

March 20 2017

“I quote and I am not making this up”: The role of quotations in the adversarial discourse of Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs).

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## INTRODUCTION

Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs) is the central British parliamentary institution and its highest profile parliamentary event. Every week in the House of Commons, Members of Parliament (MPs) have the opportunity for half an hour to pose questions to the Prime Minister (PM) on any topic of their choice. Thus, PMQs provides a degree of political accountability, which might well be envied by citizens of many less democratic states across the world.

The focus of this paper is on the use of quotations in PMQs as an argumentative and rhetorical resource. Quotations refer to instances where a politician quotes in a verbatim manner (directly) or in a subjectively coloured way (indirectly) either from his/her own previous statements, or from the statements of another politician, or from an external source. In this Introduction, a linguistic analysis is presented of quotations in terms of their form, distribution and functions; this is preceded by an outline of the social frame of PMQs, and a review of relevant academic research.

### The social frame of PMQs

The tradition of PMQs dates right back to the eighteenth century, to the era of the first British PM, Sir Robert Walpole (1721-1742). In its modern form, the institution of PMQs dates from 1961, when it was formalised to two 15-minute sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays. In 1997, this procedure was changed by Tony Blair (Labour PM, 1997-2007) to just one weekly session every Wednesday, lasting for 30 minutes. Notably, the tradition of question time is not confined to the UK. In Canada, this convention is known as Question Period, in Australia and New Zealand as Question Time, in India as Question Hour. However, the ensuing discussion is based on British parliamentary procedure.

In the UK, backbench MPs who wish to ask a question to the PM must enter their names on

the Order Paper. The names of entrants are then randomised in a ballot to produce a list in which they will be called by the Speaker of the House of Commons. PMQs always begin with the same tabled question to the PM, asking if s/he will list his/her official engagements for the day. At this point, the called Member can put as a supplementary question (termed a “supplementary”) almost any question that relates to the PM’s general responsibilities or to some aspect of government policy. The MP is limited to this one supplementary, and cannot follow up the PM’s response with any further utterance (Harris, 2001). However, this is permissible for the Leader of the Opposition (LO) (currently the Leader of the Labour Party), who is allowed up to six questions. These questions may be posed all in one bloc, or in more than one bloc (for example, in two groups of three questions). Only the initial question regarding the PM’s engagements is tabled. Because MPs have the advantage of putting supplementaries to the PM without notice, PMQs have the important elements of unpredictability and surprise.

In PMQs, MPs must orient to the expectation that the dialogue should follow a question-response pattern. However, they are expected to observe certain traditions and conventions regarding what is termed “unparliamentary language”. Specifically, they should not be abusive or insulting, call another member a liar, suggest another MP has false motives, or misrepresent another MP. These conventions are enforced by the Speaker of the House, who presides over the House's debates, determining which members may speak. He is also responsible for maintaining order during debate, and may punish members who break the rules of the House. The Speaker may ask a Member to withdraw an objectionable utterance. Over the years, Speakers have objected to the use of abusive epithets such as blackguard, coward, git, guttersnipe, hooligan, rat, swine, traitor, and stoolpigeon (House of Commons Information Office Factsheet G7, 2004). A Member who refuses to comply with the Speaker may be suspended from the House (referred to in parliamentary procedure as “naming”).

The purported purpose of a question to the PM is “to obtain information or press for action” (HC555, 1995). This can be linked to the five broader objectives of Parliamentary Questions: “a vehicle for individual backbenchers to raise the individual grievance of their constituencies”; “an opportunity for the House as a whole to probe the... Executive”; “a means of illuminating differences of policy on major issues between the various political parties, or of judging the Parliamentary skills of individual members...”; “a combination of these or any other purposes, for

example, a way of enabling the Government to disseminate information...”; and “the obtaining of information by the House from the Government” (HC178, 1991).

Although there have been instances of praise for PMQs (e.g., Sedgemore, 1980; Thatcher, 1993; *The Guardian*, 2010), it has often faced severe criticism from select committees, parliamentarians and commentators (e.g., Thomas, 2006; Blair, 2010; Martin, 2013). Such criticism is exemplified by the current Speaker, John Bercow, who complained in 2010 about the “character, conduct, content and culture” of PMQs, arguing that it is dominated by questions from the Leader of the Opposition to the exclusion of backbench questions, that MPs treat the PM as though s/he were “a President in sole control of the... Government”, and that MPs “yell and heckle” in an “unbecoming manner” providing “scrutiny by screech”.

