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Calling Mr Speaker Mr Speaker: the strategic use of references to the Speaker of the House of Commons

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Introduction

The Speaker of the House of Commons presides over the House's debates, maintaining order during debate, and determining which members may speak. The office dates back to the Middle Ages, the use of the term is first recorded in 1377 during the reign of King Edward III. At that time, the Speaker was the Member of Parliament (MP) chosen by the other MPs to quite literally speak on their behalf, in particular, to communicate their decisions to the reigning monarch. This was a dangerous business. Between 1399 and 1535 no less than seven Speakers had their heads chopped off. In modern times, this grisly history is reflected in a ritual whereby the MP newly elected to the office shows reluctance to accept it, and is forcibly dragged to the chair by other MPs.

One of the Speaker's tasks is to preside over Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs), the central British parliamentary institution and its highest profile parliamentary event. Every week in the House of Commons, MPs have the opportunity for half an hour to pose questions to the Prime Minister (PM). PMQs always begins 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), who is allowed up to six 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.

Although PMQs has been widely and extensively criticized (e.g., Thomas, 2006; Blair, 2010; Martin, 2013), this a remarkable institution, providing a degree of political accountability which might well be the envy of the citizens of many less democratic states across the world.

In PMQs, there is an expectation that the dialogue should follow a question-response pattern, just like an interview. But unlike a broadcast political interview, questions in PMQs are posed by other politicians, not by interviewers. This has important implications for the discourse which takes place. As journalists, political interviewers are expected to be impartial. In contrast, politicians are restricted by no such constraints. MPs can be as partial and as unashamedly partisan as they choose. Furthermore, MPs are protected by parliamentary privilege, which allows them to speak freely in the House without fear of legal action on grounds of slander.

At the same time, MPs cannot simply say what they like. 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 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”).

Thus, in PMQs, MPs must orient both to the expectation that the dialogue should follow a question-response pattern, and refrain from unacceptable unparliamentary language. However, within these constraints, they are still allowed a great deal of scope to attack and criticize their fellow Mps. In doing so, they may employ considerable ingenuity to remain within the conventions of acceptable parliamentary language. For example, the former Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill once famously substituted the phrase “terminological inexactitude” for the unacceptable term “lie” (House of Commons Information Office Factsheet G7, 2004).

Indeed, PMQs has become notorious for its political point-scoring. According to the late Simon Hoggart (2011), distinguished political columnist of *The Guardian* newspaper:

Prime Minister’s Questions is increasingly like an unpleasant football match, in which the game played publicly is accompanied by all sorts of secret grudge matches, settlement of scores and covert fouls committed when the players hope the ref is not looking.

Qualitative analyses of PMQs have been conducted by both Harris (2001), and Bull and Wells (2012). In the context of Brown and Levinson’s (1978, 1987) theory of politeness, Harris argued

that much of the discourse of PMQs is composed of intentional and explicitly face-threatening acts (FTAs). She provided illustrative examples of a number of techniques whereby FTAs may be performed, such as asking disingenuous questions to which the questioner already knows the answer. A systematic investigation of FTAs in PMQs was conducted by Bull and Wells (2012), based exclusively on interaction between the PM and LO. They identified six distinctive ways in which FTAs are performed in questions, and five in which the PM may counter FTAs in replies. Based on Goffman (1967), Bull and Wells utilised the term *face aggravation* to refer to the aggressive use of facework, 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 Leader of the Opposition (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.

There are a number of ritualistic conventions governing the discourse of PMQs. In particular, MPs must address their remarks to the Speaker of the House rather than directly to one another. MPs must also refer to other MPs in the third person (*rather* than as "you"), and use formal and honorific titles, such as the Right Honourable Gentleman, or the Foreign Secretary. These conventions are enforced by the Speaker, who may suspend a Member from sitting in the House (referred to as "naming"). So, for example, a left wing Labour MP (Dennis Skinner) was suspended for a day (11 April, 2016) from the House of Commons for persistently referring to former Conservative PM David Cameron not as Prime Minister but as "Dodgy Dave", in relation to a controversy over Cameron's personal tax affairs.

Although in other situational contexts, such practices might suggest a high degree of formality and deference, in PMQ discourse Harris (2001) observes that they are often combined with intentional FTAs. In this context, they arguably serve to mitigate FTAs, thereby keeping the discourse within the bounds of acceptable parliamentary language. In the following example, David Cameron LO launched a wholesale attack on former Labour PM Gordon Brown (Bull & Wells, 2012):

Mr Speaker, for 10 years the PM plotted and schemed to have this job—and for what? No conviction, just calculation; no vision, just a vacuum. Last week he lost his political authority, and this week he is losing his moral authority. How long are we going to have to wait before the past makes way for the future?

