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Advisees or Colleagues: Will Advisors Flout Grice's Maxim of Quality with Their Students?

## **Introduction**

Everyone has uniqueness to their use of language. One fascination with a person's language occurs when their language varies when a person encounters different situations or people. As well, a person can manipulate how they use language to create different meanings with what they say in order to create relationships, present themselves in a certain way, or get what they want. Besides these, there are so many different factors that make a single person's speech so diverse from others. This, of course, applies to professors within universities and colleges. Professors speak to students and their advisees differently than they would their colleagues, other professors, and faculty. Looking into this from a student's standpoint, very interesting things can be observed. One observation that can be looked at is Grice's Maxim of Quality. Grice's Maxims of Conversation, which lie under the linguistic field of pragmatics, hold many of these variations of language use and how a person uses language to create meaning.

When looking at a professor's language use, they obviously use diverse language depending on the situation and who they are communicating with. When faced with a question from an advisee of theirs about a fellow professor, they face a challenge. Do they reserve their thoughts about that colleague (good or bad), do they maintain trust and honesty with their student, or do they find another alternative? This can go many different routes and can be very interesting to observe and research as a linguist, a student, and future educator.

## Statement of Research Question

Among professors at MSUM, are female professors more likely to violate Grice's Maxim of Quality than male professors when asked, by an advisee, about a professor they know to be troublesome with students?

## Literary Review

One of the strongest pieces of linguistics, in the field of pragmatics, is Paul Grice's contribution with his Maxims of Conversation and Cooperative Principle. In the words of Jan and Ronald Chenail, professors at Bowdoin College and Nova Southeastern University, "Paul Grice... believed that conversation is a cooperative activity in which both speaker and addressee engaged each other using the same (understood) guidelines" (277). This is the basis for Grice's Cooperative Principle, which states, "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (qtd. in Chenail 277). In other words, the conversation between the speaker and the listener must be cooperative in a way that is reasonable and mutual within the exchanges of speech.

The Cooperative Principle is followed when its four maxims of conversation are followed. The four maxims are: Quantity, Quality, Relevance, and Manner. The four maxims together are considered, according to the glossary of *Language: Introductory Readings*, editors, Virginia Clark, et al, state the Maxims of Conversation are: "Grice's formulation of shared conversational rules constraining participants in conversation" (869). Ronald Wardhaugh, professor emeritus at the University of Toronto, examines speech act theories and discusses Grice's Cooperative Principle and Conversational Maxims. In summary, he states, that although these maxims, or rules, are necessary for cooperative speech according to Grice's principle,

typical, everyday speakers do not follow the maxims, which result in flouting. When speakers flout maxims, they implicate a meaning in what they say instead of directly stating their intended meaning (307-308).

One of Grice's four maxims of conversation is the Maxim of Quality. Don Fallis, professor of philosophy at University of Arizona, discusses Grice's Maxim of Quality in analysis of lying. He explains there are two parts to obeying Maxim of Quality. "The first part of agreeing with this rule is the speaker must not make assertions that they believe to be false" (36). Sarcasm, irony, and lying exemplify this. "The second part of following the maxim of quality says that the speaker should not provide information that they do not have 'adequate evidence' for" (36). Giving advice or directions without strong knowledge about the topic or location in question would be an example of violating this rule.

Philosophy professor, Mark Kingwell, of York University brings up an interesting idea in regards to Grice's Maxim of Quality. He questions: What if people did not flout the Maxim of Quality? Through his analysis, he explains, if people had everyday conversations without flouting the maxim of quality, they would be participating in "perfectly rational speech" (387-388). Positive aspects can come from this idea such as, "maximizing the efficient exchange of information between speakers and so allow them to achieve their goals more easily" (388). The problem arises that a person who refuses to flout Grice's Maxim of Quality, if doing so is truly possible, will start to disconnect from others. Being truthful all the time, Kingwell suggests, can lead to unintended consequences. For a person who "restrict[s themselves] to true and direct questions and answers, [they] quickly discover that [their] friends have" disappeared and have become uninterested and avoid them (388). This has to do with the main reasons why the maxim of quality is usually violated.

