



Conversational Blindness: Answering the Wrong Question the Right Way

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Conversational Blindness: Answering the Wrong Question the Right Way

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Abstract

What happens when people try to “dodge” a question they would rather not answer by answering a different question? Two experiments demonstrated conversational blindness – listeners’ surprising failure to notice such dodges – and explored the interpersonal consequences of this phenomenon. Listeners viewed successful question-dodgers as positively as speakers who actually answered the question they are asked, but were not blind to all efforts to dodge: They both noticed – and punished – particularly egregious attempts (Study 1). More troublingly, listeners preferred speakers who answered the wrong question well over those who answered the right question poorly (Study 2).

Individuals frequently attempt to avoid questions they do not want to answer, from politicians dodging reporters' requests to clarify their position on when life begins, to employees sidestepping their bosses' questions as to why they are late for the third straight day, to spouses evading their partners' inquiries as to their whereabouts the previous evening. We suggest that when faced with unwanted queries, question-dodgers sometimes exploit conversational blindness – a phenomenon whereby listeners fail to notice when speakers respond to a different question than the one they are asked – by responding with answers that seem to address the question asked, but which in fact address an entirely different question. A successful dodge occurs when a speaker's answer to the wrong question is so compelling that the listener both forgets the right one, and rates the dodger positively: A politician in a debate asked about the illegal drug problem in America whose answer stresses the need for universal healthcare has engaged in a successful dodge if listeners have both forgotten that she was even asked about drugs, and evaluate her highly. Indeed, we propose that in some cases, speakers end up better off by answering the wrong question well than the right question poorly. In the studies below, we demonstrate conversational blindness in the context of political debates, exploring both the conditions that impact the likelihood of such dodges going unnoticed, and how speakers' successful – and failed – attempts to capitalize on conversational blindness impact listeners' opinions of them.

Just as magicians engage in successful sleight-of-hand by misdirecting their victim's attention (Macknik et al., in press), we suggest successful question dodgers redirect listeners' attention from the question asked to the answer given. How might they accomplish this redirection? Both magicians and politicians likely rely on the frequent

attentional lapses caused by the mind's tendency to wander (Mason et al., 2007; Smallwood & Schooler, 2006); indeed, one item in a scale of absent-mindedness refers specifically to losing track of conversations due to "zoning out" (Carriere, Cheyne, & Smilek, 2008). Previous research has demonstrated people's surprising failures to notice even dramatic changes to the environment (Grimes, 1996; Simons & Levin, 1998; Simons & Rensink, 2005). In Johansson, Hall, Sikstrom, & Olsson (2005), for example, when pictures of faces that people had selected were swapped out for other pictures, people were surprisingly unlikely to notice the switch; in addition, the similarity of the swapped pictures was an important predictor of these failures to notice, mirroring research demonstrating an important role for similarity in detecting changes (Most et al., 2001; Simons & Levin, 1998). Therefore, we predict that dodges are most likely to be successful when an answer given by a speaker is thematically similar to the question asked – even when that answer is objectively to a different question.

We present the results of two studies that demonstrate conversational blindness, investigate the role of a dodge's similarity to the question asked on listeners' likelihood of noticing that dodge, and explore the consequences of dodging on listeners' interpersonal perceptions of speakers. In Study 1, participants listened to a debate in which a politician answered the question he was asked, tried to dodge that question by answering a similar question, or tried to dodge that question by answering a dissimilar question. We measured listeners' interpersonal ratings of that politician and the frequency with which they were able to recall the actual question the politician was asked – our measures of the success of the dodge. In Study 2, we added a condition in which the politician answered the question he was asked, but answered it badly, allowing us to

examine whether answering the wrong question well might be perceived more positively than answering the right question poorly.

Study 1: Successful – and Unsuccessful – Dodges

In Study 1, we asked participants to listen to a brief excerpt from a political debate between two politicians. For the second politician, we varied the question asked – about healthcare, the illegal drug problem, or the War on Terror – but this politician always gave the same answer about healthcare. Thus we varied whether the politician answered the question asked (about healthcare), a similar question (the drug problem), or a dissimilar question (the War on Terror). We expected that when the politician answered a similar question, he would successfully dodge such that participants would forget the original question and rate him highly; in contrast, we expected that when the politician answered a dissimilar question, participants would notice the effort to dodge and penalize him accordingly.

Method

Participants. Participants ($N = 243$, 57% female, $M_{age} = 43.0$, $SD = 12.7$) completed the study online.

