Equivocation and Challenge to Equivocation in the Proceedings of a Special Parliamentary Commission at the Lithuanian Parliament

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Abstract. The present article generally falls within the domain of problem-oriented sociolinguistics (Janicki, 1990, 1999) with the basic target of a sociolinguistic problem of equivocation in political contexts. Bavelas et al (1990) theory of equivocal communication has been taken as a framework for the present analysis of equivocation. The study is a qualitative analysis of two extracts from the official transcripts of the proceedings of a special parliamentary commission on the issue of the possible threats to Lithuanian national security. The work of the commission was in progress in November, 2003. By applying principles of conversation analysis (Hutchby and Drew, 1995), the study examines the respondents’ attempts to evade the given questions in their turns. It concomitantly considers the questioners’ turns, where they challenge the equivocation of their opponents trying to elicit the necessary information. The study results in outlining the means of equivocation and the ways of challenge to equivocation used by the participants, as, for instance, appealing to the failure of memory, attacking the question, etc. in the category of equivocation as well as specifying the question, reminding the respondents of their responsibility, etc. in the category challenge.

Introduction

In recent years the scholarly interest in a versatile interrelation between language and society has shaped out into several fast growing paradigms such as language and medicine (Ainsworth-Vaughn, 2001; Fleischman, 2001), language and law (Shuy, 1998, 2001), language and media (Cotter, 2001; Fairclough, 1995) as well as language and politics (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 1997; Wilson, 1990). All of these approaches are to a certain extent directed towards tackling societal inadequacies. This article is an attempt to join the problem-oriented sociolinguistic scholarship, more specifically, the field of political linguistics, by shedding light on a sociolinguistic problem of equivocation in political discourse. Provided that equivocation is conceptualized as an intentional avoidance of giving a straightforward reply (see section 2), its frequent use by politicians and other influential state officials can be a significant hindrance for the general public to get the inevitable information. Consequently equivocation in political discourse poses an acute language-based problem. The main goal of the present analysis is thus to examine, firstly, the means of evading a question and, secondly, the means of challenging these attempts of evasion in a question-answer type of interaction in political discourse.

Although neither research on equivocation itself nor its analyses in political contexts are deprived of a certain scholarly insight, the present study differs from the previous ones in two aspects. Firstly, it is common practice to use televised political interviews in the research on political equivocation (Bull, 1998, 2000; Bull and Mayer, 1993) where politicians are questioned by reporters. In this article, however, data are taken from the proceedings of a special parliamentary commission at the Lithuanian Parliament. In this form of political discourse the function of questioning is fulfilled by politicians, namely members of the Lithuanian Parliament. Secondly, the present study focuses not only on the analysis of how the respondents equivocate, but also on the challenge that their attempts of equivocation receive from the questioners. Challenging the use of equivocation has scarcely received scholarly attention even though it presents an important strategy in political discourse.

Theoretical Considerations

On Problem-oriented Sociolinguistics

A route for a non-essentialist and problem-oriented sociolinguistics was introduced by Janicki in 1990. For him, sociolinguistic inquires should primarily center around the acute practical or theoretical problems, as for instance, a language-related persecution, injustice, ignorance, prejudice and intolerance as well as communication breakdowns and misunderstandings (Janicki, 1990:51-7). As he points out, in a sociolinguistic inquiry, problems can and should be solved at the linguistic level by easing social tension through the increased language awareness of the general public. To set an example, in his own scholarly endeavors, Janicki tackles the issue of political correctness (1997), the causes of misunderstandings (1999) and the use of difficult and incomprehensible language by such public figures as lawyers, politicians, academics, etc. (2002).

On Political Discourse Analysis

Political discourse can be highlighted as one of the fields fertile for sociolinguistic problems. Although the interest in political rhetoric can reach as far as the times of antiquity, the current goals of political linguistics are
considerably different. One of the most significant features of the contemporary research on political discourse is a highly interdisciplinary approach. To put it in Wodak’s terms: “Social phenomena are too complex to be dealt with by only one field” (1995:206). Consequently, in research on language and politics various perspectives have been combined, as, for instance, a cognitive perspective in the study of political ideologies (Lakoff, 1996), critical discourse analysis in the study of racism (Van Dijk, 1993), or a pragmatic approach in the study of implicatures and presuppositions in political contexts (Wilson, 1990).

