

# Influence of (Non) Observance of Maxims on Evasion in Malaysian Parliamentary Question Time

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## ABSTRACT

This content-analytic study examines the influence of (non) observance of maxims on evasion in Malaysian Parliamentary Question Time based on the theories of Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975) and Clayman's Levels of Resistance (2001; 2012). Two strategies of (non) observance of maxims were found to produce evasive responses namely, violating and opting out. Ministers and deputy ministers were found to frequently shift tasks required by providing assurances to the audience and acknowledging the issues raised without addressing them. Further, they talked about prior actions taken to address current issues and shifted responsibility to another party which led to the violation of maxims. Evasive responses also occurred when ministers and deputy ministers opted out of the Cooperative Principle, thus disregarding the questions altogether. Despite being evasive, equivocal responses were deemed cooperative as no instances of follow-up questions were recorded. The findings of the study contribute to the scant literature on CP in parliamentary discourse.

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## INTRODUCTION

Listeners generally assume that conversations are logical, rational, and relevant. This notion led to the formulation of the Cooperative Principle (henceforth CP), which states “make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. One might label this the COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE” (Grice, 1989, p. 26). CP has been widely adopted and studied in multidisciplinary areas including but not limited to classroom discourse, gender studies, and studies that built upon and extended Gricean Maxims to form other frameworks such as the Politeness Theory and neo-Gricean Pragmatics (Lindblom, 2001). From analysing classroom discourse to various other genres of analysis, the use of CP in understanding language is without a doubt, significant.

From the pragmatics perspective, an evasion serves as a response to make the questioner believe that the responder is fulfilling what Searle (1969) defined as felicity conditions of speech acts (Galasinski, 2000). As such, the responder must perform certain speech acts such as a statement or a promise so as to look like the act is felicitous (Galasinski, 2000). In this case, whether the act is semantically relevant or not, is not of utmost importance. Since the formulation of CP is to maximise conversations to ensure effective communication (Levinson, 1983), this begs the question of how the ideals of CP hold up in evasion and whether there is a breakdown of communication when interlocutors avoid answering questions. This study was constructed to

explore how non-observance of maxims contributes to the production of evasion in Malaysian Parliamentary Question Time and to provide evidence of how two frameworks by Grice (1975) and Clayman (2012) could be concurrently used to examine linguistic strategies in parliamentary discourse, specifically within the context of Malaysia.

### **The Cooperative Principle**

The notion of cooperation stems from the structure of communicative exchanges that allows people to socially cooperate (Reich, 2011). A challenge to Grice's CP (1975) according to Leech (1983) is that it "does not stand up to the evidence of real language use" (p. 80). Leech's (1983) main criticism of the CP is that it does not explain why people use implicatures to communicate. Nonetheless, Grice's maxims account for "context and background knowledge shared by speakers" (Attardo, 1998, p. 628) which is substantial to the discussion of parliamentary discourse. Further, Attardo (1998) pointed out that CP also accounts for other factors between the interlocutors. For instance, when reading a letter of recommendation submitted for a job application, the reader of the letter will necessarily factor in his/her knowledge of the power relationships between student and professor, whereby a professor is more or less free to deny his support to the candidate's application for a job. For the same reason, students do not usually write letters of recommendation for their professors (Attador, 1998, p. 628).

Even though criticisms on CP exist as discussed by Leech (1983) and Davies (2007), it is agreeable that at the very least that utterances are used to exchange information (Ephratt, 2012) and must be understandable by the listener (Reich, 2011). Moreover, people often have common expectations when they engage in conversations which include mutually dependent and dovetailed contributions, common immediate objectives, and an explicit or implicit agreement by the interlocutors that the conversation will continue or terminate when it is agreed upon (Grice, 1989).

Prior studies have shown instances of non-observance of maxims that occurred due to various reasons which include influence of institutional motivations and constraints (Antaki & Stokoe, 2017), failure to provide first-hand information in the context of courtroom discourse (Ceballos & Sosas, 2018) and influence of cultural norms and constraints (Yaqin & Shanmuganathan, 2018). Additionally, maxims were also commonly violated to shape and keep the content of news interesting (Khalisah & Anjarningsih, 2020) and to create humorous effects (Attardo, 1993; Nemesi, 2015; Yamalita et al., 2021). On the contrary, conversational maxims were more observed in translated fiction containing fewer implicatures thereby indicating a high use of explicit language (Abualadas, 2020). The interpretation of Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975) that is used in this study can be summarized in the subsequent sections.

