemed negative, but the reply is still expected. They (Bavelas et al., 1988) further proposed that the understanding of evasion or equivocation can be achieved in terms of four dimensions, namely “sender, content, receiver, and context” (p. 334). The messages that are regarded as equivocal could happen in any one of these four dimensions (Bavelas et al., 1988). The sender dimension refers to the extent to which the response is the speaker’s own opinion. Content refers to the comprehensibility of the message – the more unclear the statement is, the more it is considered equivocal. The receiver dimension refers to the extent to which the message is directly addressed to the interlocutor in the situation. Context, on the other hand, refers to the relevance of the response to the question. Therefore, Bavelas et al. (1988) arguably conform to this approach for emphasizing that equivocation should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon.

This idea is supported by Vukovic (2013) in her latest study, where her findings showed that evasion practices are context-bound, rather than politicians’ attributes. In fact, her analysis supported Bull’s hypothesis that evasion occurs due to the adversarialness of the questions. Vukovic (2013) investigated the evasion rates in four interviews with former U.S. President George W. Bush. The result showed that evasion varied in the four interviews with the same politician. She further proposed that the politician practiced evasion using hedges like “Well” and “I think” at an initial turn of the answer. Vukovic’s (2013) findings in Montenegrin interviews also surprisingly showed that both high and low levels of adversarialness result in more evasive actions. In the case of high levels of adversarialness in questioning, politicians evade because they have to. On the other hand, in case of low level of adversarialness, politicians evade because they can. Hence, evasions do not only occur due to toughness of interviewers in questioning turns, but also to the leniency of the interviewers as
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well. This hypothesis is in line with Clayman’s (2001) discussion about the costs and benefits of using evasion in news interviews. Clayman (2001) in his paper states that,

Alternatively, increasingly adversarial questioning could have precisely the opposite effect: insofar as adversarialness includes a greater propensity to ask follow-up questions that pursue evasive responses, it could encourage interviewees to adhere more closely to the question agenda. (p. 440)

Despite these findings in relation to the adversarial setting of interview, the analysis of the evasive answers was only based on yes-no interrogative questions. Here, it shows that researchers in previous studies were able to highlight different reasons and factors for the occurrence of evasive answers in news interviews particularly with political leaders.

Bull and Mayer (1993) examined the practice of equivocation by two British politicians namely Margaret Thatcher (Prime Minister 1979-1990) and Neil Kinnock (Leader of the Opposition 1983-1992). They used the term “non-replies” for evasive answers. The findings of the study were based on the typology of non-replies to questions that can be considered as the evasion strategies. There are 11 main categories of non-replies: ignores the question, acknowledges the question without answering it, questions the question, attacks the question, attacks the interviewer, declines to answer, makes a political point, incompletes answer, repeats answer to previous questions, states or implies that the question has already been answered, and apologizes. The findings revealed that both the politicians showed no difference in their evasion practices. The level of non-replies by Neil Kinnock in the study is 36.8%, which is a little higher than that of Margaret Thatcher, 25.9%. Although the politicians showed a similar pattern of using non-replies to answer, they applied different strategies to evade. For example, the most frequent evasion strategies used by Neil Kinnock were negative answers, stating that he had already answered the question, and reflecting the question. In contrast, these strategies were not employed by Margaret Thatcher. The most frequent evasion strategy used by Margaret Thatcher was attacking the interviewer. Using this strategy, she put the interviewers on the defensive by taking their questions and criticisms as accusations. Bull and Mayer (1993) finally concluded that Margaret Thatcher was more aggressive in evading the question in political news interviews compared to Neil Kinnock who seemed to be more defensive in his evasion moves.

Mehdipour and Nabifar (2011) investigated the evasion techniques in 20 samples of American political interviews. Using Bull and Mayer’s (1993) and Clayman’s (2001) approaches to study evasion, they concluded that “making a political point” was the most frequent evasion technique used by the American foreign minister (or Secretary of State), while “attacking the questioner” was the least frequent technique used by ministers to evade in the selected news interviews. In addition, they found that politicians tend to evade answering the question by using a “topic shift” in a positive dimension of resistance and “incomplete answers or providing short answers” in a negative dimension of resistance as proposed by Clayman (2001). The positive dimension of resistance refers to “the degree that the politician moves beyond the parameters of the question, saying and doing things that were not specifically called for” (Clayman, 2001, p. 413). On the other hand, the negative dimension of resistance refers to “the degree that the politician’s response falls short of an adequate answer to the question” (Clayman, 2001, p. 412). Notwithstanding the results obtained, the researchers (Mehdipour & Nabifar, 2011) did not show the readers how they analyzed the data in their study. Instead, they merely presented the final result descriptively in tables. Thus, the findings remained inconclusive.

