

Use of the first person pronoun *ngo⁵dei⁶* and evasion in political discourse in Hong Kong

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Outline of the presentation

- Adversarial questioning and evasion in political discourse
- Reasons for evading aggressive questions
- Types of evasion strategies
- Evasion in the Hong Kong political context
- The use of inclusive and exclusive first person plural pronoun *ngo⁵ dei⁶* ‘we’ in political discourse
- Data analysis
- Conclusion

Adversarial Questioning and Evasion in Political Discourse

- There has been a growing trend in adversarial journalism since the 1950s (Harris 1991; Greatbatch 1988; Clayman & Heritage 2002).
- Journalists often aim to gain professional status by:
 - Asking aggressive questions;
 - Asking hostile follow-up questions to pin down evasive politicians.
- Journalists also produce controversial discourse to discredit or embarrass politicians.
- In periods of political tension or scandals, politicians will face harsh criticism from the media and their rivals (Bitiniene 2007).
- On the other hand, politicians often treat political interviews or debates as a means to disseminate their statements and policies. They often ignore aggressive questions and simply repeat their prepared statements regardless of whether these statements are relevant to the topic or not (Day 1991).

Reasons for evading aggressive questions

- Answering questions is a basic moral obligation for politicians (Raymond 1998).
- However, politicians are increasingly being posed questions to which all possible replies may have potentially negative consequences, yet a reply is still expected (Bull 2008).
- The negative consequences of a direct reply either threaten the politicians' public image or circumscribe their future freedom of action.
- On the other hand, if the politicians are perceived to have been evasive in responding to aggressive questioning, they often face various pressures from journalists and the audience in subsequent media coverage.
- Politicians thus need to adopt various “**damage controls**” to reap the benefits of not answering while at the same time minimizing the costs associated with this risky action (Clayman 2001).

Types of Evasion Strategies

1. Implication

- A reply in which the speaker makes his/her views clear but without explicitly stating them (Bull 1994:127).
 - For example, when the Chief Executive candidate (CY Leung) was asked if he would abolish the indirect election model involving functional constituencies in the next Legislative Council election in 2020, **he replied he would try his best to fight for universal suffrage in Hong Kong**, *implying he would do so but not fully committing himself to such an outcome.*
- From this answer, the audience does not know whether the candidate would abolish the functional constituency or not after he gets elected.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QA52YmlvXLQ>

[\(1:16:43 – 1:17:59\)](#)

Types of Evasion Strategies

2. Partial reply

- The speaker only answers part of the question.
 - For example, in one of the election debates, the incumbent Chief Executive (Donald Tsang) was asked by a news reporter *why he did not carry out universal suffrage* and *why the general public was not allowed to attend the debate*.
- The candidate only answered the second question by saying that it was the prerogative of the organizers of the debate to select the audience and he respected their arrangement. He went on to say he would attend other debates which would be open to the general public.
- Note, however, that the candidate did not attempt to answer why he did not carry out universal suffrage during his term in office.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Hv_bZxiiwE

[\(0:07 – 1:24\)](#)

Types of Evasion Strategies

3. Non-reply

- The speaker fails to provide any of the information requested in the question (Clayman 2001).
 - In another election debate, one of the candidates (Henry Tang) was asked how he would solve various social problems such as the housing shortage and the inadequate medical services.
- However, in his reply, *the candidate started talking about his previous accomplishments in the civil service*. There was no mention of any solid measures to solve the social problems in Hong Kong.
- In this way, he side-stepped the ‘how’ question.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QA52YmlvXLQ>

[\(23:01 - 24:16\)](#)

Types of Evasion Strategies

4. Challenge

- The speaker disputes the presupposition of the question (Harris 1991).
 - For example, in an election forum, the Chief Executive candidate (CY Leung) was asked if he would appoint a particular person to be a government official if he was elected.
- The candidate countered by asking where such information was obtained, and subsequently followed through with an implicit reply, which the questioner exasperatedly takes to be a non-reply.

