

Techniques of political interview analysis

Peter Bull

Department of Psychology, University of York, United Kingdom

Introduction

How do politicians in interviews cope with questions and interruptions? How often do they avoid replying to questions, how and why do they do this, and what are the consequences of their evasions? What makes a politician an effective interviewee, what makes for a skilled professional interviewer? These are all questions of significant interest, but to address them, it is necessary to have techniques for political interview analysis. To describe such techniques is the purpose of this chapter, based on research conducted by the author and his colleagues on British interviews over the past two decades (e.g., Bull & Mayer, 1993; Bull, 1994; Bull, Palmer, Elliott & Walker, 1996; Bull, 2003).

To the layman, it may seem perfectly obvious what is a question, and what is an answer. But to the analyst, it is far from self-evident, and arguably, clearly specified criteria are required for identifying question-response sequences. These can be broken down into a number of specific topics, to be discussed in this chapter in the following sections:

1. Identifying questions.
2. Identifying replies.
3. Intermediate responses.
4. Non-replies.
5. Face-threats in questions.
6. An illustrative example.

1, Identifying questions

Specifying what makes an utterance a question is by no means self-evident. Although questions are typically characterized by interrogative syntax (use of a question word and/or subject/verb inversion), this is not always the case. Certainly, it is possible to pose questions without the use of interrogative syntax. Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1985) have identified what they call *declarative questions*, comparable in form to declarative statements, except for the final rising question intonation (e.g., “You realise what the risks are?”; “They’ve spoken to be ambassador, of course?”). Indeed, some declarative questions may not even be accompanied by rising intonation, although the function of the utterance is clearly to pose a question rather than make a declarative statement. Conversely, it is also possible to use interrogative syntax without necessarily posing a question. Thus, so-called rhetorical questions are not only expected to remain unanswered but to be unanswerable. For example, if a latecomer is greeted with the utterance, “So what sort of time do you call this then?”, it is clearly not a request to tell the time, but a reprimand. A schoolboy who replied “It’s 9.15 Sir” would be regarded not as polite, but as impertinent.

Hence, in defining what constitutes a question, the form of an utterance does not provide a clear guide as to its function. Arguably, questions are better defined in terms not of form but of function, which has been conceptualized in the research reported here as essentially a request for information (Bull, 1994). Based on the analysis of 33 televised British political interviews, six main types of question have been identified, three of which take the interrogative form, three of which are non-interrogative (Bull, 1994).

The three interrogative question types can be distinguished according to the type of reply expected (Quirk et al., 1985). Those that expect affirmation or negation (e.g., “Have you finished the book?”) are called yes-no or polar questions. Those that expect as the reply one

of two or more options presented in the question (e.g., “Would you like to go for a walk or stay at home?”) are referred to as alternative questions (sometimes also as disjunctive questions). Those that typically expect a reply from an open range of replies (e.g., “What is your name?” or “When are you going out?”) are referred to as wh-questions, because they begin with the words “what,” “when,” “why,” “who” and “which” (Quirk et al., 1985). It should be noted that Quirk et al. did not include the word “where”, although it can function as a question word (Bull, 1994). However, they did include “how” (which of course does not begin with “wh-“). Thus, because the term “wh-question” is somewhat confusing, the term “interrogative word question” has been preferred in the studies reported here (Bull, 2003).

Three non-interrogative types of question can also be distinguished: *declarative*, *moodless*, and *indirect*. Declarative questions have already been described above. Moodless questions are those that do not have a finite verb (Jucker, 1986). So, for example, if the current British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, was talking about the achievements of the Labour government, an interviewer might interject with the phrase “Such as?”. This would be regarded as a moodless question, because it does not have a verb, but does ask the speaker to give some specific examples of what the Labour government has achieved. Finally, there are indirect questions: a means of asking a question through reporting that of another. For example, an interviewer addressing Tony Blair (Labour Prime Minister, 1997-2007) might say “Many people have asked the question why did you go to war in Iraq”. In this example, the force of the question is expressed not directly but indirectly in the form of a subordinate clause.

