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# Culture or Communicative Conflict? The Analysis of Equivocation in Broadcast Japanese Political Interviews

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## Abstract

The focus of this article is on equivocation in Japanese televised interviews, broadcast over a 14-month period in 2012-2013 (before and after the general election of December 16, 2012). An analysis was conducted of responses to questions by three different groups (national politicians, local politicians, and nonpoliticians). Results showed a striking level of equivocation by both national and local politicians, who together equivocated significantly more than nonpoliticians. Furthermore, national-level Diet members equivocated significantly more than local politicians, and both coalition groupings when in power were significantly more likely to equivocate than when in opposition. The results were interpreted in terms of the situational theory of communicative conflict and also in terms of cultural norms characteristic of Japanese politics and society. The failure to consider the role of such norms, it is proposed, represents an important omission in the original theory of equivocation.

## Keywords

political interviews, television, media discourse, theory of equivocation, Japan

Televised political interviews provide easy and accessible ways to identify, understand, and evaluate social and political issues and distinguish among the individuals and groups that endeavor to solve related problems and their measures. As a genre of the mass media, political interviews, set up to produce face-to-face confrontational

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and challenging encounter of journalists and politicians for an “overhearing audience” (Heritage, 1985), have become in recent years one of the most important means of political communication in Japan.<sup>1</sup>

With the increased exposure of the Japanese public to political information through the media, particularly television (Feldman, 2011), broadcast interview programs are a valuable channel through which to follow public policy developments, distinguish between political candidates and competing groups and their stances, and evaluate the various political alternatives. Despite this and with a few exceptions (e.g., Furo, 2001, pp. 37-52; Tanaka, 2004; Yokota, 1994), there is a lack of knowledge in Japan on how political affairs talks are organized in this type of media discourse, the nature of the interaction between interviewers and interviewees, their communicative style when addressing or replying to questions, and the strategies employed by the participants to pursue their goals. This study aims to fill some of the existing gaps in the literature. Based on data gathered over a 14-month period before and after the general election of December 16, 2012, this article aims to explore the communicative patterns and responsiveness of high echelon members of the Japanese National Parliament (Diet) as well as local-level political leaders throughout broadcast talk shows and to compare them with those of nonpoliticians. It focuses specifically on *how* Japanese politicians cope with the questions posed to them during televised political interviews.

## Political Interviews

Broadcast political interviews have their own distinctive features and a defined set of rule and norms dominated by the roles and functions of the interviewer(s) and the interviewee(s). First, these interviews are staged performances that take place with the participation of journalist(s) and political officer(s) or expert(s) and in which the ultimate addressee is absent from the actual event. The interview is enacted for the benefit of an “overhearing audience” whose probable expectations shape what is being said and how. Both the interviewer and the interviewees (politicians or experts) will have the general viewers in mind. The interviewer will consider the consumers of their talk show and simultaneously also colleagues in their organization; success or failure in their performance can determine their future career and their status within their peers and the corporation. For politicians, attending interview programs is often taken as their best tool for political communication: an opportunity to speak “directly” to hundreds of thousands of people, an occasion to advance their ideas and thoughts to the electorate and their fellow politicians, an instance for enhancing positive images of their own and their political groups, and a ground for attacking their political opponents and challengers.

Second, there is the pattern of “turn-taking system” that noticeably defines the conflicting functions of interviewer(s) and interviewee(s) as both are working to generate discourse for the “overhearing audience” in a two-way process. Thus, the interviewers are responsible for determining the topic for discussion, monitoring the discourse’s time, and adhering to specific ritualistic patterns, including introducing interviewees and concluding the interview session. At the same time, interviewers also pose

questions and challenge interviewees to specify and explain their positions and views on variety of issues, and they are expected to do so by keeping a balance between adversarialism and objectivity, maintaining a stance of neutrality by not favoring specific politicians or a given political group. The interviewees' task is to reply to these questions to best effect for both themselves as individuals and for the political groups or institutions that they represent (e.g., Clayman & Heritage, 2002). Challenging these roles allocations would be regarded as a violation of the primary rules that structure the political interview. However, deviations from these normative expectations may not necessarily be acknowledged, sanctioned, or repaired (Weizman, 2008, p. 58). Given the advantages that the interview offers politicians to speak to a large number of audience and promote their own and their groups' agenda and images, they may strive to exert control over the interview. Thus, they may break the talking procedure, intentionally change the subject before or after giving a response, disregard the questions they are asked by repeating statements irrespective of whether they have any relation to the interviewer's questions, and shift the agenda and topic selection, a phenomenon which is termed "agenda shifting procedures" (Day, 1991; Harris, 1991; Heritage & Greatbatch, 1991).

A further distinctive feature of political interviews is interviewee vagueness, evasiveness, or equivocal communication style (the terms are interchangeable as suggested by Bull, 1994) as they hedge from providing direct answers to questions they are asked. Thirteen strategies used by politicians to avoid giving direct answers were identified by Jucker (1986), 35 different forms of nonreply were identified by Bull and Mayer (1993), and 8 evasive tactics used by political interviewees were identified by Hu (1999). Reply rates, defined as the proportion of questions which receive a direct answer (Bull, 2003), are very low. Less than 40% was reported in televised interviews broadcast in the United Kingdom (Bull, 1994; Harris, 1991) and in Taiwan (Huang, 2009), whereas less than 10% was reported in political interviews in Japan (Feldman, 2004, pp. 76-110).

## The Theory of Equivocation

Bavelas and her colleagues (Bavelas, Black, Bryson, & Mullett, 1988; Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett, 1990) proposed that it is the interview situation, rather than politicians' devious, slippery personalities, that create strong pressures toward equivocation. They regard equivocation as a form of indirect communication, ambiguous, contradictory, and tangential, which may also be incongruent, obscure, or even evasive (Bavelas et al., 1990, p. 28).

Bavelas et al. (1990) theorized that individuals typically equivocate when they are placed in an *avoidance-avoidance conflict* (or a *communicative conflict*), whereby all possible responses to a question have potentially negative consequences for the respondent, but nevertheless a response is still expected by interlocutors and audience. Such conflicts are especially prevalent in interviews with politicians because of the nature of the interview situation. Thus, interviewers may have an interest in controversial, sensitive, and divisive issues, and thereby put pressure on politicians to choose

among undesirable alternatives, in which all potential responses may damage the image of the politicians or alienate part of the electorate (Bavelas et al., 1990, pp. 246-249). Notably, the argument underlying the work of Bavelas et al. (1990) is that equivocation does not occur without a situational precedent. In other words, although it is individuals who equivocate, such responses must always be understood in the situational context in which they occur, known as the *Situational Theory of Communicative Conflict*.

Bavelas et al. (1990) further proposed that equivocation can be conceptualized in terms of four dimensions, namely, *sender*, *content*, *receiver*, and *context*. Thus, the *sender* dimension refers to the extent to which the response is the speaker's own opinion; a statement is considered more equivocal if the speaker fails to acknowledge it as his or her own opinion or attributes it to another person. *Content* refers to comprehensibility, an unclear statement being considered more equivocal. *Receiver* refers to the extent to which the message is addressed to the other person in the situation, the less so the more equivocal the message. *Context* refers to the extent to which the response is a direct answer to the question; the less the relevance, the more equivocal the message.

