Adversarial Discourse in Prime Minister’s Questions

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Introduction

One of the major criticisms of Brown and Levinson’s (1978, 1987) highly influential theory of politeness is that it fails adequately to deal with impoliteness. Within the framework of politeness theory, rudeness is envisaged simply as a deviation from or violation of rules of cooperative/polite communication.

1. In fact, rudeness can be deliberate and motivated, if not calculated and strategic (Kienpointer, 1997).

2. Lakoff (1989) argued that politeness is primarily associated with ordinary conversation. She proposed that theories of linguistic politeness must be extended to discourse in professional and institutional contexts.

3. Culpeper (1996) has argued that in some contexts (e.g., army training and literary drama) impoliteness is not a marginal activity, but central to the interaction that takes place.

4. In this paper, we want to analyse discourse in another context, namely, that of Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs) in the British House of Commons.

5. Specifically, we want to argue that this context is characterized by a particular kind of adversarial discourse, in which protagonists seek to threaten and undermine each other's face in a kind of verbal boxing match, in direct contrast to the conceptualisation of Brown and Levinson’s theory of politeness.

Prime Minister’s Questions

1. PMQs take place once a week every Wednesday, lasting for just 30 minutes.

2. PMQs always begin with the same tabled question to the PM, asking if s/he will list his/her official engagements for the day. All other questions are
supplementary - PMQs have the important elements of unpredictability and surprise.

3. MPs are protected by parliamentary privilege, which allows them to speak freely in the House of Commons without fear of legal action for slander.

4. But they are expected to observe certain traditions and conventions regarding what is termed “unparliamentary language”.
   - They should not be abusive or insulting.
   - Call another member a liar
   - Suggest another MP has false motives
   - Misrepresent another MP.

The Speaker may ask an MP to withdraw an objectionable utterance, or even name an MP, i.e., suspend them from the House for a specified period of time.

Over the years, Speakers have objected to the use of abusive epithets such as “blackguard, coward, git, guttersnipe, hooligan, rat, swine, traitor and stoolpigeon”; most recently “idiot”.

Thus, in PMQs, MPs must orient both to the expectation that:

1. Dialogue should follow a question-answer pattern.
2. Refrain from unacceptable unparliamentary language.

Within these constraints, there is still a great deal of scope for the strategic use of adversarial discourse. How they do this within these constraints was the focus of this study.

Previous research

HARRIS (2001) analyzed 12 sessions of PMQs, recorded between March and
November 2000. She argued that much of the discourse of PMQs is composed of intentional and explicitly face-threatening acts (FTAs). She identified several different strategies:

1. Leader of the Opposition asks a question requesting some highly specific information:
   - PM may not have the information to hand, or may not wish to publicize it.
   - If the PM declines or fails to answer the question, the Leader of the Opposition may then subsequently provide the information in order to embarrass or attack the PM.

2. Use of questions that build in face-threatening presuppositions.
   e.g., “Doesn’t he find it deeply disturbing that the Trade Secretary is a classic example of this all mouth and no delivery Government?” presupposes the government is “all mouth and no delivery”.

3. Use of deliberately insulting lexical choices, such as “dodging questions”, “pathetic”, or “absolutely worthless”.

At the same time, Harris (2001) also noted the use of distancing strategies, such as addressing remarks to the Speaker of the House rather than directly to the Prime Minister, and referring to MPs in the third person (rather than as “you”). Arguably, such practices mitigate the full force of FTAs, thereby keeping the discourse within the bounds of acceptable parliamentary language. However, the focus of this study was specifically on the way in which FTAs are performed in PMQs. Whereas Harris’ (2001) paper was based on the use of illustrative examples, the aim of this study was to conduct a more systematic investigation by identifying different techniques whereby
questioning turns are used by the Leader of the Opposition to attack the PM, and on the
how the PM utilises his response turns to counter these attacks.

The conceptualisation presented here is organized in terms of two main
dimensions, questions and responses:

1. It is important to note that in practice it is not question-response sequences that
form the basic interactional units of PMQs, but speaking turns (Harris, 2001).
So, for example, questions prototypically take the form of a series of propositions
followed by an interrogative (e.g., is the Prime Minister aware that, will he assure
the House that). The use of speaking turns allows the questioner to perform
additional FTAs which do not form part of an interrogative.

