

Conventionally Indirect Requests in the Press Conferences of U.S. Presidents Barack Obama and John F. Kennedy

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to investigate the use of conventionally indirect requests by the journalists in political press conferences. Being conventionally indirect is one of the politeness strategies in Brown and Levinson theory of politeness (1978). “ Being conventionally indirect means the use of phrases and sentences that have contextually unambiguous meanings which are different from their literal meanings” (Ibid.:137). It is hypothesized that journalists have become more direct and less cautious in their questions. This research is a comparative study analyzing the use of conventionally indirect questions in two different periods. The analysis concentrates on the press conferences conducted by two U.S. presidents , Barack Obama (2009- present) and John F. Kennedy (1961-1963).

The material studied show thatthe use of the indirect requests decreased significantly in the present-day press conferences. Also examining the questions indicates that there are certain factors affect the choice of the indirect speech request.

الأسئلة التقليدية الغير مباشرة في المؤتمرات الصحفية لرؤساء الولايات المتحدة

باراك اوباما و جون أف كندي

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يهدف البحث الى دراسة استخدام الأسئلة الغير مباشرة من قبل الصحفيين في المؤتمرات الصحفية. استخدام الأسلوب الغير مباشر هو إحدى استراتيجيات التأدب في النظرية التأديبية لبراون وليفنسن ١٩٧٨. استخدام الأسلوب التقليدي الغير مباشر يعني استخدام العبارات والجمل والتي يكون معناها مفهوما من سياق الكلام والذي يختلف عن المعنى الحرفي.

من المفترض ان الصحفيين اصبحوا أكثر مباشرة وأقل حدرا في أسئلتهم. البحث هو عبارة عن دراسة مقارنة تختص بتحليل استخدام الأسئلة التقليدية الغير المباشرة في فترتين زمنيتين مختلفتين. التحليل يتناول المؤتمرات الصحفية لرئيسي الولايات المتحدة باراك اوباما (٢٠٠٩- الفترة الحالية) وجون أف كندي (١٩٦١-١٩٦٣).

بينت الدراسة أن استخدام الأسئلة الغير مباشرة قد تقلص وبصورة ملحوظة في المؤتمرات الصحفية في الوقت الحاضر. أن دراسة الأسئلة أظهر أن هناك عوامل تؤثر في اختيار الأسئلة الغير مباشرة.

1-Background:

“ Press conferences are one of the most important vehicle by which presidents communicate to the media and public”(Eshbaugh-Soha,2003:348). The American presidents since John Kennedy’s day have ordinarily used the televised press conference as a main channel of communication with the American people. While British prime Ministers have done so through parliamentary questions and news interviews. Reviewing the American experience as a whole, it is interesting to find that news interviews were not so common in American news and current affairs programming. Moreover, news interview programs do not attract the same degree of public interest and specialist commentary in the U.S than they have in Britain (Clayman and Heritage,2002:46-47).

There is an important difference between press conferences and traditional news interviews concerning interaction and territorial power. News interviews consist of one interviewee and one interviewer, so competition to gain the floor is made between the two participants. The two participants take part in turn-taking. The interviewer set the agenda of the answer, he asks the question, makes statements to assess interviewee’s responses. Also he gives opinions, sometimes he conveys accusation and criticism. When one participant speaks, there is only one speaker who can interrupt.

Competition for the floor usually takes place when the interviewer tries to interrupt an answer turn with a new question or a follow up, or to challenge the interviewee’s response. On the other hand, the interviewee may interrupt a question turn with a response. Unlike news interviews, in press conference there are many participants, one or more than one politicians and a large group of journalists who take their turn to ask their questions. A press conference may have one, two or more politicians .

Also the whole relationship between the journalism and politics differs. This relationship is determined by who arranges the interview situation. So politicians in press conferences try to present a complete picture, and clear competition between them rarely takes place. Whereas political T.V or radio interview are arranged by interviewer. Unlike political news interviews, in press conferences the politician has the chance to speak to the audience without interruption. Also he has the power because he selects the journalist who is going to ask the question. There are various techniques that are employed by the politician who has the floor to select the next journalist, among these techniques is body language (pointing with the hand, nodding combined with eye contact). Also he/she does so by verbal expressions, in which the name is the most used technique in addressing the next speaker. But in news interviews the interviewer has the power because he conducts the interview and asks the questions.