A modification of equivocation theory has been proposed by Bull and his colleagues in terms of what are called *threats to face* (Bull, 2008; Bull, Elliott, Palmer, & Walker, 1996). Bull and his colleagues proposed that questions may be formulated in such a way that politicians constantly run the risk of making *face-damaging responses* (responses which make themselves and/or their political allies look bad, and/or constrain their future freedom of action). Bull et al. (1996) further proposed that politicians need to defend three faces: personal, political party, and that of significant others and that communicative conflicts may occur when *all* the principal ways of responding to a question are potentially face-damaging, thereby creating pressures toward equivocation.

This article uses this framework of the equivocation theory to analyze televised interviews with Japanese politicians and detail their attitudes toward responding to a wide range of questions posed to them during interviews. Specifically, the main focus of this article is on whether and to what extent Japanese politicians equivocate during televised programs, thereby to evaluate the significance of these talk shows in the broader context of political communication in Japan.

## The Japanese Case

Exploring Japanese politicians' responses to interview questions is of special concern not only because, as stated above, of the lack of knowledge about this country but also because of the possible effect of the cultural context on the exchanges of messages between interviewers and interviewees. This cultural context, detailed below, which is almost totally disregarded by Bavelas et al. (1990) in their theory, can and do play a role in effecting the interviewees' responses patterns. This context presents however a methodological problem that we try to overcome with some modifications of Bavelas et al.'s original research. Here, we refer to two aspects related to the cultural context (draws on Feldman, 2004, pp. 50-52 & pp. 79-80).

First, precision, clarity, and forthrightness are not necessarily seen as virtues in Japanese communication style, even in many situations where those qualities are valued in the West. Japanese, in general, limit themselves to implicit language, avoid taking extreme positions, and even regard vagueness as a virtue and an ambiguous speaking style acceptable. To avoid leaving an assertive impression, Japanese tend to depend more frequently on qualifiers such as “maybe,” “perhaps,” “probably,” and “somewhat.” Since Japanese syntax does not require the use of a subject in a sentence, “qualifier-predicate” is the dominant form of sentence construction. Omission of the subject often creates a great deal of ambiguity. In addition, Japanese tend to prefer understatement and hesitation, and avoid explaining or expressing things precisely or pointedly and often use indirect expressions. Although there are multiple pronouns that mean “I,” there is a definite tendency to avoid their use as much as possible. Instead, Japanese tend to use expressions like “many people say . . .” and “it is said . . .” in order to express an opinion without making a personal commitment to it. All these communication-related configurations suggest the large extent of equivocation one can find in sessions when individuals are asked to reveal their own opinion on variety of issues or when asked to share information related to their work and experiences (e.g., the *sender*, the *content*, and the *context* dimensions).

An equally important trait is related to the way politicians in particular construct their discourse in accordance with the conventional wisdom in Japan that says that real feelings and opinions about politics and personnel are not supposed to intrude on the “front world,” where things must be kept calm and controlled. Thus, the speech of Japanese politicians (and government officials) generally fits either into the category of *honne*, meaning honest and informal, the actual, genuine intent, or that of *tatemae*, which is formal, ceremonial, “pretense” designed for public consumption. A person may discuss a particular issue from either standpoint: *honne* or *tatemae*. When the speaker discloses genuine thoughts, opinions, and judgments, regardless of the expected reception they will receive, that is *honne*. When statements are carefully worded to restrict the conversation to official positions, or when the speaker sticks to ambiguous expressions without revealing honest opinions and feelings, that is *tatemae*. For public officials, *honne* and *tatemae* are the two sides of the Japanese political coin; they signify the difference between public disclosure and private discretion.

Politicians thus present their views with varying degrees of openness (*honne*) or fuzziness (*tatemae*) depending on the circumstances in which they find themselves. When speaking before large public gathering such as at party conventions, a large press conference, or at Diet committee meetings that are often aired live, politicians employ *tatemae* by generally expressing little beyond official, broadly accepted views in the administration or their political groups. Policy speeches delivered traditionally by the prime minister to both houses of the Diet upon establishing a new administration are often primarily occasions to expound the official party or Cabinet line. In fact, one linguistic trait peculiar to *tatemae* statements is that the speaker avoids using vocabulary that indicates any judgment or does not makes a commitment to any position. Such speakers hedge their comments with words like *probably*, *perhaps*, or *could be*. They frequently use terms like *positively* or *constructively* to give a vague

impression that they intend to move on an issue at some unspecified time in the future, *assiduous* or *energetic* to convey a sense of effort, and *to endeavor* or *work hard* when they intend to take no personal responsibility. The speaker is thus able to appear to say something, loading their speech with much professional jargon and abstractions, without revealing any personal opinion, and to phrase comments in ways that make it impossible for the listener to determine where the speaker stands on a particular issue.

Talking in *tatema*e euphemisms—by blurring opinions, commitments, and emotions, or by presenting only official, widely accepted views—is the most common form of public speaking and perhaps the safest way for Diet members and government officials to express themselves and still remain politically viable. *Tatema*e allows them to protect their own feelings, thoughts, and opinions from public scrutiny; to avoid identifying with or advocating particular ideas; and to limit the risk of embarrassing colleagues or offending anyone who holds different political views. Japanese Diet members, especially those occupying or aspiring to higher positions, who are invited to televised political interviews, have to thus pay a great deal of attention to what they say and how they say it in public (the *sender*, the *content*, and the *context* dimensions).

## Hypotheses

On the basis of both Bavelas et al.'s (1990) original theory of equivocation and the revisions proposed above in terms of cultural context, the following two hypotheses are proposed:

**Hypothesis 1:** We expect that when responding to televised interview questions, especially on delicate or controversial issues, Japanese politicians will tend to reply the *tatema*e way, use ambiguous and unclear expressions (the *content* dimension). Because of their sensitivity to the electorate, supporters, and to colleagues from different political groups, politicians would also incline to conceal their own views and opinions, and thus will less reveal their explicit views (the *sender* dimension) and even evade full replies (the *context* dimension). To skillfully use the interview venue to advance ideas and thoughts that they hold, and to enhance positive images of their own and their political groups, politicians will tend to “directly” address more often the electorate, the “overhearing audience,” rather than the interviewees who tackle them with questions (the *receiver* dimension). In particular, in comparison to any other group of nonpoliticians, who do not depend on supporters and are less concerned with public opinion and stances held by other legislators, politicians will incline more to present the formally accepted views, to aim their messages at people outside the studio, to be less explicit in their remarks, and thus to equivocate more in their replies to questions.

**Hypothesis 2:** We assume there will be differences in responses between members of the ruling and the opposition camps. Once in government, ruling parties' members are more susceptible to communicative conflicts that will lead them to equivocate when replying to questions: They will be more cautious in expressing their personal views on a variety of issues (*sender*), will incline to carefully weight their

statements to limit them to formal positions of the administration (*context*), and stick to ambiguous opinions and judgments (*content*). Members of the opposition camps, on the other hand, who face less conflictual questions and situations and have less responsibility in the decision-making process on both the domestic and the international levels and “can say what they like” will incline to less equivocate than members of the first group.

## Method

### *The Interviews*

The study was based on 194 live interviews (145 with politicians, 49 with nonpoliticians) broadcast over a period of 14 months (May 2012 to June 2013) on three television programs: *Puraimu Nyūsu* (Prime News; 147 interviews), *Shin Hōdō 2001* (New Broadcast 2001; 25 interviews), and *Gekiron Kurosufaya* (Gekiron Crossfire; 22 interviews).

