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A Pragmalinguistic and Sociopolitical Analysis of Vague Language in Two Iranian Presidents' International Interviews

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Abstract

Standard political discourse is replete with ambiguity and vagueness. Politicians frequently use vague language to hide their inadequate knowledge, show their low interest in the issue, and/or evoke emotion. This study reports on a qualitative content analysis of vagueness in two Iranian presidents' political interviews within a pragmalinguistic and sociopolitical paradigm. The data consisted of nine question-answer exchanges extracted from seven internationally live broadcast interviews. A total of 57 instances of vague language use were analyzed in terms of 21 pragmalinguistic vagueness strategies. Implications are that vagueness in political discourse is motivated by a multiplicity of factors such as face management, sociopolitical and situational adaptation, conflict avoidance, and personal characteristics of the interviewers and the respondents. Vagueness was also found to be a sign of diplomatic prudence or wisdom.

Keywords: political discourse, pragmalinguistic paradigm, vagueness strategies

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1. Introduction

Political discourse is full of contestation, conflicts, synergy, praise, dispraise, criticism, and acquiescence that can be represented differently in different discourse situations (Obeng, 1997). Obeng argues that politicians tend to communicate indirectly “in an obscure, semantically dense, vague, oblique, and, rather cautious manner” (1997, p. 58). According to Trappes-Lomax (2007), vague language (VL) refers to “any *purposive* choice of language designed to make the degree of accuracy, preciseness, certainty, or clarity with which a referent or situation is described less than it might have been” (p.18). When people converse, they are mutually required to convey the appropriate information relative to quantity and quality. If they themselves have inadequate information or be disposed to refrain from expressing full intentions to the interlocutor, what they communicate may be generic, instead of precise. Vagueness has been considered by some as an unwelcome feature of language. Aristotle (1946) and Plato (1914) believe in the supremacy of right meaning over right form (as cited in Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Others view vagueness desirable, and conceive it as part of a speaker’s communicative competence (Channell, 1994).

Although some scholars view VL from a semantic perspective, some others study it as a pragmatic phenomenon. Youzhen (2012) considers VL from a pragmatic view analyzing it from the perspectives of comprehension and language use. He believes that the meaning of an indeterminate word can only be determined when the word is pragmatically viewed within a specific context. The problem of vagueness occurs when the specific context necessitates greater lexical precision than the expressed statement provides. According to the equivocation theory (Bavelas et al., 1988; Bavelas et al., 1990) and Clementson (2015), politicians are not merely responsible for vagueness or evasion (terms synonymously used with equivocation) but it is the particular sociopolitical situation that necessitates equivocation in discourse (Bowers et al., 1977).

As such, “political discourse is full of conflicts and synergy, contestations and acquiescence, praise and dispraise, as well as delicate criticism and unmitigated support” (Obeng, 1997, p. 58). Owing to the rather tricky and/or risky nature of politics itself, and especially to the power of the spoken words, political actors may prefer to interact in a vague and rather cautious manner. The present study thus was attempted to investigate how VL is used in used in international political interviews by statesmen to serve various political purposes.

2. Literature Review

People may use VL to their advantage in dealing with other people and not necessarily to harm their interlocutors, but possibly to avoid hurting them or even to improve communication in the given context. McCarthy (2020) studied the use of VL in business, arguing that vagueness can be employed in business commutative exchanges as an indication of shared knowledge and identities. VL can also be used negatively to evade accountability, hide the truth and signal reticence. In a recent study, Zhang (2020) highlighted the ineffectiveness of VL by Australian customs officers in dealing with incoming passengers. While the officers used VL to make passengers declare their luggage, the passengers asked for clarity.

Li (2008) asserts that political discourse, especially interviews, are habitually marked with tentativeness and uncertainty. A rich and varied body of literature has investigated interactional features of political interview from a range of perspectives, for instance, discourse analysis (Blum-Kulka, 1997; Chilton & Schaffner, 1997; Chilton & Schaffner, 2002; Schaffner 2004); communication and cognition (Cap, 2005; Chilton, 1987, 2004; Hart, 2005; VanDijk 2002, 2003, 2005, 2006) and pragmatics (Allen, 2006; Christie, 2005; Indede, 2009; Obeng, 1997; Odebunmi, 2009; Valentinaviciene, 2005; Wechsler, 2004; Wilson, 1990; Zheng, 2000).

Although the field is awaiting more robust studies on vagueness in political interviews, Al-Rassam (2010), Gruber (1993), Obeng (1997), D'Errico et al. (2006), Bull (1994, 1998, 2008, 2015), Clementson (2015) and Alfahad (2016) did considerable studies in this regard.

Gruber (1993) analyzed VL in TV political interview show at two levels of pragmatic and text-internal level. He reported that vagueness can be mainly traced back to the whole text properties and its underlying values and to lexical choice, taking into account the properties of the whole situation and not the other way round. In addition, he found that people tend to describe their good deeds in detail (magnification strategy) and refer to bad deeds implicitly (mitigation strategy).

Obeng (1997) noticed that vagueness is more pervasive in developing democracies like those in Africa than in developed democracies like in the West. Indirectness was motivated by political necessity, political interest, power, and personal face-saving. He also demonstrated that the politicians in their mass

mediated political speeches and exchanges employed indirectness strategies like evasion, circumlocution, innuendo, metaphor, proverbs, and so forth. However, due to culturally and sociopolitically different conditions in the two contexts, it may be fallacious to do a comparison between Western and African (or other developed countries). The most important reasons might be that, firstly, in developed countries the freedom of speech is a more accepted norm than that in developing countries. Secondly, politicians in developed countries may see themselves as politically more powerful and authoritative in some events than those in developing countries. Thirdly, the amount of gathered data in terms of Q-A exchanges and the nature of political events under analysis in the data should be made equal which is very difficult, if not impossible. And, finally, all Q-A exchanges should be searched not merely salient, top-of-mind, accessible events (Zaller, 1992).