2- Indirect Speech Act

Directness refers to “the degree in which requestive meaning is indexed in the form of an utterance” (Searl,1969). Direct requests are syntactically shaped through grammatical mood or a performative verb. Conventionally indirect requests are composed of standard frames that are conventionalized for requestive meaning, for example the request frames including modal verbs that refer to the hearer’s ability or willingness (can you, could you, will you, or would you). Another example of conventional indirect request is to refer to the speaker’s desire or intention (Blum- Kulka, House and Kasper, 1989). The journalist’s questions are speech acts that threaten the face of the president; therefore he mitigates his questions by using indirect questions to minimize the forcefulness of his request. The indirect question is more polite than direct question

because the journalists ask about the ability or the willingness of the president to answer the question. Thus they avoid coercing the president's response by giving him the option not to answer the question if he does not want to do so. Such kinds of questions are differential to the power and position of the president, also the journalists indirectly imply that they are powerless to coerce the president (Brown and Levinson, 1978).

"In indirect speech acts the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information, both linguistic and non-linguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer" (Searl, 1975).

Thomas (1995:125) suggests that directness is universal since it takes place in all natural languages. But there are elements that control the use of indirectness in all languages and cultures. These elements are mentioned below:

- 1- The relative power of the speaker over the hearer.
- 2- The social distance between the speaker and the hearer.
- 3- The degree to which X is rated an imposition in culture Y.
- 4- Relative rights and obligations between the speaker and the hearer.

When the hearer is more powerful than the speaker, the speaker makes use of a greater degree of indirectness. Also the social distance is another element that affects the speaker's use of indirectness (Leech, 1983). In a conversation context many factors determine the degree of respectfulness such as (status, age, sex, degree of intimacy, etc.). When you want to make a request, your request will be direct or indirect according to the social distance and the degree of intimacy and friendliness. For example when a speaker wanted some change for the coffee machine, she first approached a colleague whom

she knew very well, but when he could not help, she was forced to approach a complete stranger[a man considerably older than she was] (Thomas,1995,127-28):

1- Got change of fifty pence, DB?

2- Excuse me could you change fifty pence for me?

I need tens or fives for the coffee machine.

The degree of impositions may differ according to the situation, if you want to borrow 100\$ you will be more indirect in your request than if you want to borrow a dollar. Another example when the distance is great(Speaker and Hearer are strangers):

- Look, I'm terribly sorry to bother you but would there be any chance of your lending me just enough money to get railway ticket to get home? I must have dropped my purse and just don't know what to do (Brown and Levinson,1978:86).

Pinker (2007:438) suggests that indirectness is used to avoid embarrassment and awkwardness, save face, or reduce social tension . Thomas (1995: 142-43) mentions other reasons:

- The desire to make one's language more/less interesting.

- To increase the force of one's message.

- Competing goals

-politeness/regard for face.

2.1 Performance of Indirect Directives:

Searl (1969) lists examples of some of the sentences that could be employed to make indirect requests and other directives or orders. He divides these sentences into groups:

Group 1: Sentences concerning hearer's ability to perform the act:

Can you reach the salt?

Could you be a little more quiet?

You can go now.

Are you able to reach the book on the top shelf?

Group 2: Sentences concerning speaker's wish or want that hearer will do the act:

I would like you to go now.

I want you to do this for me , Henry.

I would /should appreciate it if you would/ could do it for me.

I wish you wouldn't do that.

Group 3: Sentences concerning hearer's doing the act:

Will you quit making that awful racket?

Would you kindly get off my foot?

Won't you stop making that noise soon?

Group 4: Sentences concerning hearer's desire or willingness to do the act:

Would you be willing to write a letter of recommendation for me?

Do you want to hand me that hammer over there on the table?

Would it be convenient for you to come on Wednesday?

Group 5: Sentences concerning reasons for doing the act:

Must you continue hammering that way?

Why don't you try it just once?

You ought to be more polite to your mother.

It would be better for you(for us all) if you would leave the room.

Group 6: Sentences embedding one of these elements inside another; also elements embedding an explicit directive illocutionary verb inside one of these contexts:

Would you mind awfully if I asked you if you could write me a letter of recommendation?

Might I ask you if you take off your hat?

I hope you won't mind if I ask you if you could leave us alone.

2.2 Politeness and indirect request

Indirect request is connected with politeness and being conventionally indirect is one of the negative politeness

strategies in Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness (1978). Being conventionally indirect means "the use of phrases and sentences that have contextually unambiguous meanings which are different from their literal meaning" (Brown and Levinson, 1978:137). Thus the speaker's intention becomes obvious at the same time he indicates his desire to say something indirectly. Consider the following example:

3- Can you please pass the salt?