These programs are transmitted nationwide in Japan on a daily or weekly basis, except for rare occasions when replaced by coverage of special events like the high-school baseball championship games held each summer. *Puraimu Nyūsu* is broadcast through BS (Broadcasting Satellite) every day from Mondays through Fridays (20:00 to 21:55), *Shin Hōdō 2001* every Sundays (7:30 and 8:55), and *Gekiron Kurosufaya* broadcasts through BS every Saturday (10:00 and 10:55).

All the programs feature interviews with public figures such as members of the National Diet, government officials, and decision makers from various social and economic sectors of society. They focus on “hot” political, social, or economic issues that attract considerable public attention. Clips from the interviews are often replayed later on news programs, whereas remarks made by politicians may be headlined the next day in leading national newspapers. Questions in these programs are posed mainly by prominent journalists who also function as moderators. Their role is to open and close the interview, invite other guests to present questions to the interviewees, and challenge unsatisfactory responses. There are also additional questions from scholars or experts (referred to as *komenteitā* or “commentators”) in areas such as public policy, social affairs, or economics. The moderators typically control the interviews, whereas the commentators participate only when invited to do so. Interaction characteristically takes the form of question–response sequences, with questions from the moderators and the commentators, responses from the interviewees.

The three programs at the center of this research differ from each other in their broadcast time, length of the interview session, the moderators’ questioning style and pursuit of detailed replies, and in particular their structure. Some of these shows may take the form of one-on-one interviews, other typically involve multiple participants, sometimes as many as 10 and thus enable others besides the principal questioner and responder to take part in the discussion. *Shin Hōdō 2001*, for example, hosts a multiple number of interviewees, and interviewers tend to present open-ended questions which are apparently easy to answer. It is more like a typical “talk show” in the sense that



other interviewees are also invited to present questions and to participate in the discussion. Conversely, there are only up to two moderators in both the *Puraimu Nyūsu* and *Gekiron Kurosufaya*, and the guest-interviewees are limited in number, from one to three, and are asked questions for a lengthy time which enable the moderators to pursue issues in detail. In *Gekiron Kurosufaya*, interviewees are posed by more exhaustive questions, posed by the journalist Tahara Souichirō,<sup>2</sup> who is known for his forceful inquiry style. For this reason, one can also expect diversity in reply in the different programs. In this study, we consider the three channels separately and try to observe if there are different types of reply patterns between politicians and nonpoliticians.

Notably, the interviews in this study were broadcast both before and after the general election of December 16, 2012, for the House of Representatives (the lower house of the National Diet). Since September 2009, the majority of seats in the lower house had been held by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ; or *Minshutō*), and its coalition partner, the People's New Party (PNP; or *Kokuminshintō*). However, the election resulted in a disastrous defeat for the DPJ and an overwhelming victory for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP; or *Jimintō*) and its partner the New *Kōmei* Party (NKP; *Kōmeitō*); they won a majority in the house and consequently established a new coalition administration. The result was a transfer of power from a center-left to a conservative and nationalist political grouping, hence, a significant realignment in the Japanese political spectrum.

### TheData

The analysis was based on interviews broadcast 7½ months before the election and 6½ months afterwards (referred to subsequently as the first and second sessions). Over the whole period of 14 months (426 days), the three television programs featured a total of 1,356 interviews (3.2 interviewees per day) with 745 interviewees (359 in the first session and 386 in the second session), several of whom were interviewed more than once. On an individual basis, interviews were with 236 different individual politicians from the Diet (e.g., the prime minister, state ministers, Diet committees Chairmen, and secretary generals of political parties), 13 different politicians from the local level (prefectural governors including Tōkyō and Ōsaka and mayors), and 496 different nonpoliticians (e.g., university professors, social critics, economists, and retired politicians, “experts” who are “competent” to speak on particular issues, making sense of them for the layperson; they are invited to share with the audience their knowledge and insight or to confirm the credibility of the news or current affairs, and their views are taken seriously precisely because they have been defined as “experts”). These interviews took place either in small groups or in one-on-one sessions. However, interviews with a single interviewee were selected wherever possible to focus primarily on question–response sequences between interviewer and interviewee. Only questions asked by the moderators and the “commentators” were included in this study.

From these 1,356 interviews, interviewees were selected as follows:

1. Every week, one national politician from the coalition government (whichever coalition was in power) and a second from the opposition parties were selected.

To assess the communication style employed by the Diet members, we also selected every week a nonpolitician, and, when available, a local-level politician (they were interviewed relatively infrequently).

2. Some of the politicians, especially high-echelon members (e.g., leaders of political parties, government ministers), gave more than one interview during the period of the study. However, to examine as varied a sample as possible, only one interview per person was included, usually the longest in duration.

In determining which national-level politicians to include in the study, special consideration was allotted to the relative proportions of television appearances of members of each of the political parties. In total, there were 236 interviews with individual Diet members, made up as follows (figures for the first and second sessions in parentheses): LDP 100 (37, 63); DPJ 76 (58, 18); NKP 13 (5, 8); Your Party (YP; *Minna no tō*) 10 (5, 5); Japanese Communist Party (JCP; *Kyōsantō*) 6 (4, 2); Japan Restoration Party (JRP; *Nippon ishīn no kai*) 8 (2, 6); Tomorrow Party of Japan (TPJ; *Nippon mirai no tō*) 4 (3, 1); the Social Democratic Party (SDP; *Shamintō*) 3 (2, 1); the New Renaissance Party (NRP; *Shintō kaikaku*) 3 (2, 1); People's Life Party (PLP; *Seikatsu notō*), formally People's Life First (PLF; *Kokumin no seikatsu ga daiichi*), 4 (3, 1); the Sunrise Party of Japan (SPJ; *Tachiagarenippon*) 2 (2, 0); New Party Daichi-True Democrats (NPD; *Shintō Daichi-Shinminshu*) 2 (2, 0); the PNP 1 (1, 0); The Sunrise Party (SP; *Taiyō no tō*) 1 (1, 0); Tax Cuts Japan, Anti-TTP, Nuclear Phaseout Realization Party (TCJP; *Genzei nippon, han TTP-datsu-genpatsu wo jitsugen suru tō*) 1 (1, 0); Green Wind (GW; *Midori no kaze*) 1 (0, 1); and one unaffiliated politician 1 (1, 0).

To present these proportions, 133 interviews with national Diet politicians were selected, drawn from the different political parties as follows: LDP, 61 (20, 41); DPJ, 38 (31, 7); JRP, 7 (3, 4); NKP, 6 (3, 3); YP, 6 (4, 2); PLP, 3 (2, 1); JCP, 3 (2, 1); SDP, 2 (2, 0); PNP, 1 (1, 0); NRP, 1 (1, 0); SPJ, 1 (1, 0); TCJP, 1 (1, 0); NPD, 1 (1, 0); GW, 1 (0, 1); and one unaffiliated politician, 1 (1, 0).

3. For comparison purposes, there were 12 interviews with local politicians (6, 6) and 49 with nonpoliticians (29, 20).

In total, the sample consisted of 194 interviewees. Only 25 of the interviews took place on a one-to-one basis, 21 with two interviewees, and 148 with three interviewees or more. The longest interview lasted 45 minutes and 44 seconds, the shortest only 3 minutes; the mean duration was 24 minutes and 36 seconds. The number of questions per interview ranged from 2 to 98, with a mean of 26.2 questions. In total, 5,084 questions were analyzed.