D'Errico et al. (2006) found that the use of VL in political communication is mostly due to political candidate's weak stand and not so much because they do not express ample details. Moreover, the complexity of a political message can cause VL as a result of the cognitive difficulties in discourse management.

Bull, in a series of notable studies (1994, 1998, 2008, 2015), analyzed equivocation in political discourse and tried to distinguish it from deception. He further specified criteria on when politicians' responses should be considered evasive. A politician's reaction might be considered vague to some audience, while sends distinct messages, though implicitly, to others.

The seminal papers by Goffman (1955, 1967) are the intellectual roots of face work. Bull et al. (1996) argued that politicians must concern themselves with three aspects of face: their own individual face, the face of significant others, and the face of the party which they represent. In a similar study, Alfahad (2016) found that, within face and equivocation theory paradigm, state-owned TV channels, compared to independent news channels, pose less threat to their guests' face and ask them open-ended questions that provide them with more freedom to converse transparently rather than to give dichotomous replies under pressure. Moreover, Clementson (2015) suggested that to understand vagueness in political discourse, besides scrutinizing the politician's uttered words, one must study the sociopolitical situation under which they are making discourse. His results are in line with equivocation theory suggesting that politicians may not always be innately evasive.

Al-Rassam (2010) found that VL helps to mitigate the hazards underlying

political discourse. He further concluded that utterances which communicate difficulty or cause face threat are verbalized indirectly. Integrating pragmatic, relevance, and adaptation theories, a comprehensive multidimensional interpretation of indirectness was proposed by Ma and Li (2016) who believed that people adopt different pragmatic strategies to indirect speech in conveying their true intentions so as to protect the faces of both communication sides. McGee (2018) views VL as a linguistic device employed in everyday conversation, reporting, and politics to avoid controversy and save relationships. He believes that a certain amount of vagueness is acceptable in each communication or even appreciated in a context where creativity plays a vital role. Chapp et al. (2018) investigated ambiguity and avoidance in online political messaging from House candidates in 2014. They noted that district heterogeneity, ownership, and ideological extremity leave significant impact on the use of vague language by the statesmen. Although considerable research has already been conducted on VL in political discourse from different perspectives (e.g., philosophical, linguistic, cooperative, and elastic), a combined pragmalinguistic and sociopolitical analysis can uncover more corners of VL.

The present study aims to show how Iranian politicians use VL in live interviews in a position to be responsive to the public. Moreover, the types and number of strategies employed to achieve vagueness are reported. Finally, the probable reasons why they use VL in their political discourse are discussed. To this end, the following research questions are addressed:

1. To what extent do Iranian politicians resort to VL in their political discourse?
2. What are the types and number of strategies used to achieve vagueness?
3. Why do Iranian politicians speak vaguely?

3. Method

This was a qualitative study done within a pragmalinguistic paradigm (see Table 1) and the equivocation (sociopolitical) theory (Bavelas et al., 1988, 1990) to vagueness strategies. The data included transcripts of nine excerpts extracted from seven political discourses (D1 to D7) communicated by President Ahmadinejad (PA) and President Rouhani (PR) on different political occasions. Live international interviews assume that political figures must be as cautious as possible in answering questions

while under the pressure of being inspected by a wide variety of domestic and foreign observers consisting of fans, foes, and rivals (Li, 2008). Some additional new strategies have also been introduced whenever used by the Presidents. The related news agency Websites from which transcripts were taken are (<http://www.euronews.com>, <http://www.cbsnews.com>, <http://www.nbcnews.com>, and <http://www.cnn.com>). These news agencies are among the most popular ones in the world. The extracts were checked against genuine videos of the interviews downloaded from YouTube.com to ensure accuracy of the real-time translations done by interpreters under time pressure, and the necessary modifications were made accordingly. A brief description of the political situation in Iran, Presidents' characters, attitudes, and their political orientations are presented.

3.1. Iranian Political Situation

After the Islamic Revolution and the collapse of the Pahlavi Dynasty in 1979, the political situation in Iran has continuously been subject to a power shift from conservative right-wingers to reformist left-wingers and vice versa. Every elected president runs the country for a period of 4 years and is given the legal chance to be a presidency candidate for only a second 4-year term. With its large reserves of oil and gas and its geopolitical position in the region, Iran can considerably influence international energy security and the world economy. Its 1979 Constitution is a blend of parliamentary democracy and theocracy which allows the Islamic jurists to govern the country under the sovereignty of Supreme Leadership. It is a multicultural country bringing together numerous linguistic and ethnic groups. The official language is Persian where most people are Shia Muslims. In the 2005 presidential campaign, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as the conservative populist candidate, was elected to power. Despite a storm of protest in the 2009 Iranian presidential election, the Interior Ministry announced the incumbent PA had won 62.63% of the vote to 33.75% for Mir-Hossein Mousavi. On the next Iranian presidential election, Hassan Rouhani was elected as the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran. PR has frequently been described as a moderationist president who claimed to improve Iran's relations with the outside world, remove sanctions, resolve the nuclear dispute, and revitalize the economy.

PA is an Iranian politician and the sixth President of the Islamic Republic of Iran from 2005 to 2013. He is well-known for his extreme and candid political stands

against Holocaust and Zionism, and for his staunch support of Iran's peaceful nuclear program continuation. Also, his second-term election in 2009 caused domestically widespread protests and internationally significant criticism. During the second term, not only reformers but also traditionalists in parliament condemn him for his decision on dismissal of Minister Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Eje'i, and his support for the controversial close adviser Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei.