#### Academic research on PMQs

There has been some academic research on PMQs, which may be summarized as follows. Dunleavy, Jones and O’Leary (1990) and Dunleavy et al. (1993) analysed long-term trends in prime ministerial activity, arguing that answering questions has become more than four times as common as other parliamentary interventions by the PM (e.g., delivering a speech), principally due to the influence of PMQs. Giddings and Irwin (2005) found that about half as many questions in PMQs were receiving an oral answer in 2004 as compared with 1964, and that party leaders dominated. With regard to speech content, Irwin et al. (1993) identified a sharp decrease in the percentage of substantive questions, while Harris (2001) argued that much PMQs discourse is composed of intentional and explicitly face-threatening acts (see also Murphy, 2014; Armitage, 2013). Reid (2014) analysed the use of rhetoric in the performance of political leadership based on Aristotle’s distinction between ethos, logos and pathos. Lovenduski (2012) regards PMQs as a political ritual dominated by masculine modes of behaviour, while Salmond (2014) argued that open parliamentary question times (such as PMQs) are associated with higher levels of political knowledge, partisanship and turnout - findings that challenge recent criticisms of PMQs.

The most substantive study of PMQs to date has been conducted by Bates et al. (2012), who based their research on techniques devised by Bull for the analysis of question-response sequences (Bull, 1994, 2003; Bull & Mayer, 1993). Bates et al. compared the opening sessions of PMQs for the last five PMs from 1979-2010 (Thatcher, Major, Blair, Brown and Cameron). Their aim was to test a general perception that PMQs have developed into a focal point for shallow political point

scoring rather than serious prime ministerial scrutiny. They found that the conduct of PMQs had become rowdier over the period sampled, with weekly sessions increasingly dominated by the leaders of the two main parties to the gradual exclusion of backbenchers.

Two studies of PMQs have also been conducted by one of the authors of this paper. In one study, Bull (2013) analysed the role played by adversarial questioning in political opposition, based on how the former LO (Ed Miliband) challenged the current PM (David Cameron) regarding his handling of the British phone-hacking scandal. In the UK, phone-hacking represented an illegal intrusion into personal privacy, which furthermore had seemingly not been investigated properly by the police. Although PMQs are often castigated as no more than a worthless exercise in political point-scoring, Miliband's questions related to substantive political issues. Through his questions in PMQs, Miliband succeeded in getting Cameron to agree to setting up a public enquiry into the culture and practices of British newspapers (the Leveson enquiry), whereby he could be seen to have made a substantial political gain.

A second study was based on Harris' (2001) proposal that much PMQ discourse comprises intentional and explicitly face-threatening acts (FTAs). Bull and Wells (2012) identified six distinctive ways in which FTAs are performed in questions, and five in which the PM may counter FTAs in replies. Following Goffman (1967), Bull and Wells utilised the term *face aggravation* to refer to the aggressive use of facework in PMQs, in which antagonists seek to score points at the other's expense. Overall, they proposed that face aggravation between the PM and LO is not just an acceptable form of parliamentary discourse, it is both sanctioned and rewarded, a means whereby the LO may enhance his/her own status. They further argued that PMQs should be regarded as another of the situations identified by Culpeper (1996), where impoliteness is not a marginal activity, but central to the interaction that takes place.

One of the techniques identified by Bull and Wells (2012) for performing FTAs in PMQs is the use of quotations. Quotations are ubiquitous in discourse, not just in PMQs. They occur across different contexts and with different degrees of formality, for instance academic discourse, legal discourse (in particular cross-examination), mediated monologic and dialogic political discourse, but also in mundane everyday communication, especially personal narratives (Fetzer 2015).

### Forms and functions of quotations

Quotations have been examined in the field of linguistics, pragmatics, discourse analysis and conversation analysis, and have been classified in the following formats: *direct*, *indirect*, *mixed* and *mixed type* (Fetzer 2015). These formats are also used in the context of PMQs, but there is another very frequent format: *focusing quotation*. As regards their function, quotations refer to one or more prior utterances (or their parts) and meta-represent them in another context.

