

Evasion in Malaysian Parliamentary Question Time

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ABSTRACT

This study explores evasion employed by Malaysian ministers and deputy ministers during Question Time using Clayman's Framework of Evasion (2001, 2012). While most evasion studies have focused on political interviews, particularly within western settings, this study examines evasion during Question Time in the Malaysian parliament. The study is content-analytic and uses parliamentary Hansards. Ministers and deputy ministers performed various overt and covert strategies of resistance by refusing to commit to an answer, attacking the questioners, justifying the agenda shifts to counter negative presuppositions and provide rationales, minimizing the divergence to downgrade the severity of a situation, and operating on the question by asserting agreements and talking about the current policy. Further, the questioners did not pursue overtly employed instances of evasion, indicating the influence of context on evasion. Finally, other strategies of evasion found in this study that were not found in Clayman (2001, 2012), such as jokes, could be further explored in future studies.

Keywords: Agenda shifts, content analysis, evasion, Malaysian parliamentary discourse, question time

INTRODUCTION

Answering questions is considered a moral obligation (Clayman, 2001). However,

past studies have shown that politicians employ specific kinds of resistance in answering questions, particularly when they feel threatened. This resistance is called 'evasion' or 'equivocation' (Clayman, 2001, 2012; Dillon, 1990; Hamilton & Mineo, 1998; Rasiah, 2007).

Several gaps were identified in the literature on evasion. First, scholarly research on evasion tends to focus on interviews (Bull, 1994, 2008; Clayman, 2001, 2012; Feldman, 2020; Feldman

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et al., 2016) rather than on parliamentary discourse, except for a few, such as Rasiah (2007). Parliamentary questions are asked and responded to by Members of Parliament (henceforth MPs), unlike interviews where questioners are usually non-politicians. Even though questions in parliament from the government MPs may be collegial, question-and-answer exchanges between the government and opposition MPs may sometimes be adversarial and accusatorial (Ilie, 2015). The purpose of adversarial questions can be multifaceted, including “to hold the government to account by criticizing government policies, exposing abuses, and seeking redress” (Ilie, 2015, p. 9).

Second, evasion is commonly examined in Western political discourse (e.g., Bull & Mayer, 1993; Bull & Strawson, 2020; Simon-Vandenberg, 2008). For this reason, there is a paucity of comparable literature on evasion in Asian political discourse. Finally, studies of evasion in Question Time (henceforth QT) allow for the analysis of evasive responses in a situation where politicians are given ample time to address the issue as questions are submitted before parliament is in session. Based on the identified void in the literature, the present paper explores evasion and agenda shifts based on Clayman (2001, 2012) to offer insights into how these linguistic strategies transpired in Malaysian parliamentary discourse, specifically during QT.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term *evasion*, sometimes called *equivocation*, is extensively discussed in

the literature (Bavelas et al., 1988; Dillon, 1990; Goss & Williams, 1973; Hamilton & Mineo, 1998). It is defined as “deliberate vagueness” (Goss & Williams, 1973, p. 162), “intentional use of imprecise language” (Hamilton & Mineo, 1998, p. 3), and a “routine strategy for responding to a question without answering it” (Dillon, 1990, p. 154). Regardless of the definition, evasion tends to be employed when replies are expected, but all the probable replies pose undesirable consequences to the speaker (Alfahad, 2016). As such, they may employ obscure statements or subject switches (Bavelas et al., 1988).

Evasion is especially prevalent in political communication due to the nature of the questions themselves (Gnisci & Bonaiuto, 2003). Prior studies have examined how questions influence the evasiveness of a response. Questions are regarded as assertions when negative interrogatives are employed, threatening the political interviewees and leading to a confrontational setting (Carranza, 2016; Heritage, 2002; Kantara, 2012; Piirainen-Marsh, 2005). Similarly, when communications are framed through the assumptions of guilt and microaggression, police officials treat denials or answers to questions as a form of resistance (Guditus, 2021), whereas face-threatening and adversarial questions are commonly met with evasive responses (Bull & Fetzer, 2010; Feldman & Kinoshita, 2017; Ilie, 2021).

Evasion was also found to be responsive to the structural form of a question. Open-ended questions have been identified to

provide less evasive responses (Alfahad, 2016). Politicians also tend to provide more direct responses when a moderator asks questions during a town hall session for a political campaign rather than the public, as questions from the public tend to be challenging (Zulli & McKasy, 2020). In terms of topics, it appears that issues are likely to be evaded when they are “sensitive and conflict-ridden matters to both citizens as well as to decision-makers, politicians and government officials” (Feldman et al., 2016, p. 60).

