

**A SITUATIONAL EXPLANATION OF DISCOURSE:  
THE CASE OF POLITICAL DISQUALIFICATION**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Disqualification is vague, tangential, nonstraightforward communication. Previous research had shown that the disqualified speech of subjects who were role-playing politicians was the product of an avoidance-avoidance conflict. In the present field experiment, two groups of delegates at the Liberal Party of Canada leadership convention (1984) were asked, "Do you think the Liberals can win the next election under John Turner?" (the leading candidate). When responding to this question, delegates supporting Turner were not in any conflict. However, delegates supporting the second most popular candidate (Jean Chrétien) were in an avoidance-avoidance conflict, that is, they did not want to say Turner could win, nor did they want to say their party would lose. The responses of the delegates in an avoidance-avoidance conflict were more disqualified than the responses of the delegates not in conflict. The implications of the results of this simple conflict situation for the more complex conflict situations that politicians often encounter are discussed.

Disqualification is nonstraightforward communication and includes such speech acts as "self-contradictions, inconsistencies, subject switches, tangentializations, incomplete sentences, misunderstandings, obscure style, or mannerisms of speech" (Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson 1967: 76). One can find numerous examples of political disqualification on the news or even in carefully scripted political commercials (Joslyn 1980). This paper applies a situational theory of disqualification to explain the vague, tangential communication that politicians often use (Bavelas 1983, 1985 and Bavelas and Chovil 1985).

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## 2. DEFINING AND MEASURING DISQUALIFICATION

Haley (1959) proposed a model of the essential elements of communication that can be used to arrive at a more precise definition of disqualification. All communication should contain four elements: *I* (sender) am saying *this* (content) to *you* (receiver) in this *situation* (context). Furthermore, Haley noted that a disqualified message obscures at least one of these four elements. We have translated Haley's four elements into questions, by which the degree of disqualification in a message can be assessed:

Sender: To what extent is the message *the speaker's own opinion*?

Content: How clear is the message, in terms of *what is being said*?

Receiver: To what extent is the message *addressed to the other person*?

Context: To what extent is this a *direct answer to the question*? (Bavelas 1982)

Analysis of the following example of political disqualification illustrates two of the above dimensions:

Q: Do you favor or oppose federal gun control?

A: I favor control of the so-called Saturday Night Special, snud-nosed (*sic*) ... snub-nosed guns that are used only to kill police and each other for concealment. There is no excuse for their use.

(Walter Mondale in response to Dan Rather at a Democratic candidates' debate held in New York, March 28, 1984.)

The content (*what is being said*) of Walter Mondale's response is disqualified. The first sentence of the response is unclear. Aside from the obvious speech error ("snud-nosed guns"), the last phrase implies that guns kill "each other" to remain concealed. Moreover, the term "Saturday Night Special" is ambiguous, since it can refer to a kind of handgun (e.g., a snub-nosed gun) or a particular use of a handgun (e.g., guns used to kill police) or the legal status of a handgun (e.g., a concealed weapon). Also the second sentence is unclear; since there is no clear referent for the phrase "their use", the connection between the two sentences is obscure.

Walter Mondale's response to Dan Rather's question is also disqualified on the context dimension (*direct answer to the question*). Mr. Mondale's reply seems to answer a much different question: Do you favor the control of guns that are used only to

kill policemen, and do you think there is an excuse for their use?

### 3. A SITUATIONAL THEORY

One could attribute a politician's disqualified speech to personal shortcomings or furtive intentions (e.g. Graber 1976, Spero 1980). Our research, however, has demonstrated that disqualified speech is a function of the individual's situation (Bavelas 1983, 1985). We have extended Lewin's (1938) conflict theory to communicational settings and found that disqualified speech occurs when a speaker has a choice between two unattractive communicational alternatives. In Lewinian terms, the speaker is in an avoidance-avoidance conflict, and disqualification is the successful solution to the dilemma. For example, Walter Mondale is caught between two large and vocal constituencies, those for and against gun control. His best option was to avoid offending either group. Seen in this light, Walter Mondale's ambiguity and re-interpretation of the question is a skillful response to a problematic question.