Li (2006) analyzed a corpus of data consisting of twelve news interviews with six non-politicians and six politicians in China. Using a Face Theory model, Li (2006) came up with a typology of face-saving efforts, which included bald-on record evasion, on-record evasion with redressive actions, and off-record evasion. Goffman (1955) defined the term face as “the positive social value a person
effectively claims for himself” (p. 222). In daily interactions, people tend to save their face from face threats and to repair their damaged face from the threats as well. This notion applies in the interview context in which a politician manages his answers to protect his face from threats. Face is divided into two types: positive face and negative face. Positive face concerns with the desire to be accepted, while the latter concerns the desire for freedom of action (Goffman, 1955). Politicians use bald-on record evasion when they evade answering questions straightforwardly. In this case, they willingly refuse to provide answers to interviewers by saying “No comment”. Alternatively, by using on-record evasion with redressive actions, politicians evade answering questions with modifications to save the interviewer’s face. It can be done by stating the reasons why they do not answer the questions: unavailability of the information or principled rationale underlying the refusal. Off-record evasion, on the other hand, is done when politicians “move beyond the parameters of the question, saying and doing things that are not called for” (Li, 2006, p. 28). They also conceal any acknowledgement of the fact that the evasion is being taken place. These face-saving efforts are seen as evasion strategies applied by an interviewee in an attempt to evade the question for the sake of sustaining, protecting, and saving his positive and negative face. His study yielded three results that are very significant to this present study. Firstly, Li (2006) discovered that both politicians and non-politicians tend to evade tough questions that might threaten their face. Hence, it can be understood that the choice of evasion strategies does not depend on the social identities of the interviewees. Secondly, he also found that the interviewees most frequently used on-record evasion with redressive action when evading questions. The redressive action normally involved justification, neutralization, estrangement and hedging. However, there was no case of “no verbal reply” in the twelve news interviews. Therefore, it can be understood that from Li’s (2006) study, the Chinese politicians answered all the questions in news interviews regardless of the face threats contained in the questions. They chose to evade them using the evasion strategies as stated. Lastly, the findings showed a positive, though slight, correlation between the toughness of questions and the implicitness of interviewee’s evasion. In addition, the evasion of positive threats is a little more implicit than that of negative face threats.

Bhatia (2006) took a slightly different perspective in analyzing evasion and its motives in political press conferences. He analyzed press conferences held by Chinese President Jiang Zemin and U.S. President George W. Bush using critical discourse analysis (CDA). The results showed that evasive answers were used by both the politicians in order to “prioritize and lessen the crisis-element of certain events, minimize negative reactions, deflect moral and political blame, and assert control over laymen and journalists” (p. 20), which is the crux of controversial issues. The politicians evaded the answers posed by journalists by using a typical use of linguistic forms: expression of generality and repetition of phrases or expressions. Bhatia (2006) pointed out that politicians used these linguistic forms in answering questions or making statements so that the objective of the press conferences will be achieved, without necessarily giving any other information. For example, the use of generality in language when politicians evade questions can be seen in the phrase “…we’re working with all the countries…” (Bhatia, 2006, p. 199). It portrays the strategy used by politicians to give an answer in a general way, not focusing on the specific country as probably demanded by the question. Besides that, Bhatia (2006) also discovered that politicians would repeat certain phrases or expressions about general principles, the talks, and stated policies to evade controversial issues. Therefore, these findings are valuable as they showed how politicians enact the strategies to evade the questions posed in political news interviews.
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Methodology

Theoretical Framework

In order to analyze the data, the researcher adapted Clayman’s (2001) framework of evasion in political news interviews. Each part of the framework will be explained in the following sections.

Levels of Evasion

The levels of evasion used in this study are based on Clayman’s (2001) categorization of the positive and negative dimensions of resistance. Clayman (2001) used the term “negative dimension of resistance” to describe when the response given by the interviewee (IE) does not answer the question posed by the interviewer (IR) as adequately as required. In fact, Clayman (2001) suggested that strongest evasion occurs when “the interviewee declines to provide any information at all that bears on the question” (p. 412). Therefore, instances in which the questions were not answered and no explanations were given were considered as “full evasion”.

The other levels of evasion were based on Clayman’s (2001) dimension of positive resistance. According to Clayman (2001), this positive aspect of evasion is manifested to the “degree that an interviewee moves beyond the parameters of the question, saying and doing things that were not specifically called for” (p. 413). Clayman (2001) further suggested that interviewees ‘depart’ from the question as an attempt to evade the question asked by the interviewers in political news interviews. Pertaining to this dimension of positive resistance, Clayman (2001) introduced various departures. In this research, the departures are considered as a “level of evasion” as explained below.

The most extreme departure under this positive aspect of evasion involves a substantial change of topic. In this case, “the interviewee veers sharply away from the topic of the question and toward a substantially different area of discussion” (Clayman, 2001, p. 414). In this research, this kind of departure is considered as a “substantial” level of evasion.

Another type of departure from a question’s agenda involves a “medium level of evasion” where a response given by the interviewee is within the parameters of the question but he or she performs “a task or action other than what was specifically requested by the question” (Clayman, 2001, p.414).

The last type of departure is subtle in nature as it changes the term of the question so that it may appear the interviewee is answering the question. This kind of departure is considered as “subtle evasion” in this research. This subtle evasion addresses the question’s agenda, but extra ‘turn components’ that shift away from the focus of the agenda were also included.

