
The Pragmatics of Dialogue Evasion in American Political Debates

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Received: 15 December 2023

Accepted: 02 March 2024

Published: 19 April 2024

Abstract: *In political discourse, dialogue evasion is a strategy by which people avoid directly answering questions or talking about certain topics during talks. The present study investigates the utilization of pragmatic strategies employed by politicians during American political debates as a means of avoiding direct confrontation. It is hypothesized that politicians employ implicature and presupposition in order to navigate talks, which may include redirection, non-answers, and questioning. Politicians also flout Grice's maxims in order to avoid providing direct responses, allowing them to manipulate the established conventions and expectations of conversations.*

Keywords: *Pragmatics, Dialogue Evasion, Politics, Debate.*

1. INTRODUCTION

American political debates are an important part of the democratic process because they give candidates a chance to talk about their ideas and plans. In this situation, dialogue evasion becomes a complex strategy that politicians use to get through challenging discussions. Even though the occurrence has been observed, it has not been fully investigated, especially from a pragmatic point of view. This paper tries to fill that gap by answering the following questions:

- 1) Which pragmatic strategies do politicians employ to evade direct dialogue in debates?
- 2) What forms of dialogue evasion are employed more in American political debates?
- 3) Which maxims are flouted by politicians to achieve dialogue evasion?
- 4) Which contributes more to the effectiveness of dialogue evasion implicature or presupposition?

Based on the previously mentioned questions, it is hypothesized that politicians employ pragmatic strategies, namely implicature and presupposition, and that dialogue evasion takes various forms such as answering a different question, redirection, and not answering at all. It



is thought that politicians use practical tactics like implicature and presupposition, and that in American political debates, dialogue evasion takes the form of answering a different question, redirection, and not answering at all. Politicians flout quantity, quality, relevance and manner maxims in order to avoid direct responses, while implicature is more employed to enable politicians to infer meanings or express implicit assumptions without explicit declarations. In order to achieve the aims of this study, the following procedures have been applied: establishing a theoretical framework for the idea of dialogue evasion and exploring associated concepts that are essential to what is being investigated. Additionally, data collection will be conducted, and an eclectic model will be employed for a pragmatic analysis.

2. RELATED WORKS

"Dodging the Question: A Pragmatic Analysis of Evasion in Political Debates" (2017) by Smith et al. delves into the linguistic strategies employed by politicians to evade direct questions during debates. Through a pragmatic lens, the authors analyze various evasion techniques, such as deflecting, reframing, and equivocating, and examine their effectiveness in shaping public opinion and maintaining political image.

Following this, "The Rhetoric of Political Deception: A Case Study of Evasion in Presidential Debates" (2019) by Jones and Brown focuses on the rhetoric of political deception, specifically in the context of presidential debates. By applying both rhetorical and pragmatic theories, the authors investigate how candidates use evasion as a persuasive tool, exploring its impact on audience perception and the democratic process.

Finally, "Strategic Ambiguity: The Pragmatics of Vagueness in Political Discourse" (2021) by Garcia builds upon previous research, examining the phenomenon of strategic ambiguity in political discourse. Through a pragmatic framework, Garcia analyzes how politicians strategically employ vague language to evade scrutiny, navigate contentious issues, and appeal to diverse audiences, shedding light on the complex dynamics of communication in American political debates.

Dialogue Evasion

Dialogue evasion refers to the strategies employed by individuals in order to avoid direct engagement with questions or subjects. This means that dialogue evasion is a way of communicating in which someone avoids directly responding to the topic of a talk or question.

In the realm of political debates, the concept of dialogue evasion pertains to the deliberate avoidance of providing direct responses to inquiries presented by moderators, adversaries, or the audience (Galasinski, 2000).

According to Bull and Elliott (1998), evasion can manifest in various ways during political discourse

Redirection: Politicians can change the subject from something bad to something less bad or more positive by talking about their own successes or criticizing their opponents' flaws instead of answering the question.



A Non-Answer: is when a politician answers a question but doesn't give the information that was asked for. This can be done by making general statements or talking about related problems without answering the main question.

