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A Pragmatic Analysis of Evasion in Political Interviews

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Abstract

There are common perceptions that politicians use in a very clear way evasion strategies because they are exposed to embarrassing questions which detect their policy. So they use evasion strategies to save their face and to be polite to the audience and voters, and hence, they ensure to be elected and reelected.

Accordingly, the present study aims at analyzing evasion strategies in political interviews for four prominent politicians: the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and the leader of the Conservative Party Theresa May, the Member of Parliament and leader of the British Labor Party Jeremy Corbyn, the former President of the United States of America Donald Trump and the former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

1. Introduction

Language is powerful. It has a great impact on our daily life. Choosing words can perform positive and negative effects. Negatively, language can confuse people and even make them isolated. It can divide people and make them feel frustrated, alienated, disaffected, and even exasperated. Positively, language can encourage people, enthuse and even motivate them (Rana and Ives, 2008:6) language is used for many purposes this includes providing information, expressing feelings, interaction, persuasion, and many different purposes (Atchison, 1996 : 20).A very important tool which provide the audience with such purposes is the political interviews (Locher and Watts, 2008:85). In political interviews both the interviewer and the interviewee practicing their professional roles. Concerning the interviewers they choose the topic, asking the questions and specifying the time for answering the question by the politician. On the other hand, politicians hold a higher responsibility to the general public, who considered the interview as a means by which they decided their votes (Vignozzi, 2019:27). It was argued by Chovanec (2020:66) that the interviewer's questions most often show a threat to the interviewee's face whether it was positive or negative politeness. So the interviewee needs to overcome the threat by embracing face-saving communicative strategies. Politicians achieve this by using what has variously called evasiveness

(Harris 1991, Clayman and Heritage, 2002), equivocation (Baveles et al 1999, Anchimbe 2009), and hedging (Fraser 2010).this study deals with the pragmatic study of evasion in political interviews.

2. Problem of the study

There are many topics in pragmatics that are worth studying. One of those is evasion, which has received a little attention from the researchers and is most often studied intuitively (Galasinski, 2000: 55). So, the analysis of how politicians evade answering the question when they are interviewed provide a better understanding of the political interview. In addition; it offers a clear idea for the linguistic behavior in dealing with crucial issues, that pour into the political domain; it also provides a prediction for the politician's future decision.it is worth noticing that there have been no researches that studied the use of evasion in political interviews in a systematically and pragmatically way. So, analyzing the use of evasion by politicians reflects what pragmatics strategies politicians use to evade answering the questions and their core reason for using such strategies. Such analysis also states whether the politicians used such strategies to save their face and show politeness. The study is conducted to answer such controversies.

3. Aims of the study

The present study aims at:

- 1-Investigating different ways of evasion strategies used by politicians in political interviews.
- 2-Finding out the reasons behind using evasion strategies by politicians.

3-Finding out how often each way of evasion strategies has been used and what ways are the most recurrent ones in the investigated interviews.

4-Pointing out the most evasive figures among the politicians analyzed.

5-Finding out if there are any additional strategies for evasion that apart from those mentioned by models of study.

4. Hypothesis of the Study

The researcher hypothesized that:

1- Evasion strategies are used by politicians in political interviews.

2- More than one strategy is used by politicians to answer one single question.

3-There are some evasion strategies that are used by some politicians, but not used by others.

4-The implementation of evasion strategies is influenced by the nature of questions the interviewer or journalist asks.

5-The implementation of evasion strategies is influenced by the political position that politicians have.

6-The implementation of evasion strategies is influenced by the nationality of the politician.

5. Procedures of the Study

The following procedures are adopted to accomplish the aims of the study, and to test the validity of its hypothesis:

1-Developing an eclectic model for studying evasion strategies which are taken from different writers and researchers: Bull and Moyer (1993), Bull (2003), Galasinski (2000), Bull and Strawson (2019), Kellner (2018).

2- Selecting the data to be analyzed (choosing Teresa May, Jeremy Corbyn, Donald Trump and Mick Pompeo).

3-Collecting the data which involves a transcript of political interviews from different websites.