Regardless of how questions are framed, context influences the production of evasive responses, be it the context of a particular setting (such as political party primaries, courtroom, and public speeches) or the medium in which the questions are being asked (e.g., TV; Chovanec, 2020; Gnisci, 2021; Zulli & McKasy, 2020). For example, a comparative analysis study discovered that politicians produce less evasive responses in the courtroom than on TV (Gnisci, 2021).

Evasive responses are common in situations where politicians need to deny racist remarks or ideologies (Chovanec, 2020; Simon-Vandenbergen, 2008) and corruption allegations (Carranza, 2016). In such situations, evasive responses are maneuvered by attacking the interviewer (Bull & Mayer, 1993), denying the accusations thrown (Simon-Vandenbergen, 2008), modifying certain negative or positive semantic connotations, claiming innocence by blaming another party and reconstructing the ‘misunderstood’ recorded narrative (Chovanec, 2020). Further, evasive

responses were employed by downgrading the allegations and challenging the interviewers’ professionalism (Carranza, 2016).

A significant problem in the previous frameworks is unclear definitions. For example, in the framework proposed by Bull and Mayer (1993), there is no clear justification for what is defined as a factually inaccurate question or a question with a false promise as an evasive strategy. Another challenge is regarding questions with incorrect presuppositions. According to Bull and Mayer (1993) and Rasiah (2007), responses to questions with incorrect presuppositions are known as ‘intermediate replies’ or ‘intermediate responses.’ However, correcting the presupposition and directly answering the question is considered a direct response, addressing the agendas of the question. In contrast, if the responder corrects the wrong presupposition without addressing the question’s agenda, the response may still be evasive.

Clayman’s Framework of Evasion (2001, 2012; Table 1) provides a more detailed and specific categorization and definition of six evasive strategies than Bull and Mayer’s (1993) in Table 2. For instance, Clayman (2001) justifying a shift involves providing justifications and explanations to steer the question’s agenda. Bull and Mayer’s ‘justifies policy’ is a subcategory of ‘makes political point’ and is limited to advocating for a political stance. However, Bull and Mayer do not precisely define ‘making a political point.’ More importantly, justifying a policy can also serve non-

Table 1
Clayman's framework of evasion (2001, 2012)

Strategy	Description
1. Overt	
1.1 Deference to the interviewer	Speaker requests permission from the questioner to shift the agenda
1.2 Refusing to answer	Speaker refuses to provide any answer and may rationalize their refusal
1.3 Minimizing the divergence	Speaker reassures that the shift in agenda is minimal
1.4 Justifying the shift	Speaker justifies agenda shifts
2. Covert	
2.1 Subversive word repeats, and anaphoric pronouns	The speaker repeats selected words and uses anaphoric pronouns to change the scope of the question
2.2 Operating on the question	The speaker rephrases the question, changing its meaning, before answering

political purposes, such as clarifying or defending against criticism. Politicians may employ overt and covert strategies to reduce the negative repercussions of evasion (Clayman, 2001).

There are 11 types of non-replies according to Bull and Mayer (1993): (i) Ignores the question, (ii) Acknowledges the question without answering it, (iii) Questions the questions, (iv) Attack the question, (v) Attack the interviewer, (vi) Declines to answer, (vii) Makes political point, (viii) Incomplete answer, (ix) Repeats answer to previous question, (x) States or implies that has already answered the question, and (xi) Apologies.

Bull and Mayer (1993) did not provide explicit definitions for each of their typology of non-replies but instead provided examples for each strategy. On the contrary, Clayman's Framework of Evasion (2001) offers a more elaborate and precise classification of evasion strategies than Bull and Mayer. However, the framework has been widely

examined in political interviews (e.g., Carranza, 2016; Hanafe, 2016) and scarcely explored in parliamentary discourse. Therefore, there is a need for evasion to be examined in parliamentary discourse, particularly during QT, as it is an opportunity for MPs to question ongoing matters within the government and its ministries (Yoong, 2011).

METHOD

The corpus of the study is drawn from four '*Penyata Rasmi Parlimen Dewan Rakyat*' (House of Representatives Parliamentary Hansards), dated from 13–16 August 2018. The data were selected to understand how the new government responds to questions in parliament, as it was the first time in Malaysia's history that the ruling party changed. The dates selected were the last meetings of the first parliamentary session after the fourteenth General Election (GE14) since more questions were asked on various topics compared to the earlier sessions,

which were mostly focused on debating motions, e.g., the appointment of the new Speaker of the Parliament. The Hansards were downloaded from the official website of the Malaysian Parliament. In total, there were 181 question and response adjacency pairs during the QT sessions, which were analyzed to explore how evasion was employed by the ministers and deputy ministers on various issues.

