

Italian politicians hauled over the coals: The pragmatic effects of questions on answers in TV interviews and in courtroom examinations



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Received 20 December 2014; received in revised form 14 December 2015; accepted 15 December 2015

Available online 19 January 2016

Abstract

Courtroom and political broadcasts are institutional contexts in which activities and interactions are restricted by particular constraints and are well-suited to investigation of the pragmatic functions of politicians' question–answer exchanges. This research aimed to: (a) investigate possible differences between question and answer exchanges in TV interviews and courtroom examinations; (b) improve understanding of the pragmatic and functional aspects of question–answer relationships and how such relationships are affected by context. Nineteen courtroom examinations and 48 TV interviews involving the same 11 politicians (37 h 18 m) were coded by two independent observers; they coded a total of 2757 exchanges in terms of level of coercion and confusion in the questions, and equivocation in the answers. Analysis showed that there is a similar level of coercion in the two contexts, the rhythm of the questioning is faster in the courtroom, and there is more equivocation on TV. The relationship between question and answer varies between the contexts (moderation) but, as expected, we found many other direct and mediated relationships linking questions, answers and context. The results support the view that we need multiple pragmatic effects for understanding political questioning and equivocation.

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Keywords: Italian political communication; Interview; Equivocation; Pragmatic functions; Questions; Answers

1. Introduction

In 2003 a study which directly compared politicians' performances in broadcast television interviews and courtroom examinations during criminal trials was published (Gnisci and Bonaiuto, 2003). The main findings were that whilst the questions asked in the courtroom were as coercive as those asked in TV interviews, politicians provided more replies in the courtroom than on TV and that the sequential associations between question type and answer differed between the two contexts. This was interpreted as evidence that the same question may have different pragmatic functions in different contexts. This was a pioneering study because, throughout the world, it is extremely difficult to obtain audio- or video-recorded material of politicians in criminal trials, mainly due to legal restrictions. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the authors obtained some recordings of courtroom examinations and a comparison sample of TV broadcasts. The research did, however, suffer from some limitations; the sample was small, different subjects were used in the two contexts and the

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total duration of the interviews also differed from the one of the examinations. Furthermore, the theoretical focus of the research was on demonstrating that the associative relationships between question types and answer type varied with context. This study represents an attempt to extend the findings of the original study. First, we addressed some of the methodological weaknesses of the earlier study by using a larger, more heterogeneous sample and making an exceptional effort to find the same politicians on TV and in the courtroom to make it possible to use more powerful repeated measures analysis. Second, we improved the system used to classify questions and answers, so that they were classified in terms of the extent to which the question is coercive i.e. the extent to which the form of the question constrains the response options available to the respondent (Danet et al., 1976; Woodbury, 1984); the level of equivocation in the answer (how relevant the response is to the question that was posed; Bull and Mayer, 1993; Gnisci and Bonaiuto, 2003; Philips, 1984, 1987), question clarity (Kebbell and Johnson, 2000) and the extent to which the response agreed with the answers. Third, and probably most important – this study was theoretically oriented to identify not only one but also the many different pragmatic functions that the questions may have via the context on the answers. As we will show in detail later in Section 1, many types of relationship between context, question and answer (e.g. direct, mediated or moderated) may coexist. The pattern of relationships among the investigated variables provides important insights into the influence of context on questioning.

In brief, the dataset for this research consisted of 19 courtroom examinations and 48 TV interviews with the same 11 politicians (37 h 18 m). These data were used to: (a) investigate possible differences in questions and answers between two TV interviews and courtroom examinations; (b) improve understanding of the pragmatic and functional relationships between questions and answers on TV and in the courtroom. Given that an answer can be considered a function of both the question posed and the context in which it is asked, as well as of their interaction, we sought to find evidence of direct, mediated and moderated relationships among these variables.

1.1. TV political interviews and courtroom examinations as institutional contexts

Courtroom and political broadcasts are institutional contexts. The activities and interactions among people in these contexts are goal oriented and restricted by particular constraints and implicit assumptions (Drew and Heritage, 1992). As a consequence, people who interact in these contexts orient their activities to the institutional tasks (e.g. asking questions) and shape their conduct according to institutional rules and norms; this lends such interactions formal character (Atkinson, 1982).

Legal examinations and news interviews are two of the most common activities permitted in those contexts (Clayman, 2001; Roth, 2002); both activities are based on sequences of questions and answers (Levinson, 1992). These kinds of formal conversation are inherently dialogical (Linell et al., 1988) and the participants have distinct roles, rights, duties and obligations (Drew and Heritage, 1992). In particular, in their turns they must provide different speech acts. During cross-examinations and television interviews legal professionals (prosecutors or lawyers) and interviewers respectively ask questions whilst the examinees (defendant or witnesses) and interviewees – in our study these were politicians – provide responses to the questions. It is a rule of the adversarial system that leading questions are not permitted during direct examination of a witness in trial. With minor exceptions, even the control of the topical organization is up to the questioner (Levinson, 1992). In this asymmetrical form of conversation, the sequence of question and answer turns is rigidly prescribed and legal or symbolic sanctions can be applied to individuals who depart from the turn type prescribed for their role (Drew and Heritage, 1992).

In both courtroom examinations and news interviews questioner and respondent alternate turns; however in both contexts the two parties are surrounded by an “overhearing audience” (Drew and Heritage, 1992, p. 27): the judge, the court and spectators in the courtroom or journalists, experts, the studio audience and the TV audience on TV. The dialogical exchange of questions and answers thus becomes a sort of exhibition which is evaluated by the audience. Broadcast political interviews, for example, are attractive to the audience because they offer an opportunity to view a relatively unedited interaction between the questioning journalist and responding politician; news broadcasts tend to involve more editing (Gnisci et al., 2014). Being questioned live on TV in front of a national audience gives politicians an opportunity to show that they can handle a difficult situation, potentially involving antagonistic questioning by the interviewer (Clayman and Heritage, 2002; Hagerty, 2010; Roth, 2005).

Although formally the interactants address each other the main audience for their communication is often different, in the courtroom it is the judge or the jury who will decide the fate of the people involved in the case by their verdict (Gnisci et al., *in press*), in political interviews it is ‘the public’ at home i.e. potential voters to which the politician has to present “face” (Bull, 2003; Goffman, 1955). Of course, the consequences for a politician of a loss of face on TV are less serious than the potential consequences of an untruthful statement in a courtroom. Furthermore, the judge and the TV interviewer claim to represent the public or the people and assign themselves the role of a detached, neutral party (Atkinson, 1992; Clayman, 1988, 1992) whose purpose is to obtaining objective information (Clayman and Heritage, 2002).

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