4-Subjecting the data to the analysis according to the adopted models.

5-Discussing the results of the study in a detailed table.

6- Drawing the conclusions that the researcher arrived at from the results of the study and providing some recommendations and suggestions for future studies.

6. Literature Review

An Evader is a person who has a specific way of listening and processing information, someone who feels uncomfortable in answering questions because he has something to hide (Pyle and Karinch, 2016: 16). Evasion is a method used by politicians in order to avoid providing honest and important information (Galasink, 2000: 55). Evasion strategies are grouped into two main categories: Overt evasion and covert evasion. Overt evasion is done by the following strategies: 1) To state openly; 2) to imply and 3) To present oneself as the one who should not be asked the question. On the other hand, Covert evasion is done by the following strategies: 1) changing the textual context of the question; 2) change the focus of the question and 3) changing the focus and the textual context of the question. It should be taken into account that overt evasion strategies are easier to notice than covert evasion

and covert evasion answers manipulate the semantic content of the question (Ibid: 61).

Clayman (1993: 159) states that public figures sometimes tend to respond evasively to the questions that are exposed to by journalists. According to Agyekum (2008: 82) “it involves circumvention or avoiding answering directly or avoiding facing up to real difficult or tricky communicative or discourse issues”.

Obeng (2002: 13) illustrates that in ordinary conversation participants can easily avoid answering a question by abandoning it, but in political discourse, the situation is different where politicians have no options. Once a politician faces a dangerous question, they tend to avoid it by skillful use of words. The reason for implementing evasion in their answers is because answering straightly can make damage to politician’s reputation, Policy objectives, and career prospects (Clayman, 2001: 403)

Stamatović (2013: 21) concludes that the level of evasion in broadcast political interviews depends on the context and the style of questions that are employed by the interviewer whether they were adversarial or lenient. In addition, sometimes the degree of evasion subjects to specific cultural patterns. He ends up with a concise idea which states that “most politicians will evade when given the chance (with “slack” interviewers) and they will do the same when forced by hostile questioning (with “tough” interviewers). So, for a fruitful interview, the interviewers need to achieve the right balance. There are four levels of evasion which are based originally on Clayman’s (2003) categorization of “positive dimension of resistance” and “negative dimension of resistance.” Those levels are:

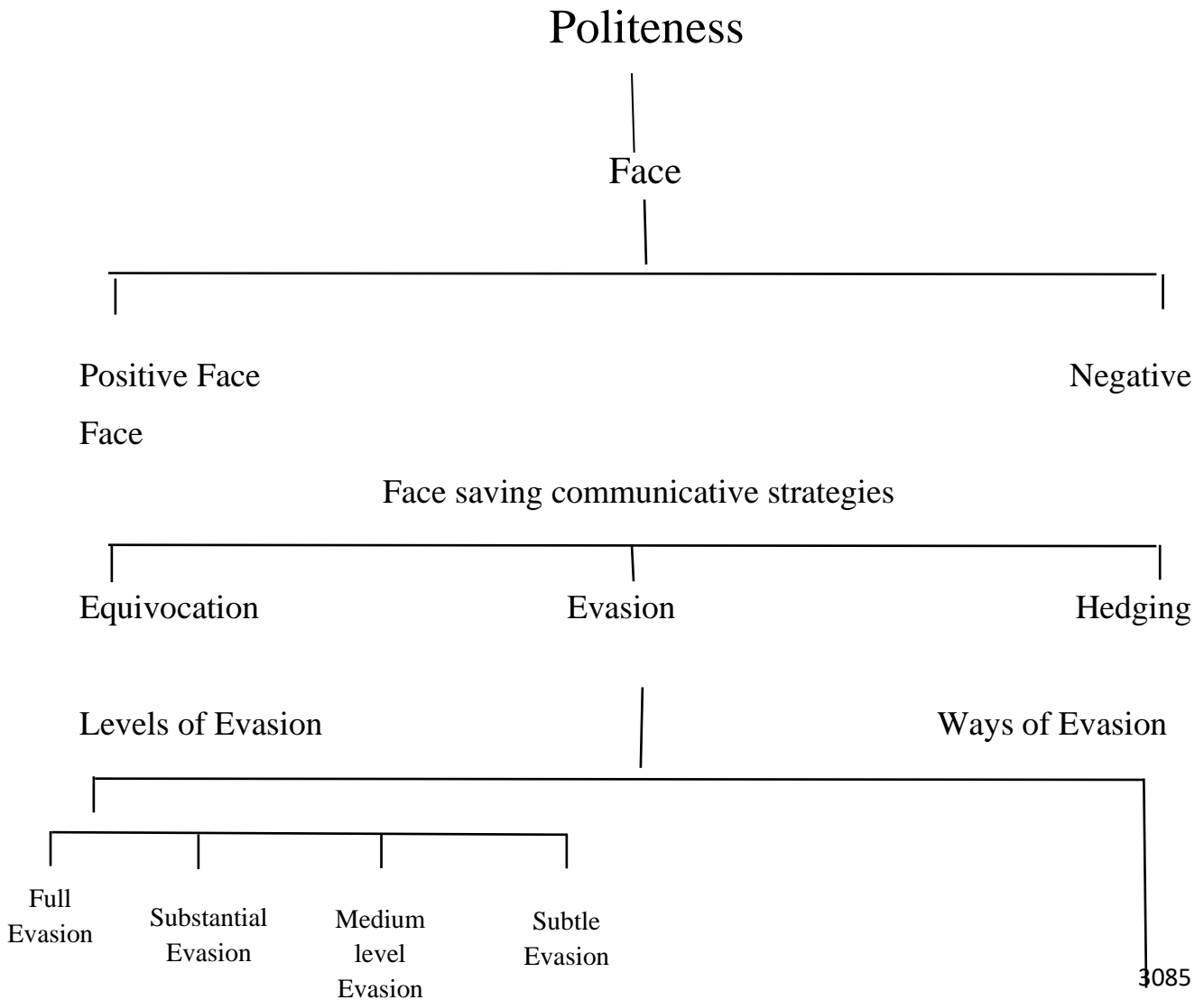
1) Full Evasion 2) Substantial Evasion 3) Medium Level of Evasion 4) Subtle Evasion (Rasiah, 2009: 669).

7. Methodology

The model of the current study is an eclectic Model; eleven items were employed from Bull and Muyer (1993:662). Bull (2003: 121) used the preceding categories of evasion. He also added an additional item for evasion, this item is called **Literalism**, by such strategy the politician answers the literal aspect of the question which wasn't intended to be answered literally so the total number became twelve. Galasinski (2000:62) allocated a specific section to discuss the idea of "changing the textual context of the question" and how the politician replies to a question in a way that may appear he speaks about the issue of question, but at the same time says things that have no relation to the content of the question. A new item was devised by Bull and Strawson (2019: 12) which is giving nonspecific response to a specific question. During the analysis data the researcher found it useful to adopt an additional category which is fake news, the most frequent phrase used by Trump and his employees when they refuse to accept reporting they don't like (Kellner, 2018: 97). So, the final total number becomes fifteen. The resulting typologies are as follow:

- 1. Ignoring the question**
- 2. Acknowledging the question without answering it**
- 3. Questions the question**
- 4. Attacks the question**
- 5. Attacks the interviewer**
- 6. Declines to answer**

7. **Makes political point**
8. **Incomplete answer**
9. **Repeats answer to a previous question**
10. **States or implies that the question has already been answered**
11. **Apologizes**
12. **Literalism**
13. **Changing the textual context of the question**
14. **Giving nonspecific response to a specific question**
15. **Fake news**



Ignoring the question	Acknowledge the question without answering it	Questions the question	Attacking the question	Attacking the interviewer	Declining to answer	Making political point	Incomplete answer	Repeating answer to A previous question	Stating that the question has been answered	Apologizing
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Ways of Evasion