PR is the seventh President of Iran and has been in office since 15 June 2013. He is also a former diplomat, academic, and lawmaker. He was deputy speaker of the fourth and fifth terms of the Parliament of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council from 1989 to 2005. In the latter capacity, he was the country's top negotiator on nuclear technology in the Islamic Republic of Iran with the world's major powers. His electoral slogan was civil rights charter, economic recovery, and management of international relations.

3.2 Procedure

Each of the nine extracts were qualitatively analyzed in terms of pragmalinguistic vagueness strategies used for abstaining from frankness and transparency. These strategies have been frequently reported by previous studies on vagueness in political discourse like Gruber (1993), Obeng (1997), and Al-Rassam (2010), summarized in Table 1. The details about live broadcast samples extracted from interviews with PA and PR are represented in Table 2.

Table 1
Commonly Used Strategies for Achieving Vagueness.

Strategy	Definition
Hedging	An application of a general sense of the word to a range of items which express a notion of imprecision or qualification. Examples of hedging include sort of, more or less, I mean, approximately, roughly (Crystal, 2008)
Gesture	Nonverbal communication done by body movements and facial expressions
Insinuation	Indirect suggestion that something unpleasant is true or will happen

Strategy	Definition
	(Hornby, 2015)
Circumlocution	A way of saying or writing something using more words than necessary instead of being clear and direct (Hornby, 2015)
Flouting	Purposely not observing maxims of Grice's cooperative principle (Paltridge, 2012, p. 63)
Evasion	Sometimes described as involving circumvention or avoiding answering directly or avoiding facing up to real 'difficult' or tricky communicative or discourse issues (Obeng, 1997).
Number game	Using numbers as a rhetorical move of emphasis and hyperbole (van Dijk, 2005, p. 87)
Innuendo	Referred by an oblique allusion or an insinuation involving a veiled reflection on an interactant's character or bad reputation. innuendoes often come in the form of compressed metaphors and sometimes as proverbs (Obeng, 1997).
Metaphor	Involving a comparison achieved by direct reference. Like the other forms of indirectness, metaphors are used where candor is considered counterproductive (Obeng, 1997)
Lexical markers	Such as subjectivizers, placeholders, possibility indicators, etc. (Sabet & Zhang, 2015)
All-purpose words	Such as thing, stuff, what-do-you-call-it, and so forth
Elasticity markers	Including upward, downward, horizontal (Zhang 2011, p. 579)
Mitigation	A pragmatic, cognitive and linguistic behavior the main purpose of which is reduction of vulnerability (Martinovski, 2006)

Table 2
Detailed Information about the Extracted Discourses

	Interviewee	Interviewer	News Agency	Date	Location	No. of extracted Q-A Exchanges
D1	PA	LK	CNN	Sep.25 2009	New York	1
D2	PA	FZ	CNN	Oct.23 2011	Tehran	2
D3	PA	JD	Euronews	4/8/2011	Tehran	1
D4	PA	DS?	Jame Jam	Feb.2 2011	Tehran	1

	Interviewee	Interviewer	News Agency	Date	Location	No. of extracted Q-A Exchanges
			TV			
D5	PR	AC	NBC	Sep.18 2013	Tehran	2
D6	PR	CA	CNN	Sep.25 2013	New York	1
D7	PR	SK	CBS	Sep.13 2015	Tehran	1

The samples were examined regarding VL and vagueness strategies employed by the presidents with reference to Table 1 and beyond, if any, providing a quantitative summary of the results. To see how such strategies are employed by the Presidents, each extract (from D1-D7) in the form of Q-A exchange is given in the following.

3.2.1 Extract 1

K: OK. Moving through another topic. Yesterday at the U.N., Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu denounced you as a Holocaust denier and he held up blueprints, blueprints of Auschwitz. Blueprints as evidence of the Nazi effort to exterminate the ... I may get personal for a moment. Don't mind me. I'm Jewish. I have had relatives, cousins, that were killed. How can you deny what is an obvious fact?

PA: Do you want me to speak about it?

K: Yes.

PA: You really would like me to speak about it?

K: Of course.

PA: What my understanding of the Holocaust is, is the need to raise a number of questions. And I actually have raised those questions. But unfortunately, my work has been distorted by the media. And it is sort of a new form of information is replaced what was the very questions that I first initially raised. And then they call it information or the free flow of information.

K: All right. So, what ... What's the question?

[PA raises some questions regarding Holocaust in a series of Q-A exchanges between him and K.]

K: Are you denying that a Holocaust existed? ... That's all I'm asking. We'll get to the Palestinian issue in a minute. Are you denying that?

PA: I am an academic. I don't speak like a journalist. So, the question was: Where did it take place? You said, "In Europe." I said, "Who were the perpetrators?" And you said, "Germans." And my third question is: Was the crime committed by the Palestinians?"

K: No. ...But, no, but the question. ... Do you agree there was a Holocaust?

PA: Allow me to raise another question, and you'll get your answer. You'll have your answer then, if you bear with me. Throughout World War II, 60 million people were killed. ... They were all human beings. ... Now, if the Holocaust is indeed a historical event, why is it that politicians care so much about it?

K: All right. I understand. I understand that, but all I wanted to know is do you agree that there was a Holocaust. That's a simple yes or no. Do you agree that there was a Holocaust?

PA: If you bear with me, I'll give you an answer.

K: OK. No, I'm, uh ... OK. Was there a Holocaust?

PA: You want to impose your viewpoint on me. I mean, why?

K: No, it's not a viewpoint. It's a question.

PA: Why do you want to impose your opinion on me? It doesn't work that way. Right now, in Europe, there are historians and scholars who have differences of opinion on the subject of the Holocaust.

K: You're kidding?