### **Gricean Maxims**

Grice's CP (1975) was generated from nine maxims that were grouped into four categories, namely quantity, quality, relation and manner. According to Grice (1975), maxim of quantity states that the speaker must be informative as is required by the conversation. Further, the speaker should not supply extra nor less information than what is required for communication purposes. Maxim of quality concerns with the kind of information that is supplied during a conversation and is considered observed when the speaker does not lie or say something which they believe to be untrue or based on insufficient evidence. While the maxim of relation is observed when the information given is relevant to the conversation, the maxim of manner states that the speaker needs to be precise and concise. The exchange of information should not be elaborate, ambiguous, or incomprehensible to the listener.

### **Strategies of Non-observance of Maxims**

Thomas (1995) and Cutting (2002) have outlined five strategies of non-observance of maxims; flouting, violating, opting out, infringing and suspending based on Grice's (1975) original work. Thomas (1995) noted that flouting happens when speakers imply meanings that are not verbally uttered, indirectly asking the hearers to look for additional meanings. The hearer must encode the utterance in order to understand the intended meaning (Cruse, 2000). Violating, on the other hand, happens ostentatiously and sometimes it can mislead the hearers (Grice, 1975). Speakers usually violate maxims when they believe the truth is not discoverable by the hearer (Cutting, 2002). Infringing occurs when a speaker's failure to observe conversational maxims is due to limited linguistic performance and suspending occurs in a situation where speakers are not expected to fulfill maxims (Thomas, 1995).

While other strategies of non-observance are fairly direct, it is worth noting that opting out may occur in two different stages; opting out of the conversational maxims and opting out of the CP altogether (Grice, 1989). Opting out of conversational maxims may be done when a speaker "say, indicate, or allow it to become plain that he is unwilling to cooperate in the way the maxim requires" (Grice., 1989, p. 30). It may also be done linguistically as per the example illustrated by Grice (1989, p. 30) "I cannot say more, my lips are sealed" or conveyed with other non-linguistic methods such as by tone of voice and a wink which can be perceived by the hearers to be intentionally done and not nonchalantly (Mooney, 2004).

On the contrary, opting out of the CP posits an opting out of conversational exchanges altogether (Attardor, 1997). In the words of Grice (1989, p. 30) "if he wished to be uncooperative, why write at all?". Attardor (1997) also claimed that since CP is used to govern conversational exchanges, the absence of it cannot be considered as violating the maxim of quantity as refusal to communicate indicates an absence of information. Thus, the notion of sufficient information may not be applicable in a situation where speakers choose to opt out of the CP.

### **Evasion**

To avoid undesirable repercussions that may be caused by direct answers, evasion is commonly employed, especially when the consequence of not answering is better than if an undesirable answer is provided (Clayman, 2001). Though questions are supposedly designed to be objective and impartial to the interviewer's adversarialness, the interviewer may employ questions to refute claims made by the interviewee to pursue their own agenda (Hanafe, 2016). In addition, when an answer is deemed unsatisfactory, the interviewer will accuse the politician of performing an equivocation by ignoring the question (Clementson, 2016).

Politicians may resist answering questions fully, i.e., responding only to a degree of what is asked. These inadequate answers may vary from no information at all, to partial or incomplete answers, and to short answers for questions that actually require longer responses. Responses are considered evasive when they do not address either the topical or the action agendas of a question or both (Clayman, 2012). There are four levels of evasion according to Clayman (2001); namely, Full, substantial, medium, and subtle evasion. A response that neither addresses the topical nor the action agenda is known as full evasion (Clayman, 2001). Clayman (2001) also introduced the notion of substantial evasion which denotes a substantial shift of the topical agenda of a question. On the other hand, medium evasion indicates a change in the action agenda whilst the topical agenda remains the same (Clayman, 2001). Finally, a subtle shift of a particular term in a question connotes subtle evasion (Clayman, 2001). Evasive responses commonly involve agenda shifts which can be done by tactfully

diverging from the main agenda by adding new issues (Clayman, 2001). Politicians employ various levels of evasion in order to avoid the consequence of providing an answer that may be harmful (Clayman, 2001).

Studies of evasion have been mostly observed to be employed by politicians in political discourse, specifically interviews, speeches and Prime Minister's Questions (henceforth PMQ). Denials, in particular, have been highlighted as a common strategy employed in evasive responses to avoid accountability and as a distancing technique, particularly in situations when politicians are being confronted on their racial statements and slurs (Simon-Vandenberg, 2008; Chovanec, 2020). They may also claim to be misquoted (Bull & Simon-Vandenberg, 2014) or have already addressed the questions without actually answering them (Bull & Strawson, 2020). The reviews of past studies explored the manner and reasons in which evasive responses are usually employed.