8. Data Collection and Description

The data of the study encompasses transcripts of eight Political interviews with four Politicians. The transcripts are taken out from different websites. Theresa May's interviews were obtained from BBC one, the Andrew Marr show. Jeremy Corbyn's first interview was obtained from the spectator and the second interview was obtained from Evening Standard. Donald Trumps' interviews were taken out from rev.com. Finally, The Secretary of the state Mike Pompeo's first interview was obtained from NPR and the second interview was obtained from the USA Today. The interviews address many matters around the world. The matters which are taken in the present data are the most eminent ones. The politicians analyzed are from different nationalities, specifically two from the USA and the others from the UK. The reason for choosing different politicians from different nationalities is to expand the scope of analysis. The USA and the UK are chosen for their great role in Politics internationally. From the USA, Donald Trump and Mike Pompeo were chosen since they were the most powerful decision-makers in the USA. For Trump, he is always considered as one of the most controversial and divisive

Presidents in US presidential history. Trump considered a controversial president not because of his political actions, but because of his way of expressing those actions linguistically, which has been always attracted critics and the public (Sclafani, 2018: 1). Mike Pompeo the former US secretary of state is a high-class diplomat, always shows off his successful Policies to disturb North Korea, Russia, and Iran. (Macias, 2018). Theresa May is chosen because she is the UK's second female prime minister after Margret Thatcher. She holds the responsibility of UKs leadership at very confused unstable times. (Stamp, 2016). For Jeremy Corypn the leader of the Labour Party he is chosen, because of his leadership which was the most controversial time in the history of labour party. (Honeyman, 2018). The interviews are ordered sequentially the researcher reads the interviews thoroughly. Evasion strategies are identified according to the adopted models. The interviews accomplished the goals of the analysis. Most of the evasion strategies are found. The following table shows the details of each interview:

Interviewee	Interview no.	Interviewer	Broadcaster	Broadcast date
Theresa May	1st interview	Andrew Marr	BBC	4th September 2016
	2nd interview	Andrew Marr	BBC	30th April 2017
Jeremy Corbyen	1st interview	Emma Banett	Radio 4	30th May 2017
	2nd interview	Andrew Niel	BBC	26th November 2019
Donald Trump	1st interview	Jonathan Swan	HPO	3rd August 2020

	2nd interview	Lesley Stahl	CBC News	25th October 2020
Mike Pompeo	1st interview	Steve Inskeep	NPR	23th October 2018
	2nd interview	Deirdre Shesgreen	USA Today	2nd March 2019

The details of the interviews

9. Limitations of the Study

The scope of the current study is restricted to analyzing eight interviews for four political leaders. Two of them are from the UK and two are from the US. The data are collected from different websites. The interviews varied from TV interviews to radio interviews to phone calls interviews. The data of interviews is between the 4th of September 2016 to the 25th of October 2020. Two interviews for each politician. The length of the interviews is varied according to the nature of the discussion in each interview. Lastly the scope of the study is limited to investigating the pragmatic nature of evasion in the political discourse of these interviews.

10. Data analysis

Below are some examples the analysis of each evasion strategy:

Ignoring the Question:

AM: So in concrete terms, there's a lot of people on your side of politics who would say that in terms of education, grammar schools are the way forward. That's what got people – you went to a grammar school that then became a comprehensive, a lot of people like you got to the top by going to grammar schools. Are you prepared to allow more grammar schools to open and existing grammar schools to expand?

TM: Well, what I want to do in looking at schools is to build on the success of the six years of David Cameron's premiership when we see – now see more children in good and outstanding schools. But there is still more to be done. There are still parents who feel that their children aren't getting the opportunities they want them to have because of what happened to their local school. So I want to make sure that children have those opportunities, that all schools are offering a good education for children. In her answer, May simply ignored the question, instead of giving a complete answer about the opening, and expansion of Grammar schools, she starts to talk about roundabout subjects, which leads the interviewer to drive her attention to the importance of answering the question:

AM: That's not quite an answer to my question about grammar schools.

Acknowledge the question without answering it:

EB: I presume you have the figures?

JC: “Yes I do. It does cost a lot to do. The point I'm trying to make is we're making it universal so that we're in a position to make sure every child gets it and those that can at the moment get free places will continue to get them and those who that have to pay won't and we will collect the money through taxation. Mainly through corporate taxation.