2. In replying to questions, the Prime Minister may or may not perform FTAs in
response. The second dimension of the study was to identify different ways in
which the PM responds to face-threats in questions.

Method

1. Study based on 18 sessions of PMQs: 9 with Tony Blair and 9 with Gordon
Brown. Blair’s resignation as Prime Minister (27 June, 2007) provided the
opportunity to sample PMQs from two different Prime Ministers.

   • The last 9 sessions leading up to Blair=s resignation (18 April - 27 June,
     2007), and the first 9 sessions of Brown=s premiership (4 July - 21
     November, 2007).
   • During all 18 sessions, they responded to questions from David Cameron
     (at that time, Leader of the Conservative Opposition).

2. Videorecordings of PMQs are available from the Downing Street website.
Transcripts are available from Hansard, the written record of parliamentary debates in the House of Commons.

3. Hansard is not a full verbatim record of parliamentary proceedings. To produce a verbatim record of each PMQs, transcripts were made directly from the videorecordings.

4. In this fashion, all questions from David Cameron to both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were then transcribed, as were the responses from both Prime Ministers.

**Question and response techniques**

1. **Questioning Turns**

1.1 **Preface**

Precedes the interrogative and are often used to perform FTAs. For example, before David Cameron asks Tony Blair a question about Gordon Brown the then Chancellor, he makes a sustained attack on him:

“We know why we do not want the Chancellor he has complicated the tax system and virtually bankrupted the pensions system, he is impossible to work with and he never says sorry. That is why we don’t want the Chancellor”.

1.2 **Detailed question**

Harris (2001) identifies how the Leader of the Opposition may asks disingenuous questions requesting some highly specific information, to which s/he may already have the answer. The PM may not have the information to hand, or may not wish to publicize it, and if he declines or fails to answer the question, the Leader of the Opposition may then subsequently provide the information in order to embarrass or
attack the PM.

NB The PM does not know the questions in advance, so may be easily caught out by this tactic.

1.3 Contentious presupposition

To directly insult another MP is unacceptable, it is regarded as a form of “unparliamentary language”. However, this convention may be circumvented by embedding insults in questions. For example, Cameron asked Blair whether his decision to resign as PM before completing a full third term “was the last of his broken promises”. Rather than directly accusing Blair of “breaking promises” which might have been regarded as unacceptable, Cameron embeds the insult in the presuppositional content of the question.

1.4 Conflictual question

According to Bavelas, Black, Chovil and Mullett (1990), equivocation occurs in response to questions which create a communicative conflict (CC), where all the possible replies have potentially negative consequences, but nevertheless a reply is still expected. In the context of broadcast political interviews, Bull, Elliott, Palmer and Walker (1996) argued that a prime cause of such conflicts are “threats to face”. If all the possible replies to a question will make the politician look bad and/or constrain their his/her freedom of action, then the most likely response is to equivocate. Thus, conflictual questions create pressures towards equivocation, which in itself can also be face-damaging, because it makes the politician look evasive. However, it is typically less face-damaging than 18 other forms of face-threat, specified in a typology of questions devised by the author and his colleagues (Bull et al., 1996).
1.5 Invitation to perform a face-damaging response

One way in which a conflictual question can be created is by inviting the respondent to perform a face-damaging act (e.g., by apologising, by criticizing a member of his/her own party, by admitting that a particular policy has been a complete failure, or that a government department has been incompetent). Cameron persistently used this strategy with Gordon Brown when he was PM, asking him to apologise for the state of the economy, or admit he was completely wrong when he said he had “abolished boom and bust”. Just as equivocation theory would predict, GB typically equivocated in response to this question. Cameron could then further criticise Brown for being evasive, and not answering the question.

1.6 Aside

An aside is a digression from the main part of the questioning turn, which the speaker may also use to perform a FTA. It may occur either in the preface or the interrogative.

For example, when the Speaker called a Labour MP to order for making excessive interruptions, Cameron digresses from his question to make an aside attacking the Labour government for its lack of discipline: “It comes to something when you have to tick off the Prime Minister’s Parliamentary Private Secretary, Mr. Speaker”).