Nonetheless, it can be seen that there is a lack of attention being given to the research of evasion in relation to the CP and its conversational maxims within the context of parliamentary discourse. However, Rasiah noted (2007), "cooperation does exist between Question Time's participants. Both Opposition questioners and their respondents cooperate in participating in adversarial communication..." (p. 122). Therefore, this study discusses how the non-observance of maxims shifted the questions' agendas and whether it leads to cooperation in parliamentary discourse.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach to examine the responses to questions in QT in order to identify types and strategies of maxims (non) observance by Malaysian MPs. According to Krippendorff (2004), qualitative method is imperative for certain types of analyses which include political, ethnographic, discourse, psychotherapeutic, and to a certain extent computer text analysis. This is because qualitative analysis could offer new insights that may not be discussed from the frame of quantitative analysis (Insch et al., 2007).

The data for this study are from the first meeting of the sixth session of the thirteenth parliament (henceforth 1M6S13P). The data were specifically selected for one major reason: 1M6S13P was the last parliamentary session before the 14th General Election (henceforth GE14) where the political coalition Barisan Nasional (henceforth BN), who was in power since Malaysia's independence, had ceased to be the ruling government. This session also had questions and responses on various topics. Further, the analysis of the data focuses on the manner in which Malaysian MPs utilise language to fulfill their political agendas and roles prior to the election.

The transcripts were extracted from the Malaysian Parliament's open-source official website. The selected dates of the parliamentary sittings were from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2018 which were the last days of the parliamentary session before the election. A total number of 179 question and response adjacency pairs were extracted from the four Hansards. Only question and answer pairs during Question Time in the parliament were selected while other sessions were not included as the study focuses on question and response adjacency pairs between the government ministries and MPs. The data gathered were then analysed using Grice's (1975) framework of conversational maxims and Thomas' (1995) classifications of strategies of non-observance of maxims. Subsequently, an interrater analysis was conducted to determine the reliability of data analysis which resulted in 83.3%.

A second analysis was then performed on the same 179 question and response adjacency pairs to identify evasive responses based on Clayman's Levels of Resistance (2001; 2012). Another reliability test was

conducted at this stage. The comparison between an independent interrater and the researcher for evasive response coding revealed a percentage agreement of 85.0%. Since the threshold of scores for reliability margin to minimise errors is 80.0% (Riffe et al., 1998), both data analyses were therefore deemed as reliable. The analyses were conducted on the original Malay hansards. Subsequently, the data were translated into English for this article to facilitate the readers' understanding.

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The findings of the study indicate that non-observance of maxims influences the production of evasive responses identified in the data. In total, 38 evasive responses were identified in the data which involved two strategies of non-observance of maxims namely, violating and opting out. Whilst the former was observed in responses that shifted the action agendas of questions, indicating medium evasive responses the latter was found in responses that fully disregarded the questions, suggesting full evasive responses. The examples are discussed in the subsequent sections.

### Violation of Maxims of Quantity, Relation and Manner

Maxims of quantity, relation and manner were frequently violated in occurrences of evasive responses identified in the data. It appears that violation of maxims occurred due to under-description, irrelevant and vague utterances produced by ministers and deputy ministers to avoid providing adequate responses. The ways maxims are violated are discussed in the following subsections.

#### *Providing Reassurances without Providing an Answer*

Maxims of quantity, relation and manner were found to be violated when ministers and deputy ministers avoided responding to questions by providing reassurances without directly addressing the action agenda. When asked about the plans made by the ministry regarding a school named SMK Pulau Tuba in Langkawi, the Deputy Minister provided a lengthy response. He began his prefatory statement by saying that “Regarding Your Honourable question on SMK Pulau Tuba in particular...” to acknowledge the question. However, several maxims were violated that subsequently produced an evasive response as observed in Example 1.

#### Example 1

MP of Langkawi: I would like to know **the plans made by the ministry in a school in Pulau Langkawi, which is Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Pulau Tuba**. The school is now operating but it seems that the student enrolment is decreasing day by day ....

