
Towards a typology of answer avoidance in political interviews

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While human verbal interaction is generally characterized by cooperativity (Grice 1975), there are many reasons for interlocutors to not fully cooperate in adversarial encounters. A paradigm example of this kind of dialogue are political interviews, in which answer avoidance is a key face-saving tool for the interviewee. This paper builds upon existing taxonomies (Bull & Mayer 1993; Ginzburg et al. 2022) of answer compliance and avoidance, and further develops a classification tailored to political dialogue. Our approach differs from the abovementioned ones regarding the following issues: first, we operate on dialogue that has been pre-analyzed with regard to its question-under-discussion (QUD) based discourse structure (Roberts 2012), enabling us to take into account entire response paragraphs/branches. Second, our taxonomy is strictly oriented along linguistic criteria, while ignoring political aspects of the respective utterances. As a preparation for the QUD analyses, interviews are segmented into discourse units and then arranged as QUD trees following the guidelines of Riester et al. (2018). QUD trees visualize the hierarchical structure of the discourse, assigning a response paragraph to each overt question. Each discourse unit contained in that paragraph is labelled for its response status. Our taxonomy of possible responses to an answer consists of 16 categories. Question-related non-answers are especially interesting, since they represent strategies of answer avoidance that are less apparent to the addressee. One strategy commonly used to avoid answering, namely changing the topic, can be observed in the following short discourse: Journalist: ‘How should schools react when students demonstrate on Fridays?’ Politician: ‘I think it’s great that those young people want to talk about the climate crisis.’ We are currently annotating a representative corpus of German interviews with QUD trees and response classifications. Our goal is to assess and quantify the dynamics and cooperativity of the respective interviews. Furthermore, we expect to gain a better understanding of both common and rare strategies used by interviewees in adversarial interviews. Which strategies are particularly creative? Which ones lead to a higher “success rate” of the interviewee getting away with not answering an overt question?

References • Bull, P. & K. Mayer (1993). How not to answer questions in political interviews. *Political Psychology* 14(4), 651–666. • Ginzburg, J. et al. (2022). Characterizing the response space of questions: data and theory. *Dialogue & Discourse* 13(2), 79–132. • Grice, H.P. (1975). Logic and Conversation. In Cole, P. & J. Morgan, *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*. New York: Academic Press, 41–58. • Riester A., Brunetti, L. & K. De Kuthy (2018). Annotation guidelines for questions under discussion and information structure. *Workshop: Information structure and the architecture of grammar*, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. • Roberts, C. (2012). Information structure: Towards an integrated formal theory of pragmatics. *Semantics & Pragmatics* 5(6), 1–69.