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## Why politicians are three-faced: The face model of political interviews

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To investigate the relationship between face and equivocation in political interviews, a new typology of questions was devised, based on their face-threatening properties. This typology was applied to the analysis of 18 interviews with the leaders of the three main political parties in the 1992 British General Election. Nineteen different subcategories were distinguished, grouped into three superordinate categories of face which politicians must defend—their own personal face, the face of the party which they represent and face in relation to supporting or not supporting significant others. On the basis of this analysis, a new model of question–response sequences in political interviews was proposed, the main tenet of which is that face is the most important factor in determining whether or not a politician replies to a question. This model provides both a means of predicting the direction of politicians' responses to questions, and a framework for future studies evaluating the performance of both politicians and political interviewers.

Political interviews have in recent years become the focus of a burgeoning research literature, conducted within the related disciplines of psychology, linguistics and sociology. Transcripts of political interviews have been analysed in great detail, and researchers have been successful in delineating how the discourse of political interviews differs from other social situations. As a consequence, the political interview has been identified as a distinctive social situation in its own right, with its own characteristic patterns of discourse. The focus of the study to be presented here is on one particular aspect of political interview discourse, namely, that of equivocation. Its purpose is to propose and test a theoretical explanation of equivocation in this social situation based on the concept of face, with a view to developing a broader theoretical model of discourse in political interviews.

In sociology, there is an extensive literature on what are referred to as news interviews—radio and television interviews not only with well-known public figures (such as politicians), but also with ordinary members of the public who may be experiencing such an interview for the first (and possibly only) time (Greatbatch, 1988). Based on the techniques of conversation analysis, studies of news interviews have been concerned with a whole range of issues, including turn-taking, openings, closings, topical organization, supplementary questioning, neutrality, disagreements between interviewees and disagreements between interviewers and interviewees. For example, a number of conversation analysts have commented on the distinctive nature of turn-taking in this social

\* Requests for reprints.

setting, namely, that the interviewer should ask questions, and that the interviewee should respond to those questions (e.g. Clayman, 1989; Greatbatch, 1988; Heritage, Clayman & Zimmerman, 1988). Indeed, Schegloff (1989) has argued that the question/answer format is the principal means used by participants in interviews for creating and sustaining talk, although, as Heritage & Greatbatch (1991) observe, interviewers may engage in non-questioning actions in order to open and close news interviews.

The way in which news interviews are terminated is significantly affected by the pattern of turn-taking, according to Clayman (1989). Given that interviewees are not expected to speak unless the interviewer has asked them to do so, termination can be accomplished in a unilateral fashion by the interviewer; this is in contrast to ordinary conversation, where it is jointly managed by the participants. The opening sequence of a news interview also differs from ordinary conversation in a number of important respects, Clayman (1991) maintains: in particular, the primary task of the opening is to project the agenda for the interview, whereas topics in ordinary conversation are not predetermined but negotiated during the course of the interaction.

Topic organization in political interviews has been considered by a number of conversation analysts. Heritage & Greatbatch (1991) point out that interviewers do have considerable control over the agenda of the interview, given that it is they who are expected to ask the questions. However, politicians may also exert some control through what Greatbatch (1986*a*) calls agenda-shifting procedures, by changing the topic of conversation either before or after giving a reply. Greatbatch (1986*b*) has studied how, in the event of a prior question not having been answered, interviewers may use supplementary questions to pursue information that an interviewee has declined to produce.

The question/answer format has the additional advantage of allowing interviewers to seek the opinions and perspectives of others while refraining from overt comment, since the interviewer is expected to appear neutral, another important feature of the political interview. Clayman (1988) describes three neutrality devices routinely used by interviewers: embedding statements within questions, attributing statements to third parties and 'doing delicacy' (i.e. forewarning that the following action may be less than proper). Subsequently, Clayman (1992) has elaborated on neutrality devices in the context of Goffman's concept of 'footing' (Goffman, 1981). Clayman argues that through taking up various 'footings' in relation to their own remarks, speakers may distance themselves from what they are saying.

Although interviewers may be able to maintain a formal position of neutrality through the procedures described by Clayman, this does not of course mean that their conduct will be viewed as substantively neutral. According to Harris (1986), it is specious for interviewers to claim that because they are only asking questions, they cannot be criticized for expressing opinions or for taking a particular standpoint. This is because questions do more than simply request information: in an important sense, they encode points of view, opinions and attitudes. Because of the problems of sustaining neutrality in the conventional political interview, Greatbatch (1992) has argued that panel interviews (involving two or more interviewees) have become much more popular in recent years. The panel interview may be used to provoke debate between interviewees without the need for aggressive cross-questioning and hence the risk of accusations of bias.

Another distinguishing feature of the news interview is that although an interview may appear to be taking place between just two participants, it is in fact talk designed for an

overhearing audience potentially of millions (Heritage, 1985). Heritage argues that this has significant consequences for the interaction which takes place. It may be one reason why interviewers make such infrequent use of what are commonly called listener responses (signals of continued listener attentiveness), because the politicians' replies are intended not for the interviewer but for the listening audience. In addition, Heritage has highlighted the use of what he calls 'formulations', which involve summarizing, glossing or developing the 'gist' of what the interviewee has previously said. Heritage argues that formulations are used to inform an audience by clarifying previous talk, by making it more focused, by underlining the significance of a previous response, or by probing or challenging stated positions.