On the Theory of Equivocation

Research on equivocation in political discourse, which is also a framework of the present study, should be placed among the above indicated approaches as well. The best-known theory of equivocal communication, offered by Bavelas et al (1990), stems from the discipline of social psychology and has been successfully applied in the study of manipulative and evasive discourse in social interviews and talk shows (Bavelas et al, 1990; Bull, 1998, 2000; Bull and Mayer, 1993). Bavelas et al define equivocation as “non-straightforward communication”, which also “appears ambiguous, contradictory, tangential, obscure, or even evasive” (1990:28). They compare equivocation to “a reversible visual illusion” (1990:13), which keeps on changing before one’s eyes. Therefore, the mission the authors set for their theory is to try to explain why people choose to sound manipulative and equivocal. According to Bavelas et al, it is a specific communicative situation that makes a person equivocate. Namely, if in a certain situation all available alternatives of a reply might have negative consequences but a reply still has to be given, a person will try to say nothing “while saying something” (Bavelas, 1990:57), i.e. he or she will equivocate. They call such situations as avoidance-avoidance conflict. For example:

**Question:** The meat that is on sale today, is it good?

**Male:** [0.5 sec.] (Pitch plummeting:) OOOOhh (then levelling; fast, picking up some enthusiasm at the end:) it’s fairly
FINE yes (Bavelas et al 1990:14; Bavelas’ et al emphasis).

Political discourse can undoubtedly be considered as one of the domains richest in the avoidance-avoidance conflict situations. On the one hand, for political figures to proceed with their successful political career, it is of vital importance to preserve their intact public image or “face” (Brown and Levinson, 1987). On the other hand, as Bull (2000) points out, in a political arena the category of face consists of three interrelated parts: one’s own face, the party face and the face of the influential supporters. A politician is obliged to attend to all three faces simultaneously and thus a possibility of being trapped in an avoidance – avoidance conflict situation significantly increases.

Data and Method

The data for this study are taken from the official transcript of the proceedings of a special parliamentary commission appointed by the Lithuanian Parliament to investigate possible threats to national security in November, 2003. For the present analysis, two extracts have been chosen from the transcript, which is available on the parliamentary website together with the audio record. The participants in the proceedings of the commission fall within two categories: questioners and respondents. All of the nine questioners are members of parliament (MP hereafter). Among the respondents there are politicians, such as MP, members of the President’s office, etc., and other state officials, such as high-rankers of the police, the head of the State Border Guard Service, etc.

The most important distributive criterion among the respondents is their relation to the issue under investigation of this commission, namely the threat to national security. According to this criterion, the respondents are either suspected as involved in the activities causing the above indicated threat or interested in investigating the causes of that threat. For the purpose of the present study, the discourse of the former group is of primary importance. For these people the proceedings of the commission can present a highly face threatening situation and make them resort to equivocation in large quantities. On the other hand, the task of the questioners is to elicit as much of the relevant information as possible. The respondents’ equivocation thus presents the main hindrance to the questioners’ task. Consequently, a high frequency of challenge to equivocation on the part of the questioners can be expected.

As has been indicated, the study generally falls within the domain of a problem-oriented sociolinguistics with the main goal of tackling the problem of equivocation in political discourse. Methodologically, it is a small scale qualitative analysis as it focuses on the question how rather than how often and how much (Johnstone, 2000:35; Johnstone’s italics). The study follows the main principles of conversation analysis: “to discover how participants understand and respond to one another in their turns at talk” (Hutchby and Drew, 1995:182). Here, the focus is on how the respondents use their turns to evade the given requests for information and how the questioners try to elicit that information through a challenge to the equivocation on the part of the respondents.

Analysis

The following two extracts show the joint effort of several questioners to obtain information from the respondents who are a police deputy general commissioner in the first extract and an MP in the second extract. Both the respondents are suspected as involved in the activities related to the above indicated threats to national security. Questioner 2 also serves the function of a moderate. The main difference between the two extracts is the result of the questioners’ effort to challenge equivocation. In the first extract the questioners succeed in receiving the requested information, whereas in the second case their effort fails.

4.1. Extract 1

(1) **Questioner 1:** The honorable police commissioner, could you please tell us if you have personally received any phone calls or any other assignments on the part of the President himself or the advisors to the President regarding the intercession and support to any of the police commissioners of the regional police stations.
that might sound as a candid negation of the propositional challenge. Therefore, the respondent continues with a reply that also seems to be the one of the simplest and the easiest to mostly used techniques (Bull and Mayer, 1993). However, political interviews, this strategy is known as one of the that…'. In the literature on equivocal communication in having already answered the question: ‘I have mentioned that kind of phone calls. 

The respondent starts his first turn (2) with a remark about the President, the highest authority to the President Mr. Račkauskas or with the others because I am not acquainted with them. On the other hand, even if the advisor the general commissioner wanted anything, our relationship is very specific; even if he wanted, he would never call, would never ask for anything.