Content analysis, a qualitative method, was used to analyze the Hansards to form “valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18) and to analyze “the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics” (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 1). A similar content analysis method was also employed by Rasiah (2007), which studied evasion in Australia’s Parliamentary QT. The data in this study were analyzed using Clayman’s Framework of Evasion (2001, 2012), as shown in Table 1, based on the following procedures shown in Figure 1.

Data Analysis Procedures

All evasive responses were extracted from the data and examined to identify their evasion strategies according to Clayman’s Framework of Evasion (2001, 2012). An inter-rater reliability test was conducted to ensure the validity of the analyzed data, resulting in an 85% similarity. The frequency of each evasive response strategy was then tabulated. Finally, the occurrences of each evasion strategy were analyzed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, ministers and deputy ministers were observed to use four of the six evasive strategies outlined by Clayman (2001, 2012) to avoid answering questions. These four strategies include refusing to answer, justifying the shift, minimizing the divergence, and operating on the question, as discussed in the following sections.

Refusing to Answer

In certain instances of evasive responses, ministers and deputy ministers outright

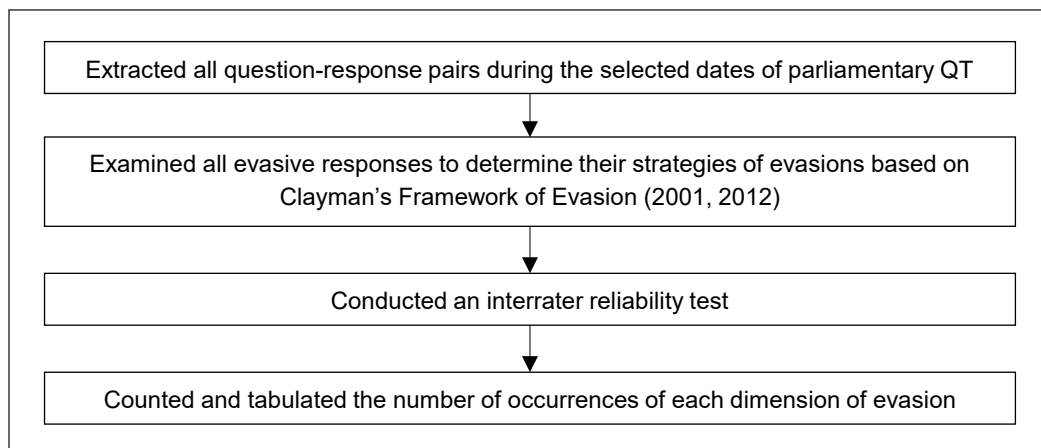


Figure 1. Procedures for analyzing strategies of evasion during QT

refused to answer the questions. This study showed instances of refusal to answer by not providing commitment responses to questions and dismissing questions as jokes. Further, they were also found to attack the questioners without questioning the appropriateness of the questions, as shown in Examples 1, 2, and 3.

Example 1:

MP of Ketereh: *...Yang Berhormat Timbalan Menteri dalam menghuraikan dasar tadi menggunakan istilah 'istiqamah'. Boleh Yang Berhormat Timbalan Menteri huraikan apa makna istiqamah dalam konteks jawapan?*

...The Honorable Deputy Minister, while describing the policy earlier, had used the term 'istiqamah'. Can the Honorable Deputy Minister explain the meaning of 'istiqamah' in the context of the answer?

Deputy Minister of Education: *Saya rasa itu soalan tidak perlu dijawablah. Terima kasih.*

I think the question does not need to be answered. Thank you. .

(Penyata Rasmi Parlimen Dewan Rakyat, 2018a, p. 14)

According to Clayman (2001), it is very uncommon for an IE (interviewee) to reject a question outright without explaining, as it may be perceived as a hostile demeanor, as

seen in Example 1. However, the rejection might be given due to the context of the question asked. As shown in Example 1, the MP of Ketereh began the question by referring to the Deputy Minister of Education's (DME) previous response. The modal verb "boleh" (can), the verb "huraikan" (explain), the wh-question word "apa" (what), and, indeed, the entire interrogative sentence was used to seek clarification. The DME evaded the question by explicitly refusing to answer, "I think the question does not need to be answered." While speakers' communicative intentions cannot be determined explicitly, they are understood through linguistic and social contexts (Fetzer, 2006).

