RESEARCH NOTE

Political Equivocation: A Situational Explanation

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Equivocation is non-straightforward communication and includes such speech acts as: 'self-contradictions, inconsistencies, subject switches, tangentialisations, incomplete sentences, misunderstandings, obscure style or mannerisms of speech, . . . etc.' (Watzlawick, Beavin Bavelas & Jackson, 1967: 76).[2] Numerous examples of political equivocation can be found in the news or even in carefully scripted political commercials (Joslyn, 1980). This article applies our general theory of equivocation (e.g. Bavelas, 1983, 1985; Bavelas, Black, Chovil & Mullett, 1988b) to the specific case of the vague, tangential communication that politicians often use. In brief, we propose that equivocation is caused by the individual's situation and not by any intrinsic characteristic of the individual.

To define equivocation more precisely, we have used Haley's (1959) model, based on departure from essential elements of communication. It is a classic principle of communication that all messages should contain four elements: *I* (sender) am saying *this* (content) to *you* (receiver) in this *situation* (context). Haley noted that an equivocal message obscures at least one of these four elements. We have therefore translated the four elements into the following four questions, by which the degree of equivocation in a message can be assessed:

Sender: To what extent is the message *the speaker's own opinion?*

Content: How clear is the message, in terms of *what is being said?*

Receiver: To what extent is the message *addressed to the other person?*

Context: To what extent is this a *direct answer to the question?* (Bavelas & Smith, 1982)

Analysis of the following example of political equivocation illustrates two of the above dimensions:

Q: Do you favor or oppose federal gun control?

A: I favor control of the so-called Saturday Night Special, snud-nosed [*sic*] . . . snub-nosed guns that are used only to kill police and each other for concealment. There is no excuse for their use. (Walter Mondale in response to Dan Rather at a Democratic candidates' debate held in New York, 28 March, 1984.)

The content *(what is being said)* of Walter Mondale's response is highly equivocal. The first sentence of the response is unclear: aside from the obvious speech error ('snud-nosed' guns), the second phrase implies that guns kill each other in order to remain concealed. Moreover, the term 'Saturday Night Special' is ambiguous, as Mondale could be referring to a kind of handgun (a snub-nosed gun), or to a particular use of a handgun (guns used to kill police), or to the legal status of a handgun (a concealed weapon). The last sentence is also unclear, because the referent for the phrase 'their use' is not clear — does he mean their use to kill policemen? Or any use?

Mr Mondale's response is also equivocal on our Context dimension *(direct answer to the question),* because he did not answer Mr Rather's question. Instead, he answered a very different question, which might be phrased as 'Do you favour the control of guns that are used only to kill policemen, and do you think there is any excuse for their use?'

This definition of equivocation as departure from essential elements of clear communication is the basis of our measurement procedure (Bavelas & Smith, 1982). We train lay judges to focus on each of the four questions set out above. Each judge indicates where a message goes on each dimension (e.g. 'How clear is this message, in terms of just what is being said' on a scale from 'completely clear' to 'completely unclear'), using a magnitude estimation scale. The raw scores (in centimetres) are standardised and then averaged across 6 to 12 judges, yielding a standard score for each message on each dimension. These scores have intraclass reliabilities greater than 0.90, as long as variance is uncurtailed. Taken together, the four dimensions provide a quantitative filter for detecting equivocation. Because they are standard scores, they can also be added across the four dimensions; a low Sum value indicates that a message is clear in all of its essential elements.

Given that we can measure equivocation, the interesting question is why does it occur? One could attribute a politician's equivocal speech to personal shortcomings or furtive intentions (e.g. Ekman, 1985; Graber, 1976; Spero, 1980), that is, to characteristics of the communicator. However, our laboratory research has demonstrated that equivocal replies are a function, not of the individual, but of the individual's communicative situation (Bavelas, 1983, 1985; Bavelas & Chovil, 1986; Bavelas, Black, Chovil & Mullett, 1988a, b).

We have extended Lewin's (1938) conflict theory to communicative settings and proposed that equivocal speech occurs when a speaker has a choice between two unattractive (negative) communicative alternatives, but must still say something. These communicative avoidance–avoidance conflicts exist when all possible direct messages in the situation lead to bad consequences. Examples of such 'communicative minefields' include a choice between lying and hurting someone's feelings (as when one is required to comment on a completely unsuitable gift from a dear relative, or when a fellow worker asks for an opinion on her appalling new hairdo); a choice between conflicting loyalties or duties (as when one is asked to write a reference for an employee or student who is very nice but incompetent); or a choice between offending either one person (or side) or the other (as when Mondale was asked a question that would alienate either those voters who were for gun control or those who were against it).