Procedure. Participants listened to an audiotaped excerpt from a debate beginning with a question about education for the first politician, which was always answered directly. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of three conditions that varied the question asked of the second politician. His response was always the same: “I am glad you asked me about this. There are so many challenges facing America today. Many of our problems have arisen because too many Americans cannot afford the care that they

need...” Some participants heard the politician answer the question that he was asked (about healthcare), others heard the politician answer a question that was similar to the question he was asked (about the illegal drug problem), while others heard the politician answer a question that was dissimilar to the question he was asked (about War on Terror).

After listening to the entire excerpt, participants evaluated the second politician on four interpersonal dimensions: how much they trusted him, how much they liked him, how honest he was, and how capable he was, all on 6-point scales (1: *not at all* to 6: *very much*). We created a composite index of these items (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .95$).

Finally, respondents answered a multiple-choice question about whether the second politician had been asked about education, health care, the drug problem, or the War on Terror.

Pretest. To ensure that the similar question was indeed more similar to the question about healthcare than the dissimilar question, a separate sample of participants ($N = 48$) rated how similar both the illegal drug problem and the War on Terror were to healthcare, on 7-point scales. As expected, the illegal drug problem was rated as more similar to healthcare ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.56$) than the War on Terror ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.62$), $t(47) = 6.14$, $p < .01$, $d = 1.21$.

Results

Interpersonal evaluations. As predicted, evaluations of the second politician on our composite measure were impacted by our manipulation, $F(2, 240) = 7.05$, $p < .005$, $p_{rep} = 0.99$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. Participants who heard the politician answer a dissimilar question punished him significantly in their interpersonal evaluations ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.39$) relative to those who listened to the politician answer the question asked ($M = 3.46$, $SD =$

1.22) or a similar question ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.06$), $ts > 2.75$, $ps < .01$, $ds > .54$.

Importantly, evaluations of the politician who answered the question asked and those who answered a similar question did not differ, $t(167) = 1.02$, $p > .31$, $d = .16$, suggesting that dodging by answering a wrong but similar question was as effective as actually answering the right question.

Recall. Were these high ratings of politicians who answered a similar question associated with participants' failure to notice their efforts to dodge? Accuracy in recalling the question asked of the second politician varied across conditions, $\chi^2(2) = 15.13$, $p < .01$. Participants who heard the politician directly answer the question asked (82%) and those who heard him dodge by answering a dissimilar question (70%) were similarly accurate at remembering the actual question, $\chi^2(1) = 2.81$, $p = .09$. In contrast, participants who heard the politician dodge by answering a similar question were significantly worse at remembering the original question, as just 54% did so, lower than both other conditions, $\chi^2s(1) > 4.45$, $ps < .04$. As predicted, answering a similar question led to conversational blindness, setting the conditions for a successful dodge.

As another comparison, we asked the same participants from the pretest to read the second politician's answer and select from four possible question topics (education, health care, illegal drug problem, or War on Terror) the one that best fit that answer. Removed from the difficulty of following a live conversation, 94% of participants identified healthcare as the question that the second politician answered, $\chi^2(2) = 78.88$, $p < .001$. These results suggest that speakers who answered a similar question truly were successfully dodging, answering a question that observers identified as objectively wrong, without being penalized.

Table 1: Interpersonal Ratings and Recall (Study 1)

	<u>Condition</u>		
	Answered Actual Question	Answered Similar Question	Answered Dissimilar Question
Interpersonal Ratings (<i>SD</i>)	3.46 (1.22)	3.28 (1.06)	2.75 (1.39)
% Recalling the Actual Question	82%	54%	70%

Note: For each dependent measure, the difference between conditions was statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Study 2: Answer the Right Question Poorly, or Dodge?

Study 1 demonstrated that speakers can get away with dodging questions without punishment when answering a question similar to the one asked. In everyday life, of course, people most attempt to dodge questions when they are not prepared with a good answer to the question asked – for example, when one’s boss pops into one’s office unannounced to inquiring as to one’s lateness, leaving one to stammer through a poorly phrased answer. In Study 2, we compared the efficacy of dodging such questions by answering a similar question to bumbling through an answer to the right question. We expected that providing a good answer to a similar question would result in evaluations similar to providing a good answer to the right question (replicating Study 1), and might even be better than answering the right question poorly.

Method

Participants. Participants ($N = 275$, 56% female, $M_{age} = 39.2$, $SD = 15.5$) completed the study online.