![Levels of Evasion](Clayman, 2001)

Figure 3.1: Levels of evasion (Clayman, 2001)
Overt and Covert Practices

In Clayman’s (2001) framework of evasion, two main practices of evasion may appear in the news interviews, overt and covert practices. The practices and choice of strategies are shown below.

Overt practices are when the interviewees evade answering questions explicitly; let the interviewers and audiences notice their evasive moves. Clayman (2001) recognized three categories of overt practices including token requests for permission, minimizing the divergence, and justifying shifts. These can be considered as overt strategies used by politicians to evade. Likewise, Clayman (2001) recognized three categories of covert practices including subversive word repeats, anaphoric pronouns, and operating on the question. Rasiah (2007) stated that “covert practice is used to conceal the fact that they are shifting away from the questions’ agenda, thereby avoiding any open acknowledgement of the move and perhaps ‘getting away’ with it” (p. 671). In short, these covert strategies are used by politicians to avoid being seen as evasive in giving their answers in political news interviews. These can be considered as covert strategies used by politicians to evade.

Source of Data

The study used the spoken data of four political news interviews which were collected from the online YouTube videos. The data were comprised of political news interviews with both Malaysian and U.S. politicians, namely Prime Minister Dato’ Seri Najib Abdul Razak and President Barack Obama. The overview of the source of data is illustrated in Table 3.3 below:

There are two videos of news interviews with the Malaysian politician, Prime Minister Dato’ Seri Najib Abdul Razak. The videos were downloaded from these links:

News interview 1: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8L4TQ2FJhil](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8L4TQ2FJhil)
News interview 2: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPvxT7HGxg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPvxT7HGxg)
i. News Interview 1 (Malaysia)

The source of the first selected news interview is from the Al-Jazeera channel. In the interview, the Prime Minister, Dato’ Seri Najib Abdul Razak, was interviewed by an international interviewer named Veronica Pedrosa. The interview was held on 26th April 2013 and lasted for approximately 25 minutes. To be more specific, it was conducted prior to Malaysia’s general election which was on 5th May 2013. In the interview, Prime Minster Najib Razak had been speaking about his vision as an example to the world of a moderate Muslim country. He aimed to show that Malaysia could be a part of a global coalition of moderates despite the challenges they have had. The interviewer, Veronica Pedrosa, in fact, had brought up the issue of difficulties in restoring confidence and belief in a multiracial Malaysian society. This is because the coalition party United Malays National Organization (UMNO) led by the Prime Minister was having a hard time facing the perceptions of corruption and cronyism in the government. This bad perception adversely affected the outcome of the general election later that year. Another challenge posed to the Prime Minister during the interview was his defeat by the leader of the opposition People’s Justice Party (PKR) via debate ahead of the vote. So, the news interview was mainly held to find out how Prime Minister Najib Razak would respond to the challenges and important issues facing Malaysia. The issues in the interview were all about the political challenges to the Malaysian politician, the UMNO party and the country as a whole.

ii. News Interview 2 (Malaysia)

The second selected news interview is also from the Al-Jazeera channel. Prime Minister Najib Razak was interviewed by an international interviewer named Fauziah Ibrahim. The interview was held on 2nd April 2010 and lasted for approximately 18 minutes. In this interview, the interviewer had brought up the issue about a bold New Economic Policy (NEP) created by the government. The issue was made relevant as it had been a year since Dato’ Seri Najib Razak became the Prime Minister of Malaysia in 2009. The Prime Minister claimed to make a revolutionary change to attract more foreign investment via the NEP. Furthermore, the issue also addressed the need for the Prime Minister to win back voters from different races. It was crucial for him to enforce the NEP move while at the same time, maintaining the harmonious race relations between Chinese, Malays, and Indians.

News Interviews with the United States (U.S.) Politician

There are two videos of news interviews with the U.S. politician, President Barack Obama. The videos were downloaded from these links:

News interview 1: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lThTTJgKYo
News interview 2: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHYjkaHaJyQ

i. News Interview 1 (U.S.)

The first selected news interview is from the CBS News channel. President Barack Obama was interviewed by an interviewer named Charlie Rose. The interview was held on 16th June 2013 and lasted for approximately 47 minutes. The interview covered topics ranging from Islamic State of Iraq (ISIS), Syria, China, the National Security Agency (NSA) leaks, and the U.S. Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) Court. This interview was crucial for President Barack Obama, since it was his first interview regarding the NSA leaks in his country. The U.S. government was criticized for weak security in the NSA. Besides that, President Barack Obama also talked about the provision of U.S. military support to countries like Iraq and Syria in managing conflicts. Thus, both national and international issues were covered in this news interview.
ii. News Interview 2 (U.S.)

The second selected news interview is also from the CBS News channel. President Barack Obama was interviewed by an interviewer named Bob Schieffer. The interview was held on 9th November 2014 and lasted for approximately 20 minutes. The issues presented in this interview include American forces in Iraq, immigration policy, and mid-term elections in general. The President talked specifically about the U.S. air support and troops in Iraq to fight against ISIS, the winning Republicans in the mid-term elections, the President’s low approval rating, and also the change of immigration policy in the U.S. These issues were challenging for President Barrack Obama as he was placed in a position to defend his government’s rule.