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fQ338yIv8U>
- [\(19:14 to 19:21\)](#)

Can be expressed while smiling,
which makes the challenge
appear less like one.

Evasion in the Hong Kong political context

1. One country two systems

- Hong Kong is a special administrative region which is allowed to elect its own Chief Executive through an Election Committee.

2. Recent Democratization

- In each of the first three Chief Executive elections, there was usually a candidate strongly favoured by the Beijing Central Government.
- However, in the recent fourth election (September 2012), there was fierce competition between candidates.
- A wide spectrum of political forces has emerged in recent years. Pro-establishment, liberal, democrat and radical groups, as well as trade unions, fight for their own interests and criticize their rival candidates aggressively both during and after the election.

3. Rumour and Scandals

- In this competitive political environment, politicians not only need to promote their policy manifestos, they often also need to discredit damaging rumours about themselves and their parties.

Evasion in the Hong Kong political context (cont'd)

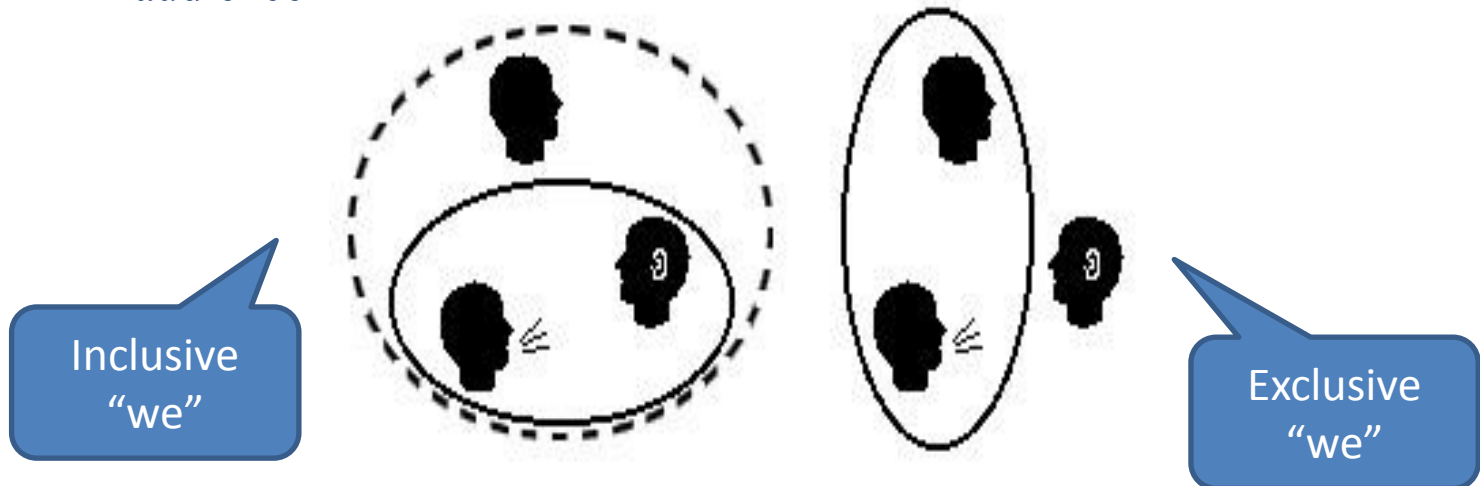
- **Damage control**

- Though the Chief Executive does not belong to any political party and has no formal partisan support in the Legislative Council, the pro-establishment camp (the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong) usually sides with the Beijing Central Government to support the elected Chief Executive.
- Nevertheless, damage control is still needed to maintain the face of the Chief Executive or the Beijing Government in embarrassing situations. **Evasion is one of the face management strategies often used to deal with this problem.**
- Often, politicians will use certain pronouns to distance themselves from responsibility (Wilson 1990, Lakoff 1990) while at the same time creating solidarity with the audience on controversial issues (Chilton & Schaffner 1997, Flowerdew 1997).
- Inclusive and exclusive 'we' are frequently used in these situations.