Deputy Minister of Education: Regarding Your Honourable question on *SMK Pulau Tuba* in particular, **we would observe from time to time and the suggestion made by The Honourable Langkawi has been one of the recommendations that we try to adopt and let us work together to ensure that Pulau Langkawi is not only famous worldwide as a tourist destination, but we would like to promote Pulau Langkawi as a highly prestigious destination**. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

*(Penyata Rasmi Parlimen Dewan Rakyat 4 April 2018, p. 11-12)*

As observed in Example 1, The Deputy Minister proceeded to say that “we would observe from time to time and the suggestion made by The Honourable Langkawi has been one of the recommendations that we try to

adopt". In this utterance, no plans were found, directly indicating a violation of the maxim of relation as it is irrelevant to the question asked. Apart from the violation of the maxim of relation, the maxim of manner was also violated as the responder did not clearly specify what the recommendations were and how they were adopting them. Instead, he only indicated that they "will observe it from time to time", indicating an undetermined and vague timeline. Since the response did not have the required information (the plan), the response was also considered as under-described thus, violating the maxim of quantity as not enough information was provided. Subsequently, the maxim of manner was also once again violated when the Deputy Minister said that "let us work together to ensure that *Pulau Langkawi* is not only famous worldwide as a tourist destination, but we would like to promote *Pulau Langkawi* as a highly prestigious destination" as the statement does not definitely provide a plan on how to make it famous and popular as a tourist destination.

Whilst the response managed to maintain the topical agenda of the question (SMK Pulau Tuba), the action agenda of the question (the plan) was not addressed. The violation of the maxims shifted the agenda of the question by providing a false sense of assurance to the audience since it gave an affirmation that the government was doing its best. Providing reassurances was also similarly observed in Bull and Mayer (1993). Further, the repeated use of the pronoun "we" (**we** would observe... **we** try to adopt... **we** would like to promote..) that was observed in the response made a formal situation impersonal and created a shared responsibility between the responder and his political group. According to Íñigo-Mora (2004), the use of 'we' may refer to different points of reference in accordance with the speaker's intention. This is commonly done to appeal to the audience's feelings "of inclusion/exclusion in order to win the battle" (Íñigo-Mora, 2004, p. 49). Since violation of maxims occurs ostentatiously (Grice, 1975) and can be pragmatically misleading, it is most observed in certain types of activity such as parliamentary speeches, debates, and trials (Thomas, 1995), as observed in this study.

In another example, when asked whether the recent change of calculation of dividends for depositors at Tabung Haji (a statutory body owned by the government), will remain in the upcoming years, the Minister in the Prime Minister's office provided reassurances as depicted in Example 2.

### Example 2

Minister in the Prime Minister's Office:	..So, is the question for this year only or the years ahead, this year and the years ahead as well as the concept is that <b>we want to take care of welfare</b> . So it means that if there is a virtue and goodness for the depositors, the custodians of Tabung Haji, <b>we will still think in the best direction as mentioned</b> . Thank you, Your Honour.
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*(Penyata Rasmi Parlimen Dewan Rakyat 3 April 2018, pp. 2-3)*

The minister indicated in his response that they would "take care of (people's) welfare..." and that they would always think of and take the best approach "we will still think in the best direction as mentioned" to provide reassurances. The maxim of manner was again violated as the responder provided an obscure plan (the best direction). With reference to whether the recent change will remain, it was found that the maxim of relation was violated since taking care of people's welfare is irrelevant and the maxim of quantity was not observed as no adequate information was provided.

Whilst the topical agenda of the question (the calculation of dividends for depositors at Tabung Haji) was addressed, the action agenda of the question (will the change remain in the upcoming years) was not responded to, indicating an evasion. Similar to Example 1, the pronoun 'we' was employed in the response to refer to the

responder and his political group (Íñigo-Mora, 2004), ensuring the audience that any steps taken by them (the government) is to ensure people's welfare. As observed in Examples 1 and 2, maxims were violated to provide reassurances, which subsequently led to the production of evasive responses.

### *Acknowledging without Addressing the Issue*

Maxims of quantity, relation and manner may also be violated by ministers and deputy ministers to acknowledge the issue brought up in a question without actually addressing it in the response. As illustrated in Example 3, the MP of Sepanggar provided an elaborative context to set up the question. He first made it known that all allocations provided are equal "I understand the allocation channeled to the state JBS is equal".

Further, he talked about the size of the State of Sabah, which covers 26 districts which is equivalent to five or six states in the Peninsula Malaysia, indicating that the budget needs to cover a vast area. He then proceeded to ask whether the funds allocated for the people of Sabah were sufficient for the JBS (Department of Youth and Sports) of Sabah to carry out its mission to empower the youths of Sabah as depicted in Example 3.

