



“Better left unsaid”: On the use of
elliptical constructions in political
discourse in Hong Kong

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Objectives of this study

- To examine the use of **indirect verbal strategies** in public discourse.
- To examine **the combined use of silence and ellipsis** in political discourse in Hong Kong.

Outline of the presentation

■ Previous studies

- Silence in discourse
- Ellipsis in discourse

■ Present study

- Examines the combined use of silence and ellipsis
- With special attention to political speeches in Hong Kong

■ Conclusion

Silence

(Kurzon 1995)

- Silence is defined as a pause in conversation.
- It can be intentional, and used to allow the addressee(s) to complete the inferences intended by the speaker.
- Kurzon (1995) refers to this type of silence as 'interactive silence'.
- **Interactive silence has propositional content, but this must be ascertained from the context.** In this regard, interactive silence is more context-embedded than speech (Kurzon 1995).

Interactive Silence

- It bears an illocutionary force with the following functions:
 - To approve
 - To command
 - To deny
 - To challenge
 - To accuse
 - To threaten
 - To insult

(Alagözlüa & Sahin 2011)

Ellipsis

- It is defined as **the omission of words recoverable or understood from the situational context or the surrounding text** (Carter and McCarthy 2006).
- There are two major approaches to the study of ellipsis (Spencer & Hendriks 2006).
- **Syntactic Approach**
 - Ellipsis refers to the deletion of lexical material by the speaker, often just mechanical steps within the generation process.
 - It focuses on the elision of Determiner Phrase, Verb Phrase or Noun Phrase.
- **Pragmatic approach**
 - This approach focuses on how speakers select what material can be left unarticulated while still preserving recoverability given the context.
 - Antecedent and predicate remnants can be in any form and not just restricted to DP, NP and VP.
 - It also allows the speaker to express something that otherwise violates syntactic constraints. The generation of ellipsis makes reference to information rather than syntactic structure.

Ellipsis as a Politeness Strategy

- **Face wants** is the fundamental motivation in interpersonal interaction (Leech 1983).
- In political discourse, the speaker often praises oneself or criticizes others to persuade the electorate to support him.
- Both moves are dispreferred moves and can be face-threatening. Raising of oneself implies lowering of others and criticism damages the positive face of others.
- Ellipsis (off-record politeness) is one of the strategies to mitigate the Face Threatening Acts in interaction (Brown and Levinson 1987).

The Present Study: Silence and Ellipsis in Political Discourse in HK

- Not much is known about the combined use of silence and ellipsis in discourse.
- The present study will examine their combined use in public speeches related to the 2012 Chief Executive (CE) election in Hong Kong.
- The data comprise two TV debates between the CE electoral candidates in March 2012.

Background on the political system in Hong Kong in 2012

- 'One country, two systems' model
- Dual roles of the Chief Executive
 - To ensure social stability and economic prosperity for Hong Kong guaranteed by the Sino-British Joint Declaration signed in 1984.
 - To safeguard the national interest of the PRC stipulated in the Basic Law.

HK Chief Executive Election 2012

■ Diverse Political Affiliations

Type of political parties	Orientation & priorities	Target audience
Pro-establishment	Stability	Conservatives
Liberal	Prosperity	Businessmen
Democratic	Autonomy	Professionals & the Middle Class
Neo-democratic	Justice & Accountability of Government	Radicals & Youth Electorate
Socialist	Equality & Wealth-sharing	Working Class & Grassroots

Persuasive strategies in political discourse

- Politicians often use persuasive strategies to manipulate their audience into agreeing with their policies, as part of a broader strategy to help them gain or maintain power (see Beard 2000).
- **Among the persuasive strategies used are:**
 - Personality (e.g. charisma)
 - Reasoning
 - Arousal of emotion

HK Chief Executive Election 2012

■ Persuasion strategies in Hong Kong

- It is difficult to use reasoning alone to satisfy such a wide spectrum of conflicting interests.
- CE candidates may choose the arousal of emotion as a strategy to avoid narrowing their target supporters in the election.
 - e.g. establishing oneself as a visionary
mud slinging at the integrity of the rivals
- This can sometimes be done by using ellipsis and silence to preface self-praising and also as a form of sarcasm to arouse the emotion of the electorate.
 - We will analyze two examples:
 - 'Doing Self-Praising'
 - 'Denigrating the Rival'

2012 Chief Executive Candidates Forum

- Date: 19 March 2012
- Venue: Chief Executive (CE) Election Committee Meeting
- Speaker: Henry Tang, CY Leung and Albert Ho
- Audience: Election Committee members only

- **Context:**

CY Leung had earlier proposed that the minimum number of nominations needed from members of the Election Committee before a potential candidate can run for the CE election should be reviewed. This proposal was made after CY Leung managed to get enough nominations only after a lot of persuasion to various Election Committee members.