Using this sixfold typology, an analysis was conducted of 33 televised British political interviews, broadcast between 1987 and 1992. The results clearly showed that most (78.8 per cent) of the utterances coded as questions in these 33 political interviews employed

interrogative syntax. The most frequent form of non-interrogative question was the declarative (18 per cent). Notably, all the 1,045 questions identified in these 33 political interviews could be classified in terms of one of these six categories (Bull, 2003).

This sixfold typology is useful not only in characterizing what utterances should be regarded as questions. It also has significant implications for identifying what utterances should be regarded as replies, to be discussed in the next section.

2. Identifying replies

At first sight, identifying replies to questions might seem unproblematic. Thus, in the case of yes-no questions, an appropriate reply should be either yes or no. However, this is not always the case. Thus, Bolinger (1978) gave the example of someone who responded to the question “Do you like Honolulu?” with “Only a little”. This would seem perfectly acceptable as a reply, although neither yes nor no can logically accompany the response “Only a little”. Again, in the case of disjunctive questions, an appropriate reply might be choosing one or other of the two offered alternatives. But not all choices are reducible to two alternatives, even if presented as such. For example, if in response to the question “Would you like to go for a walk or stay at home?” someone said “I would rather go out for a drive”, this would seem a perfectly acceptable reply, even though neither of the two alternatives has been chosen.

Thus, deciding whether a question has received a reply is by no means unproblematic. In this respect, the typology of questions presented in Section 1 is useful, in that criteria for replies can be proposed in terms of the underlying structure of the question. Each of the six major question types is discussed below.

2.1. *Yes-no questions.*

Yes-no questions invite the answer yes or no, and if this is given, the response will typically constitute a reply. However, this requires some important qualifications. Thus, affirmation and negation do not necessarily require the words yes or no, and may be conveyed by other words such as *certainly, of course, not at all, never*. Yes-no questions may also be answered along a scale of affirmation-negation, by words such as *probably, perhaps, occasionally, very often*. Indeed, even the use of the words yes or no does not automatically mean the politician has answered the question. Thus, yes may be used to acknowledge a question rather than answer it, while no may preface an attack on the question rather than a reply (Bull, 2003: 107).

2.2. *Disjunctive or alternative questions.*

Disjunctive questions present the politician with a choice between two or more alternatives. If the politician chooses one of the alternatives, then this can be seen as a reply. It is also possible to reply by presenting an additional alternative. But if the politician does not choose between the alternatives offered by the interviewer, nor offers another alternative, then the response is not regarded as a reply (Bull, 2003:108).

2.3 *Interrogative-word questions.*

Interrogative-word questions request a missing variable. If the politician supplies that missing variable, he or she can be seen as having answered the question. Seven interrogative words (what, when, why, who, how, which and where) have been utilised in the research reported here (Bull, 2003). The criteria for defining what constitutes a reply to each of these seven words are based on their customary dictionary definition. So, “what” asks for a selection from an indefinite number of possibilities, or for the specification of amount,

number, or kind. “When” asks at what time, on what occasion, in what case or circumstance. “Why” asks on what grounds, for what reason, or with what purpose. “Who” asks what or which person(s). “How” asks in what way, or to what extent. “Which” asks what one(s) of a stated or implied set of persons, things for alternatives. “Where” asks at or in what place, position or circumstances.

2.4. Questions which do not take interrogative syntax.

The three types of question discussed above all take interrogative syntax. Non-interrogative syntax question types (declarative, moodless, indirect) might seem to present a problem for this kind of analysis. But as Harris (1991) points out, since moodless and declarative utterances are typically put forward for agreement or disagreement by the interviewee, they can usually be regarded as a form of yes/no question. So, for example, the declarative question “You do not plan to raise taxes after the next election?” seeks either affirmation or negation from the politician.

To test Harris’ (1991) hypothesis, an analysis was conducted of all the non-interrogative type questions (N=223) in the data set of 33 televised British political interviews broadcast between 1987 and 1992. This showed that 92% could be regarded as yes-no questions (Bull, 2003). Furthermore, all the remaining non-interrogative type questions could be treated as disjunctive or as interrogative-word (Bull, 2003). Thus, the results showed that the guidelines for analysing what constitutes a reply to a yes-no, disjunctive or interrogative-word questions can be extended to include all the non-interrogative type questions in the data set of 33 interviews (Bull, 2003).