## Procedure

Interviews from the three programs were recorded using a DVD recorder. A verbatim transcript was made of each selected interview. Based on a methodology used by the first author in previous research in Japan (Feldman, 2004, pp. 80-88), criteria for

identifying questions and responses were determined. Two coding sheets were devised for analyzing the structure and verbal content of the interviews: the first for interviewer questions and the second for interviewee responses.

**Questions.** “Questions” were regarded as utterances made by interviewers to elicit information from interviewees. Following Jucker (1986), questions were divided into two main groups: prefaced and nonprefaced. Prefaced questions are preceded by a main clause, such as “What do you think?” “What do you feel?” “Are you saying . . . ?” “Are you suggesting . . . ?” “Will you explain . . . ?” “Could you say what . . . ?” or “Can I ask you . . . ?”, whereas the main propositional content of the question appears in indirect form in a subordinate clause. In nonprefaced questions, there is no such preceding main clause. Nonprefaced questions can be further subdivided according to whether or not they take interrogative syntax. There are three principal question forms that take interrogative syntax: (1) Polar questions are those “which seek a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response in relation to the validity of (normally) an entire predication” (Quirk et al. 1972, p. 52, cited in Jucker, 1986, p. 109); (2) interrogative-word questions are those that start with the words “what,” “why,” “who,” “when,” “where,” or “how”; and (3) disjunctive questions are those that pose a choice between two or more alternatives. Noninterrogative syntax questions include declaratives, imperatives, or moodless questions (i.e., those that lack a finite verb).

The total number of questions analyzed was 5,084, distributed across the television programs as follows: *Puraimu Nyūsu* 3,869 (76.1%), *Shin Hōdō 2001* 957 (18.8%), and *Gekiron Kurosufaya* 259 (5.1%). The high proportion drawn from the first program reflects the fact that it is broadcast 5 days a week for almost 2 hours. In this program, questions were posed by Sorimachi Osamu (member of the editorial board and political desk commentator) and Yagi Akiko and Shimada Ayaka (both newscasters). In *Shin Hōdō 2001*, questions were usually presented by the moderators Suda Tetsuo (news anchor and TV Fuji news commentator) and Yoshida Kei (newscaster), and the political commentator Hirai Fumio (*Fuji Television*, News Desk, vice-chairman of the board of commentators). In *Gekiron Kurosufaya*, questions were asked principally by the main host Tahara (journalist) and also by Murakami Yuko (announcer).

**Responses.** The second coding sheet comprised several questions intended to analyze interviewee responses. Four were based on the four Bavelas et al. (1990) dimensions of *sender*, *receiver*, *content*, and *context*. However, whereas in the Bavelas et al. procedure raters are asked to mark on a straight line the degree of equivocation for each dimension, in this study each dimension was assessed on a 6-point Likert-type scale (“neutral” was not included in these six possible responses, in order to force the rater to make a selection on the relative degree of equivocation).

Further modifications were made to Bavelas et al.’s (1990) four dimensions as follows:

*1. Sender.* Assessed by the question, “To what extent is the response the speaker’s own opinion (intention, observation, ideas)?” The scale consisted of six options, ranging

from (1) “It is obviously his/her personal opinion/ideas, not someone else’s” to (6) “It is obviously someone else’s opinion/ideas.”

As an example of an unequivocal response on the *sender* dimension, for example, explicit personal view, consider the following extract from an interview with Yamaguchi Natsuo, the representative of the NKP:

Sorimachi: I have heard from members of the LDP that during the last meeting of the leaders [of the leading three parties, the LDP, DPJ, and the NKP] it was disclosed that Prime Minister Noda [Yoshihiko] had promised at the last party leaders’ meeting in August not to touch next year’s budget compilation. Mr. Yamaguchi, did you hear about it [during the] most recent [meeting]?

Yamaguchi: I myself have not been notified about it last time, but I have confirmed it with Mr. Tanigaki [Sadakazu, former President of the LDP] on another occasion. That is, because the new President [of the LDP] has changed to Mr. Abe [Shinzō]. Initially, Mr. Tanigaki passed on the information to the new President Abe. After that he passed it on to, well, notified, me. (*Puraimu Nyūsu*, October 19, 2012)

In this instance, Yamaguchi clearly reveals (using the pronouns meaning “I” and “me”) his own ideas and observation regarding a given political event.

On the other hand, there are numerous cases in which interviewed politicians used no personal pronoun at all, leaving it unclear whose opinion they were expressing, or in which they used expressions that did not pinpoint the sender, such as “we,” “our party,” “politicians,” “it seems . . .” or “it is said . . .,” as we see from the following exchange between Sorimachi and Kasai Akira, the JCP’s Deputy Party Policy Committee. Sorimachi asked the Diet member about the Japan Coast Guard:

Sorimachi: From the perspective of JCP, is the size of the Japan Coast Guard today small?

Kasai: It is said that they do what is needed as a necessary police activity. (*Puraimu Nyūsu*, November 22, 2012)

Here, Kasai doesn’t express his own opinion: His words “*It is said*” are about as equivocal on the *sender* dimension as one can get! “It” might be the way things are perceived either in his party or the Japan Coast Guard, or anyone else, the media, perhaps a common gossip, in either case, this is not his own personal view.

**2. Receiver.** Assessed by the question “To what extent is the message addressed to the other person in the situation?”

Because the original Bavelas et al. (1990) scales were devised for the analysis of dyadic conversations, the intended receiver is always clear. However, when the scale is extended to broadcast news interviews, there arises the issue of multiple receivers. Thus, when an interviewee responds to a question, it is not always clear whether the intended receiver is the interviewer or possibly another interviewee. It may also be the

general public, a particular segment of the public, or another politician or group of politicians, all of whom can be referred to as the “overhearing audience” (Heritage, 1985).

The coding sheet in this study was intended to address this issue by posing the following question: “To what extent is the message addressed to the person(s) who asked the question?” that is, the interviewer (either the moderators or the commentators). Possible recipients were assessed on a 6-point scale, ranging from (1) “Obviously addressed to the moderators or the commentators” to (6) “Addressed to other people.”

Consider the following extract where the interviewed politician, Kamei Shizuka, former Minister of State for Financial Services, unequivocally addressed Sorimachi, the interviewer, by referring a question to him:

Sorimachi: Mr. Kamei, it seems that YP, the JRP, and Ishihara [Shintarō]’s new party, these three parties are going to tentatively make up the axis of the “third pole” [that aims to replace the DPJ and the LDP]. I wonder if they can merge together as one party to plunge into the general election. What are your prospects on this?

Kamei: Well, even if Fuji News Network [the television company that hosts him here] energize them to do so, it is impossible, it can’t be done. Mr. Sorimachi, do you think it would be possible? (*Puraimu Nyūsu*, November 6, 2012)

In contrast, the following exchange between Kakizawa Mito, the Vice Chairperson of the Policy Research Council of YP, and Suda illustrates an occurrence in which it is not clear to whom Kakizawa’s reply is aimed at (can be members of the JRP who attend the interview in the studio, or anybody else) and hence equivocal on the *receiver* dimension.

Suda: I will ask now Kakizawa from YP, is it possible [for your party] to merge with the JRP, this [topic] has also become now the focus of the news.

