

# (Im)politeness during Prime Minister's Questions in the U.K. Parliament

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## **Abstract**

Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) is a weekly, half-hour long session in the British House of Commons, which gives backbench Members of Parliament (MPs) and the Leader of the Opposition (LO) the opportunity to ask the Prime Minister (PM) questions on any topic relating to the government's policies and actions. The discourse at PMQs is often described as adversarial (see Bull & Wells 2011) and in this paper I will show how the notion of impoliteness can be applied to both the questions and the answers which make up the session. Through the detailed analysis of six sessions of PMQs I will also demonstrate that PMQs is also a source of polite linguistic behaviour of the sort described in Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Comparisons between Gordon Brown's and David Cameron's speech styles will also be drawn.

## Keywords:

politeness; impoliteness; Prime Minister's Questions; parliamentary discourse; face-threatening acts; mitigation; community of practice

## **1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) is a weekly half-hour long session in the U.K. Parliament which offers both backbench Members of Parliament (MPs) and the Leader of the Opposition (LO) the opportunity to question the Prime Minister (PM) on any matter relating to government policy. It is an event which is followed with great interest in the media. Moreover, it is a chance for the LO to set the political agenda by highlighting problems with government policy. The language used at PMQs is often described as adversarial (Bull & Wells 2011) and has often been

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge the comments and suggestions of two anonymous reviewers and Maj-Britt Mosegaard Hansen. Their advice and suggestions has improved this article greatly. It goes without saying that any infelicities that remain are all my own.

termed ‘Punch & Judy politics’ by the current PM, David Cameron. Through the detailed analysis of six sessions of PMQs (three from Gordon Brown’s premiership and three from David Cameron’s), I hope to show that impolite linguistic behaviour as conceived by Culpeper (1996, 2010, 2011) does indeed form part of PMQs. However, I also aim to show that far from being exclusively impolite in nature, a number of exchanges are better described as being polite when looked at through the prism of politeness theory (Brown & Levinson 1987; henceforth B&L). My final objective is to show that the nature of PMQs is highly dependent on the make-up of parliament and that government and opposition backbenchers, as well as the PM, use different strategies when asking and answering questions.

The article is structured as follows: §2 looks at politeness theory as applied to parliamentary discourse and provides categories of face-threatening acts (FTAs) and instances where those FTAs are mitigated; §3 considers the notion of impoliteness and shows how it is manifest in questions and answers during PMQs; §4 provides some numerical results; and §5 offers a number of conclusions and suggestions for further work.

## **2 Politeness theory and parliament**

In this paper I make use of Brown & Levinson’s (henceforth B&L; 1987) canonical theory of politeness. In recent years, a number of researchers in politeness have rejected this theory and produced their own postmodernist, discursive approaches to politeness (c.f. Spencer-Oatey 2000, Watts 2003, The Linguistic Politeness Research Group 2011). It is not in the remit of this paper to offer a critique of these approaches, nor am I inclined to give an impassioned defence of B&L’s approach (that has been done by others, e.g. Haugh 2007, Chen 2001). I do want to note, however, that many of the criticisms of B&L’s work derive from its claim to be universally applicable across the world’s languages. I would wish to make no such claim. However, I think that one would be hard-pushed to argue that B&L’s theory is not applicable to English, and as a result I feel comfortable using it. I also think that discursive approaches to politeness would be unable to capture the systematic patterns of linguistic behaviour which I believe I highlight in this paper. That is not to say that B&L’s work is without its flaws and in the rest of this section, I will highlight some refinements and clarifications that I think need to be made for their theory to

adequately describe PMQs (here, I make the assumption that the reader has some knowledge of their theory).