PA: I'm not a historian. I have nothing ... I ... it's ... history, I leave that alone.

3.2.2 Analysis of Extract 1

Extract 1 represents a very controversial issue across the world and a very strained piece of conversation. It is the Israeli Holocaust claim. PA has been notorious for frank denial of Holocaust in terms of its actual occurrence or its dimensions. K's "how" question is very straightforward: "How can you deny ... an obvious fact?"

PA's answer is very vaguely loaded: "Do you want me to speak about it?" repeated twice by K's persistence to know the answer. What does it imply? It is insinuated that PA's response may not be desirable for the Jewish people. But this is cast in insinuation. PA's attempt to get permission to reveal his position about Holocaust can be regarded as an indirectly polite warning that finds expression in an indirect speech act. The next move is also characterized as circumlocution and evasion. He feels "The need to raise a number of questions" and that in the past his expressed positions on Holocaust have been distorted by the media. Subsequently, PA raises his questions one by one (circumlocution and evasion), but repeatedly compelled by K to get back on the track and be candid on a yes/no continuum. PA again evades a clear response by circumlocution saying that "I'm an academician ...", and tries to divert the Holocaust subject to Palestinian suffering and homelessness. We see that K repeatedly and persistently asks the same yes/no question and urges PA not to be vague on this issue. But each time PA evades by questioning the question, subject diversion (Palestine, World War II killings), and finally by accusing K of trying to impose his viewpoint on him. In his penultimate statement, PA generalizes the vagueness of his stance by saying that "In Europe ... scholars ... have differences of opinion...". This way, again, PA achieves to remain vague by making the Holocaust controversy generic and hackneyed. Finally, as a reaction to K's pertinacity, he frankly manifests his inclination to be uncooperative on this issue: "It's history. I leave it alone."

3.2.3 Extract 2

Z: President Obama has said that all American troops will be out of Iraq by the end of the year. In light of this announcement, will your government increase its efforts to train the Iraqi army, since there will be a need in Iraq for training and support? Will the Iranian government be providing greater support in that area?

PA: I think this is going to be a very good idea and it should have been done sooner, maybe seven or eight years ago, and they would avoid killing so many Iraqi people or Americans as well. The Iraqi government is independent and sovereign. They should decide how to provide training for the military personnel. We should wait for the decision of the Iraqi government.

3.2.4 Analysis of Extract 2

In this extract, Z asks a yes/no question on the Iranian government's willingness to train Iraqi Army following US troops' withdrawal. PA's answer is an obvious flouting of Grice's maxim of relevance because he alludes to a totally different issue, that is, the impropriety of US troops' entry to Iraq. This way, he evades giving a yes/no answer and, by saying "a very good idea" and "done sooner" (insinuation), indirectly expresses his or Iranian government's discontent with US military presence in Iraq and the region; while Z's question is not addressing this subject. In his final sentence, PA abstains from candor and evades a clear stance by magnifying Iraqi government's authority and that it is Iraqi that will determine Iran's position in this regard.

3.2.5 Extract 3

Z: You have said there are no political prisoners in Iran. The U.N. human rights report just suggested otherwise. What we do know is that the leaders of the Green Movement, the people who ran against you, are essentially under house arrest and have not been heard from. So, I guess my specific question is while I'm in Iran, could I meet with the man who ran against you as president, Mir-Hosein Mousavi, who ... who appears to be under house arrest?

PA: In Iran, we do not have political prisoners. The government has never arrested and imprisoned people. They are against government but they have never been imprisoned based on the complaints of the government. We have an independent judiciary. We have a judicial system independent from government and that system is not under the influence of the government.

Z: But so, could I meet Mr. Mousavi then?

PA: Let me speak. The judiciary is never under ... is not under the influence of the government. So, I cannot give orders that you should do this or that.

Z: So, what is Mr. Mousavi even charged with? It's not clear that he committed any crime. He is in-he is under house arrest for political reasons.

PA: I am not in charge. I am not in charge of the judiciary. These are your claims. Explanation should come from the judiciary. We should see what the speaker of the judiciary says. I am not a judge and a judge does not receive orders from me.

3.2.6 Analysis of Extract 3

In extract 3, Z levels an indirect off-record face threat to PA's government by suggesting that there are political prisoners in Iran. Afterward, he asks his question which is, in fact, an indirect speech act of 'request': "Could I meet with ... Mousavi?" In reaction to this face threat, PA bluntly denies the existence of political prisoners in Iran. So, this outspoken denial can be interpreted as an act of veiled deception to save his face and to disguise the truth. Such a veiled deception finds its evidence in the next PA's statements: "They are against government but they have never been imprisoned based on the complaints of the government." This obviously falsifies PA's previous denial that "There are no political prisoners in Iran." The presupposition is that there are political prisoners, even though, PA claims, they have not been sued by the government. Such disjointed statements lead to contradictory verbal behavior and finally adds to the vagueness of the PA statements.

Z repeats his question, which is a sign of PA's vague answer (Bull, 2008), to urge PA to be more direct. But, again, PA evades responsibility by invoking the fact that the Judiciary is in charge of the issue and he has no say or power in this respect. In the next move, Z gives in to PA's evasiveness and reverts to another subject and asks a *What* question: "What is Mr. Mousavi even charge with?" Z's question is obviously a request for information. Nevertheless, PA evades a clear response by laying the responsibility on the Judiciary. From PA's evasive answer, it could be suggested that he violates all the Gricean maxims. He abstains from giving information. So, he is vague and non-cooperative. Additionally, he attempts to veil his vagueness by magnifying the Judiciary responsibility and mitigating the government's role herein.