*Direct quotations* (or direct speech-report) are a verbatim representation of what has been said before and are generally signaled by the use of quotations marks in written language or by quotatives “I quote” or “s/he said” in spoken language, for instance, “we need to roll back some of the green regulations and charges that are putting up bills” (David Cameron, Conservative Prime Minister (2010-2016), PMQs 23 October 2013).

*Indirect quotations* (or indirect speech-reports) represent what has been said before from the quoter’s perspective and thus display some degree of subjectivity which is reflected in deictic and temporal shifts (printed in bold), for example, if the quoter were to say that Cameron had stated that **they needed** to roll back some of the green regulations and charges that **were putting up** bills.

*Mixed quotations* comprise components of both direct and indirect quotation, for instance if the quoter were to say that Cameron had stated that they “need to roll back” some of the green regulations and charges that were putting up bills. In mixed quotations, the quoter expresses detachment from the indirectly formatted parts of the quoted while at the same time foregrounding the directly quoted part, whose appropriateness, if not validity is queried, sometimes ironically.

In the *mixed type of quotation* (also referred to as *free indirect speech*), the quoted is in present tense and self- and other references are in their original form (printed in bold), expressing immediacy and relevance to the here-and-now. For example, if a speaker were to say that Cameron had stated that **we need** to roll back some of the green regulations and charges that **are putting up** bills.

In *focusing quotations*, a direct quotation is foregrounded by the proximal demonstrative ‘this’ and a pronoun pre-empting the quoted, for instance ‘what’, such as “this is what he said”.. For example, “.... and **this is what** Cameron said: “We need to roll back some of the green regulations and charges that are putting up bills.

Quotations thus serve a particular communicative function: they import something which

has been said / written before into another discourse or a different stage in the same discourse, and assign it the status of an object of talk. The communicative action of context importation assigns the quotation the status of being relevant to a particular communicative goal at that particular stage in discourse. It may be its content, which is considered to be “quote-able” (Clayman 1995), or it may be its source with whom the quoter intends to align or disalign.

### Quotations in PMQs

The aim of this study was to analyze the forms and functions of quotations in PMQs. The specific focus was on interchanges between the Prime Minister (PM) and the Leader of the Opposition (LO). There were two sets of data, each comprising 20 sessions of PMQs. The Prime Minister in both samples was David Cameron, Leader of the Conservative Party. In the first set of data, his opponent was Ed Miliband (Leader of the Labour Opposition, 2010-2015). In the second set of data, his opponent was Miliband’s successor Jeremy Corbyn, the current LO (elected 12 September 2015). Overall, the research aims of the study were to assess the extent to which the two protagonists made use of quotations in PMQs, and to analyse the rhetorical functions served by those quotations.

## STUDY 1

### Results

Each of the 20 sessions contained quotations. There were three sessions without quotations from the PM, and only sessions without a quotation from the LO. Quotations comprised 18.3% of the total word count (N = 27,956; PM 14,865 (53.1%); LO 12,596 (45%). The breakdown for different types of quotation is shown below (Table 1):

Table 1. Subtypes of quotation

	DC (PM)	EM (LO)
Direct	565 (3.8%)	818 (6.4%)
Indirect	211 (1.4%)	409 (3.2%)
Mixed	17 (0.1%)	214 (1.6%)
Mixed type	14 (0.09%)	108 (0.6%)
Focused	98 (0.6%)	71 (0.5%)
Overall	905 (6.0%)	1,620 (12.3%)

All quotations were used in an adversarial manner, either to deconstruct the argumentation, credibility and leadership of opponents and their party, and/or enhance these qualities in self. The following example comes from Ed Miliband in an attack on David Cameron:

The person who should be apologising is this Prime Minister, for the cost of living crisis facing millions of families. Now let us talk about SSE [Scottish and Southern Energy – a Scottish energy company based in Perth, Scotland]. Because **they say on their website** - and **I quote - that they have just one strategic priority and they call it their dividend obsession**: IT IS NOT TO GET BILLS DOWN; IT IS NOT TO BE ON THE SIDE OF THE CONSUMER. *So* it is make-up-your-mind time for the Prime Minister. ***Whose side is he on: the energy companies' or the consumers'?*** (Ed Miliband, 16 October 2013).