According to Uni (2015), the arrival of Islam in the 15th century introduced Arabic loanwords into the Malay language, which were subsequently adapted and adopted in daily conversations. As evident in Example 1, since the term "istiqamah" (steadfast) is an Arabic term and is commonly understood and used by Malay speakers, it is possible that the MP of Ketereh, who is a Malay himself meant to mock the DME, whom he assumed did not understand the meaning of the word as she is Chinese or a demand for a valid response from her. His choice not to pursue the question supports the interpretation of mockery. The outright refusal implies an implicit attack on the legitimacy of the question and the judgment of the questioner (Clayman, 2001).

Since the question is considered unworthy, justifications are deemed unnecessary (Clayman, 2001). In Example 1, the respondent's deliberate choice

to refuse resulted from the perceived mockery embedded in the question asked. Her dismissal is a form of invalidation, indicating that she understood his intention. She added the particle “*lah*” at the end of the word “*dijawablah*” (answered) to soften “whatever conventions of reserve and politeness are being observed, and to allow a brief lapse into direct “me-to-you” intimacy” (Goddard, 1994, p. 160).

MPs also refused to commit to an answer as the implication of responding could threaten their political coalition’s face.

Example 2:

MP *Yang Berhormat Jelutong*
 Ketereh: *tanya dalam bentuk*
 pantun, saya soalan
 tambahan pun hendak
 bagi pantun jugalah ini;
 Peruntukan RM2 bilion
 masa Barisan;
 Yang Berhormat Jelutong
 bertuah dapat nikmat;
 Tuduhan tembereng Yang
 Berhormat Menteri sudah
 nafikan;
 Setujukah kalau saya kata
 memang YB Jelutong
 sentiasa berniat jahat?
 The Honorable Member for Jelutong asked a question in the form of a poem, I want to use a poem too;
 under *Barisan*, there is RM2 billion allocation; it was deemed as good fortune by the Honorable

Member for Jelutong;
 The Honorable Minister has denied the allegations; Do you agree if I say that the Honorable Member for Jelutong always has malicious intentions?

Deputy *Terima Kasih Yang*
 Minister *Berhormat Ketereh ya.*
 of Water, *Saya rasa soalan nombor*
 Land and *satu itu soalan kelakar*
 Natural *sajalah ya, tidak payah*
 Resources: *jawablah ya.*

Thank you, Honorable Member for Ketereh. I think the first question is just a joke, so yeah, we don’t need to answer that.

(*Penyata Rasmi Parlimen Dewan Rakyat*, 2018c, pp. 13-14).

In Example 2, the opposition MP of Ketereh alleged that the MP of *Jelutong*, who was from the same party as the Deputy Minister of Water, Land and Natural Resources (DMWLN), enjoyed benefits given by the previous government. In his poem, the MP of Ketereh denied allegations made by the MP of Jelutong and implied that they were baseless. He then asked the audience and DMWLN if they agreed that the MP of Jelutong had malicious intentions. As previously discussed, negative interrogatives are a form of an assertion that can lead to a hostile setting, thus producing evasive responses (Heritage, 2002; Kantara, 2012). However, the MP of Ketereh used a straight interrogative “*Setujukah...*” (Do you agree). The proposition in the interrogative

has a negative connotation “YB Jelutong always has malicious intentions,” framed as a question.

The question prompted the DMWLN to say that the question was a joke and did not need to be answered. He also attempted to diffuse the hostile atmosphere by using the particle ‘lah’ twice, in “*sajalah*” (just) and “*dijawablah*” (answered). Agreeing with the questioner’s statement would have jeopardized the responder’s political party’s image and indirectly confirmed that they benefited from the previous government’s RM 2 billion. It would also harm the positive image of a party member and confirm their malicious intent. A slightly different version of this maneuver can be seen in Clayman (2001), where a Serbian spokesperson was asked about reports of recent prisoners of war being subjected to physical abuse. Instead of answering the query, the spokesperson asserted that the line of questioning was confrontational and improper, effectively attacking the question itself (Clayman, 2001). This strategy not only allows the individual to avoid answering but also redirects the discourse away from the content towards the manner of the question (Clayman, 2001).

Nevertheless, unlike Clayman’s (2001) example, instead of asserting that the question was confrontational or improper, the DMWLN claimed it was a ‘joke,’ which had ‘non-serious intent’ and included “pre-empting or blocking the taking of offense to the tease, acknowledging a possible impropriety, sanctioning a recipient for taking things too seriously and disputing

the appositeness of the claim to non-serious intent itself” (Haugh, 2016, p. 31).

In another example of refusing to answer, the Prime Minister (PM) was asked if it were true that the Royal Malaysian Police would no longer be using Malay in their daily briefings, as reported by a newspaper.