3.2.7 Extract 4

JD: Are you prepared to extend the same hand of friendship in the near future to the United States - a country with whom you've had no proper diplomatic relationship for 30 years? Also, let's not forget a country which is the biggest economy in the world and which could well benefit the state of Iran. Is there any chance you're going to extend the hand of friendship there any time soon?
PA: "We believe that there should be friendly relationships at the international level

and that's the basic principle. But the Americans and their administration are confused. They don't know what to do. They don't follow clear policies. They stopped their relationship with us. The Americans thought that if they stopped their relationship with Iran we would be destroyed. Thirty-one years have passed since then and we're still sitting here. The Iranian nation is making progress. We believe that the American government should change its policies. To a certain extent they should respect others and observe justice."

3.2.8 Analysis of Extract 4

In this extract, JD with a bit of indirect justification for a yes answer, asks two yes/no questions: "Are you prepared to extend ...?" and "Is there any chance...?" In response, PA resorts to a generic statement that "Friendly relationships at the international level" is very desirable (for every country). He further tries to justify this lack of relationship with the US, which is an instance of circumlocution to evade a clear yes/no response. Then, through insinuation, he indirectly refers to the issue of historical enmity between Iran and America, which has led to imposing sanctions on Iran: "We're still sitting here. The Iranian nation is making progress." PA implies that America's enmity with Iran and the posing of sanctions, as a result, have had no destructive impact on Iran. In fact, PA is mitigating the negative aspects of the division between the two countries and, at the same time, magnifying Iran's sovereignty. In the penultimate statement, PA attempts to assert that, firstly, it is the American government that is to be blamed for the division between the two countries. This assertion is made by using insinuation: "The American government should change its policies." Secondly, he alludes to the claim that for establishing relationships between the two countries, three preconditions must be met: "They should change their policies, respect others and observe justice." Finally, it can be concluded that PA evades giving a clear yes/no answer.

3.2.9 Extract 5

INT: Three issues have been raised [in the UN Security Council] by which to put pressure on Iran. One of them is human rights status in Iran. What is your own attitude towards human rights in Iran compared with the countries in the region and the world?

PA: It is a basic issue. All things done in the world is to ensure human rights. All

Prophets have come to ensure human rights. All governments must be concerned about it. But it is evident that we cannot define a specific standard and urge all to follow it. However, where in the world have the human rights been ensured? Has it been ensured in America? 30 people are killed in police clashes in America every day. Aren't there problems in Europe? Is there freedom? Does the people's will rule? We also have our own problems and weaknesses. But it doesn't mean that those who have problems themselves may criticize us.

3.2.10 Analysis of Extract 5

In this extract, INT raises the Human Rights issue in Iran with reference to the UN Security Council report to support his claim. PA resorts to circumlocution and generalization of the problem to evade a clear response: "It is a basic issue. All things done... is to ensure human rights. All prophets ... All governments." Afterwards, PA's strategy is to mitigate the criticality of the Human Rights issue by saying that the issue is undefinable in terms of a clear standard. In the third place, PA resorts to the subject diversion strategy by invoking the Human Rights status in other parts of the world as the same problem in Iran. PA's fourth strategy to evade the answer is playing a "number game" by referring to "30 people are killed in police clashes in America every day." In the fourth place, PA questions INT on the Human Rights issue "in Europe". And eventually, PA, after a considerable amount of evasion, generalization, subject diversion, and circumlocution, confesses that "There are also problems in Iran" regarding the issue, and that "Those who have problems themselves" are not legitimate to criticize Iran. Therefore, INT's "what" question is not answered, which is an obvious flouting of all Gricean maxims.

3.2.11 Extract 6

AC: Are you willing to meet with President Obama in New York at the United Nations?

PR: I do not have any program to meet with President Obama in our agenda.

3.2.12 Analysis of Extract 6

In Extract 9, AC's question is of yes/no type: "Are you willing to meet with President Obama...?" The question is very straightforward. PR's answer seems to be candid at first glance: "I do not have any programs to meet with President Obama" It is a very vague answer. As pointed out before, PR is renowned for being a centrist and also for his government's inclination to expand relationships with foreign countries, especially America. PR's answer is neither conclusive nor pessimistic. He says that he "has no program to meet with President Obama." This string cannot be regarded as a rejection or unwillingness. He might be willing to meet with President Obama but he has "no program" on this particular occasion. AC is a representative of American people and government. So, PR's answer is a presupposed 'yes' to AC and a presupposed 'no' to conservative hardliners in Iran who still insist on a "Death to America" slogan, so flouting the maxim of manner. PR's response thus here is wisely and desirably ambiguous to signify his respect for the Americans and also not to stir up opposing debates in Iran.

3.2.13 Extract 7

AC: You mention political will. Much of what Americans think about Iran is influenced by your predecessor and some statements that he had made. So, let me ask you. President Ahmadinejad said, "The Holocaust is a myth." Do you agree?

PR: I'm not historian. I'm a politician. What is important for us is that the people, the nations in our region should get closer to one another. The nations in the world should get closer to one another so that they could prevent aggression and brutality. What I could say is that the people of Palestine should not be displaced. They should return to their homes.

3.2.14 Analysis of Extract 7

AC's question is a yes/no type. It is expected that PR observes the Gricean maxims of quality, relevance, and manner. But we see that PR's response is absolutely evasive, since the Holocaust issue is very controversial and a definite *yes* will put him in a politically insecure scene and, in addition, it is opposed to his amity-seeking approach in foreign policies. On the other hand, a definite *'no'* will arouse tension on the part of the extremist right-wingers in Iran who are against Zionism, hence an evasive or

ambiguous answer is prudent: "I'm not a historian. I'm a politician."

Subsequently, PR resorts to circumlocution to justify his vagueness. It finds pronouncement in generalization and generic statements: "The nations in the region and in the world should get closer to one another to prevent aggression and brutality."