First person plural pronoun *ngo⁵dei⁶*

• Clusivity

- It is a distinction between inclusive and exclusive first-person pronouns, often called inclusive "we" and exclusive "we".
- Inclusive "we" includes the addressee
 - “you and I” / “speaker and audience”
- Exclusive "we" excludes the addressee
 - “I and some others, but not you” / “speaker and some others, but not the audience”



First person plural pronoun *ngo⁵dei⁶*

- Inclusive “we” or “our”
 - Construct an ‘intimate’ tone, forming a bond between speaker and listener (Wales 1996).
 - Construct audience involvement by indicating that the argument is being built up by a collaborative speaker/listener effort (Quirk et al. 1985).
 - Transmit the message that ‘You and I think alike’ and assume that their message is accepted by the audience. The addresser can then speak on the audience’s behalf (Wales 1980).
 - In political discourse, ‘we’ is used to manipulate group membership and the social values of ‘ingroupness’ (Duszak 2002). This indexical meaning of ‘we’ draws and reinforces ideological and national affiliations.

First person plural pronoun *ngo⁵dei⁶*

- Exclusive “we” or “our”
 - A referentially expansive activity, usually indexing the speaker as a member of a group or aligned with an institutional point of view, showing solidarity with a political position (Goffman 1959, 1981).
 - Often used to report on activities accomplished by speakers and people close to them (e.g. partners, group members, and political party) (Scheibman 2007).
 - By using exclusive “we”, a politician can promote his/her positive face when reporting their achievement with group efforts (i.e. the political party they belong to) in political discourse, especially during election or in times of harsh criticism from media and rivals (López 2006).

Data

- **Televised debates**
 - Two Chief Executive election debates in March 2012 are selected for analysis



Data

- **Televised debates**
 - Two Chief Executive election debates in March 2012 selected for analysis
 - A wide range of adversarial questions were raised and candidates responded with different damage control strategies.
 - Only two potential candidates Henry Tang and CY Leung are selected for analysis because:
 - both had an equal chance to be elected as Chief Executive;
 - both were involved in political scandals respectively.
 - 106 questions were asked.
 - 73 evasive responses
 - 95 first person plural pronouns *ngo⁵dei⁶* ('we' / 'our') were found .
 - Inclusive : 61 instances
 - Exclusive: 34 instances

Data

Evasion strategies		Types of first person plural pronoun	
Types	Frequency	Frequency	
		Inclusive	Exclusive
Implication	56	86	56
			30
Non-reply	14	5	4
			1
Partial reply	1	3	0
			3
Challenge	2	1	0
			1

Analysis (1)

- **Exclusive “we” in Challenge**

- Chief Executive Election Debate on 16 March 2012 (Part I)

- Question to CY Leung from Henry Tang (07:28 – 07:46).
- Henry Tang claimed that CY Leung reduced his promise of public housing supply in his election manifesto after nomination.
- It was originally planned to supply 35,000 units in the first year of his new governance but it was later revised to be achieved as soon as possible in the initial years.
- Henry Tang asked CY Leung if he had dishonoured his promise of public housing supply after nomination because he avoided to damage the interest of the property developers.