3. Intermediate responses

In assessing whether a politician answers a question, there are certain responses which fall somewhere between giving a reply and not giving a reply, referred to as “intermediate responses” (Bull, 1994, 2003). Harris (1991) made a similar point, identifying what she called “indirect answers,” which can be placed midway on a scale of evasiveness between direct answers and outright evasion. The author has distinguished between three types of intermediate response (Bull, 1994, 2003). Firstly, a reply may be implied in the politician's response, but not explicitly stated. Secondly, a politician may answer a question, but only in part. Thirdly, a 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. These three types of intermediate response are discussed further below.

3.1. Answers by implication.

The interviewee makes his or her views clear, but without explicitly stating them. A celebrated answer by implication was given by the late Diana, Princess of Wales, in her televised interview with Martin Bashir (20th November, 1995). When asked “Do you think Mrs. Parker Bowles was a factor in the breakdown of your marriage?”, Diana replied “Well there were three of us in this marriage so it was a bit crowded”. This response clearly implied that the answer to the question was yes, although Diana managed to convey this without ever actually saying so. She also accompanied her reply with a wry smile, where a more direct or even vitriolic response might have laid her open to the criticism simply of being embittered, which could then have been used as a means of discounting other things which she said in that interview (Bull, 1997).

3.2. Incomplete replies

The second type of intermediate response is the incomplete reply. Three sub-

categories of intermediate response can be distinguished: partial replies, half-answers and fractional replies (Bull, 2003: 110-112). If the interviewer is in effect asking two questions (a double-barrelled question), and the politician only answers one of the questions, then this is termed a half-answer (Bull, 2003: 110). In a fractional reply, the politician answers only part of a multi-barrelled question (Bull, 2003: 110-111). In a partial answer, the politician replies to only part of a single-barrelled question. So, for example, Neil Kinnock (Leader of the Labour Opposition, 1983-1992) was asked by David Dimbleby in the 1987 general election “Is it still your position that nobody earning under five hundred pounds a week is going to be damaged in any way financially by the return of a Labour government in terms of tax?” Kinnock’s response (“They won't be worse off in income tax that's for certain”) was challenged by Dimbleby, because income tax is only part of the tax that people pay, hence it was only a partial reply to the question.

3.3. *Interrupted replies*

The third major type of intermediate response is the interrupted reply, where it is not possible to say whether or not the politician would have replied to the question because the response is interrupted by the interviewer (Bull, 2003: 111-112)

4. Non-replies

Instances where politicians do not provide any of the requested information are referred to as *non-replies* (Bull & Mayer, 1993). This term was coined in preference to the more pejorative term *evasion* (cf. Harris, 1991), because under certain circumstances not giving an answer can readily be justified. For example, if a question contains contentious or inaccurate presuppositions, these may be legitimately challenged by the politician; it would be specious to dismiss such challenges as just “evasions”. Indeed, in attempting to answer such a question, a politician may fall into the trap of seeming to accept presuppositions that are in

fact seriously open to dispute.

Non-replies to questions can take a variety of forms; to analyse these in greater detail, an equivocation typology was devised by Bull and Mayer (1993). The term *equivocation* (like that of non-reply) was intended to be neutral as to whether not providing the requested information was justifiable. It should be noted that in addition to non-replies, this typology has been used to analyse incomplete replies (see Section 3.2 above). These are included because such responses fail to provide the full information requested by the interviewer, hence may also be regarded as a form of equivocation.

The equivocation typology is divided into superordinate and subordinate categories. For example, one superordinate category is *attacks the question*. This can be further subdivided into eight subordinate categories, for example, *the question is hypothetical or speculative, the question is based on a false premise, the question includes a misquotation*. In total, there are 12 superordinate categories. When further subdivided into subordinate categories, 35 ways of not answering a question can be distinguished. The full typology is presented in Bull (2003: 114-122). It was developed inductively on the basis of responses in which the politicians failed to provide the information requested by the interviewers, and was intended to provide the “best fit” in terms of characterising these responses. It should be noted that this system is not intended to be exhaustive; there may well be more than 35 ways of not answering a question!