Answering a Question with Another Question: that challenges the idea of the first question, gives the person time to think, or changes the focus for the person who asked the question. Additionally, they have the ability to redirect the topic to one that the individual is more familiar with or prepared to address.

These strategies aim to prevent self-incrimination, avoid contentious issues, and maintain a favorable public perception.

Pragmatics

The field of pragmatics, which falls under the umbrella of linguistics, investigates the connection between linguistic signs and their users, with a particular focus on the contextual character of meaning (Verschuere, 1999). Levinson (1983) examines the manner in which speakers employ language in social exchanges and how listeners perceive messages that go beyond their literal interpretations. Pragmatics plays a crucial role in examining political communication, as the unspoken elements can have a significant impact on the overall message.

Within the realm of political communication, the field of pragmatics sheds light on the strategic utilization of language by politicians in order to accomplish particular goals, such as avoiding direct confrontations while upholding a favorable public perception (Chilton, 2004).

Flouting Grice's Maxims

According to Grice (1975), Grice's Maxims encompass conversational norms that participants are anticipated to adhere to in order to promote comprehension and clarity. It is categorized into four distinct classifications:

- 1. Quantity:** be sufficiently informative
- 2. Quality:** be truthful
- 3. Relation:** be relevant
- 4. Manner:** be clear and concise.

To avoid dialogue, politicians frequently flout these rules by using ambiguity, too much detail, or irrelevant topics, which direct the conversation away from the original topic without directly refusing to participate.

Implicature

According to Grice (1975), implicature refers to the act of conveying a message indirectly by means of suggestion or implication, as opposed to making a straight declaration. It can be classified into two primary categories:

Conversational Implicature

is derived from the contextual framework of a discussion, which is directed by Grice's maxims of discourse. It is not explicitly stated, but rather deduced by individuals who conform to conversational conventions. It can be further classified into the following



Generalized: is inferred from general conversational norms and doesn't depend on specific contexts.

Particularized: relies on the specific circumstances of the conversation.

Conventional Implicature: which is associated with particular words or phrases, operates autonomously from conversational maxims and plays a role in determining the meaning of sentences.

Implicature plays a crucial role in political speech, enabling politicians to imply certain positions or beliefs without explicit statements, thus leaving room for plausible deniability (Davis, 1998). This strategy is particularly useful in contexts where direct statements might be politically damaging or undesirable.

Presupposition

According to Levinson (1983), presupposition refers to the assumptions that a speaker has, that are believed to be accepted by both the speaker and the listener without requiring explicit confirmation. Yule (1996) classifies it into six distinct categories:

1. Existential Presupposition assumes the existence of entities;
2. Lexical Presupposition assumes that one form translates to another;
3. Structural Presupposition assumes a certain structure is true;
4. Factive Presupposition is true;
5. Non-factual Presupposition implies the assumption is false;
6. Counter-factual Presupposition suggests the opposite.

Politicians frequently employ presuppositions to structure questions or remarks in a manner that accepts certain contentious assumptions as reality, thus shaping the direction of the discussion and the audience's perspective (Levinson, 1983).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The present study employs a mixed-method approach, utilising qualitative and quantitative Research methods to synthesize the data. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2008) define mixed methods as research studies grounded in the pragmatist paradigm and incorporating both qualitative and quantitative approaches across various stages of the research process. The qualitative aspects of the current study comprise the analysis of diasporic ideologies underlying selected novel discourse That is to interpret the use of language by diasporic societies. The quantitative analysis counts the frequency of CS tools used in the extracts to reflect diasporic ideologies.

The quantitative account bolsters, supplements, and strengthens the qualitative work by providing additional value through more prominent, profound, fuller, or more complex answers to the research questions. Notably, 15 extracts from each novel will be analysed to represent the diaspora discourse in the selected novels.



3.2 Data Selection and Description

The current study examines NoViolet Bulawayo's novel 'We Need New Name' as a contemporary representative literary discourse for diaspora. Elizabeth Zandile Tshele, often known as NoViolet Bulawayo, was born in Zimbabwe in 1981. In her book, NoViolet Bulawayo chronicles the life of Darling, a small child raised in Zimbabwe. As they are experiencing turmoil and hardship in Zimbabwe at the time, the first part of the book centres around Darling and her childhood friends and how they understand what is happening there. They frequently act out what is happening in the world through games. The book's second part tracks Darling as she immigrates to America and documents her attempts to assimilate. Darling realizes that she is no longer "Zimbabwean" but rather merely "African" after moving to America. She no longer identifies as a Zimbabwean as a result. Darling accepts that America is not what she had anticipated and often wishes she was back home with her family and friends.