Thus, in conversation analysis, there is a substantial body of research which delineates how the discourse of news interviews (hence, too, the discourse of political interviews, as representing one type of news interview) differs from other social situations. In psychology, a number of studies have been conducted, specifically on political interviews, on two aspects of discourse considered to be particularly associated with interviewing politicians, namely, the high frequency of both equivocation and interruptions. Interruptions, according to Beattie (1982), occur with a high degree of frequency in political interviews. Beattie (1982; Beattie, Cutler & Pearson, 1982) produced an analysis of why Margaret Thatcher (Conservative Prime Minister, 1979–1990) appeared to be so frequently interrupted in political interviews, although his findings were hotly disputed by Bull & Mayer (1988, 1989; see also Beattie, 1989*a,b*).

Equivocation was the focus of a further study by Bull & Mayer (1993), based on eight political interviews from the 1987 British General Election with Margaret Thatcher and Neil Kinnock (Leader of the Labour Opposition, 1983–1992). Bull & Mayer distinguished 30 different ways of not replying to a question, and found that Margaret Thatcher replied to only 37 per cent, and Neil Kinnock to only 39 per cent of interviewer questions. In a comparable study in linguistics, Harris (1991) found with a different set of political interviews (principally with Margaret Thatcher and Neil Kinnock) that the politicians gave direct answers to just over 39 per cent of the questions asked; this shows a striking similarity to the results of Bull & Mayer (1993) described above.

A theory of equivocation has been proposed by Bavelas *et al.* (Bavelas, Black, Bryson & Mullett, 1988; Bavelas, Black, Chovil & Mullett, 1990). They argue that in political interviews, politicians are frequently placed in what Bavelas *et al.* call an avoidance–avoidance conflict, where all of the possible replies to a question have potentially negative consequences, but where nevertheless a reply is still expected. According to Bavelas *et al.*, equivocation occurs not because of the intrinsic evasiveness of politicians, but because of the communicative demands of the social situation.

Bavelas *et al.* (1990) go on to identify a number of features of the political interview which create avoidance–avoidance conflicts for the politicians. For example, they point out that there are many controversial issues on which there is a divided electorate. Politicians often seek to avoid direct replies supporting or criticizing either position, which would offend a substantial number of voters. Another set of conflicts is created by the pressure of time limits. If the politician is asked about a complex issue but is forced to answer briefly, he or she has to make a choice between two unattractive alternatives: reducing the issue to a simple, incomplete answer, or appearing long winded, circuitous and evasive. Again, if the candidate lacks sufficient knowledge of the issue being

addressed, he or she has to make the unfortunate choice between acknowledging ignorance, or improvising, even fabricating an answer.

Although Bavelas *et al.* (1990) present a whole number of reasons why avoidance-avoidance conflicts frequently occur in political interviews, they do not identify any common underlying theoretical explanation for this phenomenon. In this context, one interesting observation has been made in linguistics by Jucker (1986, p. 71), who states: 'It is clear that what is primarily at issue in news interviews is the interviewee's positive face'. Jucker has studied news interviews with politicians, 'experts' and news correspondents; he presents a number of analyses, including a flow-chart representation of the structure of interviews, a consideration of the function of discourse particles such as 'well', 'now' and 'but', as well as a discussion of the role of face in political interviews. In fact, Jucker identifies 13 different ways in which the face of a politician may be threatened during the course of an interview.

Jucker's analysis of face is based on Brown & Levinson's (1978) theory of politeness, according to which face preservation is a primary constraint on the achievement of goals in interaction. Brown & Levinson assume that face is important in all cultures, that it can be lost, maintained or enhanced. The main principle of Brown & Levinson's theory is that 'some acts are intrinsically threatening to face and thus require "softening"' (p. 24). Brown & Levinson focus on ways of performing individual face-threatening acts, such as commands or complaints, by using either positive or negative politeness strategies. Positive face is the desire to be approved of by others, whereas negative face is the desire to have autonomy of action. It is maintaining positive face in news interviews which Jucker argues is of particular importance for democratically elected politicians, since their political survival ultimately depends on the approval of a majority of people in their own constituency. Jucker argues that the concept of negative face, on the other hand, is of little importance in this social context, because the interviewee by consenting to appear in an interview has already consented to his or her freedom of action being limited in this way.

Brown & Levinson also set out to specify the particular verbal strategies used for attending to both positive and negative face; indeed, in their theory of politeness, the concept of face is used as a means of explaining specific discourse strategies. An extensive literature has developed out of Brown & Levinson's (1978) theory, much of which is reviewed in their subsequent book (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In this book, the original monograph is reprinted, together with a 50-page introduction, which not only reviews research stimulated by politeness theory, but also addresses some of the basic criticisms which have been made of it. Tracy (1990) points out that since a number of these criticisms seem to undermine Brown & Levinson's original position, it is not obvious how they can be integrated into politeness theory. Tracy argues that the decision not to revise the original monograph seems to send an implicit message to the readers that the authors stand by their original claims. Hence, the current status of politeness theory is somewhat equivocal.