Example 3:

MP of Kubang Kerian: ... *Saya minta komen daripada Perdana Menteri berhubung laporan Malay Mail pada hari ini, yang mengatakan bahawa Polis Diraja Malaysia akan menggunakan penggunaan bahasa Inggeris dalam taklimat harian dan operasi pada setiap hari...*

... I would like to ask the Prime Minister in relation to comment on the Malay Mail report today, which stated that the Royal Malaysian Police will be using English in daily briefings and operations ...

Prime Minister: *Tuan Yang di-Pertua, kadang-kadang kita guna bahasa Arab supaya yang mendengar itu tidak faham dan terjemahannya kita tidak tahu betul atau tidak betul. Jadi amat penting sekali apabila kita berhubung dengan orang dalam bahasa apa pun yang penting dia faham,*

apa yang kita kata. Kalau dia kurang faham, kadang-kadang kita terpaksa guna bahasa Arab bagi orang yang pandai dalam bahasa Arab.

Mr. Speaker, sometimes we use Arabic so that the people listening do not understand and we do not know whether the translation is correct or not. So, the most important thing is, when we communicate with people in any language, they are able to understand what we're saying. If they do not understand, sometimes we have to resort to using Arabic for people who are fluent in Arabic.

(Penyata Rasmi Parlimen Dewan Rakyat, 2018b, p. 11).

The Prime Minister (PM) responded: “sometimes we use Arabic so that the people listening do not understand and....” The adverb “*kadang-kadang*” (sometimes) is a usuality device that serves as a hedge (F. Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Apart from avoiding “personal accountability for statements” (K. Hyland, 1994, p. 240), hedges can be considered “a non-straightforward answer” that “could be interpreted as resistance to giving a response” (Carranza, 2016, p. 580).

Additionally, this study showed that hedges are used as a device to exercise power over the opposition bloc, which was

also found in Jalilifar and Alavi-Nia (2012). This notion is cemented by the mention of ‘Arabic’ in the response provided. The Prime Minister’s linguistic choices and context suggest the deliberate reference to Arabic was to attack the questioner. Evidently, the questioner’s party frequently uses Arabic terms such as “*tahaluf siyasi*” to justify its political coalitions or “*ta’awun siyasi*” for their political cooperation (Wan Jan, 2020).

Further, responders may adopt a more assertive approach to avoid answering (Clayman, 2001). As previously addressed, this is done by claiming that the question is undeserving of a response, subsequently attacking the question itself. However, in Example 3, instead of attacking the question, the responder overtly attacked the questioner. Rather than addressing the future policies of the country, the focus of hedges during the communicative exchange could be to mainly attack the characters of the opposing parties who used to run the country (Jalilifar & Alavi-Nia, 2012). In Example 3, the PM chose to attack the questioner and his party over addressing the issue of the use of English in the police force’s daily briefings, thus avoiding confrontation on the issue, which is a slight variation of Clayman’s (2001) analysis. This maneuver is an extension of refusing to answer as it redirects the responsibility of answering to external variables, as Clayman (2001) stated.

Even though the question was specifically addressed to him, he used “*kita*” (we) rather than “*saya*” (I). “*Kita*”

is more inclusive, deflecting responsibility away from him (Bull & Fetzer, 2006). He further ended his response by attacking the questioner again (sometimes, we have to resort to using Arabic for people who are fluent in Arabic). The PM could have chosen another language as an example, but his choice of ‘Arabic’ emphasizes that he was indeed talking about the questioner’s party.

Another instance of attacking the questioner was observed in Example 4, shown below. Here, the strategy of attacking the questioner is analyzed. The Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture was asked whether the government was ready to take further steps to revitalize the country’s vast tourism sector by introducing tourists to certain Islamic elements after several foreign tourists danced and behaved inappropriately in front of mosques.

Example 4:

MP of Bachok: *...apakah kerajaan bersedia untuk mengambil langkah yang lebih ke hadapan bagi menyemarakkan lagi sektor pelancongan negara kita yang begitu luas itu dengan menambahkan unsur-unsur berbentuk pengenalan dakwah dan promosi kepada agama Islam yang kaya dengan nilai-nilai hidup yang tinggi serta sentiasa menyeru kepada kesejahteraan, kasih sayang dan kecintaan?...*
 ... is the government ready to revitalize our country’s

substantial tourism sector by adding elements that introduce da’wah¹ and promote Islam, which has noble values and always advocates well-being, love, and affection?...