Using conversation analysis as an approach when analyzing evasion practices among politicians in news interview, the researcher was able to interpret the evasive answers based on news interviews participants’ understanding for achieving the goal in the interaction (Clayman, 2001). Moreover, CA helps the researcher to see how the evasion practices were carried out by the politicians by looking at the interruptions or follow-up questions from the interviewer. This structural action of evasion in answering can thus be seen in turn-taking of the interaction using the CA approach.

Data Collection and Procedure

The research procedure for this study involves nine (9) steps. These steps will be explained one by one from how the data were collected to the way they were analyzed.

Firstly, the researcher selected the online news interview videos based on the issues and conflicts which are relevant to the country where the politicians reside in. The selection was made only for one-on-one news interviews. Then, the category of the video – News & Politics – in the YouTube page was identified. The videos were then downloaded into a portable format to keep the data tangible for references (see Appendix F). The videos were then transcribed with notations adopted from Atkinson and Heritage (1984). Following these steps, the researcher identified the sequences of question-answer in the interview transcriptions. To do that, the researcher identified the Wh-questions (What, Where, Why, Who, Which, When) and yes-no interrogative type of questions such as “Do you...?” and “Are you...?”. In addition, the researcher also looked at the questions that began with the word “but” and ended with a question mark as they can be considered as follow-up questions. Also, the questions can also be in a form of modal verbs such as “Can you explain...?”. Following the questions’ turns of each of these types, the researcher identified the answers in the next turn. As mentioned earlier in Section 1.8, evasion is defined as “actions that are treated as inadequately responsive by the interview participants” (Clayman, 2001, p. 407). Following this, the researcher extracted the answers that were considered as evasive based on the first part of Clayman’s (2001) framework of evasion – levels of evasion. Another indicator of evasive answer also includes the presence of a follow-up question from the interviewer (IR) where the IR interrupts the interviewee’s (IE) response with the word ‘but’. The coding for the data to be analyzed was done at this stage. Later, the researcher determined the levels of evasion based on Clayman’s (2001) framework (see Table 3.1). Lastly, the researcher analyzed the evasion strategies and types of evasion practices whether they were covert or overt in nature based on the same framework used (see Figure 3.2). In particular, data analysis was done according to the sequences of question and answer and the organization of the turn-taking in the news interviews.

Reliability and Validity

The researcher used expert review approach to ensure reliability and validity of this study. An expert reviewed the coding process of how the researcher found the evasive answers in the samples of news
interviews. After the data have been coded and transcribed, the expert validated the data, confirming whether each evasive answer fitted the chosen category of evasion or not.

The selection of the expert was based on her expertise and experience in teaching in the Pragmatics’ field of study. In this study, the researcher selected an expert who has been teaching at the University of Malaya (UM) for 20 years in that field of study.

Results

Interview Sessions with Prime Minister Najib Razak

M1E1 excerpt (Substantial evasion, anaphoric pronoun strategy)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IR:</th>
<th>Those people who are not your customers according to the surveys. hhh 21% undecided, 42% would vote for BN. (,) 37% for the opposition - Pakatan Rakyat. (,) 21% is a lot of people and they come from your very diverse society here in Malaysia. It’s one of the hhh things that Malaysia were very proud of. - but obviously you are aware that it is also criticized that for having a race-based political system. hhh and that’s one of the things that unless you’re saying - under test at this point. (,) you spoke about your candidate. (,) and how (?) 30% of them are going to be new faces (,) But one of them - is not a new face - and he’s criticized for the manner of making the statement. (,) I’m talking about hhh and for people who are familiar with Malaysia politics. uhh a man called Zulkifli Nurdin. Is he really an ideal candidate if that’s what you are trying to - put across?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IE:</td>
<td>He - he has changed - he made that statement 10 years ago (,) when he was in PAS. hhh and [and but the video has gone viral]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis M1E1

In the excerpt M1E1, the IR inserted an extensive prefatory statement about the statistics of Malaysian citizens who are eligible to vote for a race-based political system (lines 54-55). Then, she further stated that there was a candidate in the election campaign, who was criticized for making an insensitive anti-Hindu statement (lines 61-62). Following these prefatory statements, the IE was asked whether the man called Zulkifli Nurdin is really an ideal candidate to be put on board (lines 64-65). The question asked is a yes-no interrogative type of question which demands a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response from the IE. However, the IE responded to the question by asserting the fact the Zulkifli Nurdin has changed. In fact, he emphasized that the statement the candidate made was such a long time ago when he was a PAS party member (lines 66-67). In this evasive maneuver, the IE attempted to evade the yes-no type of question by moving away from the topic of the discussion to an entirely different area of discussion (Rasiah, 2010). This can be seen in the IE’s answer when he talked about changes made by the new candidate, instead of directly saying whether the new candidate is ideal or not to hold a post in UMNO party. It was salient that the IE was bound to the yes-no question which made it difficult for him to directly answer either yes or no because he might be pledged to the damaging implications of that question itself (Emmertsen, 2007). Moreover, his response inadequately answered the question as the IR directly continued to claim that the video of the case has gone viral (line 68). Therefore, the IE is considered to have practiced substantial level evasion. This finding is in line with Kantara’s (2012) finding in which the Greek politicians responded to challenging questions by shifting the topic of the question.
In this example, the IE made an attempt to evade the question substantially by using the covert strategy. This is evident in the portrayal of anaphoric reference used in terms of the pronoun “He” (line 66). By repeatedly responding “He has changed...” twice, he is deemed to give a vague response to the IR by referring his claim to the action that has been performed by Zulkifli Nurdin. He made a response to the prefatory statement, instead of the question. This anaphoric pronoun of “He” is directed to oppose the criticism made about Zulkifli Nurdin rather than responding to IR’s actual question whether he is an ideal candidate or not. Therefore, instead of agreeing with the IR, the IE seemed to defend his new candidate in UMNO party.