To investigate the antecedents of disqualified speech, we have used a simple experimental paradigm in which subjects are randomly assigned to an avoidance-avoidance conflict or to a nonconflict situation. We have conducted the previous 19 disqualification experiments by using a number of hypothetical situations, ranging from a choice between either lying or hurting a friend's feelings to a choice between either lying for financial gain or telling the truth at a financial cost. The subjects in these experiments have written their replies, replied to questions on the telephone, and answered questions face-to-face with an experimenter. In all experiments, regardless of the communication format or the situation, disqualified communication was the product of an avoidance-avoidance conflict situation.

One experiment in this paradigm (Bavelas 1985) is germane to the present discussion. In this study, subjects were asked to imagine themselves as a Member of Parliament; a highway was being planned for the home riding and two routes were being considered. Subjects in the conflict condition were told that both routes had advantages and disadvantages and that the constituency was equally divided about which route was better. In the nonconflict situation, subjects were told that, of the two routes being considered, one route was clearly better and favored by the constituents. All subjects were asked to respond by telegram to a hometown reporter's question, "Which route do you prefer, Route A or Route B?" The written responses of the subjects in the avoidance-avoidance conflict were disqualified on the content and context dimensions; that is, they were vague in content and did not answer the reporter's question, while the responses of subjects in the nonconflict situation were clear and directly answered the question.

This experiment provided strong support for a situational explanation of political disqualification. The responses of university students in a common political dilemma (avoiding a commitment that would alienate part of the electorate) appeared indistinguishable from the statements of real politicians in similar situations. The subjects in this hypothetical political dilemma also had the time to construct and write their answers carefully. Consequently, the disqualified responses are not attributable to time pressure or error but rather to the avoidance-avoidance conflict.

However, we were appropriately cautious about generalizing the results of this experiment to an explanation of actual political disqualification. It could be that politicians (unlike university students) are by nature vague, in which case a conflict situation may not be necessary to produce disqualification by politicians. This same assumption (that politicians are fundamentally different from the average human being) would also suggest that they might be impervious to conflict situations. It may also be that avoidance-avoidance conflicts do not occur in actual political settings. Finally, the results of the experiment may be limited to written communication and should not be generalized to spoken or other forms of communication.

#### 4. THE LIBERAL PARTY CONVENTION 1984

The present experiment addresses the limitations of our previous research. We conducted a field experiment at the 1984 leadership convention of the Liberal Party of Canada. The party leader chosen to succeed Pierre Trudeau would serve as Prime Minister and subsequently lead the party in the coming election. Elected delegates responded to a question posed by an experimenter/interviewer. Thus, subjects in our study were politicians participating in an actual political event. Since the experimenter interviewed the delegates with a tape recorder, the limitations of written responses are transcended. Finally, in order to ensure that an avoidance-avoidance conflict was the necessary and sufficient situational antecedent of political disqualification, the experimenter asked a question designed to put some delegates in an avoidance-avoidance conflict and other delegates in a nonconflict situation.

##### 4.1 Method

###### 4.1.1 Subjects

Thirty-eight delegates (25 males, 13 females) attending the Liberal Leadership convention in Ottawa in July, 1984, participated voluntarily in the experiment. Thirteen of the subjects' first language was French and 25 of the subjects' first language was English. All interviews were conducted in English.

For reasons to be described below, the final number of subjects whose messages were analyzed was 12.

#### 4.1.2 Procedure

All interviews took place at the convention site (Ottawa Civic Centre) the day before the balloting for party leader took place. The experimenter introduced herself to each delegate as a student conducting a study of political communication and asked if s/he would answer some questions. If the delegate consented, the experimenter began to tape record the interview. The experimenter first asked the delegate which candidate s/he was committed to and whether s/he was an elected delegate. The experimenter then asked the delegate several questions, the first of which was, "Do you think the Liberals can win the next election under John Turner?" After the interview, the experimenter thanked the delegates for answering her questions.