However, the argument for the importance of face in political interviews is not dependent solely on the work of Brown & Levinson; there are additional grounds for arguing that face is of particular importance in this social situation. Brown & Levinson's politeness theory was based on the highly influential paper 'On face-work' by Goffman (1955/1967), according to whom concerns with face are salient in virtually all social

encounters. Not only do people defend their own face in social interaction, Goffman points out that there is also an obligation to defend the face of others. In the context of a political interview, politicians might seek to support the face of political colleagues and allies; at the same time, they would not wish to support the face of negatively valued others, such as their political opponents. Goffman further observes that in many relationships the members come to share a face, so that in the presence of third parties an improper act on the part of one member becomes a source of acute embarrassment to other members. This is especially true of the British party political system, where the party is paramount: typically, the politician appears on television as the representative of that party to defend and promote its collective face. Consequently, on the basis of Goffman's observations, it can be argued that politicians must concern themselves with three faces: their own individual face, the face of significant others and the face of the party which they represent.

In fact, face may be of even greater importance in political interviews than extrapolations from Goffman and from Brown & Levinson would suggest. For these three authors, face seems to be not so much an objective of interaction, but rather a kind of ritual constraint or even a condition for interaction to take place. However, Pearson (1988) makes the point that face maintenance can be seen more positively as a strategy which speakers skilfully manipulate in order to achieve their goals in social interaction. Indeed, it is possible to go beyond Pearson and argue that face maintenance in political interviews is not merely a strategy, but an end in its own right. According to this view, a prime objective of politicians is to present the best possible face both for themselves and for the party which they represent, while also seeking to enhance their face at the expense of their political opponents.

Thus, there are a number of good reasons for arguing that face is of central importance in political interviews; furthermore, the concept can also be used to provide an underlying rationale for the avoidance-avoidance conflicts identified by Bavelas *et al.* (1988, 1990), which were described above. So, for example, Bavelas *et al.* point out that politicians equivocate because there are many controversial issues on which there is a divided electorate; in this case, politicians can be seen to be protecting their own face by not espousing opinions which a substantial body of voters may find offensive or unacceptable. Another set of conflicts is created by the time limits of the interview. Again, it is the politician's own face which is at stake, since he or she does not wish to appear either incompetent (by reducing the issue to a simple, incomplete answer) or devious (by appearing long-winded, circuitous or evasive). In the case where the candidate lacks sufficient knowledge of the issue being addressed, the risk to the politician's face is of either appearing incompetent (by admitting ignorance), or of putting his or her face at risk in the future, if subsequently it can be shown that the answer was less than adequate.

In short, issues of face arguably underlie all the avoidance-avoidance conflicts identified by Bavelas *et al.* as responsible for equivocation. Indeed, not only can the phenomenon of equivocation be explained in terms of face it also can be used to explain when and why politicians *do* reply to questions. So, for example, if a politician is asked to justify a specific policy, failure to offer some kind of rationale may raise doubts either about the politician's professional competence, or about the validity of the policy, or both.

Hence, the concept of face offers the possibility of a theory of question-response sequences in political interviews. In order to conduct an empirical test of this theory, a

new typology of face-threatening acts in political interviews was devised, since none of the existing schemas were considered suitable for this purpose. Brown & Levinson's politeness theory is a general theory of face which does not address (nor was intended to address) the specific threats to face which occur in political interviews; moreover, as was noted above, its current status is still equivocal. Jucker's typology of face-threatening acts is of course specific to political interviews, but it focuses principally on the way in which politicians defend their own individual face without reference to the face of the political parties which they represent. Furthermore, since the focus of this study was on question-response sequences, it was decided to devise a typology of questions focusing on the different ways in which they pose threats to face, and, for the most part, Jucker's categories are too general for this purpose.

It was also decided to base this typology on a set of 18 interviews with the leaders of the three main political parties in the 1992 British General Election. The advantage of this particular data set is that systematic comparisons can be made between the three different politicians, since each politician was interviewed by the same six interviewers. On the basis of this new typology, it was then possible to test the specific hypothesis that politicians, in responding to questions, opt for the least face-threatening response, which may be either a reply or a non-reply, depending on the face-threatening structure of the question. As such, this study was intended as a logical counterpart and sequel to the previous investigation, in which a typology was presented of different forms of non-replies to questions (Bull & Mayer, 1993). Whereas the purpose of that typology was to show the manner in which politicians fail to reply to questions, the purpose of this study was to investigate why politicians answer some questions and not others, and thereby to test the theory of question-response sequences in political interviews proposed above.

## Method

### *Participants*

A set of 18 interviews from the 1992 British General Election formed the basis of this study. Six of these interviews were with John Major (Prime Minister since 1990), six were with Neil Kinnock (Leader of the Labour Party, 1983-1992), and six with Paddy Ashdown (Leader of the Liberal Democrats since 1988). Each politician was interviewed by Sir Robin Day, David Dimbleby, Jonathan Dimbleby, David Frost, Jeremy Paxman and Brian Walden. Interview durations (to the nearest minute) were:

|                   | John Major | Neil Kinnock | Paddy Ashdown |
|-------------------|------------|--------------|---------------|
| Sir Robin Day     | 25         | 25           | 25            |
| David Dimbleby    | 39         | 40           | 38            |
| Jonathan Dimbleby | 20         | 20           | 17            |
| David Frost       | 39         | 15           | 14            |
| Jeremy Paxman     | 19         | 17           | 17            |
| Brian Walden      | 42         | 42           | 42            |

### *Apparatus*

All 18 interviews were recorded off air and analysed using a VHS format video-cassette recorder, with slow-motion replay facilities.