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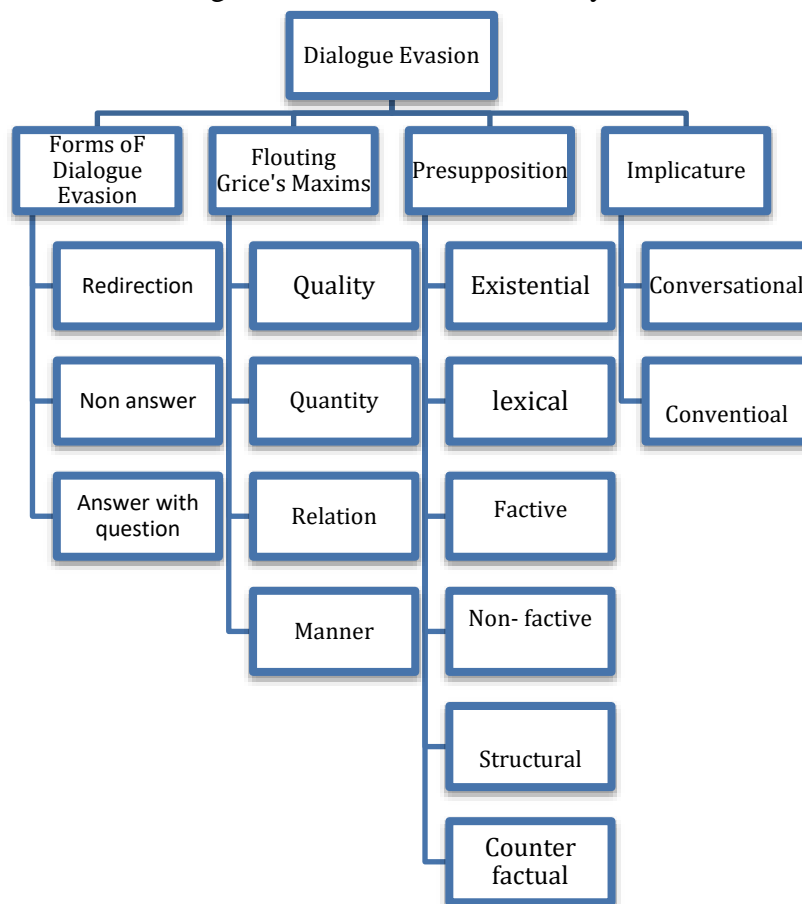
The present study employs mixed methodologies, qualitative and quantitative approaches to synthesize the data. Qualitative methods include describing the types of characteristics of the characters and events without comparing these events in terms of measurement amounts (Thomas, 2003:1). To enhance the qualitative approach, the researcher adopts the quantitative approach to subject the 39 analyzed data to statistical treatment to support or refute alternate

knowledge claims (Williams, 2007). In relation to the quantitative method, statistical means are used for calculating the results of the analysis by using the percentage equation as shown below:

$$\text{Percentage} = \frac{\text{Occurrence of each strategy} \times 100}{\text{Total number of strategies}}$$

After the data is collected, an analysis is done by examining the extracts through the eclectic model which is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The model of the analysis



Data Analysis

Extract No. 1

Wallace: "What is the Trump healthcare plan?"

Trump: "First of all, I guess I'm debating you, not him, but that's okay. I'm not surprised..."

Forms of Dialogue Evasion

Trump redirects the conversation from the initial question about the healthcare plan to a comment about the debate dynamics as in "I guess I'm debating you, not him". This shift away from the healthcare topic serves to avoid providing a direct answer. Furthermore, the response can also be classified as a non-answer because it doesn't provide any information regarding the Trump healthcare plan, which was the subject of the question. Additionally, while not explicitly posing a question in response, the statement implies a rhetorical question about who the real opponent is in the debate, which distracts from the original question.