Kakizawa: When appearing on this program I looked forward enormously to decide on this, well, it is up to policy, policy is important. (*Shin Hōdō 2001*, November 25, 2012)

**3. Content.** Assessed by the question, “How clear is the message in terms of what is being said?” The six options aimed to evaluate the various degrees of equivocation range from (1) “Straightforward, easy to understand, only one interpretation is possible” to (6) “Totally vague, impossible to understand, no meaning at all.”

For an example of a clear, understandable, and unequivocal reply, consider the following example from an interview between Tahara who challenged Sengoku Yoshito, the DPJ’s Acting Chairperson of the Policy Research Council and former Chief Cabinet Secretary:

Tahara: Well, Hmmm. In short, I [perceive] the nuclear power plant problem as an important one, but on the other hand, nuclear power plant er-, the trade deficit is

rapidly increasing. In this regard, er-, neither newspapers nor television say anything [on this issue]. Er Mr. Sengoku [what is your opinion]?

Sengoku: Yes. They don't say much. (*Gekiron Kurosufaya*, June 2, 2012)

An opposite, a vague and ambiguous reply, is identified in the following extracts taken from the interview with Morimoto Satoshi, the Defense Minister, as the talk focused on the deployment of Osprey multimission hybrid American aircraft in Japan. While Tahara, the interviewer, is manipulating a model of the aircraft, he noted,

Tahara: The airplane is taking off this way, humm, and goes down this way.

Morimoto: It changes the nacelle, rotates it, changing the mode, like a helicopter it can rescue human life [move and] bring down Marine Corps, and has an amazing speed with its fixed wings.

Tahara: What speed can it reach?

Morimoto: More than double, but its radius of action is more than four times. (*Gekiron Kurosufaya*, July 21, 2012)

Morimoto's reply is incomprehensible, hence, he completely fails to answer the question. Instead of indicating the speed of the aircraft in terms of miles or kilometers per hour, he gives some comparison figures, but it is not clear to what these numbers relate. It might be assumed that he was comparing the performance of the discussed aircraft with the helicopter used today in Japan, the Boeing Vertol CH-46 Sea Knight.

**4. Context.** The question used to assess this dimension was, "To what extent is this a direct answer to the question?" (Bavelas et al., 1990). The six options ranged from (1) "This is a direct answer to the question asked" through (6) "Totally unrelated to the question."

An example illustrating an unequivocal reply comes from an interview with Iijima Isao, a special advisor to the Cabinet:

Sorimachi: With respect to the notification of withdrawal from YP, did you put out a new parliamentary group?"

Iijima: Not yet. (*Puraimu Nyūsu*, October 2, 2012)

An opposite example, of a reply totally unrelated to the question, is taken from an interview where Yagi challenged Watanabe Yoshimi the leader of YP:

Yagi: First, as you saw also in the VTR, the DPJ is divided on the vote in the House of Representatives over the bill of integrated reform of the social security system. In any case, how do you perceive this situation?"

Watanabe: Well, you can clearly see that the DPJ has gotten into the process of dismantling. Ultimately, er-, the DPJ of [Prime Minister] Noda is saying exactly the same thing the LDP said three years ago, and I withdrew from the LDP three years ago. The administration at that time, the Asō [Tarō] administration, planned

the integrated reform of the tax and the social security, indeed this was the plan of the LDP's Asō administration. Of course this [reform] was dictated by the Ministry of Finance, and [the administration of] Noda now became a second LDP as he is performing the ventriloquism's role for the Ministry of Finance. On the other hand Ozawa [Ichirō] and his group, who once jumped out from the LDP, performing this time the same style. Tanaka [Kakuei] Faction, the Takeshita [Noboru] Faction were known as a unity box lunch.<sup>3</sup> But now Ozawa's lunch box is tattered, sparse. It is not chock full, in comparison to the past Tanaka and Takeshita Factions is it like a sparse lunch box, it became a lunch box one has spilled or flaked. (*Puraimu Nyūsu*, July 9, 2012)

Obviously, Watanabe has not replied to the question regarding the DPJ division over the bill in the Diet. Instead, he begins his answer by stating that the DPJ has gotten into the process of falling apart and that the administration of Noda is acting exactly as the LDP did 3 years ago when Asō planned to follow the Ministry of Finance guidance and to pass the integrated reform of the tax and the social security in the Diet. Noda, according to Watanabe, also follows the directions from the Ministry of Finance. Then Watanabe criticizes Ozawa that he can't build any solidarity within the group he leads and can't play the coordinator role in politics the way his two political mentors and LDP bosses, Tanaka and Takeshita, used to do. Not only that Watanabe completely ignores the question he was asked, but also his response consists of an imprecise remarks.

One important point to be noted is that a message can be equivocal on any of the four above dimensions. So the content may be perfectly clear (unequivocal in terms of *content*), but not a direct answer to the question (equivocal on the *context* dimension). To illustrate, consider the following extract from an interview with Noda Seiko, the LDP's Chairperson of the General Council:

Suda: Until the [approaching] upper house's election, you face a great deal of work, including the selection of candidates, which is, of course, a task [by itself]. How about getting rid of the "twisted Diet" [divided Diet, where no party can claim overall control of both Japanese houses of parliament]?

Noda: Amongst the increasing number of problems I am facing, at any rate, the economic recovery is of immediate priority that needs to be taken care of. (*Shin Hōdō 2001*, January 6, 2013)

Here, Noda's reply is very clear, easy to grasp (*content* dimension), and she also shares her own personal ideas (*sender*), but, at the same time, she fails to answer the question about the "twisted Diet" (*context*). As the ruling party's Chairperson of the General Affairs Committee, Noda is, among other things, in charge of decisions on important matters relating to the Diet activities. Accordingly, the "twisted Diet" is obviously one of her uppermost concerns, as she is in constant negotiations with representatives of other political parties to pass legislation and is familiar also with the strategies and tactics within her party toward winning the coming election (and thus

eliminating the divided Diet). But detailing her ideas on how to do away with the divided Diet may also invite criticism from her current partners to the negotiations, jeopardizing cooperation, and even members of her own party may show displeasure with her related remarks. The best method for Noda then is intentionally ignoring the question on how she intends to deal with the “twisted Diet” and trying to change the focus of attention while launching into another discussion, that is, her concern for the economic recovery.

## Coding

The coding on the above four questions was conducted initially by a well-trained graduate student. The training process involved studying the dimensions of the equivocation theory and a coding of a sample of 300 questions from the interviews while working closely with the main authors. The rater usually received the transcripts of several interviews and did the coding work independently. On completion of a set of interviews, a meeting was arranged with the main authors to discuss any problem that arose during the coding. This was resolved immediately through discussion. A sample of 300 questions was assigned to another rater to check intercoder reliability. The Pearson’s correlation coefficients were 0.72 (for the *sender* dimension), 0.73 (*receiver*), 0.85 (*content*), and 0.82 (*context*), all at the  $p < .001$  level.

## Results

The analysis is based on 194 interviews: 145 interviews with individual politicians (as opposed to interviews with two or more politicians simultaneously)—133 interviews with Diet members and 12 interviews with local-level politicians—and 49 interviews with nonpoliticians on three television channels. A total of 5,084 questions were identified. Politicians were asked 3,748 questions (73.7% of the total questions): Diet members who belonged (at the time of the interview) to the ruling coalition parties were challenged with 1,978 questions; opposition parties’ members 1,364 questions; and local-level politicians 406 questions. Nonpoliticians were asked 1,336 (26.3%) questions.