Again, Corbyn evades answering by acknowledges the question without answering it, he admitted that he has figures but he didn't spell it out

Questions the question:

Lesley Stahl: But can we go back for one second to the pandemic? Because you called Dr. Fauci and other health officials, idiots-

Stahl asked Trump about the fact of calling Dr. Fauci and the rest of the health officials for being idiots. Trump evade answering by questions the question:

Donald Trump: Dr. Fauci, when did I call him an idiot?

Lesley Stahl: And I'm wondering if think-

Donald Trump: When did I call him an idiot?

Stahl insists that Trump described them as being idiots, but Trump still evading by questioning the question.

Attacking the interviewer

Deirdre: For many Americans, the summit in Vietnam looked like a fiasco. And the North Koreans are saying that was basically their one and only offer. So what now?

Pompeo: That's not what the North Koreans said, Deirdre. Don't, don't, don't say things that aren't true. That's not constructive.

Pompeo seems to be furious at such a question, he evades answering by attacking the interviewer and even attacking the question. His justification was that that's not what the North Korean said supposing that the question contains a misquotation.

11. Discussion of the Results

After analyzing the data the researcher found out that most of the strategies of evasion that are employed in the model are used by politicians in Political

interviews. The interviews were analyzed carefully and thoroughly. It was found out that 13 evasion strategies out of 15 are found in the analyzed data, The Total rate of evasion strategies gained from the analyzed data was 53. The most frequent evasion strategies that are used in the data are ignoring the question, Making a political point, and giving a nonspecific response to a specific question. The reason for re-using such strategies is because they are not overt clearly, politicians used to use evasion covertly Cakir (2016:63). So it was noticed that the politicians ignored the question 12 times. They made a political point 10 times and they gave a non-specific responses to a specific question 9 times. Theresa May used 5 evasion strategies out of 15; she evades 9 times out of 53 as total. Jeremy Corbyn used 6 evasion strategies out of 15; he evades 11 times out of 53 in total. Mick Pompeo used 7 evasion strategies out of 15; he evades 10 times out of 53 in total. It was considered that Donald Trump is the most evasive figure among the other Politicians. He used 8 evasion strategies out of 15 in answering the question. In total, he evades answering the question 23 times out of 53 as total. The reason for being an evasive figure could be back to his narcissistic personality Lee (2017:36) or because of Trump's way of keeping a rate of harmony so that he feels he can dictate or manipulate the media. Immelman and Griebie (2020:28). Apologizing strategy and Literalism didn't use by politicians of the analyzed data because of the limitation of data, those missing strategies could be found if analyzing additional interviews. Although the results show that all politicians used evasive strategies in answering their questions, they also show there are some evasion strategies that are used by some politicians but never used by others. For instance, the strategies of "questions the question" and "fake news" are used only by Donald Trump:

Jonathan Swan: You had a phone call with Vladimir Putin on July 23rd. Did you bring up this issue?

President Donald J. Trump: No. That was a phone call to discuss other things. And frankly, that's an issue that many people said was fake news.

Lesley Stahl: But can we go back for one second to the pandemic? Because you called Dr. Fauci and other health officials, idiots-

Donald Trump: Dr. Fauci, when did I call him an idiot?

Furthermore, the strategy of “changing the textual context of the question” and “incomplete answer” are used by Jeremy Corbyn but didn't use by the others.

AN: Jeremy Corbyn, the Chief Rabbi says a new poison of anti-Semitism, anti-Jewism, has taken root in the Labour Party and it's sanctioned by you, he says. He questions you're fit for office. What's your response?

JC: Well anti-Semitism, anti-Semitism is there in society. There are a very, very small number of people in the Labour Party that have been sanctioned as a result of complaints about their anti-Semitic behavior. As far as I'm concerned one is one too many and I've insured action has taken on that. But we've always on a positive side, recognized the need for education, so we set up an education process in the party, education packs are available and also made it very clear that in government we would obviously support the Holocaust Education Trust and the need for all of our children to understand how the Holocaust came about and how the growth of the far-right in Germany led to that. And I think as a society we have to recognize that any

form of racism is divisive and dangerous. An attack on a Jewish woman in the street or a Muslim person in the street, it's equally bad and an attack on a synagogue or a mosque is equally bad.