The respondent’s equivocation in turn (2) can be considered unsuccessful as it does not slip unnoticed by the questioner 3. The latter resorts to a mild form of challenge by specifying the question in turn (4). This challenge does not present an open threat to the respondent’s face as it would be in the case of a direct charge with equivocation. Nevertheless, the very fact that the questioner 3 clearly voices his intention to put the same question to the respondent again — ‘I would like to specify the question’ — shows that the questioner 3 means to sound demanding. Moreover, the questioner 3 makes it a constructive challenge by narrowing the scope of reference of the previous question to a single person, namely the President. This formulation of a question is effective to return the respondent’s attention to the person – the President of the Republic – he tried to evade talking about in turn (2).

The basis for the respondent’s further desperate attempts to continue with equivocation becomes clearer only after the last piece of challenge is given by the questioner 3 in turn (12). What the questioner 3 does is to disambiguate the referent of the term “the President of the Republic”, which seems to have been artificially made ambiguous by the respondent. At the time, when the questioner 3 uncovers in turn (12) the keystone of the respondent’s equivocation, the latter is left with nothing to take hold of and comes up with a straightforward answer: ‘Yes’.

4.2. Extract 2

(1) Questioner 1: Coming back to your conversation which was already made public two weeks ago; tell us is it your
In comparison to the aggressive performance on the part of the respondents, the questioner 1 assumes a relatively more reserved tactics of challenge. In turn (2), he interrupts the respondent to remind him of the facts that the latter seems to be ignoring. In turn (5), the questioner 1 voices his determination to elicit the requested information: ‘What would be your answer though?’ Similarly, in turn (9) he specifies the question: ‘And how was the money received?’ Nevertheless, in spite of not sustaining the respondent’s aggressive tone, the questioner 1 shows his willingness to stop the respondent’s equivocation. It is seen in such moves as interruption, repetition – ‘It was publicized, the honorable colleague, it was publicized…’ – and a straightforward assertion – ‘You heard it yourself at the Seim’.

In the meantime the respondent undertakes quite a successful strategy of equivocation to cut the given question into small fragments. In doing so, he achieves the following result: the details distracted from the context appear irrelevant and the whole discussion turns into meaningless exchanges. For example, in turns (6) and (7) the respondent gives short questions in reply: ‘To what question?’ and ‘From where?’. However, the most significant manifestation of this strategy appears in turn (8). Here, the respondent concentrates on a single word from the initial question – ‘pieces’. Namely, he confirms the questioner’s assumption that the term ‘pieces’ refers to thousands and thereby adds nothing new regarding the requested information.

The culmination of this episode of the interview is reached in turn (11). After tolerating the respondent’s aggressive form of equivocation for a considerable part of the episode, the questioner 1 radically changes his strategy by embarking on an open and strong challenge. Firstly, the questioner 1 resorts to metaphorical use which effectively strengthens his argument: ‘Well, I suggest not playing a cat and mouse game’. Then he straightforwardly points out the responsibility the respondent has to assume: ‘You have to answer the question which has been put to you’. Such a move is a highly face threatening act to the respondent, who, nonetheless, does not seem to adequately react to it. In turn (12) the respondent continues with the previously adopted strategy of equivocation to touch upon separate fragments of the initial question: ‘Mr. Konradas Juzeliūnas has covered 2 thousand litas of the travel expenses of a Dutch professor’. Given that an intact “face” is one of the basic attributes of a successful political career in a democratic political system, an unconstrained sacrifice of one’s “face” must be a very radical and unlikely choice. To try to explain it, a principle of cost-benefit calculus could be applied. If a politician prefers to lose “face” through an open challenge of his equivocation, it means that the benefit of not giving the information that is required is bigger than the damage of a bad reputation.

**Conclusions**

Equivocation is a widely spread discursive strategy among politicians and a sociolinguistic problem for the recipients of their discourse, namely the general public. Therefore, it is of primary importance to enlighten the general public about the manipulative and equivocal use of language by political and other public figures. The purpose of this study was to analyze how politicians and other state officials use their turns to evade the given questions and to challenge equivocation.

As long as it was a small scale qualitative analysis no far reaching generalization are possible. However, the following conclusions can be made. Firstly, the respondents equivocate
by making reference to the failure of memory, by claiming that the question has been answered, by attacking the questioners or the content of the questions. These techniques of equivocation are among the most typical in political contexts (Bull and Mayer, 1993). In addition, the respondents also use means of evading a question that have not been widely discussed. These are: resorting to ambiguity, ignoring the presumption of relevance and cutting the question into decontextualized meaningless fragments. The last strategy seemed to be the most fruitful in evading questions in this piece of data.