## 2.1 Parliament as a community of practice

Harris (2001) is, to my knowledge, the first scholar to suggest that the British House of Commons (HoC) can be thought of as a ‘community of practice’, i.e. “a specific kind of social network [...] characterised by: mutual engagement; a jointly negotiated enterprise; [and] a shared repertoire” (Meyerhoff 2006: 189). It seems clear that the HoC fulfils these criteria, as MPs are mutually engaged: they work together closely, form alliances, dine together, etc. (i.e. they have *direct* contact with one another); they work on the jointly negotiated enterprise of improving the lot of the country (that they sometimes vote for different policies and laws does not mean that they do not share the same goal, but merely that they disagree on the means to get there); finally, MPs do share a repertoire, one which has been described in Erskine May (2004) – often described as the Bible for MPs.

The implications for considering the HoC a community of practice are that, whilst in Parliament, we can say that MPs have differing face wants than do members of the public – albeit that these differences are fairly subtle<sup>2</sup>. As a result, I would define the face investments of active MPs carrying out their duties in the following ways:

*Positive face*: the desire to be thought of as competent, as well as to be popular amongst both other politicians (particularly those from the same party) and, more importantly, amongst the electorate. The desire to have one’s views, actions, proposals and legislation endorsed and supported both within the community of practice (i.e. Parliament) and outside of it (i.e. amongst the electorate).

*Negative face*: the desire to carry out one’s own legislative programme and enact the reforms which one and one’s party thinks are best for the country. In the case of opposition MPs (and government backbenchers) who do not often have the chance to introduce legislation, the desire to freely speak and make representations about their own interests and the constituency they represent is of most salience.

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<sup>2</sup> B&L define face components thus – “**negative face**: the want of every ‘competent adult member’ that his [sic] actions be unimpeded by others’ and ‘**positive face**: the want of every member that his [sic] wants be desirable at least to some others” (1987: 62; boldface original).

## **2.2 Defining a face-threatening act (FTA)**

According to B&L, FTAs are ones which “by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or the speaker” (1987: 61). In the next section I outline the ways in which face can be threatened at PMQs. At this point I want to highlight another category of act used by among others Culpeper (2011: 114ff.), which he calls the ‘face-attack act’ (FAA). Face-threats have the potential to cause face-damage to speaker or hearer. The risk of the act causing damage can be minimised by employing a politeness strategy when performing it (in §3.3 I highlight the mitigation strategies available to politicians in parliament). Face-attack(ing) acts, on the other hand, are ones “that are judged deliberately nasty and spiteful, where the speaker is assessed by the target and at least some others as purposefully out to disrespect and insult” (Tracy 2008: 173); they result, therefore, in *actual* face damage. This is, however, a category which I do not employ in this description of (im)politeness in the HoC. The first reason for this is that there has been no work, to my knowledge, outlining criteria for where an act stops being an FTA and becomes an FAA; without such criteria, drawing a distinction risks being overly subjective. Secondly, we encounter the problem of whether parliamentarians are “assessed by the target and at least some others”, and the acts are judged to be intentionally disrespectful and insulting. Whilst some utterances may seem clearly face-attacking, detailed ethnographic work has shown that this is not consistently the case across different types of context. By way of example, consider the vulgar insults indirectly targeting a hearer’s parents which would usually be thought of as FAAs, but amongst black American youths are treated as a marker of in-group solidarity (Labov 1972: ch 8). Culpeper (2011: 215) notes that this type of behaviour “takes place between equals, typically friends, and is reciprocal”, a similar situation to what we find in the HoC (see §2.1 and §5.2.1). As a result, without ethnographic investigations into how MPs interpret critical utterances, labelling them FAAs could be thought premature. Not using such a category in this paper means that the FTAs discussed in §3 include more acts than B&L (1987) originally discussed.

## **2.3 Distinguishing between politeness and politic behaviour**

Though I have rejected the use of discursive approaches to politeness, that does not mean to say that I cannot see uses for some of the notions which they have developed. In particular, Watts’ (2003) distinction between politeness and politic behaviour is

one which is useful for describing some aspects of the language used in parliament. In the House of Commons, MPs do not use the personal name of another MP and instead refer to them using forms of address like ‘The (Right) Honourable Member’, ‘My (Right) Honourable Friend’, etc. (see Ilie 2010 for a detailed discussion of address in the U.K. Parliament). These indirect forms of address can be categorised as ‘politic’ behaviour – they are used because the rules of the House dictate them, and they can be viewed as routinized behaviours “perceived to be appropriate to the social constraints of the ongoing interaction” (Watts 2003: 19). In the present paper, I do not discuss ‘politic’ behaviour, but focus instead on the non-routine linguistic behaviours of politicians in the House of Commons.