Here "can" is only an indirect request and not a question about the addressee's potentialabilities. Another transformation that rules out the literal meaning and forces an indirect speech -act reading is that which converts (4) to (5) by the omission of the auxiliary and tense markers (as noted by Gordon and Lakoff, 1971):

4- Why are you painting your house purple?

5- Why paint your house purple?

Example (4) could be either a mere question accompanied by curiosity (the literal reading) or a critical note (the indirect reading). But after the omission of tense and auxiliary (5) can only be a critical note.

Some conventionally indirect expressions slightly are more or less polite than others. "The more effort a speaker expands in face preserving work, the more he will be seen as trying to satisfy hearer's face wants" (Brown and Levinson, 1978:148). This means that the conventionally indirect request seems more polite when compound with hedges and particles.

In the following examples the speaker is trying to be maximally polite. The order of polite requests is from the most polite to the least polite.

6- There wouldn't I suppose be any chance of your being able to lend me your car for just a few minutes, would there?

7- Could you possibly by any chance lend me your car for just a few minutes?

8- Would you have any objections to my borrowing your car for a while?

9- I 'd like to borrow your car if you wouldn't mind.

10- May I borrow your car please?

11- Lend me your car.

Kasper (2006) in her research examining the politeness of multiple requests in oral proficiency interviews, she notes that interviewers sometimes repeat a request with more or less variation immediately after completion of the first in the same turn. Interviewers repeat the same request in certain cases of increased task demands, or in response to the interviewee's difficulties in addressing the agenda set by the request. Two kinds of structurally parallel operations of mitigation and conventionally indirect request frame are observed. The interviewer usually uses the conventionally indirect request and mitigation in the first version, but he makes the second version of the same request more direct and without any mitigation markers.

3- Findings

The material studied have encompasses press conferences from two different periods. Six press conferences with U.S president John F. Kennedy (1961-1963), and six press conferences with U.S president Barack Obama (2009-present). The analysis is mainly concerned with the journalists' questions and their use of conventionally indirect requests that begin with one of the following phrases such as *can you, could you, will you, would you* followed by a speech act verb like *say, name, give, explain*. Other requests may be prefaced with *I wonder, I would like to ask, I want to ask* and so on.

The material studied show that there is a shift from the conventionally indirect request to the direct request. Journalists' requests are more direct in press conferences with Obama whereas they are less direct and more

indirect in press conferences with Kennedy as clarified in table 1.

Table 1. Direct and indirect requests

		Direct Requests	Indirect Requests	Total
Kennedy	n	110	64	174
	%	63.21	36.78	100.0
Obama	n	89	29	118
	%	75.42	24.57	100.0

From the material studied it is noticed that the journalists use indirect requests with president Obama in certain situation. Such situation is connected with the norm of turn-taking when the journalists want to ask a follow up question. Consider the following examples:

(1) [Obama December 2010]

Q. If I may follow up quickly, sir. You're describing the situation you're in right now. What about the last 2 years when it comes to your preferred option? Was there a failure either on the part of the Democratic leadership on the Hill or here that you couldn't preclude these wealthier cuts from going forward?

In the above example the journalist uses a conventionally indirect request so the president will not ignore his request and select another speaker. After along answer by the president about extending the tax cut, the journalist wants to ask another question about the same subject. He asks a question that is framed in such away to press the president to admit that there is a failure in their policy. Here the journalist expends more effort to satisfy hearer's face and to increase the relative politeness of the expression (Brown and Levinson, 1978:148). The journalist asks the permission of the addressee to do the volitional act of asking another question, he accompanies this with another politeness strategy when he uses the word "quickly" to minimize the imposition. And the use

of “sir” that index difference, so all these strategies pay the addressee difference and index the journalist’s awareness that time is important in press conferences.

(2) [Obama May 2010]

Q- You just said that the Federal Government is in charge, and officials in your administration have said this repeatedly. Yet how do you explain that we're more than 5 weeks into this crisis and that BP is not always doing as you're asking, for example, with the type of dispersant that's being used?

And if I might add one more, to the many people in the Gulf who, as you said, are angry and frustrated and feel somewhat abandoned, what do you say about whether your personal involvement, your personal engagement, has been as much as it should be, either privately or publicly?