Which candidate the delegate supported determined whether or not the question put him/her in an avoidance-avoidance conflict. Delegates supporting John Turner were considered not to be in a conflict situation, since polls at the time indicated he would be elected as the next Prime Minister of Canada, and they obviously thought he could win. Jean Chrétien's supporters were considered to be in an avoidance-avoidance conflict, since they were caught between two unpleasant communicational alternatives: vocal disloyalty to the party (e.g., "No, the Liberals cannot win the next election under John Turner") or vocal disloyalty to their candidate by conceding a major point to another candidate (e.g., "Yes, the Liberals can win under John Turner").

To determine which messages were suitable for analysis, the interviews were analyzed for variations in procedure. Of the 38 delegates interviewed, 12 supported John Turner and 26 supported Jean Chrétien. Half of the Turner responses could not be analyzed (two of the supporters were not actually elected delegates, one delegate indicated wavering support, and the experimenter asked the question incorrectly of three others). Ten of the responses of the 26 Chrétien supporters were dropped from further analysis (three of the Chrétien supporters were not elected delegates, two supporters' responses were obscured by background noise, one delegate indicated wavering support, and the question was asked incorrectly on four occasions).

These procedural checks left six responses by Turner delegates that were suitable for analysis. Hence, the remaining 16 Chrétien responses were reduced to six by matching their characteristics to those of the John Turner delegates on two potentially confounding factors, first language and sex of subject. From a total of six male English speakers who supported Jean Chrétien, the responses of two were randomly selected. From a total of four female English speakers two responses were randomly selected. From a total of four male French speakers, one message was randomly selected, and one female French speaking

delegate was randomly selected from two possible choices. After this selection process there were 12 messages for the judges to scale, six conflict messages and six nonconflict messages.

#### 4.1.3 Measures

The messages generated by the delegates were scaled by lay judges using our established scaling procedure (Bavelas and Smith 1982). The judges scale the messages for each dimension of disqualification (sender, content, receiver, and context) using a magnitude estimation procedure. These raw scores are standardized and averaged across judges, so that a single value can be given to each message on the dimension. In addition, the values for each message are summed across the four dimensions of disqualification to obtain a total disqualification for each message.

Other research has demonstrated that avoidance-avoidance conflicts take longer to resolve than do nonconflict situations (Barker 1942, 1946). Since response latency has been used to show the effects of such conflict situations, this measure can be used to provide further evidence that delegates were indeed in a conflict situation. Thus, the time between the end of the experimenter's question and the beginning of the delegate's response was measured.

#### 4.2 Results

The messages, scale values, and *t* comparisons are reported in Table 1. On the content and receiver dimensions of disqualification, there were no significant differences between the messages of the conflict and nonconflict delegates. However, there were significant differences of the sender and context dimensions of disqualification. The delegates in the avoidance-avoidance conflict did not state their own opinion and did not answer the question as directly as did the delegates in the nonconflict situation. Moreover, the summed scale values of the conflict and nonconflict messages were significantly different, so the messages of the delegates in the conflict situation were *in total* more disqualified than the messages of the delegates in the nonconflict situation.<sup>2</sup>

The response latencies of delegates in the conflict situation (mean = 1.80 seconds, standard deviation = 1.08) were longer than those of delegates in the nonconflict situation ( $\bar{X}$  = .75 sec, *SD* = .36). A *t* comparison of the difference between the conflict and nonconflict latency times was significant ( $t$  = 2.29, *df* = 10,

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<sup>2</sup> Over a series of 19 disqualification experiments to date, the context dimension has always been significant, that is, it seems to be the most likely means by which a message is disqualified.