#### **2.4 Participant structure at PMQs**

As mentioned above, MPs do not address each other using their names in Parliament. This kind of indirectness goes further in that all utterances in the chamber are addressed to the Speaker. So at PMQs, when an MP asks a question, the Speaker can be thought of as the addressee, whilst the PM is the recipient of that utterance (to use Levinson’s terminology; 1988: 178). However, there are instances when an MP in asking a question (or the PM in responding) makes reference to another politician in the chamber. One of the most common ways this happens is when the PM highlights a positive government action in response to a question from a government backbench MP and then uses the opportunity to criticise the Leader of the Opposition’s policies. An utterance of this sort adds another layer to the participant structure, with the LO as a ratified over-hearer becoming the actual recipient of an utterance. This complexity has implications for B&L’s definition for FTAs, which asserts that they are acts which go against the face wants of “the addressee and/or the speaker” (1987: 65). Instead, it is probably wiser to say that an FTA can threaten the face of *any* participant in a speech event. That said, however, in this paper I will only focus on relatively simple FTAs in which the speaker threatens the face of the direct recipient of the utterance (so either an MP/the LO threatening the PM’s face or vice versa).

### **3 FTAs at PMQs**

In light of the theoretical deliberations of the previous section, in this part of the paper I will outline the categories of FTA which I have found to form part of PMQs; in

addition, I will show how those FTAs can be mitigated.<sup>3</sup> I should note here that not all utterances at PMQs contain FTAs; a number of turns at PMQs do not fit into any of the FTA categories which I propose in this section. I have not attempted to categorise these utterances in any way except to say that they contain no FTA.<sup>4</sup> I have further attempted to say whether an FTA has implications for positive or negative face (or both). Such a categorization is not without its difficulties (as B&L themselves note (1987: 67)), but there is usually a good basis to argue for such a labelling.

### 3.1 FTAs performed by MPs

The following, then, are the types of FTA that can be performed by an individual MP or the LO. Since these politicians are in the position of *asking* questions during the session, they have the opportunity to perform different FTAs to the PM who is restricted in his rôle to answering questions. The examples provided here (and in §3.2, §3.3 and §4.2) are intended to be prototypical of the utterances which form a particular category and I will explain what (linguistic) features the utterances in a particular category share.

#### 3.1.1 (Attempt to) have the PM make an undertaking (1) *Housing, 06/02/2008 Column 952, 11:22*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jucker's (1986) monograph suggests 13 different FTA strategies used against politicians in news interviews. Whilst there is some overlap between the categories proposed in the present paper and Jucker's analysis, I do not adopt his categorisation as there are examples in his corpus which I do not find in parliamentary debate (and vice versa). This is to be expected since the journalists performing the FTAs in the interviews he analyses are constrained by the need to seem impartial; the politicians performing FTAs in the sessions analysed here do not have such constraints. A further reason for preferring a new set of categories is that Jucker neglects to discuss how a respondent has the potential to threaten the face of the questioner in their answer. Doing this here would give a less thorough description of the nature of PMQs.

<sup>4</sup> An anonymous reviewer, referring to Tracy (1990), found the idea that an utterance may contain no FTA problematic. S/he suggested that 'even a simple and genuinely innocent question imposes on the addressee's attention...thus it threatens their negative face'. Whilst this is true in everyday talk, PMQs is a forum in which questions must be asked – indeed without them, the sessions would not exist. As a result, I do not think that asking a genuinely innocent question has any implications for the PM's face; also, there are further utterances which, when made outside of the context of PMQs, would have implications for face but do not seem to within this parliamentary context (e.g. an MP asking the PM for a meeting to discuss an issue). As a result, I think the category of 'no FTA' is justified.