Similarly, the strategy of “Declining to answer” is used by Mick Pompeo only.

Deirdre: And has he denied it to you?

Pompeo: Ma'am, I don't talk about the conversations that I've had with him, in any context. I don't talk about the negotiations over nuclear weapons. And I'm not going to talk about private conversations that I've had with my counterparts. I don't do that when I talk with any counterpart around the world, Deirdre.

Those results can be seen in detail in table (2):

STRATEGIES OF EVASION	POLITICIANS				Total
	Theresa May	Jeremy Corbyn	Donald Trump	Mick Pompeo	
Ignoring the question	1	5	5	1	12
Acknowledge the question without answering it	1	2	-	-	3
Questions the question	-	-	2		2
Attacking the question	1	-	1	-	2
Attacking the interviewer	-	-	2	2	4
Declining to answer	-	-	-	1	1
Making political point	2	-	6	2	10
Incomplete answer	-	1	-	-	1
Repeating answer to a previous question	-	1	3	1	5

Stating that the question has been answered	-	1	-	1	2
apologizing	-	-	-	-	-
literalism	-	-	-	-	-
Changing textual context of the question	-	1	-	-	1
Giving nonspecific response to a specific question	4	-	3	2	9
Fake news	-	-	1	-	1
TOTAL	9	11	23	10	53

Table (2) the results of the analysis

12. Conclusions

The following conclusions are arrived at based on the theoretical and practical chapters of the study:

- 1- Politicians in political interviews always evade answering questions when they are asked by interviewers or journalists. They rarely give an answer free of evasion strategies. Their evasive answers are achieved by using different strategies. It could be by ignoring the question, questioning the question, attacking the question, attacking the interviewer, making a political point, and so on and forth. This conclusion verifies the first hypothesis which is: Evasion strategies are used by politicians in political interviews.
- 2- More than one evasion strategies are used by politicians to answer one single question. For example in Jeremy Corbyn's second interview (text3), Corypn used two evasion strategies to answer one question. Those strategies are the

repeating of the same answer to a previous question, and the second one is the claiming that the question has been previously answered.

Similarly, in Mick Pompeo's second interview (text3), Pompeo used two evasion strategies to answer one question, he attacked the question and attacked the interviewer.

Furthermore, in Donald Trump's second interview (text4), Trump used two evasion strategies to answer the same question which is giving a nonspecific response to a specific question and repeating the same answer to a previous question. This confirms the second hypothesis: politicians use more than one evasion strategies to answer one question.

- 3- It was concluded that some politicians use some evasion strategies while others were not. For example Donald Trump used the “fake news” strategy, but the others didn't. In a similar way, Jeremy Corypn used the strategy of “changing the textual context of the question”, but the others didn't use it. Mick Pompeo used the strategy of “declining to answer” but the others didn't. This verifies the third hypothesis: There are some evasion strategies that are used by some politicians, but not used by the others.
- 4- A further conclusion is that the use of evasion strategies is affected by the nature of questions asked, whether they were aggressive or favorable. For example, in Donald Trump's second interview Trump abruptly ended the interview with Lasely Stahl and didn't return for an appearance. Trump walked out of the interview because he was frustrated with Stahl's way of question. This confirms the fourth hypothesis: the implementation of evasion

strategies is influenced by the nature of questions the interviewer or journalist asks.

- 5- It was concluded that the implementation of evasion strategies influences by the political position of the politicians. That point clearly appears in Donald Trump's results of the analysis which show that he is the most evasive figure among the other politicians which reflects the relationship between his implantation of evasion and his position as a president of the US. This verifies the fifth hypothesis: the implementation of evasion strategies is influenced by the political position that politicians have.
- 6- The US politicians achieved the highest results of using evasion strategies. For example, Donald Trump and Mick Pompeo evade answering 33 times out of 53 while Theresa May and Jeremy Corypn evade answering 20 times out of 53. This supports the six hypothesis: the use of evasion strategies is influenced by the nationality of the politicians.

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