Using this typology, pairwise comparisons were made between three British party political leaders: Neil Kinnock, Margaret Thatcher (Conservative Prime Minister, 1979-1990), and John Major (Conservative Prime Minister, 1990-1997). In terms of the superordinate

categories, a highly significant mean correlation of .92 showed that the three politicians equivocated in very similar ways. However, when both superordinate and subordinate categories were analysed, it was possible to discern distinctive forms of equivocation, unique to each politician.

Thus, a highly distinctive feature of Margaret Thatcher's style was to make personal attacks on the interviewer (Bull & Mayer, 1993). Whereas British politicians frequently attack the question (Bull & Mayer, 1993; Bull, 2003), it is highly unusual for them to attack the interviewer. For Neil Kinnock, there were two distinctive forms of equivocation: *negative answers*, and *reflecting the question*. Negative answers take the form of stating what will not happen instead of what will happen. In reflecting the question, the politician simply deflects the question back to the interviewer (e.g., by saying "Well you tell me"). For John Major, there were three distinctive forms of equivocation (Bull & Mayer, 1991; Bull, 2003). One was termed the *literalism*, which a question is taken literally (and not in the sense in which it was clearly intended) as a means of not giving a reply. Another was *pleading ignorance*, simply saying "I don't know" in response to a question. The third was termed the *deferred reply*, in which the politician says he or she is unable to answer the question for the present time, for example, by saying "Well you'll have to wait and see".

The use of negative answers and reflecting the question by Neil Kinnock contrasted sharply with the aggressive tactics of Margaret Thatcher. One way of assessing the effectiveness of these strategies is to look at the responses of the interviewers. Following an attack on the interviewer by Margaret Thatcher, they typically asked a new question (in 83 per cent of cases) rather than reformulating the original question. However, Neil Kinnock's attempts to reflect the question on each occasion led to the interviewer simply reiterating the

point. Most of his negative answers (75 per cent) also typically led to reformulations of the question by the interviewers. Thus, whereas Margaret Thatcher's aggressive tactics had the effect of inhibiting the interviewers from pursuing a particular line of enquiry, the defensive tactics of Neil Kinnock simply invited further questioning on the same topic (Bull & Mayer, 1993; Bull, 2003). It should, however, be noted that Thatcher's tactics may also have contributed to the wider perception of her at that time as aggressive, bullying and overbearing. In contrast, John Major during his premiership was often criticized by the media as colourless and grey, with no clear views of his own (Bull, 2003). This view could only be reinforced by his distinctive style of pleading ignorance, taking questions literally and deferring replies by saying "You'll have to wait and see". Thus, in these respects, unlike the other two politicians, John Major showed open evasiveness (Bull & Mayer, 1991; Bull, 2003).

The above examples show some rather inept ways of responding to awkward questions, but it should not be assumed that equivocation is always unskilful. For example, a high degree of skill was shown by Tony Blair in televised interviews during the 1997 general election campaign (Bull, 2000). Blair made extensive use of the term "modernisation" to justify the dramatic volte-face in policy which took place years following Labour's disastrous electoral defeat in 1983 and which culminated in its landslide victory as New Labour in 1997. This "rhetoric of modernisation" allowed Blair not only to explicitly acknowledge the policy changes which had taken place, but also to present them as principled - as an adaptation of the traditional values of the Labour Party to the contemporary political situation. In this way, he could not only equivocate skilfully in response to awkward questions but also present a positive face for his party, as both principled and moving with the times.

Thus, equivocation can be skilled or unskilled. By identifying the different ways in which politicians equivocate, one aspect of their skill in interview performance can be evaluated.