M1E2 excerpt (substantial evasion, generalization strategy)

| 89 | IR: Would you: (0.1) be ready to: face the opposition - politicians hh in a debate? Could we see during |
| 90 | the campaign () “Prime Minister Najib hh uhh facing off with () Anwar Ibrahim”? |
| 91 | IE: You know – um:: there are many ways () in which uh you know - we can - reach out to the public. |
| 92 | Debate - is - is only one form of reaching out to the people () it’s not the only way hhh = |
| 93 | IR: = but you wouldn’t rule it out? |

Analysis M1E2

In the excerpt M1E2, the IR asked the IE two questions in the same turn regarding the readiness of the IE to face opposition leaders in a debate during the campaign. The two questions (lines 89-92) are considered a question cascade. A question cascade refers to the question produced as a second or third version of the first question in the same turn. In other words, following the given question, the IR went on to produce a second version of that question on the same issue (Clayman & Heritage, 2002b). The two questions show the different version of what is apparently is the same question (Clayman & Heritage, 2002b). It is adversarial in nature as the later version of the question (lines 90-91) restricts the adequate response (Clayman & Heritage, 2002b). In the next turn, the IE appeared to be evasive in his response by suggesting that there are many ways to reach out to the public in an election campaign. His assertiveness in his turn (lines 92-93) shows the substantial evasion as it involves a substantial change of topic (Clayman, 2001). The IE was asked about his state of readiness to face the opposition leaders in a debate (line 89) and the possibility of seeing that happened during the campaign (line 90). The IE suggested that there are many ways to reach the public (line 92); he then went on (lines 93-94) to emphasize that the debate is not the only way to do that. In this case, the IE veered away from the topic of the question and towards a substantially different area of discussion. Instead of responding to his state of readiness to face the opposition in a debate, his response is shifted away from the original topic of question by providing unsolicited statements about the credibility of debates.

The strategy of evasion the IE is shown to use in the excerpt is that of generalization. The strategy of generalization is considered as a new finding in this study, because it is not identified in Clayman’s (2001) framework. This strategy shows how the IE used linguistic form to evade the question in news interview. Generalization is used when the politicians tend to make a required answer general rather than specific – what has been expected (Bhatia, 2006). In this example, instead of stating whether he is ready or not to face the opposition, he responded evasively using the word “many ways”. Using this strategy, the politician managed to divert from the topic of the question. This evasive move did not escape the notice of the IR as she latched the IE’s response with “but”. The IE seemed forthcoming in giving a response broadly, yet was not forthcoming in giving an adequate response as required by the question. Therefore, the IE covertly evaded the question by asserting that there are
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other alternatives available to face the opposition leaders during the election campaign, rather than only debate.

Based on this excerpt, Prime Minister Najib Razak again applied substantial evasion in his course of his answer, which concurs with Li’s (2006) result on the use of off-record evasion by Chinese politicians and non-politicians in the news interview. In addition, the finding of the generalization strategy used is in line with Bhatia’s (2006) research on evasion in political press conferences.

M1E3 excerpt (medium-level evasion, justifying shift strategy)

Analysis M1E3

In the first turn of the question (line 95), the IR began with “but” and provoked the IE by asking “you wouldn’t rule it out?” to actually rule out the debate with the opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim. The IE then responded, “It’s not likely we will have a debate” which is unavoidable for him to say no. This is because “the aspect of the yes-no question in news interview makes it a resource for IR’s challenges in questioning practices” (Emmertsen, 2007, p. 580). In other words, the IR can restrict the IE to answer the question that he may have reasons not to want to answer by limiting the range of answers to only ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Then, the IE continued to provide reasons why he might not want to do so (line 96). In his response, the IE stated that he was planning to do his engagement with the citizens and the opposition will do the same as well (line 98-99). In lines (99-101) he suggested that people would have the freedom to choose based on the freedom of information they have. However, the IR tended to oppose the plan suggested by the IE by stating that “but if you look at the policies of the manifestos...Malaysians are comparing them and thinking where they are not really that different” which showed the necessity for the IE to face the opposition leader in the debate so that people will see clearly the difference between the two big parties in Malaysia. As the news interview is a social action between interviewer and interviewee (Clayman & Heritage, 2002a), the interaction is produced in the domain of question-answer between participants’ own understandings of their conduct. The IR treated the IE’s answer as evasive as the subsequent turn by the IR starting with ‘but’ demonstrated that he wanted to present an opposing idea (Rendle-Short, 2007) or “to present information that counters what the IE has said” (p. 393). Therefore, it can be seen that the evasive answer given by the IE in this excerpt, did not escape the notice of the IR. The IE answered differently from that required by the question, even though it was still in the parameters of the topic, the debate. Therefore, in this excerpt, it is deemed that the IE practiced a medium-level evasion which has the same finding as Clayman’s (2001) study on evasion.