### *Procedure*

Transcripts were made of each interview. Questions, replies and non-replies were identified. All interviews were coded by at least two raters, one of whom was always the principal author; disagreements were resolved by discussion. Good reliability for the coding of questions, replies and non-replies has already been demonstrated in a previous study (Bull & Mayer, 1993), in which two raters (one of whom was the principal author of this paper) independently coded two complete interviews (one with John Major as Chancellor of the Exchequer, one as Prime Minister). The results, using Cohen's (1960) kappa, showed  $\kappa = 0.82$  on the scoring of questions/replies/non-replies.

Full details of the procedure for identifying questions, replies and non-replies are given elsewhere (Bull, 1994), but are summarized briefly below. In this system, responses to questions in political interviews are regarded as corresponding to three principal question types: yes-no questions, interrogative word (or wh-) questions and disjunctive questions. With yes-no questions, there are three possible response options: to confirm that the assertion contained in the question is true, to deny the assertion, or not to reply. For questions beginning with an interrogative word, there are only two principal options: to reply or not to reply. Disjunctive questions pose a choice between two or more alternatives. Where the question poses a genuinely binary choice (i.e. it can only be either choice A or choice B), then there are three response alternatives possible: alternative A, alternative B, or a non-reply. Where the question is not genuinely binary and it is possible to produce a third alternative not stated in the original question, then four response alternatives are possible: alternative A, alternative B, alternative C, or a non-reply.

However, in identifying replies and non-replies to questions, it became apparent that there are certain utterances that cannot be regarded as either replies or non-replies (Bull, 1994). For example, a reply may be implied in the politician's response, but not explicitly stated (answer by implication). Again, a politician may answer a question, but only in part (incomplete reply). Furthermore, the politician's response to the question may be interrupted by the interviewer, such that it is not possible to say whether or not a reply would have been given (interrupted reply). In each case, the politician cannot be said to have given a full reply to the question, but neither can he or she be said not to have given any reply at all. As a consequence, a third superordinate category of what are called intermediate replies is distinguished. Intermediate replies may be given to any of the three main question types described in the previous paragraph.

Based on the complete set of 18 interviews, a coding system was then devised for the measurement of threats to face in political interviews; all the authors collaborated in the development of this typology. To check the reliability of this system, the second author independently scored three interviews (one from each politician) which had been coded by the other three authors. The results, using Cohen's (1960) kappa, showed  $\kappa = 0.80$  on the face typology. Satisfactory reliability having been demonstrated for the coding system, all 18 interviews were then scored by the first two authors, any disagreements being resolved by discussion.

## **Results**

To show how the analysis was conducted, the coding system is presented in full with appropriate examples.

### *The coding system*

The coding system is organized in terms of the three principal components of face which it has been argued that politicians must defend: personal face, the face of the political party and the face of significant others. In terms of the coding system, these are regarded as superordinate categories, which are further subdivided into a number of subcategories. The full list of 19 subcategories, together with examples of their use, is presented below; each code is designed to be prefaced with the phrase, 'To answer X would involve the threat of . . .'.

It should be noted that in no sense is it being claimed that this list of potential face-threats is exhaustive for all political interviews. Rather, these were the categories that



seemed to provide the 'best fit' for the 18 interviews studied in this analysis, and which in the development of the typology were shown to be scored reliably. However, it has already been found that the coding system fits a considerable number of questions (557), and that it seems likely that the typology should be widely applicable, forming a basic framework for the analysis of face-threats in political interviews.

*1. Personal-political face.*

(1) *Creating/confirming a negative statement or impression about personal competence.* Jucker points out that an interviewer may threaten a politician's face by accusations, criticisms, disagreements and so forth, but a politician may also threaten his or her face by excuses, apologies, admissions of guilt or responsibility. The creating/confirming distinction in this code is intended to embrace both these possibilities.

e.g. Jeremy Paxman asks John Major: '... isn't all this emphasis on personality a cover for the fact that you haven't got a big idea?'

If John Major answered yes to this question, it would represent an admission that he has no significant political ideas, and hence threaten his own personal competence.

(2) *Failing to present a positive image of self if offered the opportunity.* Some questions do not directly challenge or criticize the politician, but rather present the politician with an opportunity for presenting a positive image of self. However, failure to take advantage of such an opportunity will reflect badly on the politician, and in that sense can be seen to create a threat to face.

e.g. David Frost asks Neil Kinnock: '... can you just give me some specific things these are still frames of how your life will be different after 12 months of Neil Kinnock in Number 10?'

If Neil Kinnock fails to reply to this question, it will obviously reflect badly on him, since he is being given the chance to say how things would be different if he became Prime Minister.

(3) *Losing credibility.* If a politician makes a statement which is clearly incredible, then this will threaten face by throwing into doubt the politician's personal judgement. Credibility refers to all aspects of a statement's credibility—factual, logical or otherwise.

e.g. Jeremy Paxman asks John Major: 'But on the nature of the campaign so far this whole pitch of you can't trust Labour, negative campaigning, it's no reason to assume we can trust you is it?'

If John Major answered yes to this question, it would ascribe properties to negative campaigning that logically it does not possess. Hence, it would raise doubts about John Major's judgement, and consequently about his credibility.