This excerpt is formatted as an indirect quotation, which contains an explicit reference to the source of the quotation (“*on their website*”). Miliband’s interpretation is elaborated by his re-contextualization of the quotation through the emotive term “dividend obsession”. He translates SSE’s goal into ordinary language (IT IS NOT TO GET BILLS DOWN; IT IS NOT TO BE ON THE SIDE OF THE CONSUMER) thereby making it accessible to the general public, the potential electorate, and facilitating his own interpretation. Thus, he corners the PM with the strategic use of a yes/no-question requesting him to take sides with either the “energy companies” or the “consumers”.

## STUDY 2

In his first PMQs (16 September, 2015), Corbyn introduced a radical innovation. Each of his six questions quoted a question from a member of the public. Subsequently, Corbyn reduced this to four out of six questions (October 14 and 21, 2015), and then to only one or two questions in every PMQ session (except 13 April, 2016). For example:

Corbyn: Two-and-a-half thousand people emailed me about the housing crisis in this country. I ask one from a woman called Marie, who says,

“What does the government intend to do about the chronic lack of affordable housing and the extortionate rents charged by some private sector landlords in this country?”

Cameron: ..... Let me now answer, very directly, Marie’s question. We do need to see more affordable housing in our country. We delivered 260,000 affordable housing units during the last Parliament, and we built more council houses in our country than had been managed in the previous 13 years, but I recognise that much more needs to be done.....

To test the impact of this technique on the discourse of PMQs, questions based on quotations from members of the public (public questions) were compared with those not based on quotations from members of the public (non-public questions). There were two measures: reply rates and personalisations.

Reply rate simply refers to the proportion of questions that receive a direct reply. The results for reply rate showed no difference between public and non-public questions. The reply rate for public questions was 23%, for non-public questions 20%. In comparison, analyses of televised political interviews show a reply rate of 46% (based on 33 interviews, Bull 2003).

Personalisations refer to disrespectful comments directed at another politician rather than addressing the topic under discussion, figuratively referred to through the football analogy of “playing the man rather than the ball” (Waddle & Bull, 2015). So, for example, Cameron imagined his mother saying to Corbyn: “Put on a proper suit, do up your tie and sing the national anthem.” (PMQs 24 February, 2016). Overall, the results showed that Cameron (27%) used significantly more personalisations than Corbyn (15%) ( $n=120$ ,  $p<.05$ ). However, for public questions, there was no significant difference between Cameron (19%) and Corbyn (16%) ( $n=31$ ), whereas for non-public questions, the difference was significant - Cameron (29%), Corbyn (15%) ( $n=89$ ,  $p.<05$ ).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, it was hypothesised that the use of quotations in the discourse of PMQs, may be seen as a rhetorical form of argumentation. The results of the first study showed that quotations made up a substantial part of the discourse between PM and LO, and that in every case, they were used in an adversarial manner, either to deconstruct the argumentation, credibility and leadership of opponents and their party, and/or enhance these qualities in self.

In the second study, the novel use of quotations by Jeremy Corbyn was analysed, in which he posed questions based on quotations sourced from members of the public. Although the use of public questions had no significant effect on the overall reply rate, they did seem to affect Cameron's use of personalisations. Whereas Cameron personalised significantly more than Corbyn in response to non-public questions, this was not the case for public questions. In that respect, Corbyn's novel use of quotations actually seemed to make PMQ discourse less adversarial, in marked contrast to the results of the first study. From this perspective, it would seem that there is nothing intrinsically adversarial in the use of quotations in PMQ discourse, it is how they are used which is important.

Notably, when David Cameron became Leader of the Conservative Party (6 December, 2005), he famously pledged to put an end to "the Punch and Judy politics of Westminster, the name calling, backbiting, point scoring, finger pointing". Subsequently, Cameron admitted that he had not kept this pledge, blaming the adversarial nature of PMQs (29 April, 2008). Similarly, Corbyn's attempt to use such publicly sourced questions to change the overall culture of PMQs has to be judged a failure, if viewed from a broader perspective. Corbyn has been widely derided as an ineffectual and incompetent leader, the Labour Party as a dysfunctional opposition, while PMQs still remains essentially adversarial, characterized by political point scoring, confrontation, and verbal pugilism.

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