In example(2) the journalist again asks for the president permission to ask another question, but he doesn’t wait for the president response or permission and he goes on his lengthy question. He uses this strategy to minimize the risk of being interrupted by the president after asking his first question. The journalist is aware of the fact that the president has the power to interrupt him and ends his turn.

Most of the time when the journalists ask for the permission of president Obama to ask another question, they don’t wait to hear his response ,but they go on asking questions or making comments on an issue that just has been discussed. There are very rare cases that have been noticed in the material studied when president Obama gives the journalist the permission to follow up, as in the following example:

(3) [Obama may 2010]

Q- *If I could follow up*——

Obama- *Sure.*

Q. Do you—are you sorry now—do you regret that your team had not done the reforms at the Minerals Management Service that you've subsequently called for? And I'm also curious as how it is that you didn't know about Ms. Birnbaum's resignation/firing before—
In Obama press conferences sometimes the journalists use two versions of the same question as in the following example:

(4)) [Obama may 2010]

Q. Mr. President, you announced—or the White House announced on—2 days ago that you were going to send 1,200 people to—1,200 members of the National Guard to the border. *I wanted to—if you could precise what their target is going to be, what you're planning to achieve with that—if you could clarify a bit more the mission that they're going to have.*

The journalist begins his turn with a statement (a pre-request) to provide background information and to justify the upcoming question. He increases the demands on the president to elaborate further on that topic, also he casts the president task more specific form. There is a shift from self referencing formulae “I wanted to...” to a more polite other referencing formulae “If you could precise what.....”. Also there are two different request versions “if you could precise what their target...” and “ if you could clarify a bit more the mission that they are going to have..”, both versions are designed as being conventionally indirect. These multiple requests have the same degree of indirectness, but the second version includes mitigating strategy when the journalist uses the phrase “a bit more” to minimize the degree of the imposition. This strategy is not found in the first version. Indirect questions are used more frequently with Kennedy. There are many instances when the journalists combine their requests with politeness marker (please) which indicates that the journalists’ is doing

something that threatens the politician face, or that they are going to ask pressing questions. As in the following example:

(5) [Kennedy April 1969]

Q- Mr. President I wonder if you would tell us what your ground, your investigation of the Maj. Gen. Ted Walker incident in Europe ..if you will please tell us what grounds you found for relieving him of his command for allegedly teaching troops anti-Communist doctrine?

With the request in example (5), the journalist nominates a new subject as expressed in the self referencing request form "I wonder if you would tell us ..". Then he makes another version of the same request by prefacing the second request with "please" before the imperative verb form "tell". "Please" here carries a politeness marker. In other cases the journalists use "please" at the end of their turn as in the following examples:

(6) [Kennedy August 1962]

Q. Mr. President, the United States has been urging four-power consultations in order to reduce tension in Berlin. In this connection there have been reports of a foreign ministers meeting in advance of the General Assembly and also there has been speculation that you may personally meet with Mr. Khrushchev at the U.N. *Would you give us your views on this, please?*

It is important to mention that most of the time in their questions, the journalists use with Kennedy other deferential strategies such as address forms and titles which are indexed in the use of the words "sir" and "Mr. President". In their use of such phrases the journalists treat Kennedy as a powerful person not only because he is the president, but also as a chairperson in the press conference who has the power to open and close the interview, and also to choose any journalist to speak and he can interrupt and ignore the journalists who are trying to take turns for additional questions.

Also sometimes journalists accompany their indirect questions mitigating phrases to minimize the degree of the imposition and to indicate that what is demanded is to be “ a little bit more specific”, or “to give at least a hint” on certain issue:

(7) [Kennedy February 1961]

It has been almost 6 weeks, sir, since the conference on Laos has been under way. There seems to have been little progress, at least little understanding, between the two sides. Do you consider it worthwhile to continue the conference?

Conclusion

The material studied show that the use of the indirect questions decrease significantly in present-day press conference. There are certain factorsthat affect the use of the indirect questions with Obama. Among these factors is when the journalists want to make a follow up question so they ask for the president's permission to elicit more revealing answer from the president. Thus the journalists are aware of the fact that too many follow up questions is associated with risk. Also journalists use indirect questions in their attempt to ask new questions, because in press conferences they have the right to ask only one or two questions. There are few cases when the journalists use some mitigating material to minimize the degree of the imposition in questioning Obama.

With Kennedy, the journalists use more indirect questions. Their questions are sometimes combined with other politeness strategies such as the politeness marker "please" and the frequent use of the deferential phrases like "sir" and "Mr. President". But the use of such phrases is few in Obama press conferences.

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