### **Example 3**

MP of Sepanggar: Thank you Mr. Speaker, thank you Honourable Minister. I have two additional questions. First, I understand the allocation channeled to the state JBS is equal. However, the administrative structure of JBS Sabah covers 26 districts and is divided into six parts, namely ... Due to the size of the state of Sabah itself when compared to the land of the Peninsula, Sabah has an area of 73,620 square kilometres, which is equivalent to five or six states in the Peninsula. My question is, **is the allocation channeled to JBS Sabah sufficient to enable JBS Sabah to carry out its mission in empowering the youths of Sabah?**

Deputy Minister of Youth and Sports: Thank you Mr. Speaker and thank you Honourable Members. I would like to reassure the Honourable Members, **the people of Sabah will not be marginalised from the current development. However, the allocation is channeled according to existing funds. However, recently we have seen the demand from Sabah has increased and the Ministry of Youth and Sports will try to help as much as we can according to what is available.** Thank you.

*Penyata Rasmi Parlimen Dewan Rakyat 4 April 2018, p. 18*

The Deputy Minister began his statement by reassuring that the people of Sabah will not be marginalised from the development, violating the maxim of manner as it is an obscure statement. Whilst the assurance may provide a sense of comfort to the audience, it did not answer the question. He further said that "the allocation is channeled according to existing funds", violating the maxim of relation. Whilst the topic of 'allocation for Sabah' is maintained, it is an irrelevant response since the question specifically asked whether the allocation is sufficient for the Department of Youth and Sports Sabah to carry out its mission. Since the information provided is not an adequate response to the question, the response also violated the maxim of quantity as it is under-described. Subsequently, the Deputy Minister said that they have seen the increased demand in Sabah, acknowledging the issue and that they will try to help, an instance of another vague statement as to whether the help is enough or not is uncertain.

Example 3 illustrates how the violations of the maxims of quantity, relation and manner create an equivocal response. Whilst Ceballos and Sosas (2018) discovered that the maxim of quality was commonly violated in

courtroom proceedings due to witnesses' and defendants' failure to provide firsthand information, this study observed that the maxim of quality was consistently observed. Notably, this substantiates the notion that institutional practices and constraints influence maxim observance as noted by Antaki and Stokoe (2017).

The utterance “recently we have seen the demand from Sabah has increased...” indicates an acknowledgment from the responder. Nonetheless, no further confirmation was given as to whether the allocation was sufficient, indicating the shift of the agenda of the question. By acknowledging the concern raised and providing assurances responses provided by the ministers and deputy ministers were seen as relevant since no follow-up questions were recorded. This signals that the non-observance of maxims that influences the production of evasive responses was not realised by the audience.

The maneuver of acknowledging the question without answering it was similarly found in Bull and Mayer (1993). In another example, the Ministry of Health was asked whether there is any data that shows that supplements cause diseases like kidney failure and others. In turn, the Deputy Minister responded by saying that they have categorized 20 types of diseases in which food or health supplements cannot make claims as shown in Example 4.

#### Example 4

MP of Pengkalan Chepa: ...In terms of supplements, we feel it is relatively easy for the government to control them but from the perspective of nutrition **there are many claims being made**. First I would like to ask, **is there any data that shows that these supplements cause diseases such as kidney failure and so on? ...**

Deputy Minister of Health: ...Indeed, for your information, **we have categorized many diseases there are 20 types of diseases that any food supplements or health supplements should not make claims**. It's a lot. There are 20 of them, Mr Speaker, if you want me to mention them, yes I can. First, kidney-related disease or failure. Some would claim it can be cured. Diseases or failure related to heart, diabetes, seizures, paralysis, tuberculosis, asthma, leprosy, cancer, deafness can also be treated drug addiction...

*Penyata Rasmi Parlimen Dewan Rakyat 4 April 2018, p. 17*

Whilst the response talked about the list of diseases that food supplements cannot make claims, it is irrelevant and inadequate to answer the question of whether there are data that show supplements can cause kidney diseases and so on, thus violating the maxim of relation and quantity. Further, the Deputy Minister went on to talk about the list of those diseases, violating the maxim of manner as it was ambiguous and unnecessary to the question asked. In addition, the list provided a disguise to make it look like he was ‘answering’ the question. In contrast to Yaqin and Shanmuganathan’s (2018) study which discovered that lengthy responses are polite and a means of being courteous, thus maxim violating, this study showed that the maxims were violated to conceal the speaker’s evasiveness. Even though the Deputy Minister managed to stay within the parameters of the topical agenda of the question, he performed a different task than what was required by the question. The missing variable from the question ‘is’ was inadequately responded to. As such, the response was considered evasive.