(4) *Contradicting past statements, policies etc.* Although politicians are often anything but consistent, there is an expectation that they should be consistent in their statements and policies. Hence, if inconsistency can be demonstrated, this is considered to threaten the face of the politician.

e.g. Neil Kinnock, in an interview with David Frost, has already stated at the outset that he is not prepared to discuss specific details of the forthcoming shadow budget. David Frost then asks: 'And you're not going to increase Corporation Tax?'

If Neil Kinnock either confirms or denies this question, he will be contradicting his previous statement that he would not give details of the shadow budget.

(5) *Personal difficulties in the future.* Goffman suggests that there is a duty to protect one's face against even the possibility of threat: people avoid performing actions which although acceptable in the present may reflect badly upon them in the future. Hence, a politician will be careful to avoid making statements which may hamper or constrain his or her future freedom of action.

e.g. Sir Robin Day asks Paddy Ashdown whether, if John Major lost the General Election: '... he should resign in those circumstances?'

If Paddy Ashdown answers yes, John Major should resign, this could create future difficulties, since Paddy Ashdown might have to work with John Major if in the event of a hung Parliament a coalition were formed with the Conservatives.

(6) *Difficulty in producing/clarifying personal or party beliefs, statements, aims, principles, etc.* If a professional politician is asked to give a view or opinion on a particular issue, then he or she is expected to be able to do so. Failure to reply may result in a loss of face, in that it implies either that the politician has no relevant opinion, or that he or she has not thought through the situation adequately.

e.g. David Dimbleby asks John Major: 'I wonder whether wavering voters aren't influenced by not quite knowing where you, Prime Minister, stand and in particular whether you stand for what Mrs Thatcher your predecessor stood for or whether you stand for something different from her?'

If John Major fails to reply to this question, it implies some uncertainty or reluctance to state what he stands for.

(7) *Creating/confirming a negative statement or impression about one's own public persona.* Politicians typically have a personal image which they need to support in public. For example, John Major presents himself as softer and more caring than Margaret Thatcher, while Paddy Ashdown cultivates an image associated with forthrightness and integrity, as occupying the moral high ground in contrast to the other two major political parties.

e.g. Jeremy Paxman asks Paddy Ashdown: 'Are you embarrassed at all about the way in which this whole Liberal Democrat campaign has been hung on you?'

If Paddy Ashdown answers no to this question, it might imply he encourages a cult of personality, which would be inconsistent with his self-presentation as a committed democrat, hence undermining his claim to occupy the moral high ground.

## 2. Party face

(8) *Creating/confirming a negative statement/impression about the party or its policies, actions, statements, aims, principles, etc.* This corresponds to category I of the personal-political face. The politician may threaten the face of the party either by confirming a negative statement or by creating a negative statement through, for example, excuses, apologies, admissions of guilt or responsibility.

e.g. Brian Walden says to John Major: 'Mr Major things aren't looking all that good for your party are they? You've had to go into this election without that clear and sustained lead that you must have hoped for haven't you?'

If John Major answers yes to this question, he will be confirming both the negative characterization of the Conservative Party, and the implication that the Conservatives will not win the election.

(9) *Failing to present a positive image of the party if offered the opportunity.* Again, this category corresponds to category 2 of the personal-political face. Some questions do not directly challenge or criticize the party, but rather present the politician with an opportunity for presenting it in a positive light. However, failure to take advantage of such an opportunity will reflect badly on the party, and in that sense can be seen to be face-threatening.

e.g. David Frost asks Neil Kinnock: '... can you just give me some specific things these are still frames of how your life will be different after 12 months of Neil Kinnock in Number 10?'

If Neil Kinnock fails to reply to this question, it will obviously reflect badly on the Labour Party, since he is being given an opportunity to present a positive image of the party. (N.B. this extract is also scored under category 2, since it affects both his personal face and the face of the party.)

(10) *Future difficulties for the party.* This category corresponds to category 5 of the personal-political face. Just as a politician will be careful to avoid constraining his or her future freedom of action, so too will a politician be careful to avoid restricting the future freedom of action of the party which he or she represents.

e.g. David Dumbleby asks John Major: 'It looks very likely that you're going to be short, at any rate, of an overall majority. If that happens, will you do what the Tories did last time they were short of an overall majority and try and do some deal with somebody to keep yourself in office?'

If John Major either confirms or denies this statement, he will be constraining the future freedom of action of the Conservative Party.

(11) *Contradictions between the party's policies, statements, actions, aims, principles, etc.* Even though political parties are often highly inconsistent in their policies, statements, actions and aims, nevertheless there is an expectation that they should be consistent; if inconsistencies or contradictions can be exposed, this is seen to reflect badly on the party.

e.g. Brian Walden asks John Major: 'Are you now admitting that the tax cuts that you are planning for the future will not in fact have such a great impact on the improvement of the public services as if you gave them the money directly?'

If John Major confirms this question, he will be contradicting existing Conservative policies in relation to taxation and the funding of the public services.

(12) *Creating/confirming a negative assessment of the 'state of the nation' (for the party in power only).* This category makes no direct reference to the party, and concerns only the 'state of the nation'. However, since negative assessments of the nation may be seen to reflect badly on the party in power, then this is also included under party face.

e.g. David Frost asks John Major: '... but this one, the latest recession, was made in England however it may have been prolonged by overseas factors but it started here didn't it?'