According to Lewin's theory, the effects of an avoidance–avoidance conflict are vacillation and, if possible, escape from the field. Equivocation, which avoids the essential elements of direct communication, thereby avoids the negative consequences of direct communication in the situation. The individual resorts to 'the gentle art of saying nothing by saying something . . . as the only possible reactions to an . . . untenable communication context' (Watzlawick, Beavin Bavelas & Jackson, 1967: 78). Thus, when the evoking situation is considered, Mondale's ambiguity and re-interpretation of the question can be seen as a skilful answer to a problematic question.

To investigate the antecedents of equivocal speech we have used a simple experimental paradigm in which subjects are randomly assigned to a hypothetical situation that created either an avoidance–avoidance conflict or no communicative conflict (the control condition). We have conducted 19 experiments (cf. Bavelas, 1983, 1985; Bavelas & Chovil, 1986; Bavelas, Black, Chovil & Mullett, 1988a, b) using many different hypothetical scenarios, such as a conflict between lying versus hurting a friend's feelings (e.g. the unsuitable gift) or a conflict between lying for financial gain versus telling the truth at a financial cost (e.g. writing an advertisement for a car in poor condition). The response format was also varied: In different experiments, participants have chosen responses among provided alternatives, written their own replies, replied to questions on the telephone, and answered questions face-to-face with an experimenter. The resulting messages were scaled for equivocation using the procedure outlined above and detailed in Bavelas and Smith (1982). In all experiments, regardless of the communication format or the specific scenario, the messages elicited in avoidance–avoidance conflicts were significantly more equivocal on one or more dimensions than were the control messages.

These studies permitted us to explore in considerable detail both the situations that lead to equivocation and the subtle ways in which people are able to escape confict by equivocating. The participants took the situations seriously, and we hoped that hypothetical scenarios were similar to 'real-life' conflicts. The obvious next step was to find a field setting in which we could use the same paradigm, in order to expand the generality of our theory and findings.

One experiment in this paradigm (Bavelas & Chovil, 1986, Experiment 2) provided a bridge to the present study. Each of our undergraduate subjects was asked to imagine that he or she was a Member of Parliament and that a highway was being planned for the home riding, with two routes under consideration. In the conflict condition, the subject was told that both routes had advantages and disadvantages and that the constitutency was equally divided about which route was better. In the non-conflict condition, the subject was told that one route was clearly better and favoured by all constituents. Then the subject was asked to write a telegram responding to a hometown reporter's question, 'Which route do you prefer, Route A or Route B?' The written responses of the subjects in the avoidance–avoidance conflict were significantly more equivocal than those of the control subjects. An example of a conflict message is:

> Since both routes have their inherent advantages and disadvantages, I plan to seek the route which will benefit our community the most.

An example of a non-conflict message is:

    I'd prefer to choose Route A.

Thus, the responses of university students role-playing the common political dilemma of avoiding a commitment that would alienate part of the electorate appeared to us indistinguishable from the statements of real politicians in similar situations. However, it was obviously not appropriate to generalise from the results of this experiment to an explanation of actual political equivocation. Politicians' equivocation could involve entirely different processes. For example, it could be that politicians are impervious to avoidance–avoidance conflicts, so that such conflicts do not cause them to equivocate. Or, it could be that politicians are by nature vague and non-commital, and they equivocate whether conflict is present or not. Note that both of these proposals invoke the common assumption that a politician is fundamentally different from the average person. More narrowly, it is possible that our laboratory experiment, because it involved only written responses, could not be generalised to spoken communication.

The field experiment to be reported here was conducted in order to eliminate the aforementioned alternative explanations of our results and to extend the generality of our theory of equivocation beyond hypothetical, laboratory situations. The study was conducted at the 1984 leadership convention of the Liberal Party of Canada. The party leader to be chosen to succeed Pierre Trudeau would serve as Prime Minister and subsequently lead the party in the coming election. The leading candidate was John Turner, followed by Jean Chretien. Elected delegates to this convention responded to a question posed by an experimenter/interviewer. Thus, subjects in our study were politicians participating in an important political event. Because the experimenter interviewed the delegates with a tape recorder, the limitations of written responses were transcended. Finally, in order to confirm that an avoidance–avoidance conflict leads to political equivocation, we constructed a question designed to put some delegates in an avoidance–avoidance conflict and other delegates (the control group) in no conflict at all.

The reader will see that we used a small sample ($N = 12$) to test our hypothesis. Most of our previous studies have also used relatively small samples, for three reasons. First, the scaling procedure is quite demanding, and the judges find it hard to scale a large number of messages. Second, large samples have not been necessary to achieve statistical significance. Because the power of any statistical test is inversely related to N, the use of a small sample is in fact conservative. Third, as can be seen from the large number of experiments conducted so far, we rely on replication rather than large samples to establish the generality of our findings.