In this excerpt, the IE used the overt strategy which is called justifying shift. The IE attempted to justify his deviation from the question by asserting that “I believe there’s the important thing for us to (.) hhh engage the people”. He justified his evasive maneuver in which he led the IR to the fact that there was an important thing for them – his government and party – to engage the people for the
sake of the election. Therefore, in the M1E3 excerpt, the IE used the justifying shift strategy overtly to evade the question which is in line with Rasiah’s (2010) study.

Interview sessions with President Barack Obama

U1E1 excerpt (substantial evasion, hedging and justifying shift strategies)

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IR:</td>
<td>= A couple things come out of this. Um:, clearly you had a red line (.) and clearly you say you have confirming evidence of that. Other people have raised questions as to why you didn’t do it earlier (.), Senator McCain (.) even last week (.) former President Clinton.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IE:</td>
<td>[Right]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR:</td>
<td>[Um::] there is also the question as to whether you knew if you supplied weapons they would stay in the hands of people that you intended them for. Have you been settled on that question (?) that you can ship weapons (,) and they can go to the hands of the people (,) that you intend to benefit?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IE:</td>
<td>Well (.) first of all (.) Charlie (.) - I’ve said I’m ramping up support for both the political and military opposition. I’ve not specified exactly what we’re doing and I won’t do so on this show. hhh Uhh - That’s point number one. Point number two is that this argument that somehow we had - gone in earlier or heavier (,) in some fashion that - the tragedy and chaos taking place in Syria wouldn’t be taking place (,) I think is wrong. [And]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR:</td>
<td>[Why do you think it's wrong?]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis U1E1

In the excerpt U1E1, the IR asked the IE exactly two questions. First of all, the IE was asked about his actions in providing support for both political and military opposition. This can be referred to as a previous sequential turn (see Appendix D, lines 75-82). Preceding the question, the IR stated preliminary statements regarding the question about IE’s knowledge of supplied weapons. The IE was then asked, “Have you been settled on that question that you can ship weapons and they can go to the hands of the people that you intend to benefit?” which pushed the IE to agree on those statements. However, the IE tended to become evasive in answering the question by not agreeing or disagreeing with IR. He flatly refused to specify exactly what the United States were doing such as any information about the supplied weapons (lines 98-99). In this evasive maneuver, the IE can be considered to practice full evasion because he declined to provide any information asked for by the IR in his question. The IE then made a second attempt to evade by veering sharply from the topic of the question about the IE’s ability to ship weapons to the hands of the people he intended to benefit with his answer “…this argument that somehow we had gone in earlier or heavier in some fashion that the tragedy and chaos taking place in Syria wouldn’t be taking place I think is wrong…” (lines 100-102). Here, the issue of shipping weapons to those he intended to benefit was substituted with the issue of the tragedy and chaos taking place in Syria. For second part of this answer, the IE is deemed to practice substantial evasion in his evasive maneuver.

In this example of evasive maneuver, the IE hedged his evasive answer with the hedging device “Well” at the beginning of his utterance. The hedging strategy used by the IE showed a sign of uncertainty in the course of his answer. Then, the IE addressed the IR with his name “Charlie” to signal his disagreement in his evasive answer. Clayman (2010) noted that the address term is deemed as a sign of disagreement when responding to an adversarial question. The IE then proceeded to use
the strategy of justifying shift in order to evade the question. He justified it by using the adverb “first of all...” and continued to take issue with the IR’s question over his action of shipping weapons to those he intended to benefit. He overtly evaded the question by stating that he gave support for both the political and military opposition. The strategy of justifying shift applied by the IE was made explicit and elaborated to the IR and viewers with the use of justificatory elements “Point number one...” and “Point number two...”. In this way of shifting the agenda, the IE preceded his evasive answers by ascribing the important points that should be highlighted in virtue of the question asked. Therefore, the answer is considered to be inadequate for what question required, which was acknowledging his ability to ship weapons to the people he intended to benefit, by using the justifying shift strategy overtly.

In this excerpt, President Barack Obama evaded the questions at two levels, namely full level and substantial level. These findings are in line with Li’s (2006) study on evasion by Chinese politicians and non-politicians in news interviews. The findings on the use of the hedging strategy “Well” by the U.S. politician is in line with Vukovic’s (2013) study with American and British politicians in news interviews. This analysis also shared the same finding with Rendle-Short’s (2007) study on the use of address term by Australian politicians in evading questions in news interviews. Lastly, the finding on the use of the justifying shift strategy is similar to Clayman’s (2001) study on evasion. In Clayman’s (2001) work, he found that the politician used a phrase “if I could just speak to Molly’s point” as a justificatory element in an attempt to evade the question particularly in the debate interview. Clayman (2001) claimed that this element is used as a sign of implicit rationale for the IE to evade the question. In this example, President Barack Obama used different justificatory elements which were “Point number one...” and “Point number two...”. Despite the different elements used, the function is still the same – to justify the shift.