Flouting Grice's Maxims

Trump flouts the maxim of relation because his response is not directly related to the question asked. Instead of providing information about the healthcare plan, he comments on the debate's dynamics, failing to keep the conversation relevant. The quantity maxim is also flouted because he fails to provide the right amount of information.

Implicatures

By employing conversational implicature in his response, Trump indicates that the moderator may act more like an opponent than a neutral facilitator as in "I guess I'm debating you, not him".

Presupposition Types

In Trump's response, two types of presuppositions can be identified. The first type is existential presupposition which indicates that there is a debate and is realized by using the phrase "I'm debating you, not him" while the second one is non-factual presupposition which presupposes that Biden is the opponent in the debate not the moderator and is realized by the verb "guess".

Extract No. 2

Wallace: "You have promised to repeal and replace Obamacare, but you have never in these four years come up with a plan..."

Trump: "We got rid of the individual mandate."

Forms of Dialogue Evasion

Trump's response employs redirection by shifting the focus from the broader issue of replacing Obamacare to a specific action taken against it. The response is a non-answer to the question posed where Wallace points out the lack of a comprehensive plan over four years, and Trump's reply about the individual mandate does not address the central issue of providing a replacement plan for Obamacare.

Flouting Grice's Maxims

Trump's response does not directly address Wallace's point about the promise to repeal and replace Obamacare and instead he mentions the individual mandate, flouting the maxim of relevance. Furthermore, quantity maxim is flouted by providing insufficient information.

Implicature

Trump in his statement "We got rid of the individual mandate" implies that this action is significant enough to be considered progress toward the larger goal of repealing and replacing Obamacare. Thus, conversational implicature is employed.

Presupposition

The presupposition that the speech identifies is existential presupposition which is realized by using the noun phrase the individual mandate, indicating its existence. Moreover, it presupposes the fact that Trump promises to repeal and replace Obamacare.

Extract No. 3

Wallace: "You have repeatedly criticized...mail-in voting as being fraudulent. But in 2018...there was no substantial evidence of fraud."

Trump: "They found ballots in a wastepaper basket.....They're sending millions of ballots all over the country."

Forms of Dialogue Evasion

Trump redirects the conversation from the general statement about the lack of substantial evidence of fraud in mail-in voting to specific instances he perceives as evidence to the contrary as it is clear in "They found ballots in a wastepaper basket". Add to this, the response serves as a non-answer since Trump ignores Wallace's question concerning mail-in voting's security in 2018, focusing instead on individual situations to infer a larger fraud pattern without answering the question.

Flouting Grice's Maxims

Quality, Quantity, and relevance maxims are flouted in Trump's response because he does not give enough information, uses examples that may not prove his point well, and does not directly on-topic because does not address the specific issue that is discussed.

Implicature

Conversational Implicature**:These statement "ballots in a wastepaper basket" and "sending of "millions of ballots all over the country" imply that mail-in voting is inherently unsafe and susceptible to fraud, hence conversational implicature is employed.

Presupposition

Trump's response presupposes the existence of significant fraud in the mail-in voting system, and this type of presupposition is realized by using the noun phrase a wastepaper basket. Furthermore, Trump presupposes that the cheating in the mail-in voting system is already found as this indicate by the factive verb "found".

Extract No. 4

Wallace: "Are you willing, tonight, to condemn white supremacists and militia groups..."

Trump: "Sure, I'm willing to do that... But I would say almost everything I see is from the left wing, not from the right."

Forms of Dialogue Evasion

Trump starts with a general agreement "**Sure, I'm willing to do that**" but quickly shifts the focus towards a different issue, which serves as a non-answer to the direct request for condemnation. After that, Trump redirects the issue to criticism of the left wing, thereby deflecting attention away from the original question regarding white supremacists and militia groups.

Flouting Grice's Maxims

Quality, Quantity, and relevance maxims are flouted in Trump's response because he does not give enough information, uses examples that may not prove his point well, and does not directly on-topic because does not address the specific issue that is discussed. The response begins relevantly but quickly shifts into another issue which does not directly answer the question about condemning white supremacists and militia groups.