#### *Stating Prior Actions Taken to Address the Current Request*

Apart from providing assurances and acknowledging without addressing the issues discussed, maxims of quantity, relation, and manner may also be violated to produce evasive responses by stating the actions taken



in the past on a similar topic without addressing the current question. This is apparent in the response provided by the Deputy Minister of Health who indicated that “they have taken action in most cases” as illustrated in Example 5.

### Example 5

MP of Pengkalan Chepa: Second, in the context of deceiving consumers, we know many Malaysians have NCDs and these supplements often claim that they can treat, can cure all kinds of diseases. Often, the claims are made via testimonials. So, what are the more drastic or intimidating government measures instead of just imposing fines? This is because let's say there are fines amounting to RM10,000, RM20,000, RM100,000, they can pay this easily. **So what are the more serious actions to address these deceptions or scams of users?** Thank you.

Deputy Minister of Health: About the data, I had mentioned that earlier. Indeed, the enforcement data that I mentioned showed that **we had taken action in most of the cases I highlighted before, there are 22,550 health supplement advertisements screened that were found to be at fault and action has been taken**, Mr Speaker. Thank you.

(*Penyata Rasmi Parlimen Dewan Rakyat* 4 April 2018, p. 17)

*Note.*

\*NCD refers to non-communicable diseases

In the response provided, the Deputy Minister claimed that “we had taken action in most cases”, which is irrelevant to the question of “what are the more serious actions...”, violating the maxim of relation since the question did not ask for prior actions taken. The questioner specifically implied that previous actions taken by imposing fines did not work as sellers could have easily paid them off. Subsequently, the lack of information on the “more serious actions” caused the maxim of quantity to be violated. In addition, the sentence “there are 22,550 health supplement advertisements screened..” is lengthy and unnecessary. The whole statement was provided to give evidence of the “past actions taken” by the government. In this example, maxims of quantity, relation, and manner were violated when the Deputy Minister informed the questioner about the past actions imposed in lieu of serious actions that could have been done to address the issue. Despite having clearly implied that the fines imposed previously did not scare the irresponsible sellers, the Deputy Minister proceeded to talk about the number of cases in which actions have been taken against them. Notably, the irrelevant response was not noted by the questioner.

Whilst Antaki and Stokoe’s (2017) study revealed that police interviewers focused on details by interviewees in order “to straighten everyday narrative into the kind of detailed chronology that would be appropriate for the court” (Antaki & Stokoe, 2017, p. 14), thus violating Gricean maxims, this study showed that the Deputy Minister in Example 5 violated the maxims to focus on details that were irrelevant to the action agenda of the question to make it seem like he was “answering” the question. By focusing on the details of the past actions taken rather than providing the new serious measures requested by the questioner, the Deputy Minister managed to conceal his evasiveness. Subsequently, this provided the impression that the government had indeed taken measures to address the scams.

### *Shifting Responsibility to Another Party*

The maxims of quantity, relation, and manner were violated to shift the blame to another ‘important’ party as a way of distancing the questioner from the issue. When asked about the extent to which established programs are effective in carrying out their mandate, the Deputy Minister of Education assured the listener that the Ministry constantly considers the best method to ensure the effectiveness of programs implemented.

#### **Example 6**

MP of Batu Pahat: Thank you, the Honourable Minister. The first question, to be specific, **to what extent the programs that are organised are effective in carrying out the specified duties.**

Deputy Minister of Education: Your Honourable, as I have mentioned earlier via my initial response, **parents' recommendations play such a crucial role and these recommendations will also take into account the school and community involvement.** For your information, The Honourable, **the Ministry of Education Malaysia shall always look for the best methods to ensure the effectiveness of the programmes that we implement.** Among the initiatives that we have identified, The Honourable, for example, the one that I mentioned in this Hall yesterday, Program Remaja Wawasan. Program Remaja Wawasan is our collaborative effort according to the N-BOS initiative with PDRM as well as the Malaysian Armed Forces. **On top of that, Your Honourable, the initiatives taken by the principals are indeed extraordinary.** Let me give you an example in the Hulu Selangor Parliamentary constituency, some of the headmasters and principals had initiated ten family visit programmes...