Another PR's vagueness strategy is wordplay (Wodak, 2007) like aggression and brutality that might be considered as an oblique allusion or insinuation to Israel's killings of Palestinians in the past. And, also, it can be an indirect insinuation to the assumption that Zionists use Holocaust issue as an alibi to drive Palestinians out of their homes. Consequently, PR employs evasion, diverts the Holocaust subject to the Palestine subject and tangentially invokes the memories of killings of both sides in Israeli-Palestinian clashes in the Middle East.

3.2.15 Extract 8

CA: On the issue of human rights, just before you came, there was an announcement that 80 prominent human rights activists were released from jail in Tehran, many of them having been taken into jail in the dispute in 2009 after the reelection of President Ahmadinejad. What is your government going to do to release prisoners of conscience and particularly two politicians, opposition politicians, Mehdi Karroubi and Mir-Hossein Mousavi who are still being held?

PR: You know that in the election campaign that recently took place, I insisted on an issue which I called the Civil Rights Charter. I promised the people to put together and publicize a Civil Rights Charter, which I would then present as a bill to legislature on and to allow our society to settle many of the problems that it faces right now. So, I have actually authorized the legal department that works under me to create a committee working on this issue in specific. And I believe that very soon this charter, this Civil Rights Charter, will be ready, which I can present to the public opinion. And there's a team that's putting it together. So, I will spare no effort to ensure that those who are currently in prison will see an opening door.

3.2.16 Analysis of Extract 8

CA asks a *what* question preceded by a brief justification of the Human Rights violation in Iran. PR has promised his followers in his electoral campaign that the release of political prisoners will be one of his top priorities. So, he cannot evade full responsibility as PA did in D2 extract 6. If he does so, it will be a self-threat to his own face and will certainly lose support of his followers in Iran. On the other side, PR is well cognizant of the fact that hardliners as well as the Supreme Leader are very sensitive to the issue of political prisoners, especially those who are under house arrest.

As a result, he refers to his promise of drawing up a "Civil Rights Charter". PR mentions this only as a promise that may someday actualize. So, he embarks on circumlocution. Meanwhile, he tries to imply that he is not indifferent to his electoral promise. He indicates that the bill, if written, if legislated, and if enforced will allow the society, and not the government, to settle *many*, and not *all* the problems. He further *believes*, and does not guarantee things, that *very soon*, which itself is a vague time indicator, this charter will be ready. He, therefore, will *spare no effort*, which is again an implication that writing, legislating, and enforcing the promised charter is an easier-said-than-done undertaking.

3.2.17 Extract 9

SK: Do you think the United States is the *Great Satan*?

PR: Satan in our religious parlance is used to refer to that power which tricks others and whose words are not clear words, do not match reality. What I can say is that the U.S. has made many mistakes in the past regarding Iran, and must make up for those mistakes.

3.2.17 Analysis of Extract 9

Sk's question is a very politically tricky question that recalls an old historical enmity between Iran and America. Currently, PR is renowned for his centrist attitude in terms of foreign policies. So, his answer to this tricky yes/no question must be very cautious. Accordingly, PR does not give any explicit yes/no answer. He engages again in circumlocution and generalization by defining who deserves to be characterized as a *Great Satan*. He flouts three maxims of quantity, manner and relevance. He further adds that US "has made mistakes in the past", which is an

indirect indication that he does not adhere to the phrase *Great Satan*. *Mistake* is different from *sin* or *satanic manners*. Mistakes can be unintentional and compensated for or corrected. *Mistake* is a soft word (mitigation) the use of which implies that PR intends to be polite to the American society. It can be considered as an indirect expression of his moderationist orientation in politics.

4. Results and Discussion

The use of vagueness strategies by Iranian politicians is unavoidable. Such vague statements are actualized in different pragma-linguistic strategies with different frequency counts (Table 3).

In response to RQ1, Table 3 shows that, in total, 57 instances of 21 vagueness strategies were used in 9 Q-A extracts by PA and PR. Each extract addressed a tricky/controversial political issue.

Table 3
Quantitative Details about Vagueness Strategies Used by the Subjects

Vagueness Strategies (21)																										
Extract No.	Political Event/Issue		Direct refusal to respond	Flouting maxim of relevance	Flouting maxim of quantity	Flouting maxim of quality	Flouting maxim of manner	Presupposition	Mitigation	Magnification	Subject diversion	Generalization and generic statements	Number game	Circumlocution	Questioning the question	Contradictory statements	Hiding the truth	Probabilistic statements	All-purpose words	Elasticity markers	Hedging markers	Insinuation	Indirect warning	Interviewee	Total No.	
1	Holocaust		o	o	o	o	o		o		o	o		o	o							o	o	A	12	
2	Training Iraqi army by Iran			o					o	o										o	o	o			A	6
3	Political prisoners in Iran			o	o	o	o		o	o						o	o								A	8
4	Friendship/relations with America			o					o	o	o		o									o			A	6

Vagueness Strategies (21)																			
5	Human rights issue in Iran																		A 7
6	Meeting with president Obama																		R 2
7	Holocaust																		R 6
8	Human rights and political prisoners																		R 4
9	Is US the Great Satan?																		R 6
		1	6	3	4	6	1	6	4	1	5	1	6	2	1	1	1	1	57

In response to RQ2, Table 4 shows that 21 types of vagueness strategies have been used. From among them, direct refusal to respond, number game, hiding the truth, probabilistic and contradictory statements, all-purpose words, indirect warning, presupposition, subject diversion, elasticity and hedging markers were once-used strategies. This is while more frequent strategies included insinuation, magnification, flouting maxims of quality, relevance and manner, generalization and generic statements, circumlocution, and mitigation (with frequency of more than 3 times) indicating frequent appeal to VL.

