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Prime ministerial self-reported actions in Prime Minister's Questions 1979–2010: A corpus-assisted analysis

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Abstract

This article analyses prime ministerial self-representation in the context of responses to the questions put to four recent British Prime Ministers during Prime Minister's Questions. From the transcripts of these PMs' contributions to PMQs, all the clauses with 'I' as subject were identified. Corpus analysis software was used to calculate which are the most frequent verbs of which 'I' is the subject when PMs answer questions during PMQs. The verbs were classified semantically, and pragmatic and rhetorical patterns were identified. Results show a high proportion of cognitive and communicative processes, as opposed to verbs denoting physical or material actions. Through the close analysis of PMs' utterances featuring structures with 'I' and three frequent verbs – THINK, UNDERSTAND and SAY – we explore patterns in their argumentation, management of face and authority, and identification with the norms of this political institution as well as those of the wider society. We argue that normative influences on what PMs represent themselves as doing include explicit constraints on parliamentary behaviour, an adversarial culture that persists despite long-standing criticisms, and the requirement to conform both to the conventions of this ritualised discourse situation and to broader socio-cultural expectations.

Keywords: Prime Minister's Questions; Parliament; Parliamentary discourse; Corpus-assisted analysis; Face management; Adversarial discourse

1. Introduction

This article analyses prime ministerial self-representation as demonstrated in the self-reports of Prime Minister's actions during Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs). Specifically, it explores how these utterances are both contributions and responses to the adversarial quality of this high-profile institution in the UK Parliament. PMQs has been identified as 'the absolutely dominant form of prime ministerial activity in the [House of] Commons, especially from the mid-1970s onwards' (Dunleavy et al., 1990: 123). The encounters that characterise PMQs are the most visible demonstration, short of a vote of confidence, of a Prime Minister's authority (or lack thereof) and the institution is 'famous throughout the world for its combative, adversarial atmosphere,' (Hansard Society, 2014). It has been described as 'one of the most high-profile and glamorous speech situations to occur in many parliamentary democracies ... dramatic, adversarial, and highly publicised' (Fenton-Smith, 2008: 97). In the UK it is 'the shop window of the House of Commons', as the Speaker of the House of Commons, Bercow (2010), described it, when he was complaining about the 'character, conduct, content and

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culture' of the institution. It is perhaps the most publicly well-known forum in which government business is conducted, shown on television and broadcast on the radio by the BBC every week, with recordings available there and on parliament's own website.

Officially, PMQs is an occasion that 'gives MPs the chance to question the Prime Minister,' (Parliament.UK, 2015), and is thus supposedly a contribution to deliberative democracy. It began in its current form in 1961, when there were two fifteen-minute sessions each week; these were replaced by a single, half-hour session after the 1997 general election, and PMQs now 'takes place at midday every Wednesday when the Commons is sitting' (ibid.). However, this dispassionate description conceals a network of dynamic processes and their potential consequences, of which both participants and observers are – to varying degrees – aware. The questions put to Prime Ministers (PMs) at PMQs have an inherent potential to be face threatening, and theories of face and (im)politeness have been drawn on in previous accounts of these exchanges (Bull and Fetzer, 2010; Murphy, 2014). Harris (2001: 451) maintains that 'much of the discourse of Prime Minister's Question Time is composed of intentional and explicitly face-threatening (or face-enhancing) acts'. Moreover, since these dyadic, interpersonal exchanges take place in a very public, high-profile social setting, PMs must negotiate their own and others' face within a complex network of co-present 'listeners' – both adversaries and supporters – and distant 'hearers' (Goffman, 1981).

Furthermore, every utterance by a PM in these exchanges constitutes an incremental contribution to a genre of discourse with its own historical weight. PMQs has been described as 'a kind of stylised minuet . . . a ritual, a primitive expression of the clash of political ideas on the part of those who are playing a game called high politics' (Dunleavy et al., 1993: 276, citing Sedgemore, 1980). Associated with this are two kinds of normativity, which extend beyond the norms of face management alluded to above. Firstly, explicit norms of communicative behaviour are prescribed within the institution itself; these include not only 'politeness', and the proscription of 'unparliamentary language', but also other conventions that all MPs are required to observe – or risk censure. At the same time, the behaviour of these participants is notorious for pushing against these boundaries and producing the 'orchestrated barracking,' 'yobbery and public school twittishness' that are typical of the event, according to Bercow (Watt, 2014). Secondly, questions put by the elected representatives of the population oblige PMs to attend in their responses to social and cultural norms: PMQs is not simply an insular, parliamentary event but also an opportunity to sell oneself and one's policies to the country. We provide examples of this below.

A third characteristic of the discourse which again we focus on here is the constitutive role of language itself in political action. As Chilton and Schäffner (2002: 3) observe, '. . . political activity does not exist without the use of language . . . the doing of politics is predominantly constituted in language'. The current study offers a contribution to the political discourse analysis that should, according to Fairclough and Fairclough (2012), help to explain 'how actual discursive practices contribute to maintaining or transforming a given social order, including existing power relations' (p. 12).

It has been established by extensive research that an increasing proportion of the questions posed '. . . in public affairs during the past 30 years (Clayman et al., 2006; Clayman and Heritage, 2002a,b)' are 'unanswerable' and 'virtually dedicated to performing accusations' (Heritage, 2012: 20). This is not to say that disagreement is necessarily negative or destructive. As Sifianou (2012) observes, '. . . disagreement seems to be an essential ingredient in many daily settings . . .. It may also be a building block of various institutional interactions, such as the Prime Minister's Question Time'. However, 'the norms for reasonable discussion *presuppose* that participants actually want to resolve a disagreement' (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012: 54, italics in original), whereas research comparing the rhetorical cultures of different countries' parliaments (Ilie, 2004) has identified a relatively higher incidence in the British context, in comparison with the Swedish Riksdag, of *ad hominem* insults 'focused on personality features, such as wit and intellectual capacity' (p. 76).

The responses of the PM to many questions posed during PMQs, then, are necessarily managing not just information but also personal face, institutional authority, party morale and public image. If PMQs represents a forum for those in opposition and government alike to demonstrate their allegiances and enmities through their rhetorical prowess, the stakes are arguably higher for the PM, particularly as this weekly 'performance' is one of the few activities in the House of Commons itself in which PMs regularly participate (Dunleavy et al., 1993). It is therefore not surprising either that there are accounts of nearly every PM experiencing these occasions as personal ordeals (Moncrieff, 2011; Blair, 2011), or that a lot of time and effort are spent every week in preparing for the event (Flynn, 2012). As they respond to questions that are often hostile or unanswerable (Bates et al., 2014b: 267–9), PMs are at the centre of proceedings, and under intense pressure to defend themselves, their decisions and their actions. Inevitably, therefore, a large proportion of their turns in these exchanges comprise clauses whose subject is the first person pronoun, 'I'. It is these clauses that form the data for this article, as we explain below. Prior to this, we provide some examples of the kinds of questions put to PMs, in answer to which clauses with 'I' as subject are typical.

2. PMQs as rhetorical performance

The roles of the parliamentary actors who ask the questions inevitably influence the kinds of questions they put to the PM. The most prominent questioner is the Leader of the Opposition (LO), whose words account for an increasing