Deputy Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture: *...Juga apabila kita sebut fasal akhlak Islam, kita juga hendak menghormati hak sebagai makhluk-makhluk Allah yang lain. Hak kita mesti menghormati hak orang asal. Seperti di Kelantan, kita tidak menghormati hak orang asal... [Tepuk]*

...Also, when we talk about the moral values in Islam, we must also respect the rights of other creatures of Allah. We must respect the rights of indigenous peoples. But in Kelantan, we do not respect their rights. . . [Applause]

(Penyata Rasmi Parlimen Dewan Rakyat, 2018d, pp. 19-20).

The Deputy Minister attacked the questioner by asserting that Kelantan, the questioner’s state, which his political party ruled, did not respect the rights of the indigenous people (...But in Kelantan, we do not respect the rights of indigenous peoples). At this point, the responder indirectly attacked the questioner. An attack on a question differs from an attack

¹ ‘Da’wah’ is an Arabic term referring to the act of inviting people to the teachings of Islam.

on the interviewers themselves (Bull & Mayer, 1993) or the questioners, as in this study. This strategy, even though hostile, was advantageous to the Deputy Minister as it highlighted the ‘hypocrisy’ of the questioner’s political party when asked about the government’s readiness to promote Islamic values to tourists.

Justifying the Shift

After shifting the agendas of questions, ministers and deputy ministers were asked to provide justifications for their actions. Justifications are commonly given by providing rationales or concerns about the issues asked (Clayman, 2001). In our data, apart from rationales, justifications for the agenda shifts were also provided to counter the negative presuppositions of the questions.

An example of this is depicted in Example 3. The departure from the action agenda of the question was further justified by the responder when he claimed that “when we communicate with people in any language, it is important that they are able to understand what we’re saying.” As per Clayman’s (2001) discussion, reasons given for shifting the interview agenda tend to avoid depicting self-interest as a motivator, which is observable in Example 3. The phrase “*jadi amat penting sekali*” (so, the most important thing) was used to signal his agenda shift and emphasize his subsequent points. The phrase was also found to be employed by Australian MPs in Rasiyah (2007) to justify their shifts, calling the audience’s attention to what is essentially his committal response to a priority. The question presupposed that

the Malaysian government disregarded the importance of the Malay language as part of national identity, as allegedly, the police force used English in their daily operations and briefings.

Examples 4 and 5 (shown below) show instances of justifying the shift by providing rationales.

Example 5:

MP of Bachok: *...Mereka ini saya dimaklumkan telah diambil tindakan oleh pihak kerajaan. Cuma ada isu mengenai denda yang terlalu rendah, beberapa ringgit sahaja didenda...*

... I was informed that the government did take action. The only issue is, the fines were too low, only a few ringgit...

Deputy Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture: *...Satu syarahan juga yang baik. Sebenarnya, kes yang berlaku di Sabah, di mana ada pelancong daripada negara asing yang menari di hadapan masjid adalah kes-kes terpencil. Tahun 2016, pelancong asing yang datang ke negara Malaysia adalah sebanyak 26 juta. Tiga orang daripada 26 juta ini ialah satu kes yang terpencil. Kita pun telah ambil tindakan dengan mendenda mereka. Denda ini adalah walaupun kecil, ia untuk menjadi pengajaran kepada*

pelancong-pelancong asing tersebut...

...What a great speech. In fact, the incident that took place in Sabah, where tourists from overseas danced in front of a mosque, was an isolated case. In 2016, 26 million foreign tourists came to Malaysia. Three out of 26 million people, this is negligible. Also, we did take action by fining them. Even if the amount is small, it is a lesson to those foreign tourists.

(*Penyata Rasmi Parlimen Dewan Rakyat*, 2018d, pp. 19-20).

The phrase “we must also respect...” in Example 4 was used as a “choice that provides an implicit rationale for the agenda shift” (Clayman, 2001, p. 419), further signposting it as an obligation. The phrase highlights what should have been the priority by interlocutors when discussing Islamic values. According to Clayman (2001), justifications may be based on an implicit sense of fairness or the need to respond to opposing views. In Example 4, the maneuver was evasive and based on the former as the responder affirmed that respecting the rights of other creatures is consistent with Islamic values, as espoused by the questioner.

In contrast to Example 4, the evasive maneuver in Example 5 was committed due to the latter since the question expressed the questioner’s dissatisfaction with the

low fines imposed on the tourists. The quantifier “*beberapa*” (a few) indicated how insignificant the fines were, which was then addressed by the Deputy Minister. He asserted that even though the fines were small, they served as a lesson for them, providing a moral justification. In both Examples 4 and 5, the justifications acknowledge the shift in the QT agenda and present the breach in a favorable manner based on the principle of fairness or relevance to the discussion topic, as outlined in Clayman (2001).