The 194 interviews were analyzed to explore interviewees’ responses to questions in terms of the four Bavelas et al. (1990) dimensions (*sender*, *content*, *receiver*, and *context*). From Table 1, it can be seen that mean average scores (on a scale of 1 to 6) were 3.26 ( $SD = 1.2$ ) for the *sender* dimension, 3.98 ( $SD = 0.6$ ) for the *receiver* dimension, 2.09 ( $SD = 1.1$ ) for the *content* dimension, and 2.36 ( $SD = 1.5$ ) for the *context* dimension. In other words, when Japanese politicians and nonpoliticians respond to questions during televised interviews, they are less likely to disclose their personal thoughts and opinions, tend often to address people other than the interviewers, incline to talk unclearly, and habitually do not directly answer the questions they had been asked.

As details in Table 2 show, of the 5,084 questions included in this study, only 509 (10%) of the interviewees’ replies undoubtedly reflected their personal opinion and



**Table 1.** Means, Standard Deviations, and Pearson Correlations Between Variables.

	1	2	3	4
1. Sender	1	.033*	-.020	-.033*
2. Receiver	—	1	.137**	-.021
3. Content	—	—	1	.540**
4. Context	—	—	—	1
Mean	3.26	3.98	2.09	2.36
SD	1.29	0.69	1.11	1.55
N	5,084	5,084	5,084	5,084

Note. N = number of questions asked. Mean ranges between 1 and 6.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 2.** Complete, Full Reply on Each Dimension.

Dimensions	National politicians	Local politicians	Nonpoliticians	Total
Sender	298 (8.9%)	69 (17%)	142 (10.6%)	509 (10.0%)
Receiver	12 (0.4%)	1 (0.2%)	4 (0.3%)	17 (0.3%)
Content	1,279 (38.3%)	164 (40.4%)	526 (39.4%)	1,969 (38.7%)
Context	1,384 (41.4%)	177 (43.6%)	699 (52.3%)	2,260 (43.6%)
Total <sup>a</sup>	3,342	406	1,336	5,084

a. The *Total* represents the number of replies members of a given group gave during the interviews.

ideas, not someone else's (*sender* dimension): National-level politicians had 298 such replies (8.9% of the replies they gave), local politicians 69 (17%), and nonpoliticians 142 (10.6%). Only 17 replies (0.3%) were explicitly addressed to the person who asked the question (*receiver*): National-level politicians had 12 such replies (0.4% of the replies they gave), local politicians 1 (0.2%), and nonpoliticians 4 (0.3%). Merely 1,969 (38.7%) were straightforward, easy to understand, with only one interpretation (*content*): National-level politicians had 1,279 (38.3% of the questions they were asked), local politicians 164 (40.4%), and nonpoliticians 526 (39.4%). Finally, of the 5,084 questions included in this study, 2,260 (43.6%) were direct answers to the question asked: National-level politicians had 1,384 (41.4% of the questions they were asked), local politicians 177 (43.6%), and nonpoliticians 699 (52.3%).

The significant correlation (+0.137) between the *receiver* and the *content* dimensions (in Table 1) suggests that the interviewee responses directed to people (or organizations) other than the interviewers consisted of language that was less clear in terms of the *content*. Furthermore, the significant correlation (+0.540) between the *content* and the *context* dimensions indicates that interviewee responses that were not a direct answer to the question also tended to be vague and unclear.

To test Hypothesis 1 regarding possible differences in equivocation between politicians and nonpoliticians, *t* tests were conducted on the four Bavelas et al. (1990)

**Table 3.** Comparisons of the Means, SD, Standard Error of the Means, and *t* Value of the Four Dimensions for Politicians and Nonpoliticians.

	Politicians/ Nonpolitician	N	Mean	SD	Standard error of the mean	<i>t</i> value
Sender	Politicians	3,748	3.34	1.280	.021	6.75***
	Nonpoliticians	1,336	3.06	1.281	.035	
Receiver	Politicians	3,748	4.03	0.698	.011	8.36***
	Nonpoliticians	1,336	3.85	0.650	.018	
Content	Politicians	3,748	2.10	1.120	.018	1.84
	Nonpoliticians	1,336	2.04	1.065	.029	
Context	Politicians	3,748	2.44	1.574	.026	7.22***
	Nonpoliticians	1,336	2.10	1.447	.040	

Note. N = number of questions asked. Mean ranges between 1 and 6.

\*\*\**p* < .001.

dimensions of *sender*, *receiver*, *content*, and *context*. Results (presented in Table 3) show that the first hypothesis was supported. For the *sender*, the *receiver*, and the *context* dimensions, there are significant differences between politicians and nonpoliticians. Thus, in comparison to nonpoliticians, decision makers (on both the national and the local levels) are less inclined to reply to questions asked and to disclose their own thoughts and ideas; they are also more inclined to address other people rather than the interviewers. Only the content dimension revealed no statistical difference between the two groups.

A related question that is of interest in this regard is, “To what extent the respondents’ responses differ according to the televised program?” As mentioned, the three programs at the center of this research differ from each other in their broadcast time, structure, length of the interview session, and in the moderators’ questioning style and pursuit of detailed replies. We focused then on the three channels separately and tried to observe if there are different types of reply patterns between politicians and nonpoliticians.

In Table 4, *t* value of the four dimensions for nonpoliticians and politicians (both national and local) are presented for *Shin Hōdō 2001*. These results showed that politicians tended to equivocate significantly more than nonpoliticians on the *sender*, *receiver*, and *context* dimensions. The limited sample of the local-level politicians (only six questions) makes it difficult to compare the local and the national-level politicians. Yet if we assume that this limited sample is representative, then the *t* test for both level of politicians indicates a significant difference regarding the *context* and the *sender* dimensions: Diet members tend more to equivocate on these dimensions. We further compare politicians and nonpoliticians by conducting Tukey’s honest significant difference test.<sup>4</sup> This revealed that only in regard to the *sender* there was significant difference between the local- and the national-level politicians.

Table 5 illustrates similar data for politicians and nonpoliticians on *Gekiron Kurosufaya*. The *t* test for politicians and nonpoliticians reveals significant differences

**Table 4.** Comparisons of the Means, *SD*, Standard Error of the Means, and *t* Value of the Four Dimensions for Politicians and Nonpoliticians in *Shin Hōdō 2001* Program.

Dimensions	Sample	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Standard error of the mean	<i>t</i> Value/ difference mean
Sender	Nonpoliticians	32	2.25	1.107	.196	-2.832***
	Politicians	227	2.93	1.283	.085	
	National	221	2.96	1.280	.086	2.463**
	Local	6	1.67	0.516	.211	1.293**
Receiver	Nonpoliticians	32	3.91	0.390	.069	-3.783***
	Politicians	227	4.21	0.631	.042	
	National	221	4.22	0.626	.042	1.493
	Local	6	3.83	0.753	.307	0.388
Content	Nonpoliticians	32	1.97	0.861	.152	-2.229***
	Politicians	227	2.34	1.079	.072	
	National	221	2.34	1.078	.072	-0.359
	Local	6	2.50	1.225	.500	-0.161
Context	Nonpoliticians	32	2.31	1.655	.293	0.592
	Politicians	227	2.49	1.567	.104	
	National	221	2.52	1.574	.106	2.841**
	Local	6	1.50	0.837	.342	1.016

Note. *N* = number of questions asked. Mean ranges between 1 and 6.