U1E2 excerpt (medium-level evasion, hedging strategy)

| Line | IR: Let me go to China. Last week at this time you were meeting with the President of China, Xi Jinping. = | 237 |
| Line | IE: Yes. = | 239 |
| Line | IR: "What came out of that? = | 240 |
| Line | IE: Well, you know, this was an unconventional summit. Uh: We did it outside of the White House. First time - a Chinese president, I think, had been outside of a formal [state visit]. | 241 |
| Line | IR: [Did it make things better?] [The informality of it?] | 244 |

Analysis U1E2

In the excerpt U1E2, the IR asked about the result of the IE’s meeting with the President of China, Xi Jinping. However, the IE evaded the question by asserting that the meeting was an unconventional summit. He even continued “We did it outside of the White House. First time - a Chinese president, I think, had been outside of a formal [state visit] ” (lines 241-243). He thus performed a task entirely different from that required by the question albeit still within the parameters of the topic – the meeting. The IE’s evasion practice did not escape the notice of the IR. The IR’s follow-up question “[Did it make things better?] [The informality of it?] ” (line 244) overlapped with the IE’s last words. This shows that the IR noticed that the IE did not answer the question adequately and attempted to narrow down the question. Therefore, the IE is considered as having evaded the question at a medium-level of evasion.
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In the excerpt above, the IE used the hedging strategy in an attempt to evade the question. For example, the hedges used like “Well” showed the IE’s hesitation in giving his answer, thus evaded it. The hedges were used right before the IE made an effort to evade, specifically at an initial turn of IE’s answer. These findings are all similar to Clayman’s (2001) and Vukovic’s (2013) studies on evasion.

U1E5 excerpt (full evasion, declining to answer strategy)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>IR:</th>
<th>IE:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>497</td>
<td>Let me just ask you this. If someone leaks all this information about NSA surveillance, as Mr. Snowden did, did it cause national security damage to the United States (?) and therefore should he be prosecuted?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>498</td>
<td>Uh: I’m not going to comment on prosecutions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis U1E5

In the U1E5 excerpt, the IR asked IE an adversarial question with a feature of assertiveness. According to Clayman and Heritage’s (2002b) basic dimensions of adversarialness, the term of assertiveness is related to the extent to which the journalist is able to force the politician to provide a particular answer. Under this line of assertiveness, the IR asked a yes-no question which embodied a preference towards saying yes. In lines 497-498, the IE was asked whether someone leaking information about NSA surveillance causes national security damage to the United States. The IR then further asked the IE whether Mr. Snowden should be prosecuted. Both these questions were designed to favor gaining a ‘yes’ answer from the IE himself. However, the IE evaded the question by clearly stating that he was not going to comment on prosecutions. He still abandoned the first part of the question – “did it cause national security damage to the United States” – leaving it unanswered. In this example of evasive maneuver, the IE can be considered to practice full evasion as he declined to give any of the evidence or information that was required by the question. He flatly refused to answer it, which made his response (line 500) seemed inadequate. In this excerpt, the finding is similar to Li’s (2006) study on types of evasion among Chinese interviewee participants.

In this excerpt, it is clear the IE evaded the question by stating that “I’m not going to comment....” (line 500). This strategy was clearly made explicit to the IR. There are no more propositions made after this turn. The phrase “I’m not going to comment...” clearly showed that the IE was unwilling to answer those questions. Using that phrase, he cast his refusal to answer as a willful choice. So, it can be considered that the IE has used the strategy of declining to answer within the phrase “I’m not going to comment...” in his answer. The new finding of this strategy is in line with Bull and Mayer’s (1993) study on equivocation techniques used by British politicians. Bull and Mayer (1993) found that Margaret Thatcher evaded the question by using the declining to answer strategy. Specifically, the politician used that strategy to appear as unwilling to answer the question asked by the interviewer. For example, Margaret Thatcher declined to answer by stating, “I am not going to prophesy what will happen on Thursday and I’m not going to be tempted along this route”.
Evasion Strategies by Politicians in News Interviews

U1E6 (medium-level evasion, anaphoric pronoun strategy)

| 633 | IR:  | [But if he wanted to be reappointed (,) you would reappoint him? |
| 634 | IE:  | He has been an outstanding partner (,) along with the White House (,) in helping us recover much |
| 635 |     | stronger than (,) for example (,) our European partners (,) from what could have been uh: (0.1) an |
| 636 |     | economic crisis of epic proportions. |
| 637 |

Analysis U1E6

In the excerpt U1E6, the IE was asked a yes-no interrogative type of question which demanded an answer of yes or no. He was asked whether he would reappoint Ben Bernanke if he wanted to be reappointed (line 633). In turn, the IE offered a generally positive appraisal or evaluation of Ben Bernanke’s previous accomplishments (lines 634-637), but he did not specifically endorse his reappointment. Therefore, this evasive maneuver in this example is considered to be medium-level evasion because his answer lay within the question’s topical parameters but performed a task other than what was specifically requested by the question. Broadly speaking, the IE’s answer is within the parameters of the topic – it is “about” Ben Bernanke – but even so it is regarded as evasive because it performs a different task than the question required. In this excerpt, the finding of the medium-level evasion applied by the U.S. president is in line with Rasiah’s (2007) study on evasion.