Minimizing the Divergence

Minimizing the divergence was employed when ministers and deputy ministers wanted to downgrade the severity of a situation. In Example 5, the Deputy Minister justified the incident by saying it was an isolated case. To further defend this shift, he talked about the total number of tourists who came to Malaysia “...Three out of 26 million people, this is negligible....” Clayman (2001) noted that apart from temporal and numerical minimizers, adverbs may be included to further minimize the divergence. However, instead of adverbs, this study observed the use of adjectives. In Example 5, the adjective “*terpencil*” (negligible) was employed in the response. The deviation of the agenda, even though minor, frames it as inconsequential (Clayman, 2001), as understood from the adjective used. Whilst Carranza (2016) found that politicians minimized the divergence by downgrading the corruption allegations thrown at them, this study, on the other hand, found that

minimizing the divergence was employed to downgrade the severity of a situation, making it less harmful.

Operating on the Question

Clayman (2001) emphasized that the strategy of operating on the question “may be embedded within some other activity—assertions of agreement or disagreement” (p. 431). Instances of operating on the question in this study were commonly found when ministers and deputy ministers were called out for diverging from the issue, which caused them to assert their agreements in responses. They also operated on the question by discussing the government’s current policy rather than answering it. Operating on the question allows responders to align their responses and shape the question to fit their intended answer, guiding the subsequent answer, as discussed in the following paragraphs.

The attack on the questioner in Example 4 and the downgrade of the severity of the issue in Example 5 led the MP of Bachok to draw attention to the matter and address the speaker of the House, who acted as the mediator in conflictual situations (Bull et al., 2020). It can be interpreted as a request for the Deputy Minister to remain focused on the main agenda of the question and to indirectly request the speaker to impose a sanction for the deviation. The address made to the speaker prompted the Deputy Minister to respond, “I haven’t finished yet...” His response put a stop to further attempts from the questioner since it implied that he was (perhaps) going to address the issue, as illustrated in Example 6.

Example 6:

MP *Tuan Yang di-Pertua,*

Bachok: *soalan saya...*

Mr Speaker, my question...

Deputy *Saya belum habis lagi...*

Minister of I haven’t finished yet...

Tourism,

Arts and

Culture:

MP of *Soalan saya mudah*

Bachok: *sahaja. Adakah kerajaan lebih bersedia mengambil langkah?*

My question is simple. Is the government ready to take further steps?

Deputy *Ya, itu yang saya sebutkan*

Minister of *tadi. Kita memang*

Tourism, *Kerajaan Malaysia baharu*

Arts and *ini telah mengambil*

Culture: *langkah yang positif terhadap memperkenalkan budaya...*

Yes, that’s what I mentioned earlier. We, the new Malaysian Government, took positive steps toward introducing the culture...

(Penyata Rasmi Parlimen Dewan Rakyat, 2018d, pp. 19-20).

Subsequently, the questioner redirected attention to the question’s agenda, asking whether the government was ready to promote Islamic elements to revitalize tourism. It presented a dilemma for the responder: a “yes” answer would commit

them to discussing Islamic elements, while a “no” answer would suggest opposition to promoting these values. Both options would indirectly admit that he had diverged from the original question.

While the question focused on the government’s readiness to take the next steps, he claimed that “...We, the new Malaysian Government, indeed took...” a reformulation from the original question. As time is not explicitly indicated in Malay verbs, aspectual markers are employed to ascertain the time when a particular action is performed (Yoke & Hasan, 2014). As pointed out by Clayman (2001), reformulation “affiliates the matter-to-be-pursued with the matter-that-was-inquired-about, thereby minimizing the discrepancy between the two” (p. 430). The matter-to-be-pursued in Example 6 talked about past actions. On the other hand, the matter that was inquired about indicated a future action. The tense marker “*telah*” indicates past action.

Furthermore, the tense shift in the response is also indicative of evasion (Rasiah, 2007). The verb “*mengambil*” (take) in the question was changed into “*telah mengambil*” (took) in the response, whereas the phrase “Yes, that’s what I mentioned earlier” provided a reference to a missing ‘mention’ claimed by him. To further reiterate his assertion, the adjective “*positif*” (positive) was included to compliment the government’s effort. Additionally, the phrase “that’s what I mentioned earlier” served to make it look like he had previously addressed the question. As a result, the

questioner did not pursue the question further.

Rather than addressing the issues brought up in questions, ministers and deputy ministers were found to also operate on the question to emphasize their current policies, indirectly highlighting their effort as the government. Such an occurrence is shown in Example 7.