Two major ways Grice's Maxim of Quality is typically flouted is to be polite or to lie. Kingwell focuses on politeness in correlation to Grice's Maxim of Quality. "[Being] polite is troubling" when the maxims of conversation are involved. "Polite deflections and evasion, indirection and not-saying... including saving face... are obvious deviations from the four original maxims" (391). An example of this would be complimenting on someone's outfit with a genuine tone to be polite even though the outfit has unappealing qualities. They would be flouting Grice's Maxim of Quality because they send a message that they know to be false. This violation of the Maxim of Quality was purposeful, though, to be polite and "save face".

Lying also violates Grice's Maxim of Quality on a regular basis. Don Fallis discusses two key factors in forming lies. First, "in order to lie, you have to make a statement.... however, you do not have to make this statement out loud" (37). In other words, by nodding 'yes' to a question that the answer is 'no', this is a way of lying. Secondly, "...in order to lie, you have to believe that your statement is false" (38). If someone asks a question and the listener responds with something they are unsure of but believe to be as truthful as they can present the information they can give, they are not lying just uninformed or unreliable.

When flouting Grice's Maxim of Quality between sexes of males and females, very little research has been conducted and information is sparse. Åsa Brumark, professor at Södertörn University College in Sweden, has performed some research and study in this field. With use of combination of sources from Brown, Levinson, Lakoff, and Rundquist, Brumark states, "...the popular assumption that women are more indirect and concerned about face-saving "politeness" in social interaction than men are has not been confirmed by empirical research" (1207). Referring to Rundquist's 1992 study, Brumark states that "men flouted the Gricean maxims more frequently than women did. In addition, men seemed to have special reasons for flouting the

maxims, such as... being humorous... ironic or sarcastic... addressed to their conversational partners” (1207-1208). In all, from the little amount of data and research on this subject of gender lines and flouting, men tend to have a more negative aspect when violating maxims, whereas women tend to flout when they want to save face or be polite. From the essence Brumark gives of Rundquist’s 1992 study, assumptions can be made that men and women do follow some sort of specific way they tend to flout Grice’s Maxim of Quality as well as other Conversational Maxims.

### **Methods and Analysis**

When researching whether a person flouts Grice’s Maxim of Quality, collecting accurate data can be difficult. When presenting information to a person, expecting them to flout the maxim of quality, it is hard to say whether or not what they say is truthful. This predicament made research and methods of my study to be difficult to figure out; I needed a way to collect reliable data.

When researching whether men or women flout Grice’s Maxim of Quality, I wanted to use the situation of a person being asked to give their phone number to someone they find attractive in a social setting. When I was preparing this idea to study, a secondary factor came to mind that may alter how someone may react to this situation. This secondary factor may be whether or not the person is alone. But when I began the final preparation stages of my methods, I started to find that my study was too large and, in such situation, was hard to gauge if they would truly respond the way they said they would. Because of these difficult factors, I chose to find a different way to measure which gender flouts Grice’s Maxim of Quality more. In turn, I decided to find if professors at MSUM will violate the Maxim of Quality with their advisees, directly observing the gender of the professors who participated.

Some credit has to go to Dr. Elizabeth Kirchoff, who helped me throughout the process. She guided me to choosing this study on professors at the university. Due to my work with tutoring students in MSUM's University Writing Support Center and being a college student who faces the effects poor professors have on students, we both found that this topic was appropriate for me to research and study. This seemed like an awfully boring choice, but later turned out to be very enjoyable.

My method of collecting data was a survey. The survey was given out to professors at MSUM in all departments. The survey was a form-like sheet asking for their department, gender, a yes or no question, and a space allowing each participant to justify their response.

I asked for department on my survey to know what departments I have been to and where I could receive more data if I needed it.

The gender question was placed there so I had my binary that I was observing and analyzing for my research.

The question that I used to analyze Grice's Maxim of Quality violations between genders among MSUM professors was stated as such: "Your advisee comes into your office with a question pertaining to a class they would like to take next semester. You notice there is only one section of this particular class taught by an instructor that you know to be very poor. You know that the rate of student failure with this professor is high in every course they teach and students struggle to understand the concepts and material due to the instructor's teaching styles and grading along with other components.

"The student asks you directly and in person, "Is this a good professor?" Do you tell the student that the instructor is *not* good?"

I emphasized the word ‘not’ in my survey to indicate that this professor performs poorly at instructing, as well as to indicate the direct meaning of the question that I am looking for.