Henry Tang then responded, apparently in agreement with the proposal, but uses this opportunity to also engage in self-praising. However, since self-praising is a dispreferred move, he deploys a number of indirect verbal strategies, including the use of **generic and impersonal reference, followed by silence and an elliptical construction.**

2012 Chief Executive Candidates Forum (01:19:47 – 01:20:35)

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjttMs931Ws>



2012 Chief Executive Candidates Forum (Henry Tang Speech)



Antecedent of Ellipsis (with politeness strategies)

07: 一般 一 個 人 從政 一 段 時間
jat1bun1 jat1 go3 jan4 cung4zing3 jat1 dyun6 si4gaan3
 generally one CL person engage.in.politics one CL time

Antecedent

‘Generally, when a person has engaged in politics for a certain period,’

08: 通常 係 會 應該 凝聚 倒
tung1soeng4 hai6 wui5 jing1goi1 jing4zeoi6 dou2
 usually COP FUT should converge PRT

09: 某 一 啲 群組 嘅 支持 嘅 (暫停...掌聲)
mau5 jat1 di1 kwan4zou2 ge3 zi1ci4 ge3
 certain one CL group ATTR support SFA

Silence

‘he should normally have obtained support from certain groups.’ (Pause ... Applause)

10: 我 係... (微笑)...(掌聲)
ngo5 hai6
 1SG COP ...

Nominal Phrase Ellipsis

‘I am ...’ (Speaker smiles and audience applauds)

Self-praising and politeness

- In the antecedent (lines 7-9), the speaker (Henry Tang) first concurs with his rival's proposal, but then proceeds to do self-praising.
- However, self-praising is a violation of the Maxim of Modesty (Leech 1983).
- As such, Henry Tang uses various linguistic devices to mitigate these face-threatening acts (FTAs).
- He uses **indefinite and impersonal referents** (e.g. *jat1 go3 jan4* 'a person', *mau5 jat1 di1 kwan4zou2* 'certain groups') and **adverbs of frequency that highlight a generic interpretation** (e.g. *jat1bun1* 'generally', *tung1soeng4* 'usually').
- This is followed by a **pause**, with **almost immediate applause** from the audience, signalling that they understood that the speaker counts himself among the eligible candidates.
- Henry Tang tries to follow up with an explicit claim about himself, but aborts doing so, and instead smiles, apparently indicating his recognition that sometimes things are better left unsaid. This brings great applause from the audience. Henry Tang has succeeded with his use of ellipsis and silence.

Silence and Ellipsis

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Nominal Phrase Ellipsis

‘I am ...’ (Speaker smiles and audience applauds)

Discourse integration in ellipsis

■ Main Assertion Hypothesis:

- Other things being equal, listeners usually retrieve the elided part from an antecedent of a **preceding sentence** better than **within a single sentence** (Clifton & Frazier 2010).
- a. *John said Fred **went to Europe** and Mary did too.*
- b. *John **said Fred went to Europe**. Mary did too.*
- **Ellipsis (b) has higher acceptability.** Listeners prefer to integrate newly asserted material (e.g. *Mary did too*) with material that appeared earlier in the discourse as part of a main assertion (e.g. ***said Fred went to Europe***), rather than as embedded and presupposed material (e.g. ***went to Europe***).

Pragmatic vs Syntactic Ellipsis

- Main Assertion Hypothesis:

- a. John said Fred **went to Europe** and Mary did too.
- b. John **said Fred** *went to Europe*. Mary did too.

- When a **sentence boundary intervenes** as in Ellipsis (b), the **discourse representation** is more dominant than the **syntactic representation**.

- Discourse representation involves broad scope; syntactic representation in this case involves immediate adjacency.

- Crucially, after a sentence has been parsed, the syntactic representation becomes less salient, and the discourse representation becomes relatively more salient.

(Clifton & Frazier 2010)

The role of silence in discourse integration involving ellipsis

- Consistent with the Main Assertion Hypothesis, research shows that **silence** can be used to allow the hearer(s) **more time to complete the inferences** intended by the speaker.
- **Silence** can be introduced into the discourse as **prolonged sentence boundaries to separate an antecedent from an upcoming elliptical construction.**
- At the end of line 9, Henry Tang uses **silence** to reinforce the hearers' focus of attention on the substance of his criticism in lines 7 to 9. In this way, he helps them to **retrieve the speaker's implication from the preceding sentence.**

Discourse linking effect of ellipsis

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‘Generally, when a person has engaged in politics for a certain period,’

Antecedent

08: 通常 係 會 應該 凝聚 倒
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mau5 jat1 di1 kwan4zou2 ge3 zi1ci4 ge3
 certain One CL group ATTR support SFA

‘He should have obtained support from certain groups.’ (Pause ... Applause)

Silence

10: 我 係... (微笑)...(掌聲)
ngo5 hai6
 1SG COP ...