\*\*\**p* < .001. \*\**p* < .01.

in the *content* and the *receiver* dimensions. For the receiver, as in the case of the previous television program, remarks of the politicians are most often directed at other people than the moderators, but for the *content*, unlike the *Shin Hōdō 2001*, the replies of the nonpoliticians are more vague and unclear. This reflects perhaps the fact that in *Gekiron Kurosufaya*, nonpoliticians are posed by more exhaustive questions posed by the journalist Tahara who is known for his forceful inquiry style. The *t* tests between Diet members and local-level politicians indicate a significant difference on the *receiver* and the *sender* dimensions. In both cases, the local-level politicians tend to equivocate more. A multiple comparisons also to the nonpolitician indicate further a significant statistical difference even in the *context* dimension. Local politicians equivocate more on the *sender* and the *receiver* dimensions, but Diet members' replies are less clear (the *content* dimension). The reason for this finding is perhaps related to the interview with (the local) Ōsaka Mayor Hashimoto Tōru. He was interviewed as the Mayor, but since he served also as the coleader of the JRP, he tried in his replies to present the views held in this party, often appealing more to the viewers rather than addressing the interviewer. Yet his remarks were easy to understand. On the other hand, in regard to Diet members, the more they gave replies to detailed topics posed to them, the less clear their talk was.

Finally, Table 6 compares the nonpoliticians and the two politician groups in *Puraimu Nyūsu* program. In comparison with the previous two television programs,

**Table 5.** Comparisons of the Means, SD, Standard Error of the Means, and *t* Value of the Four Dimensions for Politicians and Nonpoliticians in *Gekiron Kurosufaya* Program.

Dimensions	Sample	N	Mean	SD	Standard error of the mean	t Value/ difference mean
Sender	Nonpoliticians	287	3.31	1.134	.067	0.439
	Politicians	670	3.28	1.273	.049	
	National	601	3.24	1.276	.052	-2.367*
	Local	69	3.62	1.201	.144	-.3819*
Receiver	Nonpoliticians	287	3.72	0.707	.041	-6.445***
	Politicians	670	4.03	0.637	.024	
	National	601	4.00	0.639	.026	-3.827***
	Local	69	4.29	0.571	.068	-.2815*
Content	Nonpoliticians	287	2.14	1.126	.066	3.473***
	Politicians	670	1.87	1.033	.040	
	National	601	1.91	1.053	.043	-1.446
	Local	69	1.52	0.759	.091	.388*
Context	Nonpoliticians	287	2.44	1.622	.096	-1.499
	Politicians	670	2.61	1.633	.063	
	National	601	2.58	1.609	.066	-1.466
	Local	69	2.88	1.819	.219	-0.300

Note. N = number of questions asked. Mean ranges between 1 and 6.

\*\*\**p* < .001. \*\**p* < .01. \**p* < .05.

*Puraimu Nyūsu* is aired from Monday through Friday, and in this study, we were able to gather the largest sample from this program. The *t* test reveals that on all the four dimensions, there are significant differences between nonpoliticians and politicians: Diet members clearly gave less complete but yet more vague replies than nonpoliticians. The *t* test indicates also a difference between the local- and the national-level politicians regarding the *sender* and the *content* dimensions: Diet members tend to talk as clearly as they can (the *content* dimension) yet less disclose their personal opinions (the *sender* dimension) as they try to present the lines of their political parties; local-level politicians, in comparison, feeling less committed to their local organizations, reveal their own views, but conversely their talk is most often vague and less clear.

To test Hypothesis 2 regarding the differences in responses between members of the ruling and the opposition camps, two analyses were performed: the first on the period before the 16 December general election when the DPJ and the PNP were in power (see Table 7) and the second on the period after the general election when the LDP and the NKP were in power (see Table 8). The results of these analyses showed that whichever coalition grouping was in power, they were significantly more likely to equivocate, thereby supporting Hypothesis 2. Both coalition groups were significantly more likely to provide less direct answers to questions (the *context* dimension). DPJ politicians in government were significantly more likely to provide fuzzy and unclear responses (*content*), whereas LDP politicians in government were significantly less

**Table 6.** Comparisons of the Means, *SD*, Standard Error of the Means, and *t* Value of the Four Dimensions for Politicians and Nonpoliticians in *Puraimu Nyūsu* Program.

Dimensions	Sample	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Standard error of the mean	<i>t</i> Value/difference mean
Sender	Nonpoliticians	1,017	3.01	1.310	.041	-7.846***
	Politicians	2,851	3.38	1.275	.023	
	National	2,520	3.45	1.248	.024	8.457***
	Local	331	2.80	1.332	.073	.6543***
Receiver	Nonpoliticians	1,017	3.88	0.636	.020	-5.310***
	Politicians	2,851	4.01	0.714	.013	
	National	2,520	4.01	0.709	.014	-0.950
	Local	331	4.05	0.751	.041	-0.041
Content	Nonpoliticians	1,017	2.01	1.052	.033	-3.179***
	Politicians	2,851	2.13	1.134	.021	
	National	2,520	2.11	1.117	.022	-2.275*
	Local	331	2.28	1.252	.068	-.1645*
Context	Nonpoliticians	1,017	2.00	1.373	.043	-7.679***
	Politicians	2,851	2.40	1.558	.029	
	National	2,520	2.41	1.555	.031	0.518
	Local	331	2.36	1.580	.087	0.047

Note. *N* = number of questions asked. Mean ranges between 1 and 6.

\*\*\**p* < .001. \**p* < .05.

**Table 7.** Comparisons of the Average Values for the Ruling and Opposition Parties' Politicians (During the DPJ Administration).

Dimensions	Coalition/opposition	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Standard error of the mean	<i>t</i> Value
Sender	Coalition (DPJ, PNP)	903	3.45	1.294	.043	1.55
	Opposition (LDP, NKP, etc.)	1,059	3.35	1.346	.041	
Receiver	Coalition (DPJ, PNP)	903	3.96	0.710	.024	-1.55
	Opposition (LDP, NKP, etc.)	1,059	4.01	0.729	.022	
Content	Coalition (DPJ, PNP)	903	2.17	1.125	.037	4.33**
	Opposition (LDP, NKP, etc.)	1,059	1.95	1.052	.032	
Context	Coalition (DPJ, PNP)	903	2.57	1.583	.053	2.62*
	Opposition (LDP, NKP, etc.)	1,059	2.38	1.563	.048	

Note. *N* = number of questions asked. Mean ranges between 1 and 6. DPJ = Democratic Party of Japan; PNP = People's New Party; LDP = Liberal Democratic Party; NKP = New Kōmei Party.

\**p* < .01. \*\**p* < .001.

**Table 8.** Comparisons of the Average Values for the Ruling and the Opposition Parties' Politicians (During the LDP Administration).