<sup>5</sup> Each example is transcribed using the conventions found in Jefferson (2004) and is preceded by a brief description of its topic, the date of the session from which it comes, a reference to where it can be found in the Hansard report available at <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/hansard/commons/>, and a time stamp for the video from which it was transcribed and which can be found at [www.c-spanvideo.org/program/QuestionTime](http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/QuestionTime)

**David Clelland (Lab)**<sup>6</sup>: mister speaker (.) gateshead council is planning the development of a brownfie- a twenty acre brownfield site in the city centre for housing [...] will he look into this matter to try to break the logjam?

An FTA of this kind has implications for both the positive and negative face of the PM. The negative face is threatened as the PM may be forced to enact reforms which he had not previously planned to introduce (in the case of this example, reforms may not be needed to break the logjam, but his time and energies will have to go into attempting to resolve this matter). The PM's positive face is also put under threat as there is an implication that he lacks competence because a problem which requires resolution has arisen 'on his watch', as it were. The propositional content of this FTA is that the PM is to make a change or that he, at least, considers making such a change.

**3.1.2 Ask the PM his opinion/seek agreement from the PM**  
(2) *High-speed rail, 06/02/2008 Column 953, 13:12*

**Gwyn Prosser (Lab)**: [...] does my right honourable friend agree with me? (.) that assemblies like seera [South East England Regional Assembly] are stopping places like dover achieving their true potential?

Such requests leave the PM open to expressing an opinion which may not be shared by the general public (i.e. the electorate, whose support he needs for re-election), or the MP who asked the question (which could be damaging to the relationships which he has with such members and therefore constitutes a threat to the PM's positive face).

The MP can ask the PM whether he agrees with him or her as in (2) or he can be asked what he thinks about a certain topic.

**3.1.3 Accuse the PM of not answering a question**  
(3) *Police forms, 30/01/2008 Column 307, 03:39*

**David Cameron (Con, LO)**: i know the prime minister is physically incapable of answering a straight question! (.) but this is this is such a straightforward question (0.2) [...] and let me ask him again (.) THIS IS THE FORM (0.2) WILL HE SCRAP IT?

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<sup>6</sup> Lab indicates that the speaker is a member of the Labour party, Con: of the Conservative party, LD: of the Liberal Democrat party.

This act is chiefly available to LO, since he has multiple questioning turns with which he can pass comment on the satisfactoriness (or otherwise) of the PM's answering turn. Of course, other MPs can perform this FTA, but it would pass comment on an answer to an earlier question asked by another MP. The act is threatening in that it criticises the PM personally and judges the PM to be failing in his duty (that of answering questions) – a further instance of a threat to positive face. The FTA can be performed more indirectly by requesting the PM answers a question 'now' – which implicates that a previous question or questions have gone unanswered.

**3.1.4 Accuse the PM of inaction/slow pace of action**

(4) *Aircraft carriers, 30/01/2008 Column 315, 28:50*

**Willie Rennie (LD):** [...] can he therefore explain (.) when the defence secretary agreed the go aHEAD for the aircraft carriers (.) last july why the co-contracts for construction have not yet been signed.

As we saw with example 1, this type of FTA sees the MP question the PM's competence. Such an act draws attention – both public and political – to the issue, which may shame the government into acting more quickly (or, begin to act) on an issue. The use of 'yet', as in (4), to imply that something ought to have happened before now is common in this FTA type, as is the adverb 'finally' (e.g. 'is he finally going to do X'), which makes clear the MP believes the government has been acting sedately.

**3.1.5 Draw attention to an undesirable (consequence of) government policy**

(5) *VAT on leisure passes, 18/06/2008 Column 937, 01:39*

**Eric Illsley (Lab):** [...] is my right honourable friend aware that many leisure trusts and sports centres throughout the country are facing retrospective v a t [Value Added Tax] bills on concessionary leisure passes (.) and any extension of that facility will mean an increased tax burden? [...]

