



# Negotiating difference in political contexts: An exploration of Hansard

Dawn Archer

Department of Languages, Information & Communication, Manchester Metropolitan University, Geoffrey Manton Building, Rosamond Street West, Off Oxford Road, Manchester, M15 6LL, UK

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the language of MPs and Peers, when negotiating their *differences* in times past. Specifically, I draw upon Historic Hansard data (1803–2005) representative of the two Houses (Commons and Lords), paying particular attention to exchanges involving expressive politeness features (deferential terms, polite preludes, etc.). I demonstrate how such features enabled parliamentarians to “do” deference and respect, but sometimes at a surface level only. For example, utterances containing expressive politeness features functioned as implicit accusations relating to another’s inaccurate or misguided views on a particular issue and/or as a means of claiming a conflicting position. I suggest that, because such behaviour was (and remains) institutionally sanctioned and deliberately ritualistic, it did not then nor does not now constitute systematic impoliteness, in the main (cf. Harris, 2001). Rather, we witness a range of facework behaviour in parliamentary debates: from face enhancement to face aggravation, and everything between (Archer, 2015).

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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary political discourse has been identified as a site where debates tend to be framed around issues of truth (Hodges, 2008: 1), albeit “truths” that represent a shared belief about – as opposed to knowledge that corresponds – to a state in the world (cf. van Dijk, 2008). As part of such debates, political actors will often highlight “the ‘real’ truth” and/or “counter opponents’ truth claims” (Hodges, 2008: 1) by assimilating and re-accentuating the prior discourse(s) of others (Bakhtin, 1986: 89). This might relate to the *already uttered*, the *already known* and/or *common opinion* (Bakhtin, 1981: 279).

This paper draws upon a 200-year subset of UK Parliamentary speeches, drawn from official Hansard records, in order to study the behaviour of political actors of times past. The speeches relate to both the Commons and the Lords, and are available via the SAMUELS’ Experimental CQPweb Interface: SECI (Hardie, 2012; Wattam et al., 2014).<sup>1</sup> Table 1, below, provides a breakdown of the number of speeches and total words for each subset, as well as their cumulative totals.<sup>2</sup>

E-mail address: [d.archer@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:d.archer@mmu.ac.uk).

<sup>1</sup> These subsets were incorporated into SECI as part of the cross-university, AHRC/ESRC funded SAMUELS project (grant reference AH/L010062/1).

<sup>2</sup> The complete Hansard archive contains approximately 5 billion words (Vice, p.c.).

**Table 1**  
Breakdown of Hansard sub-sets.

Hansard sub-set	Total no. of speeches	Total no. of words
Commons	6,257,721	1,263,023,403
Lords	1,287,381	424,631,234
Cumulative totals	7,545,102	1,687,654,637

Having such historical records in an electronic format means that we can use computers to find utterances like (1) and (3), via the conventional formula *noble friend*, and (2)–(4), via polite precludes such as *respectfully*, *with due respect* and *with great respect*:

- (1) I profoundly disagree with my noble friend's theory (S5LV0021P0\_02257, 18/5/1916)
- (2) I wish respectfully to tell them that they have not made up their minds on any single question material to the war: The public have been in advance of the Government on every single question (S5LV0021P0\_01683, 19/4/1916)
- (3) With due respect to my noble friend, he is not quite correct (S5LV0395P0\_02576, 25/7/1978)
- (4) If I may be allowed to say so with great respect to the gentleman who is to be, as I understand, the new Minister, the Minister of Reconstruction is going to be a glorified Under-Secretary of the Prime Minister (S5LV0026P0\_00787, 8/8/1917)

Because they are encoded in speech, these kinds of expressive politeness features (Eelen, 2001) can be searched for relatively easily via SECI's word look-up function (in conjunction with wild card searches such as *with \* respect* and *respect\**, for example). SECI also provides details of a term's frequency via its frequency lists function, a term's context of use via KWIC concordance lines, and a term's distribution over time via its *distribution* function. By drawing upon such techniques, we can begin to better document the extent to which – as well as the ways in which and reasons that – MPs and Peers used modes of address, and other deferential terms when debating in the two Houses. Deferential terms and modes of address are regularly referred to as politeness markers in the extant literature, for example. However, I will show that their highly ritualised use in this context (past and present) is best understood to be part-shaped by Hansard reporting, and part-triggered by activity type (Levinson, 1992) norms and ways of manipulating such norms without falling into impoliteness and/or without necessarily engaging in face enhancement (Archer, 2015; Archer and Malory, 2017). Note that (1)–(3) contain implicit accusations relating to the interlocutors' inaccurate or misguided views on a particular issue, for instance, and (4) contains an implicit criticism of the Minister who was to become no more than a *glorified Under-Secretary*. In all cases, then, the Peers were engaging in various levels of face damage, but *varnishing their face* threatening acts (FTAs) with a surface layer of linguistic politeness (Johnson and Clifford, 2011). In (1)–(3), in addition, we have evidence of the Peers assimilating as a means of re-accentuating the prior discourse(s) of their targets (Bakhtin, 1986: 89), via terms such as *theory*, *not made up their minds* and *not quite correct*.

As this study constitutes a diachronic exploration of the MPs' and Peers' need to use ritualized discourse when negotiating their differences, I first explain the usefulness of the Hansard records when it comes to studying discursive phenomena (Section 2), before moving on to explore a number of deference markers and modes of address using the techniques outlined above (Sections 3–3.3.3). Given the apparent interplay between face enhancement and face aggravation in this context (sometimes simultaneously), face and facework will be discussed throughout the paper. *Face* is understood, here, to be a dynamically-negotiated image of self that, because it is shaped by interlocutors, can be withdrawn as readily as it is given, following Goffman (1967: 5, 10, 14). *Facework* is understood to be the “actions taken by a person to make what [s/]he is doing consistent with face” (Goffman, 1967: 5). As Archer (2015) notes, this can be with the aim of achieving face enhancement, face threat, both (i.e., face enhancement and face threat) or even be (deliberately) ambiguous as to its face-enhancing or face-damaging intent.

## 2. Linguistic studies which have drawn upon Hansard to study discursive phenomena

The Hansard records are not – nor should be considered to be – verbatim transcripts. Indeed, repetitions, redundancies and obvious mistakes (including grammatical mistakes) are regularly omitted from them (Jack et al., 2011). There are also highly regulated ways of referring to Members, and a policy that Hansard recorders should correct incorrect references, unless the latter is commented upon (see Sections 3.3 and 4). Such transcripts provide a useful means of investigating discursive phenomena from times past, nonetheless. For example, Harris (2001) has explored the discourse of Prime Minister's Question Time (March to November 2000) to determine how much (im)politeness was exhibited during such sessions. She reports that impoliteness was systematic to the extent of being sanctioned (in this admittedly short period). It was also found to bring its own rewards, as long as it did not equate to “unparliamentary language” use (see <http://www.parliament.uk>). Archer and Malory (2017) have since explored Parliament's admission that MPs regularly demonstrate considerable ingenuity when circumventing the “unparliamentary language” prohibition, drawing upon the same subsets as this paper. They consider examples such as (5):

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