If John Major confirms this statement, that the recession started in England, there is a strong implication that this was somehow the fault of the government, and hence it reflects badly on his own party.

3. *Significant others.* Not only do politicians seek to defend their own face and the face of the party which they represent, they are also under pressure to defend the face of others. This can be subdivided into both supporting positively valued others (such as the electorate, colleagues and members of one's own party), and not supporting negatively valued others, such as political opponents.

(13) *Not supporting the electorate.* In any democratic political system, a politician must be careful to avoid casting any aspersions on the electorate as a whole.

e.g. David Frost asks Paddy Ashdown: 'But before proportional representation becomes as it were final there would be a referendum?'

If Paddy Ashdown answered no to this question, it would suggest that the Liberal Democrats did not want to give people any say in what changes would be made to the electoral system.

(14) *Not supporting a significant body of opinion in the electorate (where there is a division of opinion).* On major social and political issues, where it is possible to discern a substantive division of opinion in the electorate, the politician also may run the risk of offending substantial portions of the electorate.

e.g. Brian Walden asks John Major: 'Are you saying that when these people tell the polls what I desperately care about are the public services, I reject tax cuts, I want the money spent on the public services, they are actually lying?'

Clearly John Major cannot answer yes to this question, because then he would be casting the 'caring voters' as wilfully lying.

(15) *Not supporting a colleague.* The term colleague is used to refer to members of the Government (for the party in power) or to members of the Shadow Cabinet/spokespeople for those who are not.

e.g. Brian Walden in an interview with John Major says: '... listen to this wonderfully blithe statement that the Chancellor of the Exchequer Norman Lamont gave to the House of Commons during Treasury Questions last year he said rising unemployment and the recession have been the price we've had to pay to get inflation down, this is a price well worth paying a lot of people say I can't imagine a more uncaring statement than that and that's true 'n it?'

Clearly, if John Major replied yes to this question, he would not be supporting the face of his then colleague Norman Lamont.

(16) *Not supporting a subgroup of one's own party.* In all the major parties, there are discernible subgroups whom a politician may have to be careful not to offend.

e.g. David Dimbleby asks John Major: 'But do you think the Conservative Party was wrong to have removed her (i.e. Margaret Thatcher)?'

If John Major confirms that it was wrong to have removed Margaret Thatcher, he risks offending those Conservatives who voted her out, whereas if he suggests that it was right to have removed her, then he runs the risk of offending the Thatcherites within the Party.

(17) *Not supporting other positively valued people or institutions.* Outside the party which the politician represents, there will be people or institutions who are the natural allies of that party, whom the politician will be careful to avoid offending, e.g. the trade unions for the Labour Party, the Confederation of British Industry for the Conservative Party.

e.g. Jeremy Paxman asks Neil Kinnock: 'Would sympathy actions be legal or illegal?'

If Neil Kinnock says that they would be illegal, then he would certainly offend a positively valued institution in the Labour Party, namely, the trade unions.

(18) *Not supporting a friendly country.* Politicians will not wish to offend friendly countries with whom their own country has strong financial, commercial or military links.

e.g. David Frost asks Neil Kinnock: 'If at some stage President Bush were to ring you up and ask the favour that he asked of Mrs. Thatcher in 1986 to fly American bombers from British bases against Libya, would you be disposed to agree?'

If Neil Kinnock answers 'no' to this question, then he is not supporting a friendly country, namely, the USA.

(19) *Supporting a negatively valued other.* Negatively valued others may be politicians of opposing political parties, or representatives of countries or organizations with which the country currently has poor relations, e.g. in Britain, the IRA. The politician will seek to avoid supporting the face of such negatively valued others, either by withholding praise or by actively criticizing them.

e.g. David Frost asks John Major: '... is there really a shift of opinion towards the Liberal Democrats or is it because they have run a better campaign than you have?'

In this question, David Frost offers John Major two alternatives, confirming either of which would be offering praise to an opposition party.

### *Rules of application*

1. *Types of question.* Each possible response option to each of the three types of question outlined in the Method section (yes-no questions, interrogative word (or wh-) questions and disjunctive questions) is coded in terms of its possible face-threats.

2. *Use of multiple categories.* It is important to note that the categories of face-threat (1-19) are not mutually exclusive. For example, it is possible for a question simultaneously to threaten more than one superordinate category of face (e.g. replying to a question might threaten both the politician's personal-political face and the face of the party which the politician represents). It is also possible for a question to threaten more than one subcategory of a particular type of face (e.g. replying to a question might create or confirm a neg-

ative statement both about the politician's personal competence and about the politician's persona).

3. *The meaning of pronouns.* In political interviews the problem often arises of reference for pronouns such as 'you'. For example, when David Dimbleby asks John Major: 'Did you expect to be ahead in the polls by now?', the 'you' could refer either to John Major personally or to the Conservative Party as a whole. Given the essentially ambiguous nature of these pronouns it is assumed that they refer to both politician and party unless there are clear contextual cues for deciding otherwise. One way of establishing whether the 'you' is ambiguous is by inserting the name of the individual politician and then the name of the party. If both versions of the sentence still make sense, then it is considered that the 'you' refers to both the individual politician and to the political party the politician represents.