Table 1: Messages, Scaled Values and "t" Comparisons<sup>a</sup>**Nonconflict Messages**

- 1: Sure do.  
(sender = .22, content = .53, receiver = .72, context = -.75, sum = .72)
- 2: I think so ... yes. I think with the momentum of the convention and fairly soon ... and an election fairly soon I think that's possible.  
(sender = -.78, content = -.12, receiver = -.75, context = -.43, sum = -2.08)
- 3: Yes I do.  
(sender = -.04, content = -.01, receiver = .93, context = -.98, sum = -.10)
- 4: I believe so yes. He can especially attract the west.  
(sender = -.23, content = .28, receiver = -.26, context = -.26, sum = -.47)
- 5: Yes, I think so. It's why I ahhh my vote will ahhh to John Turner.  
(sender = -.73, content = .11, receiver = -.07, context = -.71, sum = -1.40)
- 6: I'm sure of it. Not only will we win, but we'll have a majority government I think.  
(sender = -1.05, content = -.94, receiver = -.31, context = -.26, sum = -2.56)

**Conflict Messages**

- 1: Yes (hesitantly).  
(sender = 1.38, content = .13, receiver = .77, context = -.86, sum = 1.42)
- 2: Well ahhh maybe they could, but I think it would be better to have Chrétien. Chrétien is my man and I think he's ah everybody likes him... and he's been in the House of Commons for so long... he's got the experience... he's the one that can lead us to a victory. Definitely. Maybe Turner would do it, but Chrétien sure would.  
(sender = -.18, content = -.24, receiver = .40, context = .89, sum = .87)
- 3: We could win, yes.  
(sender = .71, content = -.42, receiver = .13, context = -.25, sum = .17)

Table 1 (continued).

- 4: Under John Turner? Ahhmm I think that the Liberals are in a good position right now to win under a strong leader and I think John Turner would be a strong leader. But of course I'm biased I think it ahe (*sic*) would have a stronger chance of winning under Jean Chrétien.  
(sender = .03, content = .02, receiver = -1.15, context = .92, sum = -.18)
- 5: Ahhh I think the Liberals have a good chance of winning elections with either Mr. Chrétien or Mr. Turner. So ah I think that the Liberals are bound to win the next election the way things are going now. So I think either if they have Mr. Chrétien or Mr. Turner their chances are good. The reason I'm for Mr. Chrétien is that I think he's the candidate of continuity and that's what I'm looking for. So ahh that's why I support him.  
(sender = -.12, content = -.43, receiver = -.50, context = 1.09, sum = .04)
- 6: Ah no. I really don't. Certainly not in the west, ahm because Mr. Turner represents Bay Street and everything that is feared in ah Alberta... certainly in the oil patch. And ahh so I would say ah any hope we have. We would have such respect to go with Mr. Chrétien. That ahh with Mr. Turner we could write off Alberta as far as getting members elected. And I'm really concerned about the east... for that same reason. I don't think the easter... I don't think the east would vote for Mr. Chrétien because he's French, I think it would be because of his party loyalty and his performance and those are the exact same reasons, of course, the west respects him.  
(sender = .70, content = 1.19, receiver = .07, context = 1.60, sum = 3.56)

	Sender	Content	Receiver	Context	Sum
$\bar{X}$ nonconflict	-.44	-.03	.04	-.57	-.98
$\bar{X}$ conflict	.42	.04	-.05	.57	.98
$t(10)$	2.65	.20	.22	2.85	2.56
$p <$	.025	ns.	ns.	.01	.025
Reliabilities <sup>b</sup>					
this set	0.84	0.59	0.78	0.96	
test set	0.90	0.98	0.98	0.97	



Table 1 (continued).

- <sup>a</sup> After transformation, a positive value indicates that the messages are relatively more disqualified.
- <sup>b</sup> Intraclass correlations are highly sensitive to curtailment of range, hence the apparently lower reliabilities of the content and receiver dimensions. The same judges' scalings of the more varied message set used in the reliability trial are highly reliable. (Cf. Bavelas and Smith 1982.)
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$p < .03$ ), providing evidence that the delegates who supported Jean Chrétien were indeed in an avoidance-avoidance conflict.