Dimensions	Coalition/opposition	N	Mean	SD	Standard error of the mean	t Value
Sender	Coalition (LDP, NKP)	1,074	3.44	1.142	.035	3.91**
	Opposition (DPJ, PNP, etc.)	306	3.13	1.256	.072	
Receiver	Coalition (LDP, NKP)	1,074	4.05	0.639	.019	-2.69*
	Opposition (DPJ, PNP, etc.)	306	4.17	0.685	.039	
Content	Coalition (LDP, NKP)	1,074	2.18	1.139	.035	1.44
	Opposition (DPJ, PNP, etc.)	306	2.08	1.084	.062	
Context	Coalition (LDP, NKP)	1,074	2.50	1.576	.048	3.68**
	Opposition (DPJ, PNP, etc.)	306	2.14	1.461	.084	

Note. N = number of questions asked. Mean ranges between 1 and 6. DPJ = Democratic Party of Japan; PNP = People's New Party; LDP = Liberal Democratic Party; NKP = New Kōmei Party.

\* $p < .01$ . \*\* $p < .001$ .

likely to reveal their own thoughts on the question topic (*sender*) and to appeal to other people and organizations rather than the interviewer (*receiver*).

## Discussion

The results of this study show a striking level of equivocation by both national- and local-level politicians during televised political interviews. Politicians equivocate significantly more than nonpoliticians, and national-level Diet members equivocate significantly more than local-level politicians, especially on the *sender* and the *receiver* dimensions. For those national politicians, broadcast interviews serve as an opportunity to publicize the views that are prevalent in the political groups they represent or lead. Accordingly, they aim their replies not at the interviewer who sits in front of them but rather at their supporters, the electorate, and members of other political parties and officials who are their partners in the political game.

From a broad political communication viewpoint, however, this tendency is reasonable and acceptable. After all, high-echelon, experienced politicians who are invited for televised political interviews, are also expected to reveal not only their own personal views and stances on important issues but also those of members who they work with: their colleagues from political parties and factions who share political beliefs and policy orientations. Moreover, those who are invited to televised interviews are not anticipated to have a private, closed, and intimate talk with the interviewers; rather, they are expected to send their messages to "overhearing audience," to be heard, seen, and evaluated by the general public and potential supporters, as these politicians try to

increase political awareness and followership to their groups. The *sender* and the *receiver* dimensions in this regard are probably less suitable as criteria for assessment of the responsiveness of public officials to questions.

In contrast, the *content* and the *context* dimensions are decisive in this sense because interviewee politicians are expected to talk in a language that will be easily understood by the diversified segments of the “overhearing audience” and to reply directly to the interview question. In this study, however, interviewees, especially politicians, equivocated in the majority of their replies regarding both dimensions. Diet members’ responses contain less explicit and less easy-to-understand remarks than nonpolitician and local-level politicians, as they confine their talk to a bland statement, or they are difficult to grasp double talk. Likewise, national-level politicians provide less direct replies than their counterparts from the local level, and significantly much less than the nonpoliticians. Very often, it is obvious that national-and local-level politicians are trying to convey certain opinions through the media regardless of what question they are asked. They give incomplete replies, talk at length about issues that have little relation to the topic introduced by the interviewer as they try to channel attention to the working of the political system and the function of political groups.

Noteworthy in particular, in this regard, are the attitudes of members of the parties that dominate political power in Japan: Without regard to their political party, those who rule the country at any given time communicate in the same style. That is, in comparison to members of the opposition camp, members of the ruling coalition parties tend to reply less directly to interview questions and talk less clearly. This finding is of importance here, indicating that, as hypothesized, that those who are in control of the country are more vulnerable to *communicative conflicts* that will lead them to equivocate when replying to questions. This is in contrast to members of the opposition parties, who face less controversial questions and have less responsibility in the decision-making process and thus, relatively speaking, “can say what they like.”

An important factor correlated with the *communicative conflicts* and what should be considered in future work is the quality of the questions posed during televised political interviews. Can they be rated in terms of degree of aggression or complexity, and does this affect the level and kind of equivocation that follows?

The rate of politicians’ direct replies (*context* dimension) in televised interviews in Japan (barely 41.4% and 43.6% for the national-and the local-level politicians, respectively) is closely parallel to data available about similar television shows in the United Kingdom and Taiwan where the proportion of questions that receive a direct answer is as low as less than 40% (Bull, 1994; Harris, 1991; Huang, 2009). The fact that Japanese politicians tend to equivocate much more than nonpoliticians (the later directly replied to 52.3% of the questions) may suggest that at least on the *context* dimension, it is not simply a reflection of the often-noted general tendency toward equivocation in Japanese society, which is said to be due to cultural factors. It may be that politicians tend to equivocate because they face a communicative conflict, which Bull and his colleagues (1996) coined “level of threat,” and face tougher questions. Considering the evidence provided from other countries, which supports the notion that politicians do not reply to a large proportion of questions in political interviews, one could say

that the behavior of Japanese politicians seems to resemble that of other politicians more than it resembles the behavior of other Japanese.

In conclusion, equivocation can be seen both as a response to communicative conflicts and in terms of the cultural context in which it occurs. For a skilled communicator, politicians or others, equivocation can be a highly effective instrument of self-disclosure and self-presentation. Public officials in particular employ the art of equivocation as an important element of their political skill, using ambiguous, even evasive language, as a strategy for turning difficult situations to their own advantage. As this article indicates, interviewees in Japan also equivocate probably for the same reasons, and the effectiveness of this type of communication strategy should be examined further in cross-cultural, cross-national studies.

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### Notes

1. Among these programs, known as *tōron bangumi*, or debate programs, are NHK's *Nichiyō tōron* (Sunday's Debate); Nippon Television Network's *U-ēkuappu! Purasu* (Wake-Up! Plus); TV Asahi Network's *Hōdō sutēshon sandē* (News Station Sunday); TBS network's *jiji hōdan* (Free Talk on Current Events); TV Tokyo's *Tase yasuihiro no shūkan nyūsu shinsho* (Tase Yasuihiro's Weekly News Book); Fuji Television's *Bīesu fuji raivu puraimu nyūsu* (BS Fuji Live Prime News); and a variety of show programs, including TV Asahi's *Bīto takeshi no TV takkuru* (Beat Takeshi TV Tackle) and Yomiuri TV network's *Takajin no soko made itte iinkai* (Committee to Say Up to There). (In Japanese vowels can either be short or long; a diacritical mark, e.g., ō, ū, ē, or ā over the vowel indicates that it is a long vowel.)
2. Personal names are given in the Japanese order, that is, family name first.
3. Watanabe refers to the fact that these LDP factions held regular weekly meetings where they practiced "*itchi kessoku hako bentō*," literally, building solidarity while eating boxed



lunches. This practice symbolized the solidarity and team-work that was vital to the survival of the faction and its ability to win positions of power and influence.

4. If we divide the sample of the three groups, that is, Diet members, local-level politicians, and nonpoliticians, and perform *t* test twice, there is a risk of causing a Type I error or an error of the first kind. Therefore, by performing multiple comparisons, we reduce the concern of having this error. One can perform here multiple comparisons with the Kruskal–Wallis test, a nonparametric test used to compare three or more samples, but yet we used the *t* test here, and thus the Tukey’s honest significant difference is commonly accepted. Notably, a Kruskal–Wallis test that was carried out to the multiple comparison (Bonferroni correction) in our sample revealed significant differences between the national- and the local-level politicians regarding the *sender* dimension in both the *Shin Hōdō 2001* and the *Puraimu Nyūsu*, and in the *receiver* and the *content* dimensions in *Gekiron Kurosufaya*.

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