Analysis (1)

- **Exclusive “we” in Challenge**

- Challenge from CY Leung (07:47 – 08:32)

你 大 概 係 呢 段 時 間 無 乜 睇 報 紙 ...
nei⁵ daai⁶ koi³ hai⁶ lei¹ dyun⁶ si⁴ gaan¹ mou⁵ mat¹ tai² bou³ zi²

現 在 特 區 政 府 有 嘅 地 ...
jin⁶ zoi⁶ dak⁶ keoi¹ zing³ fu² jau⁵ ge³ dei⁶

現 在 係 無 可 能 喺 短 期 裡 面
jin⁶ zoi⁶ hai⁶ mou⁵ ho² nang⁴ hai² dyun² kei⁴ lei⁵ min⁶

增 加 土 地 供 應 黎 到 增 加 呢 個 公 屋 數 量
zang¹ gaa¹ tou² dei⁶ gung¹ jing¹ lai⁴ dou³ zang¹ gaa¹ lei¹ go³ gung¹ uk¹ sou³ loeng⁴

我 嘅 講 法 喺 記 者 會 度 講 得 好 清 楚 ...
ngo⁵ ge³ gong² faat³ hai² gei³ ze² wui² dou⁶ gong² dak¹ hou² cing¹ co²

就 係 喺 七 萬 五 千 個 單 位 裡 面
zau⁶ hai⁶ hai² cat¹ maan⁶ ng⁵ cin¹ go³ daan¹ wai² lei⁵ min²

擺 三 萬 五 千 個 出 黎 喺 早 年 裡 面 完 成
lo² saam¹ maan⁶ ng⁵ cin¹ go³ ceot¹ lai⁴ hai² zou² nin² lei⁵ min⁶ jyun⁴ sing⁴

喺 中 期 呢 我 地 呢
hai² zung¹ kei⁴ lei¹ ngo⁵ dei⁶ lei¹

再 覓 新 地 黎 興 建 更 多 嘅 公 屋 單 位 ...
zoi³ mik⁶ san¹ dei² lai⁴ hing¹ gin³ gang³ do¹ ge³ gung¹ nguk¹ daan¹ wai²

請 唐 英 年 先 生 返 去 翻 查 報 紙
cing² tong⁴ jing¹ nin² sin¹ saang¹ faan¹ heoi³ faan¹ caa⁴ bou³ zi²

Analysis (1)

- **Exclusive “we” in Challenge**

“I think you haven’t read newspaper recently... The land supply of the current government ... It is impossible to increase the land supply to build such quantity of public housing units in a short time. I have clearly stated in the press conference ... that 35,000 public housing units will be finished initially from a total of 75,000 units. With an interim review, *we* will source more new land for public housing construction... Mr. Tang, please check the relevant news report accordingly.”

- In his reply, CY Leung challenged the validity of Henry Tang’s criticism.
- CY Leung reiterated his detailed plan of public housing supply again and did not bother to clarify if he tried to protect the interest of the property developers.
- On one hand, CY Leung used exclusive “we” to relieve himself and his team of their culpability when talking about the insufficient land supply in the current government, which made it impossible for him to keep his original promise of building 35,000 public housing units within one year.
- On the other hand, he used exclusive “we” to show his future plan to make up the shortfall in promising to build 35,000 public housing units at the earliest possible time.
- It is a strategy to improve his and his team’s image as a responsible and hard working political group that would work for the benefit of the society.

Analysis (2)

- **Exclusive “we” / “our” in Partial Reply**
 - Chief Executive Candidates Forum on 19 March 2012 (Part IV)
 - Question to CY Leung from Albert Ho, candidate from Democratic Party (07:24 – 08:01).
 - Before the nomination, CY Leung proposed a comprehensive welfare policy and gained the support from Social Welfare constituency.
 - After the nomination, CY Leung labeled the other candidates, Albert Ho and Henry Tang, as advocates of welfarism in a meeting with the business sector.
 - Albert Ho asked CY Leung to explain why he changed his social welfare policy and why he labeled his rivals as welfarists.