5. Face-threats in questions

In analyzing the factors that underlie equivocation, a major contribution has been made by Bavelas, Black, Chovil and Mullett (1990). According to their theory, people typically equivocate when posed a question to which all possible replies have potentially negative consequences, but where nevertheless a reply is still expected. This situation they refer to as a *communicative avoidance-avoidance conflict* (referred subsequently in this chapter as a *communicative conflict*). Many everyday situations can be seen to create these kinds of conflicts. Perhaps the most common involves a choice between saying something false but kind and something true but hurtful. For example, a person receives a highly unsuitable gift from a well-liked friend, who then asks directly “Did you like the gift?”. In responding, the person has two negative choices: saying, falsely, that s/he likes the gift or saying, hurtfully that s/he does not. According to equivocation theory, the person will if possible avoid both of these negative alternatives - especially when a hurtful truth serves no purpose. What s/he does instead is to equivocate; for example, someone might say “I appreciate your thoughtfulness”, with no mention of what s/he thought of the actual gift. Bavelas et al. stressed that although it is individuals who equivocate, such responses must always be understood in the situational context in which they occur.

According to Bavelas et al. (1990), communicative conflicts are particularly prevalent in the situational context of political interviews. In this context, Jucker (1986) has argued that upholding face is of particular importance for democratically-elected politicians. This is

because their political survival ultimately depends on the approval of a majority of people in their own constituency. Jucker's analysis was based on a theory of politeness developed by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987). They argued that face is important in all cultures, it can be lost, maintained or enhanced. They distinguished between what they termed positive and negative face, where positive face is the desire to be approved of by others, negative face the desire to have autonomy of action. So, for example, a request to do something may threaten someone's negative face (by restricting their freedom of action), whereas disagreements may threaten positive face (by showing a lack of approval). It is upholding positive face which Jucker argued is of particular importance in political interviews.

Politeness theory was itself based on a highly influential paper "On Face-Work" by Goffman (1955/1967). His observations have important implications for the analysis of political interviews. For example, he pointed out that not only do people defend their own face in social interaction, there is also an obligation to defend the face of others. Thus, 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 observed that in many relationships, members of a group come to share a collective face. In the presence of third parties, an improper act on the part of one member can become a source of acute embarrassment to other group 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.

On the basis of Goffman's (1955/1967) analysis, it was argued that politicians must concern themselves with three aspects of face: their own individual face, the face of

significant others and the face of the party which they represent (Bull et al., 1996). It was further argued that communicative conflicts in political interviews can be understood in the context of what are termed *threats to face* (Bull et al., 1996; Bull, 2003). This concept can be understood as follows. The structure of a question (yes-no, interrogative word, disjunctive) will project a number of possible responses. For example, to a yes-no question a politician may reply in the affirmative, or in the negative, or may equivocate. Each of these three principal responses can present potential threats to face, that is to say, responses which could make the politician look bad. If all the principal forms of response are considered face-threatening, the question is regarded as creating a communicative conflict, thereby creating pressures towards equivocation.

Equivocation in itself is regarded as face-threatening, because it makes the politician look evasive, but arguably less so than 18 other forms of face-threat (Bull, 2003), specified in a typology devised by the author and his colleagues (Bull et al., 1996). This distinguishes between 19 different ways in which questions can pose threats to face. The coding system is organized in terms of the three principal components of face which it is argued politicians must defend: personal face, the face of the political party, and the face of significant others. These three components are regarded as superordinate categories, and further subdivided into a number of sub-categories. The full list of 19 sub-categories, together with examples of their use, is presented in Bull (2003: 134-145); an illustrative example of a face-threat analysis is presented below.

6. An illustrative example

The example of a communicative conflict analysed in this section is drawn from an interview in the 2005 general election (broadcast 20th April) between the BBC interviewer

Jeremy Paxman (JP) and Tony Blair (TB).

In this extract, Blair was asked whether he accepted any responsibility at all for the death of Dr. David Kelly, a microbiologist who was chief scientific officer for the Ministry of Defence. Kelly apparently committed suicide after his identification as the source of revelations to the BBC that intelligence officers were unhappy with the government's dossier on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (referred to at that time as the "dodgy dossier"). Because it was the Ministry of Defence who identified Dr. Kelly, the government was widely assumed to bear some responsibility for his death. The full text of the extract is reproduced below:

JP-1: Do you accept any responsibility at all for the death of Dr. David Kelly?