All interviews took place at the convention site (Ottawa Civic Centre) on the day before the approximately 3,500 eligible delegates would cast their ballots for party leader. The experimenter stationed herself off the convention floor and looked for individuals who were wearing badges or buttons exclusively for Turner or for Chretien. She approached each individual, introduced herself as a student conducting a study of political communication, and then asked if he or she would answer some questions. If consent was given, the experimenter began to tape-

record the interview. She first asked which candidate the individual was committed to and whether he or she was an elected delegate. The experimenter then asked a series of questions, the first of which was always, 'Do you think the Liberals can win the next election under John Turner?' After the interview, the experimenter thanked the individual for answering her questions.

Which candidate the delegate supported determined whether the question put him or her in an avoidance–avoidance conflict. Delegates supporting John Turner were considered not to be in a conflict, because polls at the time indicated he would be elected the next Prime Minister, and they obviously thought he could win. Jean Chretien's supporters were considered to be in an avoidance–avoidance conflict, because they were caught between two unpleasant communicative alternatives: vocal disloyalty to the party ('No, the Liberals cannot win the next election under John Turner') or vocal disloyalty to their candidate by conceding a major point to the other candidate ('Yes, the Liberals can win under John Turner').

Of the 38 delegates who agreed to participate, 25 were male and 13 female. Thirteen of the subjects spoke French as their first language, and 25 spoke English as their first language; all interviews were conducted in English. By means to be described below, the final number of subjects whose messages were analysed was reduced to 12.

To determine which messages were suitable for inclusion, the interviews were analysed for variables such as delegate status and procedure. Of the 38 delegates interviewed, 12 supported John Turner and 26 supported Jean Chretien. Half of the Turner responses were excluded for the following reasons: two of the supporters were not elected delegates (i.e. were merely attending), one delegate indicated wavering support, and the experimenter asked the question incorrectly on three occasions (e.g. 'Can the Liberals win the election under Turner?'). Ten of the responses of Chretien supporters were excluded: three of the supporters were not elected delegates, one delegate indicated wavering support, the question was asked incorrectly four times, and two supporters' responses were obscured by background noise.

When the above criteria had been applied, six responses by Turner delegates and 16 by Chretien delegates remained. Hence, the Chretien responses were reduced to six by matching them to those of the Turner delegates on two potentially confounding factors, first language and sex of subject. From the six male English speakers who supported Jean Chretien, two responses were randomly selected. From the four female English speakers, two were randomly selected. From the four male French speakers, one message was randomly selected, and from the two female French speaking delegates, one was randomly selected. After this selection process, there were 12 messages for the judges to scale, six in a conflict and six not in a conflict.

The messages generated by the delegates were scaled by eight trained judges using our established scaling procedure (see above; full details in Bavelas & Smith, 1982, and Bavelas, Black, Chovil & Mullett, 1988b). All of the judges were, as usual, blind to the experimental design and hypothesis. The judges rated the taped messages on each dimension of equivocation (Sender, Content,

Receiver, and Context) using a magnitude estimation scale. The raw scores were standardised and averaged across judges, so that a single value could be given to each message on each dimension. The values for each message were then summed across the four dimensions of equivocation in order to obtain a total equivocation score for each message. The reliabilities for this set of messages ranged from 0.59 to 0.96; the reliabilities for the same judges on a test set with uncurtailed range ranged from 0.90 to 0.98.

The two groups differed significantly on total equivocation (t for Sum = 2.56, $p<0.025$) and also on the Sender ($t = 2.65$, $p<0.025$) and Context ($t = 2.85$, $p<0.01$) dimensions (df in all cases = 10). The messages of the delegates in the conflict condition were in total more equivocal than were the messages of the other delegates. Specifically, the delegates in the avoidance–avoidance conflict did not state their own opinions and did not answer the questions as directly as did the delegates not in a conflict. (These specific effects are consistent with the overall pattern we have found in previous research, in which the most sensitive, or most used, dimension is Context, followed closely by Content and Sender, with Receiver least likely to show effects.)

Some examples will illustrate what these results mean in terms of the messages themselves. Two responses from the non-conflict condition were

> I'm sure of it. Not only will we win, but we'll have a majority government I think.

and

> Yes, I do. [In a matter-of-fact tone.]

In contrast, a delegate in the conflict condition provided a classic example of changing context, that is, not answering the question asked:

> Ahh, the Liberals have a good chance of winning elections with either Mr Chretien or Mr Turner. So ah I think the Liberals are bound to win the next election the way things are going now. So I think either if they have Mr Chretien or Mr Turner their chances are good. The reason why I support for Mr Chretien is that he is the candidate of continuity and that's what I am looking for. So that is why I support him.