Implicature

Conversational Implicature is identified in this extract. Trump's response implies that he thinks violence or extremism from the left wing is a bigger problem than from white supremacists and militia groups, making it seem like the issue with these groups is not as important.

Presupposition

The response presupposes that violence and extremism primarily originate from the left wing, an assertion that shifts the focus of the conversation. Implicitly, there's a presupposition that if the left wing were not as described, the issue of condemning white supremacists and militia groups might not be as pressing or framed in the same way.

Extract No. 5

Wallace: "What do you believe about the science of climate change?"

Trump: "I believe that we have to do everything we can to have immaculate air, immaculate water..."

Forms of Dialogue Evasion

Trump's response can be classified as a non-answer with respect to the specific question about the science of climate change. Instead of addressing his beliefs about climate science, he shifts the focus to the goal of having "immaculate air, immaculate water," which does not directly answer the question about climate change science. Additionally, Trump's response redirects the conversation from the science of climate change to the outcomes of environmental policy.

Flouting Grice's Maxims

In this response, all the maxims are flouted. The maxim of relevance is flouted by not directly answering the question about climate change science. Instead, it addresses a related but distinct topic of environmental quality. The answer provides less information than what might be expected from a direct response to the question, leading to the flouting of quality

maxim. Additionally, the response is clear and provides a positive statement about environmental goals but lacks the direct engagement with the topic of climate change science that the question demands.

Implicature

The response implies that the focus should be on the practical outcomes related to environmental management (air and water quality) rather than the scientific debate on climate change. Thus, conversational implicature is employed.

Presupposition

Trump’s response presupposes that he mentions information that may be wrong by using the verb “believe”

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study is summarized as follows

Table (1) The Results of the Analysis

No.	Forms of Dialogue Evasion	Freq.	Pr.	presupposition	Fr.	Pr.	CP	Fr.	Pr	Implicature	Fr.	Pr
1	Redirection	3	37.5%	Existential	5	55.5%	Quantity	4	22.2%	Conversational	5	100%
2	Non answer	5	62.5%	Factive	1	11.1%	Quality	5	27.7%	Conventional	0	0
3	Answer with question			Non Factive	2	22.2%	Relation	5	27.7%			
4				Structural	0	0	Manner	4	22.2%			
5				Counter	1	11.1%						
Total		8	100%		9	99.9%		18	99.8%		5	100%



The study of dialogue evasion strategies in American political debates, particularly 2020 presidential debates, reveals significant insights into the tactical use of language by politicians. This study focuses on examining how pragmatic strategies such as implicature and presupposition, alongside the flouting of Grice's maxims, facilitate dialogue evasion. The results reveal a consistent pattern in all the studied extracts. This supports the original hypotheses and provides a more nuanced understanding of how people talk about political issues.

1. Politicians, as observed in the analyzed extracts, employ various forms of dialogue evasion, including redirection, non-answers, and answering a question with another question. These strategies serve multiple objectives, such as diverting from potentially damaging topics, avoiding controversial matters, and maintaining a positive public image. The strategic use of implicature and presupposition further enhances the effectiveness of these tactics, enabling politicians to imply meanings or assert unspoken assumptions without explicit statements.
2. The analysis indicates that politicians frequently flout Grice's Maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner to avoid direct dialogue. This deliberate flouting serves as a tool to redirect the conversation, mitigate potential fallout from direct answers, and maintain narrative control.
3. Implicature and presupposition emerge as pivotal in understanding political speech. Politicians use these linguistic tools to convey messages that resonate with their agenda or to couch their responses in ways that offer plausible deniability.
4. The use of dialogue evasion, while potentially frustrating for audiences seeking direct answers, reveals a complex interplay between language, power, and public perception.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has been limited to analyze dialogue evasion in American political debates, highlighting how politicians navigate their conversations. By employing pragmatic strategies, flouting conversational norms, implicature and presupposition, politicians skillfully mix revealing information with keeping things hidden. This helps them control what they share without being completely transparent. While such strategies may serve immediate rhetorical and strategic goals, they also prompt a broader reflection on the nature of political discourse and its implications for democratic engagement.

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