4. *Default codings.* Sometimes the very way in which a question is phrased projects a particular answer. So, for example, David Frost asks Neil Kinnock: 'You would in fact admit that they (i.e. taxes) will rise?' Anything less than an explicit refutation of this statement by Neil Kinnock would imply that it is correct, i.e. that taxes will rise under a Labour Government. To deal with non-replies to such questions, a number of extra categories are employed, referred to as 'default codings.'

(i) *Confirms by default.* This occurs where the politician fails to rebut a suggestion conveyed by the question, thereby implicitly confirming it. Typically, such a question involves some kind of negative characterization of the politician or the party which the politician represents. In the example above, when David Frost asks Neil Kinnock: 'You would in fact admit that they (i.e. taxes) will rise?', a non-reply would be coded as confirms by default.

(ii) *Denies by default.* This typically occurs where a politician fails explicitly to confirm a suggestion implied by the question. So, for example, David Frost asks Neil Kinnock: 'You're definitely not going to pull more people into that bracket?' (i.e. the standard rate tax bracket). This question must be confirmed explicitly because anything less than an explicit confirmation would imply that the Labour Party are intending to increase the number of people paying the standard rate of tax.

(iii) *No clear default.* Not every non-reply has a clear default meaning, in the sense that the politician's non-reply could be taken as meaning either yes or no, or that there is no clear default at all. For example, David Dimbleby asks John Major: 'Do you think the Conservative Party was wrong to have removed her?' (i.e. Margaret Thatcher). If John Major confirms this statement, then he runs the risk of offending those who voted against Margaret Thatcher; if he denies the statement, then he runs the risk of offending the Thatcherites. Since there are clear face threats in both directions, the default remains unclear.

5. *No necessary threat.* It is important to note that with some questions it is possible to produce a response which does not necessarily involve a threat to face, i.e. a response which

is convincing, relevant and can be adequately defended. 'No necessary threat' is scored if it is possible to produce such a response, regardless of whether such a response actually occurs.

Furthermore, it is also important to note that a 'no necessary threat' response can take the form of either a reply or a non-reply. Sometimes, replying to a question does not necessarily pose any threat to face. Some questions simply ask for a definition; giving a reply should pose no necessary threat to face. For example, Sir Robin Day asks John Major in respect of the term 'shroud waving': 'I'm interested in that phrase I've not heard before, I heard you make it earlier today, what does it mean?' Other questions are so favourable that they give the politician an open invitation to make positive statements about him or herself and the party the politician represents. So, for example, Sir Robin Day asks John Major: 'Why do you deserve . . . why does the Conservative Party deserve under your leadership what the British people have never given any political party in modern times—a fourth successive term of office?'

Conversely, it is also possible for a non-reply to offer no necessary threat to the politician, if the question itself is either factually incorrect, or if its presuppositions are seriously open to dispute. In these circumstances, a non-reply can be used to demonstrate the inadequacy of the question without damaging the face of the politician, whereas a reply could imply that the politician had failed to discern either the factual inaccuracies or the contentious presuppositions in the question. For example, Sir Robin Day asks John Major: 'Why have you changed your mind on the desirability of proportional representation?' John Major can quite legitimately attack the question by pointing out that he has never supported proportional representation; were he to attempt to reply, he would be implicitly accepting the proposition that he had changed his mind. Again, Jeremy Paxman asks John Major: 'If you've got it wrong and if you lose, the party'll hang you out to dry won't they?' John Major's response is to say: 'I haven't got it wrong and I'm not going to lose.' If John Major were to confirm this statement, he would threaten his own personal position, whereas any attempt at denial would clearly lack credibility. By not replying, he avoids these pitfalls while quite legitimately attacking the speculative and hypothetical nature of the question.

#### *Analysis of data*

The transcripts of all 18 interviews were then analysed using the face-threat coding system. In presenting these results, a basic distinction can be made between those questions where every possible response presented some kind of threat to face (40.8 per cent of questions), and those questions where a 'no necessary threat' response was considered possible (the remaining 59.2 per cent of questions). This latter type of question enabled a direct test to be made of the main hypothesis under investigation, namely, that politicians, in responding to questions, will tend to opt for the least face-threatening response, irrespective of whether it is a reply or a non-reply.

The results provided overwhelming support for this hypothesis, in that on 81.5 per cent of these questions, the politicians opted for the 'no necessary threat' response. In a further 5.3 per cent of questions, they either answered part of the question, or opted for an answer by implication, in the appropriate direction for a 'no necessary threat' response. Out of these 86.8 per cent of questions, 69.3 per cent of the responses constituted replies, 20.3 per cent non-replies and 10.3 per cent intermediate responses.

**Table 1.** Probability of 'no necessary threat' (NNT) responses occurring by chance (Percentages in parentheses)

| Type of question   | Probability of NNT by chance (%) | Total No. of responses | Number (%) of NNT responses | Number (%) of answers by implication and incomplete replies in appropriate direction | Total NNT responses |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|--|---------------------|
| Yes-no             | 33                               | 209                    | 167 (80)                    | 14 (7)   | 181 (87)            |
| Interrogative word | 50                               | 103                    | 86 (83)                     | 3 (3)  | 89 (86)             |
| Disjunctive (3)    | 33                               | 2                      | 2 (100)                     | 0  | 2 (100)             |
| Disjunctive (4)    | 25                               | 5                      | 5 (100)                     | 0  | 5 (100)             |

It is possible to calculate the chance expectation for the proportion of 'no necessary threat' responses on the basis of the number of potential response options for each type of question (see above, Rules of Application: 1. Types of question). For example, with yes-no questions, there are three principal response options (confirm, deny, non-reply); hence, the probability of each of these response options occurring by chance is of course 33 per cent. For questions beginning with an interrogative word, there are only two principal response options. With disjunctive questions, there are either three or four possible response options, depending upon whether or not the disjunctive question poses a genuinely binary choice.