‘I am ...’ (Speaker smiles and audience applauds)

Discourse Linking
determiner

Discourse integration in Ellipsis

- Antecedent (self-praising)
- **(Silence)**
- **D-link determiner (*I am*) . . . (Empty Noun Phrase)**

- Research on the use of elliptical constructions further shows **Discourse linking (D-link) determiners** can be used to connect the empty Noun Phrase (NP) to discourse old information, specifically, to the discourse topic (Lopez, 2000).
 - The determiner is usually in the following forms:
 1. A demonstrative (e.g. *This is ...; I am ...*)
 2. A quantifier (e.g. *Most are ...*)
 3. A genitive (e.g. *Sam's are ...*)

 - Thus, when Henry Tang follows up the silent pause in line 9 with the incomplete response '*I am ...*' with the nominal predicate elided in line 10, **the D-link determiner [pronoun (我) + copula (係)] establishes a link between the empty NP with the antecedent** and helps to remind the audience of his criticism of his rival, CY Leung.

Suspended Clause as Ellipsis

- 11: 如果 你 話 對於 一 個 ← If-conditional clause
jyu4gwo2 nei5 waa6 deoi3jyu1 jat1 go3
 if 2SG say with.respect.to one CL
- 12: (差) 從事 公職
(caa1) cung4si6 gung1zik1
 (nearly) engage.in public.service
- 13: 三十 年 有多 嘅 嘅 人 嘍 講
saam1sap6 nin4 Jau5do1 ge3 ge3 jan4 lai44 gong2
 thirty year more.than ATTR ATTR person PRT say
- 14: 未 能 凝聚 倒 任何 一 啲 群組
mei6 nang4 jing4zeoi6 dou2 jam6ho4 jat1 di1 kwan4zou2
 NEG able converge RSP any one CL group
- 15: 或者 架構 上 嘅 支持 呢... (微笑) ... (掌聲)
waak6ze2 gaa3gau3 soeng6 ge3 zi1ci4 ne1 ← Suspended Conditional with discourse particle
 or institution above ATTR support PRT

'If you say that someone has been engaged in public office for more than thirty years and he cannot obtain any support from functional groups or institutions, ...'

'Suspended clauses' as ellipsis

- A '**suspended clause**' is a **syntactically incomplete but pragmatically independent clause** formed by an *if*-clause and followed by the ellipsis of the main clause.
 - ***If*-clause + elided main clause**
- Research on 'suspended clauses' shows that these incomplete conditionals are often used as a politeness strategy. Their use can constitute an FTA (face-threatening act) but with off-record politeness effects, and are often used when dispraising others (Vallauri 2011).
- In this excerpt (lines 11-15), Henry Tang uses the *if*-conditional clause with the **impersonal pronoun** (***If a person ... cannot ...***) and in this way criticizes his rival (CY Leung) by means of innuendo as he leaves the main clause elided and turns the whole conditional into a suspended structure.

‘Suspended clauses’ as ellipsis

- Crucially, the incomplete structure still works because the unexpressed meaning is **easily recovered from the context**.
- Note that the suspended conditional retains a high ‘suspended’ tone 1. Such illocution can act as a directive to help the hearers to dwell on the elided main clause, and reconstruct its meaning by linking it to what has just been said (Vallauri 2004; Laury 2009).
- Note also that a suspended clause includes an elliptical main clause construction, and ellipsis is a form of silence. And silence helps the hearer focus on the discourse representation more than the syntactic one. **The use of ellipsis thus reinforces the innuendo of the preceding *if*-clause, while at the same time avoid making explicit the speaker’s face-threatening act aimed at the opponent.**
- In line 15, we see Henry Tang successfully suspending the independent *if*-conditional clause with the high tone particle **ne1 (呢)** to lead the hearers to recover the elided criticism against CY Leung from the context.

Conclusion

- In eastern cultures, silence is often associated with several positive impressions in communication (Alagözlü & Sahin 2011).
- Being modest is also highly valued and particularly appreciated in Chinese culture (Gao & Ting-Toomey 1998).
- In political discourse, doing self-praising and denigrating the rival are often used to persuade the electorate to support one's policy.
- Such acts either commit the social transgression of boasting or damaging the positive face of others (Leech 1983). So politicians need to adopt some linguistic strategies to mitigate these face-threatening acts (FTAs).
- In Hong Kong, politicians need to satisfy diverse and conflicting interests and it is important for them not to narrow their target supporters during elections. **Silence** and **ellipsis** are effective devices to maintain a broad base of support, as they are covert forms of FTA-mitigators in terms of politeness strategy.

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