Procedure. In this study participants watched the debates on video to simulate real televised debates (Norton & Goethals, 2004). As in Study 1, all clips began with a question about education for the first politician, which this politician answered. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of three conditions. As in Study 1, some participants heard the politician directly answer the question asked (about healthcare), and others heard him answer a similar question to the one asked (about the drug problem). Finally, we added a condition which was identical to the first condition in that the politician answered the actual question asked (about healthcare) with the same substantive response as those who heard the direct answer, but in this condition he fumbled through this answer, adding pauses, “um”s, and “uh”s throughout.

Participants evaluated the second politician on the same four interpersonal dimensions as in Study 1; we again created a composite index (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .93$).

Finally, participants answered the same four option multiple-choice question about what question the politician had been asked.

Results

Interpersonal evaluations. As predicted, evaluations of the politician were impacted by our manipulations, $F(2, 272) = 5.26$, $p < .01$, $p_{rep} = 0.96$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. Replicating Study 1, evaluations of the politician did not differ whether the politician provided a good answer to the question asked ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.13$) or to a similar question ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 1.28$), $t(188) = .45$, $p > .65$, $d = .06$. Evaluations of the

politician who answered the right question but did so poorly, however, were significantly lower than both other conditions ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 1.12$), $ts > 2.51$, $ps < .02$, $ds > .38$.

Thus, as predicted, listeners punished speakers who answered the right question but made a mess of it, and again failed to punish speakers who dodged the question by answering a similar question.

Recall. Participants' ability to identify the question asked of the second politician was again impacted by our manipulation, $\chi^2(2) = 8.50$, $p < .02$. As in Study 1, participants were generally able to identify that the question asked of the second politician was about healthcare when he answered the question asked – whether he answered it well (84%) or poorly (84%) – such that recall in both conditions was significantly higher than in the condition where he dodged by answering a similar question, where just 68% recalled the actual question, $\chi^2s(1) > 5.36$, $ps < .03$. Thus, recall of the question asked was impaired when the politician answered a similar question, and, once again, participants viewed these successful question-dodgers favorably.

Table 2: Interpersonal Ratings and Recall (Study 2)

	<u>Condition</u>		
	Answered Actual Question Well	Answered Similar Question	Answered Actual Question Poorly
Interpersonal Ratings (<i>SD</i>)	3.31 (1.13)	3.24 (1.28)	2.78 (1.12)
% Recalling the Actual Question	84%	68%	84%

Note: For each dependent measure, the difference between conditions was statistically significant at $p < .05$.

General Discussion

We might expect that when people try to dodge a question by answering an entirely different question, their conversation partners would both notice the attempt and penalize them for their audacity. To the contrary, we found that participants did not punish a speaker when he dodged a question by answering a similar one, and that this lack of punishment went hand-in-hand with their failure to detect that the question asked was not answered. Participants were not blind to all question-dodging, however. They noticed – and punished – egregious question-dodging, as when the question answered was too dissimilar to the question asked (Study 1). They also punished poor delivery of a direct answer, ironically preferring speakers who answered the wrong question well to speakers who answered the right question poorly (Study 2).

These results add to the growing literature on people's surprising unawareness to changes in their environment in two ways. First, we extend change blindness to a new domain, a back-and-forth conversational context in which a communicator can, without being detected, answer a different question than the one he is asked. Most importantly, we extend this literature into the domain of person perception. Listeners' conversational blindness allows speakers to avoid the negative interpersonal costs of answering questions they would rather not answer, while being perceived as having answered the questions they were asked. Thus conversational blindness allows politicians – and likely people in everyday discourse – to seamlessly dodge questions without detection, and without penalty.

Conversational blindness occurs in part because real-world conversations occur as a continuous ebb and flow, leaving little time for people to reflect on how every statement links to each previous statement. Indeed, people's inability to notice not just subtle changes to their environment but even obvious changes have been traced to the inherent limitations of attention (Neisser, 1979; Simons & Chabris, 1999). Thus the recall we observe in our experiments is, if anything, an overestimate of people's ability to detect dodges, since we presented participants with a forced-choice four-option question – giving them a 25% chance at the right answer – a situation that does not arise naturally in the world. Accordingly, decreasing conversational blindness in everyday interactions may be no easy task.

Interestingly, television networks have taken steps to curtail politicians' efforts to dodge questions during political debates by posting the question asked of politicians for the duration of their answers. Should such interventions reduce the incidence of

conversational blindness, the results from our second study might be reversed: Those who answer the right question with substance may be preferred over those who answer the wrong question with style.

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