If Cameron's comments had been addressed directly to the PM it would make the attack much more personal:

For 10 years *you have* plotted and schemed to have this job—and for what? No conviction, just calculation; no vision, just a vacuum. Last week *you lost your* political authority, and this week *you are* losing *your* moral authority. How long are we going to have to wait before the past makes way for the future?

This would be regarded as beyond the bounds of acceptable parliamentary language, and certainly, Cameron would have been corrected for not addressing his remarks to the Speaker.

The focus of this paper is on such ritualistic conventions, with particular reference to the practice of addressing comments to the Speaker. The data is based exclusively on interaction between the PM and LO - between the former Leader of the Labour Party (Ed Miliband) and the former Conservative PM (David Cameron), between the current Leader of the Labour Party (Jeremy Corbyn) and David Cameron, and between Jeremy Corbyn and the current Conservative PM, Theresa May.

A number of illustrative examples will be discussed, in order to test the following two hypotheses, specifically that the term Mr Speaker is used for:

1. Interaction rituals and discourse management.
2. Conflictual situations (also referred to as *critical incidents* (Fetzer 2002, 2007))

Method

The analysis was based on two sets of data:

20 sessions featuring Ed Miliband and David Cameron

20 sessions featuring Jeremy Corbyn & David Cameron

(i.e., 240 question-response sequences)

Illustrative examples are also included from interactions between Jeremy Corbyn and Theresa May

The analyses were based on transcripts which are available from Hansard, the written record of parliamentary debates in the House of Commons. Hansard, it should be noted, is edited, it is not a full verbatim record of parliamentary proceedings. Hence, in this study, transcripts were checked

against delivery from videorecordings of PMQs, which are available on YouTube.

In each session, instances where the politician addressed the Speaker as Mr Speaker were noted, and coded according whether they could be seen as interaction rituals/discourse management, or co-occur with conflictual discourse.

Results

1. Checking the Hansard transcripts against delivery from videorecordings of PMQs showed that most references to Mr Speaker are edited out, that is to say, they do not appear in Hansard.
2. All instances of addressing the Mr Speaker could be coded as either interaction rituals/discourse organizing, or conflictual.

Examples

1. Interaction rituals. For example, the Speaker calls Jeremy Corbyn to speak in the House, which he acknowledges with this polite formulation.

Speaker: I call Jeremy Corbyn. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear!"]

Corbyn: Thank you, **Mr Speaker**. It is nice to get such a warm welcome, and may I wish all Members, as well as all members of staff in the House, a happy new year?

2. Discourse organizing. Jeremy Corbyn JC pays tribute to a Labour MP (Gerald Kaufman) whose funeral JC has just attended. He acknowledges a message from the Speaker which was conveyed by the rabbi at the ceremony.

He was a champion for peace and justice in the middle east and around the world. Yesterday at his funeral, **Mr Speaker**, the rabbi who conducted the service conveyed your message on behalf of the House to his family, which was very much appreciated.

In this case, the reference to Mr Speaker makes it absolutely clear to whom the “your” of “your message” refers, hence, it would be categorized as discourse organizing.

3. Conflictual discourse. In the following example, three references to Mr Speaker co-occur with an extensive attack by Jeremy Corbyn on the government’s mismanagement of the NHS [National Health Service]

Mr Speaker her [Theresa May’s] government has put the NHS and social care in a state of emergency. Nine out of 10 NHS trusts are unsafe, 18,000 patients a week are waiting—[Interruption.] **Mr Speaker**, I repeat the figure: 18,000 patients a week are waiting on trolleys in hospital corridors 1.2 million often very dependent—[Interruption.] **Mr Speaker** it seems to me that some Members are not concerned about the fact that there are 1.2 million elderly people not getting the care they need. The legacy of her government will be blighting our NHS for decades: fewer hospitals, fewer A&E departments, fewer nurses and fewer people getting the care they need. We need a government that puts the NHS first and will invest in our NHS.

The overall breakdown on the figures is as follows:

	EM	DC	JC	DC
Interaction rituals	24	3	40	2
Conflictual	163	12	96	6

What appears very clearly from these data are two findings:

1. References to Mr Speaker are primarily associated with conflictual discourse.
2. References to Mr Speaker are primarily associated with the Leader of the Opposition.

Discussion

According to Harris (2001), ritualistic procedures of parliamentary discourse are often combined with intentional FTAs. In this context, they arguably serve to mitigate FTAs, thereby keeping the discourse within the bounds of acceptable parliamentary language/

However, if this is the case, one might ask why is Mr Speaker mainly addressed by the LO when attacking the government?

- LO calls the PM to account.
- Complains about his performance to a 3rd party (the Speaker)
- Like a litigant complaining to the judge in a court case.

From this perspective, calling Mr Speaker Mr Speaker:

- Not just a mitigating factor

- Also a strategic feature of oppositional politics.

LO uses this ritualistic discourse of the House of Commons to call attention to the failings of the government.

In short, calling Mr Speaker Mr Speaker is very much a means of conducting political opposition.

References

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