In this excerpt, the IE was asked about the reappointment of Ben Bernanke on a government board. The IE began to respond by saying, “He has been an outstanding partner along with the White House...” (line 634), using a pronoun “He” – referring back to Ben Bernanke in the question. Even though the pronoun “He” was used to refer to Ben Bernanke, the IE did not answer the question whether he would reappoint Ben Bernanke or not as the question asked. This kind of anaphoric pronoun strategy directed praise to Ben Bernanke rather than responding to the IR’s actual question of whether the IE would reappoint him or not. It thus seemed to assure a real answer as this shift was obscured by the initial back-referencing statement “He”. Therefore, the IE can be considered to practice evasion covertly using the anaphoric pronoun strategy. A similar finding of this strategy is found in Sikhwari’s (2009) study. He found that the pronoun “this” was used by the ESL speakers from South Africa to appear evasive or equivocal in giving the message.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of this study, President Barack Obama is deemed to be more overt when evading the question in news interview compared to the Prime Minister Najib Razak. Prime Minister Najib Razak was more covert in nature when evading the questions in news interview. He tended to make his evasive attempts in answering the questions hidden from the public by using more covert strategies than overt ones. On the other hand, President Barack Obama is deemed to practice evasion more overtly as evident in the use of more overt strategies than covert ones in evading the questions in news interviews. In other words, he tended to make his evasive attempts in answering the questions open to the public rather than hidden.

This difference in the evasion practices among these two politicians can be explained in view of the political systems in the two countries. In the United States, the President, Barack Obama, upholds the idea of openness in his government in which he welcomes any discussion, interviews, or conferences to share the government policies and decisions with the public. However, President Barack Obama chose to make his evasive attempts open and explicit to the interviewer and public. He is more open
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to criticism. This idea can be explained that the U.S. President welcomes openness in his own
government and he is ready to share the government policies and decisions with the public
(Coglianese, 2009). President Barack Obama seems to evade the adversarial questions openly
probably to show how he deals with the challenges in his government openly as well. However, the
political system in Malaysia is more restricted in terms of media representation of Malaysian national
leaders in the public broadcast news. The Malaysian government has control of the media and the
news can be manipulated by the government leaders to maintain power (Mohd Aizuddin, 2005). In
other words, there is a media restriction in Malaysia that will allow only good opinions about
government. Furthermore, the increase in criticisms of the Malaysian government in social media
(Weiss, 2012) would probably make the Malaysian politician, Prime Minister Najib Razak more
cautious and implicit in evading the adversarial questions from the interviewer in political news
interviews.

Other than that, the difference of evasion practice between Prime Minister Najib Razak and President
Barack Obama can also be explained by culture: high-context and low-context. These two contexts of
culture are terms introduced by the anthropologist Edward T. Hall in his 1976 book Beyond Culture.
They refer to the tendency to use direct or indirect messages in people’s interaction. The high-context
culture is frequently practiced by people from Eastern countries while the low-context culture is
frequently practiced by Western people. Malaysia is an Asian country where people practice a high-
context culture (Lailawati, 2005). In Malaysia, the people tend to be indirect and more implicit in
their communication. Lailawati (2005) stated that the speaker tends to provide only half of the
message as he may expect his interlocutor to understand the cues in the message. In fact, they also
tend to use nonverbal cues in communication as the cues “provide the missing link in the
communication process” (Lailawati, 2005, p. 4). Lewis (2006) in his study of culture also stated that
in this cultural context, individuals tend to practice indirect verbal communication with each other
and avoid giving offense. Therefore, Prime Minister Najib Razak practiced evasion more covertly
due to the value placed on indirectness in Malaysian culture. On the other hand, the United States
(U.S.) is a Western country where a low-context culture is practiced. In the U.S., people tend to be
direct and more assertive in social interaction. That is why President Barack Obama was more overt
in practicing evasion. Vukovic (2013) points out that politicians’ evasive actions occur in respect of
culture-specific patterns, nevertheless culture is still not a main initiator of evasion in the context of
political new interviews.

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**Contact Details of Authors:**

Nur Zahraa Hanafe  
Faculty of Languages and Linguistics,  
University of Malaya  
50603 Kuala Lumpur  
Email: zaarahanafe@siswa.um.edu.my

Siti Rohana Mohd Thani  
Faculty of Languages and Linguistics,  
University of Malaya  
50603 Kuala Lumpur  
Email: srohana@um.edu.my

**Biodata:**

**Nur Zahraa binti Hanafe** is currently a postgraduate student in University of Malaya. Her research interest is in pragmatics, political communication, applied linguistics and conversation analysis. Her dissertation is mainly directed to the use of language in news interview.

**Siti Rohana Mohd Thani** is a lecturer attached to Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya who teaches Theory of Linguistics, History of Linguistics, Critical Thinking, Introduction to Semantics, and Inter-cultural Language Communication.