An act of this nature makes clear that the MP does not support the Government's actions and finds its legislation to be flawed. The implication of this particular utterance is that the Government is incompetent since it has not thought through the impact of one of its policies. The way the question is framed is also of interest, since it further questions the PM's competence by suggesting that he may not even be aware of the problem – as he arguably should be in his rôle as head of the



Government. Undesirable consequences range from certain groups having to pay more in tax, constituents potentially being made homeless, constituents losing money because of welfare reforms, others being given more money in welfare payments (where the MP thinks these people are undeserving), etc.

### 3.1.6 Raising of politically sensitive subjects

(6) *EU Bailout Treaty, 27/10/2010 Column 309, 13:10*

**Andrew Turner (Con):** mister speaker (.) it's CLAIMED that the eu will (.) need a new treaty (.) to legitimise money going to greece (0.3) what is you- what is the prime minister's response?

The Conservative Party have, since the founding of the European Economic Community (the EEC, later morphed into the EU), seen much internal debate over their stance towards European integration, with bitter disputes between pro-Europeans and Atlanticists at times threatening to tear the party apart. Raising such a sensitive matter is, therefore, face-threatening for David Cameron (the current PM), since it implicitly challenges his leadership of and authority over the Conservative Party. Moreover, this particular question leaves the PM in something of a *Catch-22* situation; to support a further EU treaty would go against party policy and risk the ire of the anti-EU faction of his party, but to slap down the notion of a new treaty could potentially anger other EU leaders, who would wish him to enter negotiations on a treaty in good faith. Politically sensitive topics are ones which risk party unity as in (6) or are viewed negatively by the press (and potentially the public) such as Labour's links to trade union donors.

### 3.1.7 Question the PM's leadership

(7) *Diplomacy with China, 18/06/2008 Column 942, 20:49*

**Hugo Swire (Con):** [...] will the prime minister now show some leadership (.) by summoning the chinese a-a-ambassador, reminding her that the eyes of the world are on china and beijing in the run up to the olympics?

Statements (or questions) which cast doubt on the PM's leadership are particularly face-threatening, since demonstrating leadership is one of the most important characteristics required from the head of the government. The MP questions the PM's leadership subtly – by asking if he will *now* show leadership, he implies that the PM has not done so previously. This FTA can be performed more directly, with

statements which state plainly that the PM lacks leadership rather than simply implying it.

### 3.2 FTAs performed by the PM

Whilst it would theoretically be possible for MPs to perform some of the following FTAs against the PM, I have not found evidence of this in my corpus. In part, this is because the PM is responsible for responding to questions, rather than asking them.

#### 3.2.1 Accuse the MP of lacking knowledge/not understanding

(8) *Home repossessions, 30/01/2008 Column 310, 14:50*

**Gordon Brown (Lab, PM):** i have to say that he has misunderstood the fsa [Financial Services Authority] report of yesterday

This type of act threatens the positive face of the MP in question (Vincent Cable, a Liberal Democrat) by making clear that the PM believes that the MP is wrong or misguided in his opinion on the issue and that, as a result, the PM disapproves of the faulty question. Looking at (8), we see how Gordon Brown is clear and unequivocal in his assessment that the MP has misunderstood the FSA report; he does not say that he *thinks* that the MP has misunderstood; instead he states it very plainly. Other manifestations of this FTA include utterances like ‘let me explain this to him/her’, giving rise to the implicature that the MP has not understood.

#### 3.2.2 Accuse the MP of posturing

(9) *Phone hacking, 06/07/2011 Column 1504, 11:25*

**David Cameron (Con, PM):** those are the words he used yesterday, and in just twenty-four HOURS he’s done a u turn in order to try and look good in the commons.