Analysis (2)

- **Exclusive “we” / “our” in Partial Reply**

- Partial reply from CY Leung (08:15 – 08:35)

我 嘅 政 綱 咨 詢 稿 出 台 之 後
ngo⁵ ge³ zing³ gong¹ zi¹ seon¹ gou² ceot¹ toi⁴ zi¹ hau⁶

至 到 定 稿 嘅 段 期 間
zi³ dou³ ding⁶ gou² go² dyun⁶ kei⁴ gaan¹

我 收 倒 五 六 百 封 市 民 嘅 意 見
ngo⁵ sau¹ dou² ng⁵ luk⁶ baak³ fung¹ si⁵ man⁴ ge³ ji³ gin³

我 地 根 據 市 民 嘅 意 見
ngo⁵ dei⁶ gan¹ geoi³ si⁵ man⁴ ge³ ji³ gin³

黎 制 定 我 地 最 後 嘅 政 綱 定 稿 ...
lai⁴ zai³ ding⁶ ngo⁵ dei⁶ zeoi³ hau⁶ ge³ zing³ gong¹ ding⁶ gou² ...

我 地 係 以 市 民 嘅 意 見 為 依 歸
ngo⁵ dei⁶ hai⁶ ji⁵ si⁵ man⁴ ge³ ji³ gin³ wai⁴ ji¹ gwai¹

Analysis (2)

- **Exclusive “we” / “our” in Partial Reply**

“During the consultation period, I received around 500 – 600 letters from the public. *We* finalized *our* welfare policy in our election manifesto according to the public opinion... *We* based on the opinion from the general public.”

- In his partial reply, CY Leung only explained why he changed the welfare policy in his manifesto but did not answer why he labeled Henry and Albert as welfarists.
- Though CY Leung evaded to answer the second question, he defended his policy change with the collective work that had been done by his team after receiving 500-600 letters from the public.
- He intentionally used *ngo5 dei2* “we” to denote he had *a reliable team* to review his policy according to the public opinion rather than *he himself alone* changing the policy because of the pressure from the business sector.
- It is a strategy to maintain his positive face in an evasive reply. It is also an expression that he has a capable team to work for the new government if he is elected.

Analysis (3)

- **Inclusive “we” in Non-reply**
 - Chief Executive Election Debate on 16 March 2012 (Part III)



Analysis (3)

- **Inclusive “we” in Non-reply**

- Chief Executive Election Debate on 16 March 2012 (Part III)

- Question to Henry Tang from CY Leung (22:14 – 22:45).
- Henry Tang had blamed the poor government performance index for his low rating in the pre-election poll.
- However, Henry Tang also claimed that he had 9 years of government service experience with achievements.
- CY Leung asked why Henry Tang had such contradictory statements.

Analysis (3)

- **Inclusive “we” in Non-reply**

- Non-reply from Henry Tang (22:47 – 23:12)

梁 振 英 先 生
loeng⁴ zan³ jing¹ sin¹ saang¹

你 都 知 道 言 論 自 由
nei⁵ dou¹ zi¹ dou³ jin⁴ leon⁴ zi⁶ jau⁴

係 我 地 香 港 嘅 核 心 價 值
hai⁶ ngo⁵ dei⁶ hoeng¹ gong² ge³ hat⁶ sam¹ gaa³ zik⁶

你 係 不 斷 咁 樣 係 呢 緊 市 民 呀 你 知 唔 知
nei⁵ hai⁶ bat¹ dyun³ gam² joeng² hai⁶ aak¹ gan² si⁵ man⁴ aa¹ nei⁵ zi¹ m⁴ zi¹

喺 商 台 續 牌 嘅 時 候
hai² soeng¹ toi⁴ zuk⁶ paai² ge³ si⁴ hau⁶

你 曾 經 講 過
nei⁵ cang⁴ ging¹ gong² gwo³

就 係 你 ...
zau⁶ hai⁶ nei⁵

Analysis (3)

- **Inclusive “we” / “our” in Non-reply**

“Mr. Leung Chun-ying, you should know that freedom of speech is the core value of *our* Hong Kong society. Do you know that you keep deceiving Hong Kong people? When Commercial Radio applied for renewal of broadcast license, you had said that ...”