This question was followed by two responses they could choose from: “Yes, I would” or “No, I would not”. If they were to say yes, they would comply to Grice’s Maxim of Quality. If they were to answer no, they would be in violation of Grice’s Maxim of Quality. The reasoning behind why ‘yes’ complies and ‘no’ violates is because a student has the right to know whether or not the professor is a poor instructor. A majority of students hope to have a successful time in college and graduate with a degree. A student, with these hopes, also hopes their advisor would guide them into success as well, so, if a student asks their advisee if a certain professor is good or not, they hope that their advisee would be honest with them in that sense. In regards to this reasoning, an advisor directly being honest with their advisee about a professor by directly addressing whether such instructor is poor or not would comply with Grice’s Maxim of Quality because they are being truthful with what they say and have enough information to back up their claim. Their information was guaranteed by the statements given in the survey. A professor who does not directly advise the student on a poor professor would be flouting Grice’s Maxim of Quality because they are not being directly honest and truthful with their advisee. I want to make note that although some professors did flout the maxim by saying ‘no’, they still hope for success in their advisees and do guide them towards that, but they would not directly address the professor, instead they would find other alternatives for their student to find an answer whether or not they should take that specific course with that specific professor mentioned in my survey. I further discuss this later.

I went through many departments around campus and went door-to-door asking professors, who had their doors open, whether or not they would like to take a quick survey. As I

began, I started to notice much frustration with professors and my question. Many that were dismayed or upset about my question would say things along the lines of, “I would never say that!” in regards to the telling the students that the instructor is “not good”. For some, they were very hung up on the phrasing of “not good”. This could maybe be fixed for next time. Others were shocked other professors would say such things about professors. During my research, though, I began handing out my survey with a ready an explanation of the question. I would say, as I knew they were nearing the end of the question, “I understand that you probably would not say the words “not good”, but would you advise your advisee that a certain professor is a poor instructor?” I think, regardless of giving my explanation, they had their answer already. A total of 25 professors took my survey.

I had many shocked responses to my questions. One professor in the English department talked to me for roughly twenty minutes on the issue and could not believe that this actually happens between advisees and advisors. She believed, regardless of who taught the course, the content would be the same and students had resources to get over that struggle, and put the “blame”, so to speak, on the student and the class. Furthering this point, she said that all professors at MSUM have the credentials to be here, so it could not be the professors to blame.

Another female professor was completely dumbfounded and was definitely discouraged by the question and plainly wrote: “I would not use those words!”.

Nearly all of the male ‘no’ responses did not take the question too personally, as some of the female participants did. Many said something along the lines of allowing the students to find that information out on their own from other sources, not from them directly.

Two responders to my survey decided they did not like the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ selections and created a “third option”; one was a male professor and the other chose not to specify a gender.



They both respectively fall under the ‘no’ category, but since they did not answer as such, I put them in their own category. I did not want to disregard their answers since they are important to the research and the process. Both of their responses ran along the lines of every student is different, as well as maintaining the integrity of their fellow professors. One of the “third option” responses stated in their “why” section, “Professors I might consider ‘poor professors’ may be excellent professors for some students, and ‘excellent professors’ may be poor professors to others.” Many of the ‘no’ responses correlated with this rationale.

As stated before, any response, other than ‘yes’, violates or flouts Grice’s Maxim of Quality. Although they violate this maxim, they still have validity in their reasoning and justification of why they chose not to directly advise their advisee about a “poor professor”. All their justifications and rationale about why they said ‘no’ are, according to Grice’s conversational maxims, implicatures (307). Because they did not directly state to their advisee about a professor’s quality and, therefore, in violation of Grice’s Maxim of Quality, they imply a meaning as to why they flout this maxim.

Addressing the ‘no’ responses, many stated a few reasons that were common across all ‘no’ replies. Again, each of these reasons are implicatures and are their reasons as to why they are not directly honest about a specific professor.

One common justification for not advising a student that professor is poor was that it was unprofessional or unethical to talk about other colleagues in such a way. This was a common theme with many professors. Although they want success of their students, they also want to either hold the professionalism among their colleagues or to maintain good rapport with them, as well as their advisee. Another look at this would be another commonality among ‘no’ responses which was something along the lines of “every student is different”. Many who replied ‘no’ said

that they would suggest their advisee to talk to the professor in question for a multitude of reasons, such as: getting to know them and get a feel to as who they are, ask them about the course and get an idea about the course from the professor themselves, or ask peers who have taken classes from this certain professor. Because each student is different, a majority of advisors would not want to guide them directly away from a certain professor who has been troublesome to others in the past because there is a possibility for their advisee to work really well with the professor in question. One final commonality among ‘no’ respondents was the notion that regardless of who teaches a specific course, a student can always get something out of the class. Many of the ‘no’ replies to my survey put focus on material and content rather than a specific professor. These all constitute as implicatures when flouting Grice’s Maxim of Quality.