Example 7:

MP of Segamat: *... adakah kementerian mempunyai cadangan untuk memberi lebih banyak peluang kepada golongan minoriti, termasuk juga orang asal mahupun Orang Asli dalam bidang memasak ini?*

...does the ministry have a proposal to give more opportunities to minorities, including Aborigines and indigenous people, in this field of cooking?

Deputy Minister of Manpower: *...Kerajaan tidak pernah ada satu dasar untuk menghalang masyarakat asal kita untuk menceburi dalam sektor restoran sama ada sebagai pengusaha ataupun sebagai tenaga kerja...*

...The government has never had a policy to prevent our indigenous people from venturing into the restaurant sector

either as entrepreneurs or
as employees...
(*Penyata Rasmi Parlimen Dewan
Rakyat*, 2018c, pp. 19-20)

The Deputy Minister was asked whether the ministry had a proposal to give more opportunities to minorities, including the indigenous people, in the culinary field. In his response, the Deputy Minister indicated that they did not have a policy that prevented the indigenous people from venturing into the restaurant sector (the government has never had a policy to prevent...). The responder veered away from the agendas of the question and shifted into the narrative of their current non-discriminatory policy. In Example 7, the reformulation of the question occurred when the matter to be pursued, “never had the policy to prevent...” was replaced with the matter that was inquired about, which was “have a proposal...”.

In an example given by Clayman (2001), during an interview with presidential candidate Senator Gary Hart, he broadened the question about his alleged extramarital affair with Donna Rice to encompass his marital fidelity over the past 29 years by including periods of separation with his wife that were publicly known. The admission to infidelity was only made after he had redefined the scope of the inquiry (Clayman, 2001). In contrast to the example given by Clayman (2001), where the scope was broadened before being redefined, the scopes were shifted from future to past actions in Examples 6 and 7.

CONCLUSION

This study provides insights into how evasion is maneuvered in Malaysian Parliamentary Question Time. In Clayman’s (2001) study, attacking the question was categorized as a refusal to answer. However, ministers and deputy ministers in this study were found to attack the questioner rather than the question. Additionally, they had also refused to answer via avoiding committal responses. In their refusals, they tried to sound less formal and serious by using particles such as “*lah*”, impersonalized by using the pronoun “*kita*” (we), and used hedges. They also asserted that questions were unworthy of answers by claiming non-serious intents such as jokes.

Additionally, ministers and deputy ministers justified their agenda shifts to provide rationales and counter the negative presuppositions. Whilst the former was discussed in Clayman’s (2001) analysis, the latter was not. In justifying the shift, they tended to emphasize what was deemed a priority and provided moral justifications. Minimizing the divergence was also found in the data. The ministers and deputy ministers in this study differed from those in Clayman’s (2001) study, as they used adjectives instead of adverbs to downgrade the severity of the situation at hand. Operating on the question was another strategy ministers used when called out on their resistance. In this evasive maneuver, they changed the tense of verbs to show accountability and expressed agreement with the question. Further, operating on the question in this study involved shifting the

scope from future to past actions, unlike in Clayman's (2001) study, where question reformulation involved broadening the scope before redefining it.

Whilst this study analyzed parliamentary question time, Clayman's (2001) research analyzed news interviews, which typically involve more interaction and interviewer pressure. This study challenges the existing framework of evasion proposed by Clayman (2001). While there was some overlap with Clayman's framework (2001), several new strategies were found. In parliamentary question time, questions are restricted to speaking, and any attempt to speak without permission may result in the questioner being silenced by the Speaker. Consequently, those who evade questions would feel relatively safer in parliamentary settings than in news interviews. Practically, the study highlights the need for MPs to be more aware of evasion strategies employed by ministers so that they may continue to press them for answers, possibly preventing delays in the implementation of important policies that could benefit citizens.

Apart from identifying linguistic resources and strategies used by the ministers and deputy ministers to resist the questions, this study provided evidence for how cultural aspects influence the formulation of evasive responses, specifically in the Malaysian Parliament. Questions with negative implications and presuppositions that could threaten the face of ministers were commonly met with various forms of resistance that did not sufficiently address

the agendas of the questions. It is evident in the data in which questions with a racial tone (e.g., the presupposition that Chinese do not know Arabic) and those about upholding the national language or introducing Islamic values were evaded.

Questions with straight interrogatives and negative connotations were also evaded. Additionally, evasive responses were found to be responsive to the cultural aspects brought up in the questions, namely the use of the particle "lah", references to the Arabic language, and using an anecdote about 'Islamic values' to resist answering the questions before subsequently attacking the questioner. The investigation of this study has shown how evasion is employed in Malaysian Parliamentary Question Time, filling in the gaps in the literature and proving a need for further studies of evasion to be explored in other contexts.

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