One could criticize the small  $N$  used in this experiment. However, the power of any statistical test is inversely related to  $N$ ; therefore, the use of a small  $N$  is in fact a more conservative test of our hypothesis. Moreover, the results of this field study are a successful replication of the laboratory study which according to Winer (1971: 391) allows us greater generalizability than a single study with a larger  $N$ :

Inferences from replicated experiments have a broader scope than do inferences from a non-replicated experiment.

## 5. DISCUSSION

These results suggest that the avoidance-avoidance alternatives of a conflict situation are not only sufficient but necessary to produce disqualified communication. In the conflict situation, the politicians avoided giving their own opinion and avoided answering the question directly. On the other hand, politicians in the nonconflict situation stated their own opinions and directly addressed the question.

The similarity between our previous experiment conducted in the laboratory with students in an imaginary political situation and the present experiment in the actual political setting is worth reviewing. The politician's dilemma seems to be avoiding saying the wrong thing: Walter Mondale did not want to offend either the group who supports or the group who opposes gun control. Our laboratory subjects did not want to take a stand that would alienate one half of the constituency. Here, the delegates had to choose between implicit criticism of their own candidate or of their party. It is important to note that in both experiments, when the conflict was not present, respondents did not disqualify.

In actual political situations, questions that do not create a conflict of this kind are rare. In this arena the voters, relationships with the press, controversial "hot potato" issues, and the importance of appearing committed without actually committing oneself all contribute to create a complex conflict situation. In addition, there is the risk that the politician's disqualified answer will not satisfy the reporter. Here the reporter re-phrases the politician's answer in a more hostile manner (Heritage 1985). In such cases, the politician's dilemma becomes more acute, since the already complex conflict situation would become embroiled with an interpersonal conflict.

An example from the American 1984 vice-presidential debate illustrates the complexity of these political conflict situations. Vice-president Bush was reminded that, four years earlier, he was in favor of federally financed abortions in special cases, and he was asked if he now agreed with President Reagan that abortion was akin to murder. Bush replied with a skillfully disqualified response that his stand on abortion had undergone an evolutionary process since the number of abortions had increased dramatically. He went on to quote figures and ended by saying that he now supported the President's position. The interviewer pressed, "So you believe it's akin to murder?" Bush hesitated, stuttered, and replied, "No, I ge (sic)..support the President's position", thereby avoiding a personal opinion on whether or not abortion is murder. Bush had to respond, but there were several problems to be dealt with. The reporter used inflammatory words such as "murder" and would not let Bush evade the question. Bush could neither differ with a central tenet of the Reagan platform, nor could he lie, nor risk offending pro-life voters, nor risk offending pro-choice voters. Finally, whatever he said must come across as strongly committed and as responsive to the reporter's questions. In the end, after the obvious attempts to disqualify, Bush had little choice but to appear to agree with President Reagan. As we saw in our field experiment, loyalty to the party had to be maintained. Given the complexity of the contingencies in Bush's situation (and certainly many other political situations), it is remarkable that a statement can be formulated at all. Furthermore, it is not surprising that a politician chooses to disqualify and avoid the conflict when possible.

Graber (1976: 11) justifies the study of political communication on the grounds that from these "lies, half-lies, and other reality distortions" we can make judgements about a politician's character. While we concur with Graber that political communication should be studied (and that clarity is desirable), our data suggest that such communication should not be used to make generalizations about politicians as individuals. Our research has demonstrated that these "half-lies" and "reality distortions" reveal the *situation* that the politician is in and not his/her individual character flaws. We propose that such communication is not "an unwilling mirror of the soul" (Arora and Lasswell 1986: 2) but a mirror of the communicative situation in

all its complexities.

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