As I finished collecting my data, I sorted the surveys between genders. As I was going through responses, I realized some discrepancies with the responses that I do want to note about. There was one response from a professor who said they would not specify their gender. Their response is counted in the bar graph within the findings section. This “non-gender specific” professor also gave me a “third option” response. Though the research is between the gender binary of males and females, I did not want to completely deny the information given from this professor. As well, one male response did not follow the yes/no binary and was not included in the final analysis of data between men and women and yes or no, yet I did include them in my findings.

I then put the data into two tables; one table analyzes the male data, the other analyzes the female data, and both show the respective percentages among participants their own gender. I then combined the data to find likeliness of certain variables, like whether males are more likely to flout or not, for example. Following the tables, a bar graph displays the information held in the

tables so the information can be clearly read and visually appealing. The female data is represented in blue and the male data is represented in pink. The non-binary response is grey. They are put onto the graph in categories in regards to their response. The first set of bars compares the ‘no’ responses between men and women. The second set compares the ‘yes’ responses between men and women. Lastly, the third set compares the “third option” between men and women, and includes the non-gender specific response as well, as it was not a yes/no reply.

Overall, my research project, the data collection, and analysis were all very interesting. The analysis of why the participants who said ‘no’ was interesting as a college student as well as a future educator who will most likely have to face this very situation, and was just as fascinating through the lens of a linguist. To have professors as participants was interesting to have since usually the older adults are the ones researching younger ones. Going door-to-door asking professors was a little nerve-wracking but to see their expressions as they read the question was fun to see and at times humorous; I particularly liked the raising of eyebrows or inquisitive looking up at me from the paper without moving their face from the paper. Making professors squirm in their seats, as they sometimes make their students do, was pleasing and satisfying as a researcher and student. I knew I was opening a can of worms among the professors at MSUM.

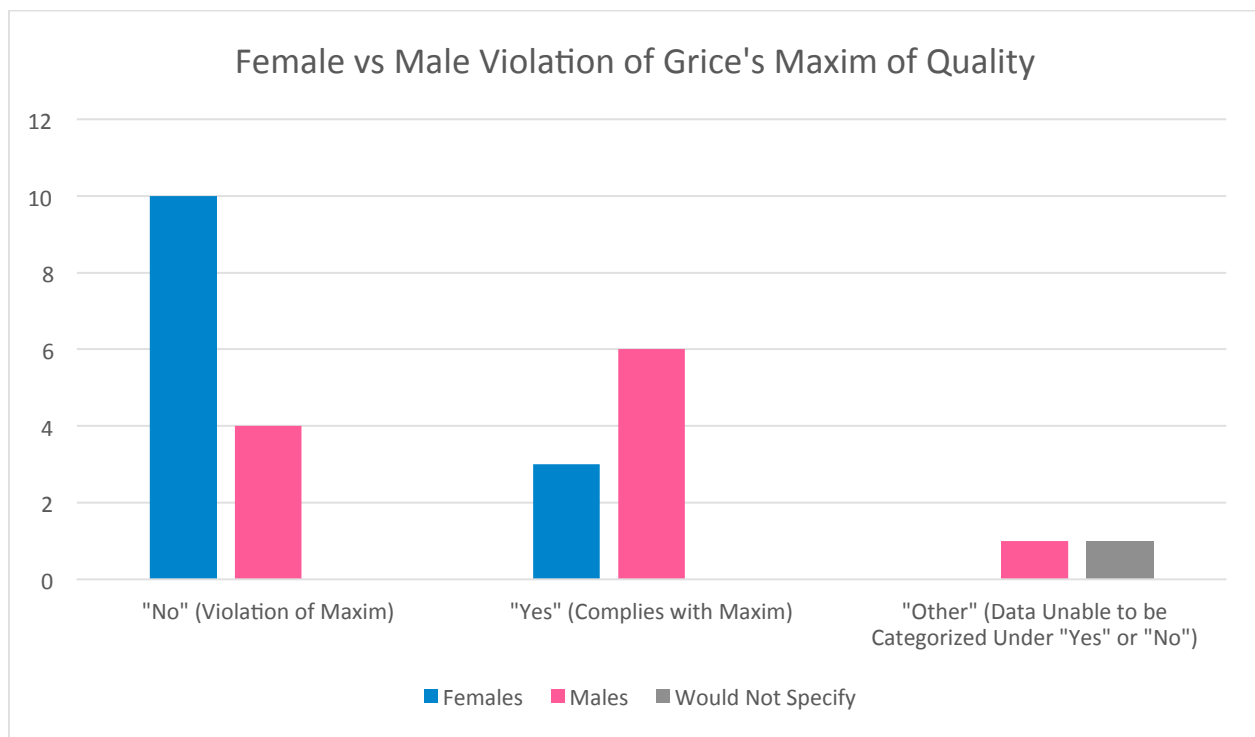
### Findings:

<b>Males:</b>		Total: 11
Yes: 6 6/11 55%	No: 4 4/11 36%	“Option Three”: 1 1/11 9%

<b>Females:</b>	Total: 13
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Yes: 3 3/13 23%	No: 10 10/13 77%	“Option Three”: 0 0/13 0%
<b>Females &amp; Males:</b>		*Total: 23
Yes: 9 M: 6/9 (67%)   F: 3/9 (33%)	No: 14 M: 10/14 (71%)   F: 4/14 (19%)	

\*This total represents the number of surveys taken that gave a yes or no answer and followed the gender binary.



The findings show that 55 percent of male participants, among other males, say that they would directly tell their advisee that a professor they know to be poor should be avoided. This is a large gap between female professors, which only 23 percent said they would. In this case, ten out of the thirteen female professors (77 percent) would violate Grice's Maxim of Quality and not tell their advisee that another professor was of poor quality, whereas only four out of eleven male professors (36 percent) would violate the Maxim of Quality to their advisee. As the charts

and graphs indicate, male professors are less likely to flout Grice's Maxim of Quality than female professors at MSUM. Looking at the numbers of both genders combined, when asking advisees about a professor, female professors/advisors are 71 percent more likely to be indirect and flout Grice's Maxim of Quality, whereas male professors/advisors are 67 percent more likely to be direct or honest about a professor in question and not violate Grice's Maxim of Quality.

## **Discussion**

Overall, my research data matched up with my hypothesis and my statement of research question. Although this correlated to my data, more data and testing would be needed to further back my findings.

However, as my data showed, compared to males, female professors/advisors are more likely to flout Grice's Maxim of Quality with their advisee when asked about a professor, as I had hypothesized. The basis I had as to why I have assumed women would flout Grice's Maxim of Quality more often than men was because of the topic of relationships we discussed in class.

In Deborah Tannen's film, *Talking 9 to 5: Women and Men in the Workplace*, she discusses that females, from an early age, continue to create closer relationships to others than males. Females typically remember things about others, try to maintain good rapport, and make connections with others. On the other hand, males keep topics on the surface, not very deep, try to be authoritative, and typically are very direct with both orders and what they have to say (Tannen). I believe this plays some part into how my results turned out. As my data shows, male professors/advisors were more likely to be direct in saying that they would tell their advisee that a specific professor was poor or not. This is that directness and honesty Tannen observed and found in her own studies in how men and women communicate. Conversely, female

professors/advisors were more likely to be indirect and either address the course itself or be very indirect about the professor in question. This, too, shows Tannen's observations (Tannen).

Male professors/advisors are more direct and honest with others, regardless of their relationships or rapport with others; their focus is in the conversation they are having with their advisee, not about their relationship with the professor in question. Whereas females want to uphold that rapport and relationship with their colleagues, as well as keeping trust in their advisees. This means, they must not say anything to disrupt their relationships with their fellow professors, so they must take an indirect route to address their advisee's questions about a professor. These are observations I saw with my research as well as connections with Tannen's research (Tannen).

This all holds much importance within education. Students want the truth so they can make educated decisions to create success for themselves. Professors hope they can maintain their rapport, reputations, and relationships with their fellow colleagues. As well, advisors wish to keep trust and rapport with their advisees with hopes they are successful while holding onto their relationships with other professors. These three sets of people, students, professors, and advisees, all have a role in education. I want to note that although professors are also advisees, these are different roles they play in the education field.