*(Penyata Rasmi Parlimen Dewan Rakyat 3 April 2018, pp. 22-23)*

While the topical agenda of the question was addressed (the programs carried out), the action agenda (extent to which the programs that have been established are effective) of the question was not adequately addressed, violating the maxims of quantity and relation as no adequate and relevant information on the effectiveness of those programs. He further highlighted the ways to make those programs effective and how they have identified certain programmes (Among the initiatives that we have identified...), without actually addressing the issue of how effective these programs were, concurrently violated the maxim of manner as the response was provided in a long-drawn-out manner. Similar to other examples, Example 6 shows an instance of an evasive response that was not pursued by the questioner. Another instance of providing assurance was also observed in the response (the Ministry of Education Malaysia shall always look for the best methods to ensure the effectiveness of the programmes ...).

The questioner was observed to rope in other parties (parents, community and school) to deviate from the agenda of the question. In this instance, the responder was seen to shift their role to the parents’ role, to equally share the ‘responsibility’ and by extension ‘blame’. Hansson (2015) noted that “shifting of responsibility and thus also blame – is particularly salient in political argumentation” (p. 299). This is because avoiding blame will prevent the speakers from the unforeseeable damaging narratives or actions (Hansson, 2015). Notably, in this scenario, the speakers facing the blame will ascribe themselves “as the Heroes, or the Helpers of a Hero” (Hansson, 2015, p. 301).

In the context of Example 5, the Deputy Minister evidently subscribed to the latter idea when he praised the initiatives taken by some of the headmasters and principals. This is because the ‘initiative’ was initially

introduced by the government (Program Remaja Wawasan is **our collaborative effort...**). Whilst the speaker tried to distance himself from the issue by including other parties, it could be understood that the efforts done by the other parties were managed to be carried out because of the government's initial effort, thus successfully deviating from the action agenda of the question (the effectiveness of the program).

The “bald on record” compliment, introduced by Brown and Levinson (1987) that was observed in the response (...the initiatives taken by the principals **are indeed extraordinary...**) avoids “ambiguity and entails honesty and directness on the speaker's part” (Maíz-Arévalo, 2014, p. 981). Depending on the relationship between the interlocutors (if it is distant), the explicit compliment may threaten the hearer's face (Maíz-Arévalo, 2014). Conversely, if the interlocutors have a close relationship, this may appeal to the hearer's face. Since the compliment was given without the presence of the receiver, it can be assumed that the purpose of the compliment was to establish to the audience how close the relationship between the government and the principals was, cementing the notion that the government was the helper of the hero.

### Opting Out of the Cooperative Principle

Apart from violating, opting out of the CP may also produce equivocal responses. Opting out occurred in questions with multiple sub-questions, providing an opportunity for ministers and deputy ministers to disregard the questions altogether thus, employing total silence as a signal to fully evade the questions. Such response is illustrated in Example 7.

#### Example 7

MP of Bukit Gantang: I would like to ask the Prime Minister **to state the latest status of Kolej Islam Malaya (KIM), which ceased its operations in 1970. List the assets owned by the institution and who manages the assets.**

Minister in the PM Office: Thank you to the Honourable (Gentleman) Bukit Gantang... **KIM has resumed its operation in the name of Universiti Islam Malaysia or in short UIM, as conceded by the 222nd Conference of Rulers on 22 October 2010. Based on the decision, Universiti Islam Malaysia is registered as a private university under the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) on 14 January 2014. In relation to KIM's assets, it is currently managed by the Board of Trustees of Kolej Islam Malaya or in short LAKIM and partially under the management of the Selangor Islamic Religious Council or MAIS.** Thank you.

*Penyata Rasmi Parlimen Dewan Rakyat 2 April 2018, p. 12-13*

Three different sub-questions can be extracted from Example 7, which are the current status of the college, the list of assets and the current management of those assets. A further inspection revealed that the first and the third tasks were adequately responded to by the minister. Nonetheless, the second question was not responded to. In the response given, the Minister said that “KIM has resumed its operation...”, which answers the first question. Further, the statement “In relation to KIM's assets, it is currently managed ...” is a response to the third question “who manages the assets”. Since there is no response that bears on the second question, it is therefore considered as opting out of the Cooperative Principle. As noted by Grice (1989) “if he wished to be uncooperative, why write at all?”. Subsequently, this could also be applied to the context of spoken discourse as shown in Example 6. Therefore, it could be said that the resistance to cooperating prompts the Minister to opt out of the conversation, thus providing an evasive response by total silence.

In this type of question, MPs would usually respond to the first sub-questions and ignore the subsequent sub-questions. Reasons for not responding to subsequent sub-questions may be attributed to two reasons namely, they may have forgotten, or they purposely chose to ignore them. It is found that even though these questions were fully ignored, the questioners did not pursue the responders to provide responses to the subsequent questions, consequently providing them an opportunity to directly opt out of the CP which in turn, produces an evasive response.