- Henry Tang did not explain his contradictory statements at all but instead he directly criticised CY Leung’s credibility in relation to a rumour that CY Leung had threatened not to renew the broadcasting license for the highly popular Commercial Radio if its phone-in programme kept on criticising the government. CY Leung did not admit he had ever made such an unscrupulous comment on freedom of speech.
- In this non-reply as well as counter-attack, Henry Tang tried to align himself with the general moral value (freedom of speech) to evade an embarrassing question.

Analysis (4)

- **Inclusive “we” in Implication**

- Chief Executive Candidates Forum on 19 March 2012 (Part IV)

- Question to all candidates from the audience (01:53 – 02:05).
- How to balance the profit of the capitalists and the basic benefits of the working class.
- How to handle the social contradictions caused by the polarization of wealth in Hong Kong.

Analysis (4)

- **Inclusive “we” in Implication**

- Implication from CY Leung (03:03 – 03:33)

至於社會貧富矛盾嘅問題...

zi³ jyu¹ se⁵ wui² pan⁴ fu³ maau⁴ teon⁵ ge³ man⁶ tai⁴

我地要注意呢個問題...

ngo⁵ dei⁶ jiu³ zyu³ ji³ lei¹ go³ man⁶ tai⁴

如果工商界要...

jyu⁴ gwo² gung¹ soeng¹ gaai³ jiu³...

有搵錢嘅機會嘅話

jau⁵ wan² cin² ge³ gei¹ wui² ge³ waa²

一定要社會穩定...

jat¹ ding⁶ jiu³ se⁵ wui² wan² ding⁶

我亦都提出就話經濟發展嘅成果

ngo⁵ jik⁶ dou¹ tai⁴ ceot¹ zau⁶ waa² ging¹ zai³ faat³ zin² ge³ sing⁴ gwo²

我地要合理分配等等...

ngo⁵ dei⁶ jiu³ hap⁶ lei⁵ fan¹ pui³ dang² dang²

Analysis (4)

- **Inclusive “we” in Implication**

“Regarding the issue of the wealth gap and social contradictions ... *We* have to deal with it ... The businessmen can only have profit when there is a stable society. I have also proposed that *we* need to redistribute wealth more reasonably ...”

- In this implication, CY Leung just provided a broad principle to handle this problem without going into a detailed solution such as a progressive tax rate or social security measure. It seemed that he will just handle it but did not commit himself to solve the problem with determination.
- A possible reason could be that he had to balance the interests of businessmen and the grassroots. A laissez-faire policy would protect the businessmen but the grassroots would be exploited. Vigorous welfarism would hurt business, although the grassroots would be protected.
- So in the use of the “we” pronoun, CY Leung tried not to align himself with either side. Rather, he used “we” in generic sense and refer to the whole society as a whole to deal with this problem collectively.
- Also, CY Leung used the “we” pronoun in an ambiguous way, which denotes either his political team or the society as a whole should deal with this issue appropriately, in the sense that he aligns himself with the society and shares the same belief with the general public.

Conclusion

- In adversarial election debates, politicians have to deploy different strategies to manage damage control. Evasion is one of the common strategies to achieve this purpose.
- But evasion is not without risk or cost to the politicians. It tends to make the politicians look irresponsible. To close the social distance created by evasion, politicians often adopt some involvement strategies to maintain their positive self-image.
- Manipulation of the first person plural pronoun is commonly used for this purpose:
 - **Inclusive “we”**
 - It is used mainly for audience alignment to enhance solidarity.
 - It is also used when the politician is trying not to commit to a certain issue, or when he/she is dealing with issues that involve conflicting interests between different sectors, such as businesses and the working class.
 - **Exclusive “we”**
 - It is used mainly for establishing group membership.
 - It is also used for reporting the activities or future plans that the politician and his team have accomplished or proposed during election period.

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