TB-1: [Pause...sigh] It was a terrible terrible thing to have happened I don't believe we'd any option however but to disclose his name because I think had we failed to do so that would have been seen as attempting to conceal something from the committee that was looking into this at the time and again in relation to this...

JP-2: Do you accept any responsibility at all?

TB-2: I-I-I've said what I've said and I feel desperately sorry for his family and indeed for the terrible ordeal that they were put through but as I said at the time and again this has been into time and time again I if we had concealed the fact cos this whole row was about um the information that as you know we've been over this many many times had been given to the BBC reporter he had then come forward and said to his superiors this is me I think it's me who's responsible for having given this story there was a foreign affairs select committee report going on at the time I think if we'd concealed

that from people we'd have been subject for a different to a different type of....

JP-3: So the answer to the question is you don't accept any responsibility

TB-3: It's not a question of not accepting responsibility it is a question of simply explaining the circumstances that happened.

JP-4: It's a question to which you could give a yes or no answer Prime Minister

TB-4: Yeah but it's maybe not a question you need to give a yes or no answer to

The first two utterances by Paxman (JP-1 & JP-2) take the form of yes-no questions. His third and fourth utterances (JP-3 & JP-4) are declarative questions; given that they are both put forward for agreement or disagreement (Harris, 1991), they can arguably be treated as yes-no questions. Hence, to reply to any of these four questions requires either an affirmative or a negative answer. In fact, Blair equivocated in response to all four questions. After his fourth non-reply (TB-4), Paxman moved on to a new topic.

The reasons for Blair's equivocation can be understood in terms of the face-threats presented by these questions. If Blair had replied in the negative (he did not accept responsibility), his response would have lacked credibility, because it was the Ministry of Defence who had identified Dr. Kelly. Furthermore, Blair might also have been perceived as unsympathetic and uncaring. If Blair had replied in the affirmative (he did accept responsibility), it would have reflected extremely badly on his own and his government's perceived competence. In addition to these potential face-threats, there might also have been the possibility of litigation from Dr. Kelly's bereaved family. If Blair had equivocated, this would also be face-damaging, because it would make him look evasive: both politicians in general and Tony Blair in particular have an unenviable reputation for such slipperiness.

Thus, Paxman's questions created a classic communicative conflict, in which either confirmation or denial by Blair would have been extremely face-damaging; equivocation was arguably the least face-threatening option. In the first three responses (TB-1, TB-2, TB-3), Blair can be seen as defending his positive face (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987) by seeking to justify his and the government's actions, and by expressing regret and concern for the bereaved family. In his fourth response (TB-4), Blair can be seen as defending his negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987) by asserting "...it's maybe not a question you need to give a yes or no answer to". Thus, arguably both the reasons for Blair's equivocation and the form of the equivocation itself can be understood in terms of the concepts of face-threat and face management.

Conclusions

All the techniques described above have been used in a programme of research conducted by the author and his colleagues on how and why British politicians equivocate in response to questions in televised political interviews (Bull & Mayer, 1991, 1993; Bull et al., 1996; Bull, 2003). Studies have also been focussed on what makes for skilled interview performance by both politicians (Bull & Mayer, 1991; Bull & Mayer, 1993; Bull, 2003) and professional political interviewers (Bull & Elliott, 1998; Elliott & Bull, 1996).

All these studies were based exclusively on British televised political interviews. This might of course be seen as a serious limitation, if the results are confined to just the British social and political context. But alternatively, this might be seen as a challenge, as a spur to investigate the extent to which the modes of analysis described above are applicable to different cultural and political settings. For example, although Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) in their theory of politeness postulated universal face needs, the particular form that face

threats take may vary across different cultures and political contexts. Thus, Gnisci and Bonaiuto (2003) proposed that Italian politicians equivocate less than British politicians, because Italian interviewers ask fewer conflictual questions, and because the public and social repercussions of inconvenient but more honest answers may be less punishable in Italy than in the United Kingdom. This is but one example, but the scope for cross-cultural comparisons of political interview analysis is simply enormous. This chapter, it is to be hoped, has provided some guidelines as to how such future research might proceed.

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