2. Responses

In responding to a FTA in a question, the PM may or may not use a FTA. At least five different ways of responding to a FTA can be distinguished.

2.1 Positive face

2.2 Rebuttal
2.3 Attack
2.4 Ignore
2.5 Self-justify

In the following example, TB uses several strategies in his response to Cameron’s question about what does he thing is wrong with Gordon Brown as his successor (invites TB to perform a face-damaging response by criticizing a colleague] (18 April 2007):

**The Prime Minister:** Let me tell the right hon. Gentleman what is right with the Chancellor.

[Ignores FTA] The right hon. Gentleman has some experience of the economy, has he not? He had something to do with the British economy once hasn't he? Back in 1992, did he not? He was the special adviser to the Chancellor of the time—we remember Black Wednesday. [Counter-attacks] The Chancellor has delivered the strongest economic growth that this country has ever seen, interest rates half what they were under the previous Conservative Government, the highest employment, the lowest unemployment for years and rising living standards. [Positive face & rebuttal] What’s he delivered for the British economy? A bit part on Black Wednesday

[Counter-attacks/joke at Cameron’s expense]

[Black Wednesday refers to the events of 16 September 1992 when the Conservative government was forced to withdraw the pound sterling from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM). In 2005, under the Freedom of Information Act, the loss to the UK Treasury was revealed as £3.3 billion].
Preliminary findings

Our current work has been principally concerned with developing the typology of FTAs in PMQs, so we do not have any formal data to report as yet.

1. Questions. Preliminary analysis indicates that almost every questioning turn from the Leader of the Opposition includes at least one face-threat, often several. From this perspective, face aggravation seems to be central to the discourse that takes place in PMQs.

2. Responses.
   - The system allows for the possibility that PMs do not always respond to FT questions with attacks. For example, the PM may rebut the FTA without performing a FTA themselves, or may simply ignore it.
   - In practice, however, they typically respond to a FT question with an attack, hence further supporting the view that face aggravation is a characteristic feature of PMQs discourse.
   - Preliminary analysis also shows that PMs use a whole range of strategies in responding to these face-threats, and often several strategies in combination.

Discussion

1. From these preliminary findings, PMQs can legitimately be regarded as one social context where face aggravation is central to the discourse that takes place.

2. Furthermore, this aggressive facework is both sanctioned and rewarded.
   - MPs see the prime role of the Opposition as to criticize, challenge and ridicule the government, then the pressure to perform face aggravation
may be unavoidable.

- If the Leader of the Opposition succeeds in this endeavour, he may enhance his own face; if he fails, he may undermine it.

3. From this perspective, face aggravation in PMQs may be seen as a form of communicative skill, which an effective leader of the Opposition needs be able to perform.

4. By the same token, Prime Ministers will be evaluated in terms of how effectively he or she deals with these techniques of face aggravation. Thus, coping with FT questions can also be seen as a form of communicative skill:

- Arguably, the relatively poor performances of the outgoing Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who was defeated in the 2010 general election, contributed to his poor standing with the electorate.
- Conversely, his predecessor Tony Blair was considered to be particularly effective in handling PMQs.

5. But what underlies these different perceptions? Through identifying different techniques in PMQs, our aim is to acquire a greater understanding of what may underlie those perceptions.

- By identifying specific strategies, it becomes possible to compare different styles of responding to questions in PMQs.
- Furthermore, it also becomes possible to compare the relative effectiveness of different PMs at PMQs.
- Our data are based on two PMs (Blair & Brown), but we now have a new PM in the UK (David Cameron), so our further aim is to compare the
relative performances of these three Prime Ministers at PMQs.

Conclusions

1. Face management and the ability to perform effective facework are widely regarded as central to political discourse.

2. They can also be regarded as forms of communicative skill, which a successful politician needs to be able to master.

3. In contemporary politics, a politician’s communication skills are arguably of central importance, especially given the salient power and influence of the mass media.

4. PMQs are broadcast every week on national television in the UK, and excerpts may also be highlighted on the national news, hence it is an important means whereby the British public come to know their political leaders.

5. Our aims are both to acquire a greater understanding of this particular form of discourse, and more effectively to be able to evaluate the communication skills of the central protagonists.

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**Bibliography**


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