Addressing RQ3, it can be briefly stated that several factors are at work. First, they used VL most commonly to evade giving a clear answer or making their position disclosed. Evasion thus can be considered as the most important incentive for the use of VL by PA and PR. Second, VL helped them to hide the truth (extract 3), or at least, refrain from giving exact details where they felt it to be inexorable. The third reason is that the State Presidents are almost always placed in shaky positions that are too vulnerable to heedless judgments or slippery viewpoints. And the fourth reason that can be pointed out in this section reflects a much more positive side of the vagueness story than the previous ones. Vagueness can be a sign of wisdom. A vague position can oftentimes rescue an entire nation from engaging in a devastating war or suffering from detrimental sanctions thereof (extract 7).

Table 4*Ascending Frequency of Occurrence of Vagueness Strategies*

No.	Vagueness Strategy	Ascending Frequency of Occurrence	Percentage
1	Direct refusal to respond	1	1.75
2	Number game	1	1.75
3	Contradictory statements	1	1.75
4	Hiding the truth	1	1.75
5	Probabilistic statements	1	1.75
6	All-purpose words	1	1.75
7	Indirect warning	1	1.75
8	Presupposition	1	1.75
9	Elasticity markers	1	1.75
10	Hedging markers	1	1.75
11	Subject diversion	1	1.75
12	Questioning the question	2	3.51
13	Flouting maxim of quantity	3	5.26
14	Flouting maxim of quality	4	7.02
15	Magnification	4	7.02
16	Insinuation	4	7.02
17	Generalization and generic statements	5	8.77
18	Circumlocution	6	10.52
19	Flouting maxim of relevance	6	10.52
20	Flouting maxim of manner	6	10.52
21	Mitigation	6	10.52
	Total	57	100

Other reasons of opting for vagueness in political discourse than evasion can be politeness and face management, reaction to sociopolitical situation, preventing negative consequences through compromise and reconciliation, avoiding radical positions, minimizing the probability of conflictual confrontations, gaining general support, etc.

4.1 Direct Refusal to Answer

PA and PR seemed naturally disinclined to straightforwardly refuse to respond, which can be taken as a sign of impoliteness, nondiplomaticity or lack of information. Direct

refusal to answer, albeit made *once*, occurred when three (pre)conditions were met in the data (extract 1). First, when a dichotomous yes/no question was asked; second, when the interviewers persistently urged the interviewees to reveal an explicit position and last, when the issue in question was too controversial. The conclusion is that politicians should not be blamed for not committing direct refusal to answer so that they look uncooperative or ignorant characters.

4.2 Evasion

Evasion was the most frequently used strategy (18 times) employed by subjects to avoid giving the required answer. The interesting point is that, as Table 5 shows, evasion was accomplished through the use of 8 substrategies to evade providing a clear answer.

Evasiveness was a strategy by which subjects demonstrated their politeness and diplomaticity. Additionally, they could avoid conflictual consequences, gain general audience support, and did face management. Evasion was detected in almost all extracts except 2 and 6, the issues of which are not as tricky as those of others. Once more, it was observed that close-ended questions (yes/no) and interviewers' pertinacity in getting a definite answer led subjects to the frequent use of evasion strategies, also reported by Alfahad (2016). It should thus be stressed that evasiveness is oftentimes employed positively which is a sign of politicians' astuteness to stay away from animosity and conflict by engaging in a sort of situational compromise.

Table 5
Total Frequency of Evasion Strategy

Evasion Sub-strategies	Frequency
Subject diversion	1
Generalization and generic statements	5
Number game	1
Circumlocution	6
Questioning the question/interviewer	2
Contradictory statements	1
Hiding the truth	1
Probabilistic statements	1
Total	18

4.3 Flouting Gricean Maxims

It can be truly claimed that one cannot speak vaguely without flouting one or two of Gricean maxims of conversation. Based on Table 4, the Gricean maxims were flouted 19 times (quantity = 3, quality = 4, relevance = 6, manner = 6). When politicians are faced with a risky question, the interviewers try to pin down the politician by asking a no-win question, or the politician is accused of something not committed (Bavelas et al., 1988), vagueness occurs to avoid conflict, offensive behavior, and to exculpate oneself from deception. The study findings also supported the equivocation theory that the sociopolitical situation and the nature of the questions are influential factors in directing politicians towards vagueness and evasion (Bavelas et al., 1990, Clementson, 2015). The present analyses implied that vagueness or evasion cannot be achieved in discourse unless the politician engages in uncooperativeness by flouting at least one of Gricean maxims (Gruber, 1993; Obeng, 1997).

4.4 Mitigation and Magnification

Mitigation and magnification strategies can be further divided into subtypes to either enhance politician's public positive face (PPF) or degrade their opponents' PPF as illustrated in Table 6.

Table 6
Mitigation and Magnification Sub-strategies

	Mitigation strategy	Magnification strategy
To degrade opponents' PPF	Direct mitigating the desirable	Direct magnifying the undesirable
	Indirect mitigating the desirable	Indirect magnifying the undesirable
To enhance ones' PPF	Direct mitigating the undesirable	Direct magnifying the desirable
	Indirect mitigating the undesirable	Indirect magnifying the desirable

Other high-frequency vagueness strategies have been mostly employed to protect interviewees' faces from face-threatening acts (FTAs) or to damage the opponents' face by FTAs. Generalization or appeal to generic statements is another strategy to communicate vagueness. It was observed that when an FTA is leveled against the interviewees, one effective strategy was to generalize the issue to other similar situations in the world. That was to say that the face-threatening issue was not attributed to the interviewees alone and it applies to so many other governments and countries as well (extracts 1, 3, 4, 5).