Note that this is an answer to a slightly different, less problematic question ('Do you think the Liberals can win the next election under either Chretien or Turner?'), which then goes on to provide an answer to an even more congenial question ('Why do you support Mr Chretien?'), which had not been asked.

Another Chretien delegate said

> We could win . . . yes. [Very hesitantly.]

The judges commented on the lack of conviction in the speaker's voice and considered the message unclear as to the speaker's own opinion (equivocal on Sender dimension).

There was a difference in the mean length of responses in the two conditions (11.5 vs. 52 words; $t = 2.25$, $df = 10$, $p<0.05$), with the conflict messages both

longer and more varied in length (range = 1–118 words vs. 2–24 words). This finding, however, should be placed in the context of the results of previous experiments, which have revealed no consistent effect of message length, that is, equivocation values and message length sometimes correlate positively, sometimes negatively, and sometimes not at all.

Finally, we measured response latency, as further evidence that the delegates were indeed in a conflict. Lewinian conflict theory proposes that, because avoidance–avoidance conficts induce vacillation, they will take longer to resolve than will choices not involving avoidance. This proposition has been confirmed experimentally (e.g. Barker, 1942, 1946), including for our communicative conflicts (Bavelas, 1985; Bavelas, Black, Chovil & Mullett, 1988b). Thus, the time between the end of the experimenter's question and the beginning of the delegate's response was also measured. The equivocation judges were unaware of these latencies, as they heard only the messages and not the questions. The two measures are independent in that latencies could not affect equivocation values, even indirectly. The response latencies for the conflict condition had a mean of 1.8 s (SD = 1.1 s), while those in the non-conflict condition had a mean of 0.8 s (SD = 0.4 s). This difference was statistically significant ($t = 2.29$, $df = 10$, $p<0.03$) and is consistent with our hypothesis that the question placed the Chretien delegates in an avoidance–avoidance conflict.

The data from our present experiment demonstrates that an avoidance–avoidance conflict results in equivocal political communication. In such a conflict, the politicians avoided giving their own opinions and avoided answering the question directly. On the other hand, politicians who were not in a conflict stated their own opinions and directly addressed the question.

The similarity between our previous experiment conducted in the laboratory with students in an imaginary political situation and the present experiment in an actual political setting is worth reviewing. The politician's dilemma seems to be to avoid saying the wrong thing. Just as Walter Mondale had to avoid offending either the group who supported or the group who opposed gun control, our laboratory subjects had to avoid taking a stand that would alienate half of the constituency. Here, the delegates had to avoid implicit criticism of their preferred candidate and of their party. It is important to note that, in both experiments, when the conflict was not present, respondents did not equivocate. The results of the laboratory and field experiments make a strong case for the generality of our theory of equivocation to the obfuscation that seems characteristic of politicians' answers to questions. That is, their equivocation, like that of our laboratory subjects, is a function of their communicative situation rather than of any individual differences.

There are similarities between our approach to equivocation and the work of other theorists — most notably Grice (1975), Searle (1975), Nofsinger (1976), Bowers, Elliott & Desmond (1977), and Brown & Levinson (1978) — all of whom have pointed out that natural communication is not always 'logical' and that we need to understand, rather than dismiss, such phenomena. One key difference, however, is that the above authors have focused on inferring the (internal) rules that generate such language rather than on identifying the situations that elicit it. Our focus, in contrast, is situational rather than intrapsychic.

We are therefore examining more closely the situations and questions to which politicians are typically responding (Bavelas, Black, Chovil & Mullett, 1988b). These are virtually always avoidance–avoidance conflicts, as the interviewer tries to pin down the politician by asking 'no win' questions, to which no answer is possible or to which any answer will risk offence. Thus, we should expand our narrow view of the politician's reply to include the wider context of the question that has been asked, including the possible consequences of various replies. Questions that do not create avoidance conflicts are rare, because interviewers are interested in 'hot potato' issues rather than bland ones on which consensus exists. Moreover, whatever the issue, the politician must appear sincerely committed without actually committing him- or herself. Finally, there is the risk that the politician's equivocal answer will not satisfy the interviewer, who will rephrase the question in a more hostile manner (Heritage, 1985). In such cases, the politician's dilemma becomes more acute, because an interpersonal conflict in a working relationship has now been added. From this vantage point, we can begin to see the importance of examining more closely the nature of political communication as an interaction between politician and interviewer, each of whom is responding to and at the same time creating a communicative situation for the other. From the point of view of the electorate, equivocal communication is not desirable; but from the point of view of politician–interviewer interaction, it is at present inevitable.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. The order of authorship is alphabetical.
2. This phenomenon has also been called 'disqualification' and 'incongruent communication'.

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