Whilst Yamalita et al., (2021) discovered that opting out occurred by verbal utterances, this study examined instances of opting out by silence. As such, opting out in Yamalita et al., (2021) study was observed in conversational maxims whereas this study discovered instances of opting out of the Cooperative Principle or conversations. Kurzon (1995) pointed out that “intentional silence, on the other hand, is a deliberate attempt by the addressee not to be cooperative with the addresser”. Irrespective of that, the data show that the ‘uncooperative’ manner was not pursued by the speaker or audience.

## CONCLUSION

### Summary

The findings of this study indicate that maxims were unobserved for various reasons that led to the production of evasive responses. Maxims were unobserved either via violation or opting out of the CP as a whole.

The violation of maxims occurred when ministers and deputy ministers provided assurances without addressing the issue on hand, acknowledged the issues asked without actually answering them, and talked about actions that have been taken in the past to address the current concern. Additionally, responders relieved themselves from bearing the responsibility of issues being asked while simultaneously showing that the government is the helper of the hero as previously discussed, which is imperative in maintaining the positive face of the government. Further, the findings illustrated how maxims were unobserved for various reasons which differ from other studies (e.g., Antaki & Stokoe, 2017; Ceballos & Sosas, 2018; Yaqin & Shanmuganathan, 2018; Yamalita et al., 2021) that consequently led to the production of evasive responses. On the other hand, CP was also opted out in instances where verbal responses were not recorded.

Furthermore, this study observed that the violation of the maxims of quantity, relation, and manner would produce medium evasive responses, in which action agendas of the questions were ignored, whereas opting out of the CP produced full evasion in which responses did not contain verbal utterances.

### Evasive Responses and Cooperative Principle

It was observed that none of the questioners pursued or insisted that the responders adequately respond to the questions in both verbal (Examples 1-6) and non-verbal (Example 7) evasive responses. Further, the study revealed that verbal evasive responses could be considered cooperative, whereas non-verbal evasive responses are observed to be non-cooperative.

In the case of verbal evasive responses, they are treated as cooperative by the audience unlike verbal responses in Antaki and Stokoe’s (2017) study that were assumed to be uncooperative by police interviewers as previously discussed. As pointed out by Lumsden (2008) “Grice is saying that even in the case of an over-the-wall chat there is some minimal kind of common aim, namely to identify with the other’s topic” (p. 1902). As such, maintaining the same topic (addressing the topical agenda) is therefore regarded as a form of ‘cooperation’. Whilst the shared information in responses may not address the action agendas of the questions,

the ‘direction’ or ‘purpose’ of the communicative exchanges is mutually agreeable and the same; which was to seek an adequate response to a question. In this instance, these evasive responses can be seen as adequate as they were not pursued or realised by the questioners.

As for Grice’s maxims, respondents are frequently forced to make compromises in the interest of saving face. For instance, MPs cannot lie in Parliament but do not want to lose face by telling the truth, and thus they evade answering questions. In such circumstances, they may respect the maxim of quality (by not lying) but violate the maxim of quantity (by not telling exactly as much as they know) (Rasiah, 2007, p. 122).

In the context of non-verbal evasive responses, instances of opting out of the Cooperative Principle by total silence were observed. It can be said that the responders were not being cooperative with the questioners for two reasons. First, there was no indication that the information of the question was acknowledged by the responder since questions in parliament were submitted before the parliament was in session. Thus, the responder might have missed or overlooked the questions. Second, ‘the common immediate aim’ as proposed by Grice (1975) clearly was not met in this context. It can be assumed that the common purpose of the questioner was to seek a response from the ministers or deputy ministers. Notably, this purpose was not met as evident by the absence of responses.

### Implications and Recommendations

The frameworks employed in the study have illustrated the manner in which how non-observance of maxims invokes evasive responses through the strategies of violating and opting out. Evidence of non-observance strategies occurred on two levels namely, at the CP level itself and at the conversational maxims level. With regard to its contribution to the literature of Gricean Maxims (1975) in institutional discourse, the study has reinforced the notion that institutional norms, specifically that of discourse in parliament, may influence maxim observance as discussed in Anataki and Stokoe (2017), therefore fulfilling the gap on the limited literature of CP in other institutional settings. Future studies may explore evasive responses beyond question time in parliament or other political data such as interviews and debates to better understand the socio-linguistic influence of political discourse in Malaysia, particularly with regard to the notion of the Cooperative Principle and evasion.

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