On the basis of this analysis, Table 1 lists the probability for a 'no necessary threat' response occurring by chance for each question type, together with the actual incidence of its occurrence. The results show that the actual proportion of 'no necessary threat' responses for all types of question was far higher than would have been expected by chance.

Not every question presented the politician with the opportunity to make a 'no necessary threat' response; in fact, in the remaining 40.8 per cent of questions, all the responses available to the politician presented some kind of threat to face. With these questions, it is much harder to specify what the least face-threatening response for the politician would be, because it is by no means apparent how different kinds of face-threat can be compared and evaluated. These questions correspond to the avoidance-avoidance conflict identified by Bavelas *et al.* (1988, 1990), where all of the possible responses are negative. In this situation, Bavelas *et al.* predict that equivocation will occur; in terms of the analysis presented here, the prediction would be that such questions would be characterized by a high proportion of non-replies. In fact, 44.9 per cent of such questions were responded to with a non-reply, and a further 18.9 per cent with some kind of answer by implication or incomplete reply, which for these purposes can be regarded as a weaker form of equivocation. Thus, only a third of these questions received a direct reply.

Table 2 shows the amount of equivocation that might be expected by chance alone for these Bavelas-type questions. For yes-no questions, the amount of equivocation is twice what would be expected by chance alone. For the other three question types, equivocation



**Table 2.** Probability of equivocation occurring by chance in response to Bavelas-type questions (Percentages in parentheses)

| Type of question   | Probability of non-reply occurring by chance (%) | Total No. of Bavelas-type questions | Number (%) of non-replies | Number (%) of answers by implication and incomplete replies | Total proportion of equivocal replies |
|--------------------|--|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Yes-no             | 33   | 198                                 | 89 (45)                   | 41 (21)   | 130 (66)                              |
| Interrogative word | 50   | 19                                  | 10 (53)                   | 1 (5)   | 11 (58)                               |
| Disjunctive (3)    | 33   | 5                                   | 2 (40)                    | 0 (0)   | 2 (40)                                |
| Disjunctive (4)    | 25   | 5                                   | 1 (20)                    | 0 (0)   | 1 (20)                                |

only slightly exceeds what might have been expected by chance, but it should be noted that the number of such questions is relatively small. In fact, they constitute only 13 per cent of the total sample of Bavelas-type questions, the yes-no questions constituting the remaining 87 per cent.

Thus, the results provided strong support both for Bavelas *et al.*'s hypothesis that equivocation occurs in response to those questions characterized by avoidance-avoidance conflict, and for the main hypothesis of this study, that where a 'no necessary threat' response is possible, this is the option that politicians will choose, regardless of whether that response is a reply or a non-reply.

### Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to investigate to what extent the concept of face could be used to predict the direction of responses to questions in political interviews, and through doing so, to develop a theoretical model relating to mechanisms underlying these sequences in political interviews. The results of our analysis clearly showed that where a 'no necessary threat' response was possible, the politician tended to opt for that choice, irrespective of whether that response was a reply or a non-reply. This finding is highly significant, because it suggests that whether or not the politician replies to a question is largely determined by the demands of face: this is the main tenet of the face model presented here.

The model as formulated also has a number of wider implications for the analysis of political interviews, particularly with respect to evaluating the performance of both politicians and interviewers. Given an adversarial political system in which politicians must seek to present the best face for themselves, their political party, and their political allies, to the extent that they fail to do this, they may be said to be making political mistakes. Thus, the model is not only descriptive, but also prescriptive, in the sense that it provides a means of evaluating politicians in terms of their relative skill in avoiding mistakes in interviews. In a further analysis, it is intended to use the model as a means of evaluating the relative performance of the three party leaders in the 1992 British General Election.

By the same token, interviewers can also be evaluated in terms of the face model. For example, if an interviewer asks a high proportion of questions to which replies are highly face-threatening, this may have the effect of making the politician look extremely evasive. If it can be shown that an interviewer consistently asks a higher proportion of such questions to members of one political party rather than another, then it can be argued that this is indicative of interviewer bias. Hence, the face model also provides a novel way of analysing interviewer neutrality, and in a second study it is intended to use the model as a means of comparing the main interviewers in the 1992 British General Election.

To observe that politicians fail to reply to questions in political interviews is no more than a commonplace; in lay explanations, it is typically ascribed to the evasiveness, deviousness or downright dishonesty of politicians. The novelty of the approach presented here is not only that it provides a means of analysing questions in political interviews, it also demonstrates that the occurrence of both replies and non-replies can be understood within a unitary theoretical framework. Furthermore, this novel theoretical framework provides a set of criteria whereby it is possible to evaluate the relative skills of both politicians and political interviewers.

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