As far as the challenge to equivocation is concerned, the strategies vary on the basis of strength and aggressiveness. Interrupting the respondent, repeating the question or specifying the question are among the mild ways of challenge. Appealing to the respondent’s conscience or sense of duty to give the requested information as well as openly pointing out his equivocation are stronger means of challenge used in the extracts discussed. It appears that a successful way of challenge is the one which allows the questioner to deprive the respondent of his basis of equivocation. In this study this strategy was more successful then an open threat to the respondent’s face.

References


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Išsisukinėjimas ir atkirtis įsisukinėjimui Seimo specialiosios parlamentinės komisijos diskurse

Santrauka


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46
APPENDIXES

APPENDIX 1

(1) G. STEPONAVIČIUS. Gerbiamasis komisare, sakykite pračom, ar jūs pats asmeniškai esate sulaikęs skambučių ar kitų pavedimų, kurie būtų buvę iš paties Prezidento arba jo patarejų pusės ir būtų susiję užtariant arba proteguojant vieno ar kito rajoninio policijos komisariato komisarius.

(2) R. A. SENOVAITIS. Aš minėjau, kad neturėjau kontaktų nei su patareju Račkausku, nei su kitais, kadangi nesu pažįstamas. Iš kitos pusės, jeigu ir būtų patarejas generalinis komisaras ir kažką norėtu, tarp mūsų specifinai santykių, jūs net ir norėdamas niekada nepaskambintų, nepaprašytų kažko.

(3) A. SAKALAS. Kas dar turite klausimų?

(4) A. KAŠTA Aš norėčiau patikslinti klausimą, ar jūs sulaikėte pačio Prezidento skambučio, dėl kokio nors klausimo.

(5) R. A. SENOVAITIS. Turite galvoje Respublikos Prezidento.

(6) A. KAŠTA Taip. Respublikos Prezidento.

(7) R. A. SENOVAITIS. Kiek pinigų šiai konferencijai buvo pervesti į Konrado Juzelių konto sąskaitą?

(8) A. SAKALAS. Ponas Steponavičius, mes turime paduoti kitus informacijos šaltinius.

(9) G. STEPONAVIČIUS. Mūsų komisija dirba ne prūs diena, gerbiamasis komisare, mes esame susipažinęs su kitais, kadangi nesu pažįstamas. Be abejo, mes turime padėti jums su kitais, kurie nėra pateikti jums informacijos šaltinius.

(10) A. SAKALAS. Jūs įsakote įsakymą tiesiogiai ir nieko daugiau.


(12) A. KAŠTA Taip. Respublikos Prezidento.

APPENDIX 2

(1) G. STEPONAVIČIUS. Gižiant prie jūsų pokalbio, kuris yra paviešintas dar prieš paties savaičių. Sakykite, ar jūsų pokalbis su ponu Juzeliu, jeigu jūs patvirtinate, kad tai buvo būtint pokalbis su tuo dėl pinigų, kur jūs išvardijote "štukomis" ir tai galima būtų suprasti tiksčiau, ar jūsų tuospinigus gavote grynais, ar tie pinigai buvo pervesti į Klaipėdos universiteto specialiųjų tikslų sąskaitų, ar jūsų užsimenėte?

(2) E. SKARBALIUS. Vėl visu patyrę aš norėčiau patikslinti klausimą, kas vyko prieš pusę, kad jūsų tuospinigus gavote į kokią tikslinę sąskaitą?

(3) G. STEPONAVIČIUS. Jūs buvo paskelbtas... Gerbiamasis kolega, jūsų tuospinigus gavote į kokią tikslinę sąskaitą?

(4) E. SKARBALIUS. Taip, aš girdėjau, bet jūsų tuospinigus gavote į kokią tikslinę sąskaitą?

(5) G. STEPONAVIČIUS. Iš kur jūsų pinigai buvo gauti?

(6) E. SKARBALIUS. Taip, ir tokią informaciją jūsų tuospinigus gavote į kokią tikslinę sąskaitą?

(7) A. SAKALAS. Į jūsų tikslinę sąskaitą?

(8) E. SKARBALIUS. "štukos", taip, yra tiksčiausiai.

(9) G. STEPONAVIČIUS. O kaip tie pinigai buvo gauti?

(10) E. SKARBALIUS. Jūsų tikslinę sąskaitą?

(11) G. STEPONAVIČIUS. Na, aš sutinku nežiūri, nei kareivii, nei pelės žaidimo. Jūs turite atsiprašyti, kur jūsų tuospinigus gavote į kokią tikslinę sąskaitą?

(12) E. SKARBALIUS. Būtint iš ponos Konrado Juzeliu, Konradas Juzeliu, taip, kad ji gavo į kokią tikslinę sąskaitą?