The impact professors/advisors have in their communication as educators has much importance. If they are not honest with their advisees, they will not be efficient as an advisor, students will not want to ask them for advice, and they could be seen as poor maybe both as an advisor and a professor because their performance as a "dishonest" advisor can reflect upon them. As well, if a professor/advisor holds poor rapport with fellow professors, they can be seen as the poor instructor as well. This can be reflected to students who do or do not have that

professor or advisor. This all correlated upon how they communicate, and Grice's Maxim of Quality holds a lot of weight because this rule indicates whether or not a person stays truthful with someone and holds them to having enough information to back up what they are saying. If a professor or advisor is not being truthful to their student or advisee, they are not going to have good relationships, reputation, or rapport with the students and, possibly, other faculty and staff.

The numbers are important as they tell me the results according to my state of research question. Though, to me, as a college student, linguist, and future educator, deciphering why they violate Grice's Maxim of Quality is just as important. I wanted to see the reasoning behind why an advisor would refrain from telling their advisee that a certain professor was poor.

As a student, I would want my advisor to tell me that an instructor is poor and I would have a difficult time with that professor. Just because the content is the same, no matter who teaches the material, certain professors have a more efficient way of teaching than others. That is where the line lies between 'yes' and 'no', though. Although a professor has shown to be poor in the past, will they also be poor with this advisee? But regardless, I would, as a student, want that information that a professor has been regarded as poor by other students and professors. That information, to me, would be very helpful in making my decision whether to take that professor's course or not; I would think all students would feel the same way. This assumption is the overall guidelines as to what constitutes as flouting Grice's Maxim of Quality or not.

As a linguist, it is not only important to observe the violations of Conversational Maxims. It is important to know why and how a person uses language to create and also manipulate meaning. This can also have importance for linguists when observing politics, family dynamics, and other crucial social situations. Since how someone uses pragmatics to their advantage can be used in many ways, finding out how people do that is vital. Just looking at the past election and

how candidates use language to put down others and generate voter likeness creates a huge area of analysis and research for linguists. Just as prominent, analyzing what a candidate is saying in correspondence to what they mean, as a linguist and as a citizen, provides not only hard facts, but unbiased information.

Finally, as future educator myself, I would want to make sure my students respect me as well as think of me as trustworthy and reliable; the same goes to my relationships with fellow colleagues. If the education system has many of these discrepancies of untrustworthy, unreliable, and hard to work with educators, students are not receiving the education they deserve and their school, college, or university also starts to have a hurt or damaged reputation as well. All these things connect to one another under the field of education and all links back to the basic function of communication, linguistics, pragmatics, and Grice's Maxims of Conversation.

## **Conclusion**

Thinking about Grice's Maxim of Quality and how that relates to professors, from a student's standpoint, brings up a lot of interesting ideas. Observing adults with more knowledge and intellect than one's self and seeing them on a level field by researching this idea of Grice's Maxim of Quality is very fascinating. Typically, schools and universities have a hierarchy fixates teachers or professors respectfully above students. With this project, I felt that the tables had turned a little bit. Instead of the teachers trying to find out more about what I knew or felt about content, I was asking them about how they felt or knew about this issue. This, I could tell, made some participants uncomfortable and the experience was amazing!

Not only fun and interesting, understanding how people communicate holds purpose and is crucial to research, acknowledge, and learn about. As well, understanding and realizing Grice's Maxims of Conversation and knowing that people do not always mean what they say, but



rather imply certain meanings intrigues many and provides a large part of pragmatics. How one uses language to create and manipulate meaning provokes thought and also vital to know when not only observing simple ideas like advisor/advisee relationships but also looking other incidents like political speeches to see how a candidate uses words to manipulate their meaning to gain voter likeness.

## Appendix

Professor Department/Subject: \_\_\_\_\_

Circle One: Gender: Male / Female

Your advisee comes into your office with a question pertaining to a class they would like to take next semester. You notice there is only one section of this particular class taught by an instructor that you know to be very poor. You know that the rate of student failure with this professor is high in every course they teach and students struggle to understand the concepts and material due to the instructor's teaching styles and grading along with other components.

The student asks you directly and in person, "Is this a good professor?" Do you tell the student that the instructor is *not* good?

Circle one:      Yes, I would.      /      No, I would not.

Why do you respond this way? \_\_\_\_\_

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<b>Males:</b>		Total: 11
Yes: 6 6/11 55%	No: 4 4/11 36%	“Option Three”: 1 1/11 9%

<b>Females:</b>		Total: 13
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