4.5 Insinuation

To Insinuate means "to suggest indirectly that something unpleasant is true", (Hornby, 2015). As shown in Table 3, insinuation was used 4 times. In this data, politicians decide to employed insinuation or "tangentialization" (Bavelas et al., 1988, p. 1) when they want to allude to the following disapproving facts:

1. PA's stance towards Holocaust will be hurtful to the Jewish people (extract 1).
2. Iranian government is discontented with US military operations in Iraq (extract 2).
3. There is an old historical enmity between Iran and America (extract 3).

High status international political interview programs can be used as a golden opportunity to send messages to the opponents about one's concerns over disputed issues. Therefore, it is evident in the data that PA and PR behave opportunistically, with the aim of being noticed by the whole world, to insinuate unpleasant issues pushed by the opponents.

4.6 Political Issue Effect

Table 7 indicates that subjects resorted to most vagueness strategies in answering issues related to *Holocaust* (12 times by PA). On the other hand, the political issue of face-to-face *meeting with President Obama* has been answered with the least number of vagueness strategies (twice by PR).

Table 7*Ascending Number of Strategies Used in Each Political Discourse Extract*

No.	Political Issue/Event	Interviewee	Ascending No. of Strategies Used in each Event
Ex6	Meeting with president Obama	PR	2
Ex8	Human rights and political prisoners	PR	4
Ex2	Training Iraqi army by Iran	PA	6
Ex4	Friendship/relations with America	PA	6
Ex9	Is US the Great Satan?	PR	6
Ex5	Human rights issue in Iran	PA	7
Ex7	Holocaust	PR	7
Ex3	Political prisoners in Iran	PA	8
Ex1	Holocaust	PA	12

4.7 Subject Diversion

In extract 1, the subject of Holocaust was diverted to the issue of Palestine by PA. It can be inferred that subject diversion served to attain 3 objectives:

1. to circumlocute and then evade a clear answer
2. to do face management
3. to use the interview opportunity to articulate one's concerns

4.8 Face Management

Nearly, in all the extracts, face management by interviewees and FTAs by interviewers were commonly achieved through strategies like mitigation, generalization, magnification, and insinuation.

Findings of Bavelas et al. (1990) and Bull (2008) on the relationship between equivocation theory and face management are supported by the present study. Politeness face management (Brown & Levinson, 1987) includes avoiding FTAs against other politicians and against oneself to prevent PPF from being defiled. In this study, face management was done by PA and PR to protect and enhance their own individual face, to pose a threat, usually indirectly, to their opponents' face, to avoid looking bad, and to convince the audience that they are good persons.

4.9 Pragmalinguistic Account of the Findings

If we divide 21 vagueness strategies with frequent use of 57 into two groups, Table 8 will be yielded. It shows that the two politicians resorted to pragmatic strategies (49 times) more than linguistic ones (8 times). The implication is that political discourse analysis requires a pragmatic approach as a central and a linguistic approach as a complementary one. This finding is not in contrast with Obeng (1997), Gruber (1993), and Al-Rassam (2010).

Table 8
Pragmalinguistic Division of Vagueness Strategies

Category	Strategies	Frequency of use
Pragmatic	Circumlocution	6
	Contradictory statements	1
	Flouting maxim of manner	6
	Flouting maxim of quality	4
	Flouting maxim of quantity	3
	Flouting maxim of relevance	6
	Hiding the truth	1
	Indirect warning	1
	Insinuation	4
	Magnification	4
	Mitigation	6
	Presupposition	1
	Probabilistic statements	1
	Questioning the question	2
	Generalization	3
	Total	49
Linguistic	Direct refusal to respond	1
	Number game	1
	All-purpose words	1
	Elasticity markers	1
	Hedging markers	1
	Subject diversion	1
	Generic statements	2
	Total	8

5. Conclusion

Politicians are usually reputed for being vague, ambiguous and evasive. They have been "castigated as ... the sort of people who will never give a straight answer to a straight question" (Bull, 2008, p. 337). In this qualitative study, Iranian politicians' discourse was examined in terms of VL and vagueness strategies applied. Attempts were made to explain the reasons within a pragmalinguistic and situational equivocation theory framework. It was uncovered that in political interviews conducted by international experienced journalists, slippery questions are raised to which interviewees cannot give a clear answer either for face-management purposes or for avoiding unfavorable outcomes. It was detected that vagueness and evasion are not always disapproving. But rather, based on the sociopolitical situation in which politicians serve, it is well prudent to speak vaguely. Looking at it from another angle, it can be asserted that politicians are not innately vague individuals. In actuality, they try to be as pithy and responsive as possible to the existing situational pressures that threaten them. It was additionally found that a pragmalinguistic and sociopolitical approach to study vagueness can yield better results than a linguistic one, even though these approaches are complementary in most respects. Moreover, it is not only the will of the political respondents to respond vaguely. Rather, factors such as type and nature of the questions, face management, the interviewees' biasedness or political inclination, their manner of interview management, sociopolitical situation, interests of the politicians' political parties, conflict avoidance, separation anxiety, and temporary compromise can influence the scale, type and number of the vagueness strategies used.

Vagueness in political discourse is a concept that can easily be misconstrued. One strength of this study was to shed light on probable reasons of vagueness, either negative or positive, in Iranian political discourse. There were limitations as well. One was the limited number of data extracts (9). Undoubtedly, the analysis of more data extracts can bring about more robust results. Another limitation was the lack of informed participants to evaluate the reasons of VL use by politicians. This way, more valid reasons could have been stated.

For further research, it may be recommended that Vagueness be compared and contrasted in other political discourse genres. Furthermore, the effect of personality characteristics of interviewees and interviewers on vagueness is also open to investigation.

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