Accusing MPs (in this case the LO) of changing their position (as in (9) *performing a U-turn*) makes them out to be disingenuous in what they are saying. The act has the potential of damaging an MP’s reputation by portraying his/her views as unreliable and rapidly changeable, thereby opening the MPs up to the risk that the public may not endorse and support their views and actions in future.

#### 3.2.3 Accuse the MP of acting as a stooge

(10) *Women’s pensions, 22/06/2011 Column 316, 09:29*

**David Cameron (Con, PM):** it would probably also help if you don’t read out the whip’s bit at the first bit of the question then we could GET THE

SECOND BIT OF THE QUESTION (0.2) er which i think was ABOUT the very important point the very important point about women and er pensions

The context of this example is that the PM has been asked a question by a Labour MP and because of hecklers from the Conservative benches, he did not fully hear the question. The Speaker reprimanded these backbenchers for being too boisterous. In attempting to answer the MP's question, the PM insinuates that she should not rely on the Whip's Office to provide her with questions. This comment threatens the face of the MP by asserting that she is acting as a stooge for her party's leadership, instead of speaking freely about her own interests (part of my definition for the negative face of politicians) and asking her own questions.

### 3.2.4 Draw attention to MP's (party's) unpopular policies

(11) *Answer to Nick Clegg on fuel poverty, 18/06/2008 Column 941, 17:37*

**Gordon Brown (Lab, PM):** at the same time we've increased winter allowances for pensioners (.) and he must remember that the conservative party AND HE opposed the winter allowances when THEY WERE INTRODUCED!

An FTA of this type draws attention to a party's plans (whether current or previous) that are not (or at least not in the PM's opinion) attractive to many members of the electorate. In drawing attention to an MP's opposition to a popular government initiative – such as the winter fuel allowance – the PM threatens the MP's positive face by portraying him as being at odds with the public since he does not (or did not) support now well-liked reforms. This FTA is similar to the one in §3.1.5. except that the policies were not enacted (either because the MP's party were in opposition, or because the policy was later rejected).

### 3.2.5 Criticise the MP's (party's) actions

(12) *Manufacturing contracts, 06/07/2011 Column 1509, 27:49*

**David Cameron (Con, PM):** [...] let me just say this because obviously i want to see (.) more british jobs in MANUFACTURING INDEED AS we are seeing across the country (0.3) but in the case of the in the case of the bombardier train contract the procurement process was designed and initiated by the government of WHICH SHE WAS A PART [...]

Cameron is responding to a question regarding the government's decision to give a train manufacturing contract to a foreign firm instead of Bombardier, a British company located in the MP's constituency. The question was asked by Margaret Beckett, who was a long-serving member of the previous Labour government (she was at one point Foreign Secretary). Cameron's response deflects her criticism by noting that his hands were tied by the previous government's actions and implies that she is at fault since she had been a member of the Labour Cabinet. By criticising the MP in this way, Cameron threatens her positive face by drawing attention to her rôle in a now unpopular action.

### 3.3 Mitigating FTAs

Bull & Wells (2011) contend that the discourse at PMQs cannot be adequately described using B&L's politeness theory, since we have a great deal of evidence of adversarial discourse which goes against the notion that in interaction interlocutors seek to accommodate one another's face wants. Whilst it is true that not all aspects can be described using politeness theory, my data show that PMQs is littered with instances of MPs seeking to mitigate the FTAs they perform with their utterances – just as B&L (1987) predict; hence their theory should not be completely abandoned. In this section I will show how FTAs can be mitigated, and I will highlight to which of B&L's politeness output strategies such mitigation is related.

#### 3.3.1 Praise another aspect of Government policy

(13) *Praise for free swimming, 18/06/2008 Column 937, 01:39*

**Eric Illsley (Lab):** whilst i ve:ry much welcome the government's recent announcement on free swimming for the over sixties and eventually for children of er under er sixteen [...]

A concessive sentence of the sort that we see in this example offers praise for the government and 'softens the blow' of a criticism which is likewise made in the utterance. This tactic mitigates the threat by making it seem as though the point of criticism is a rare 'slip-up' on the part of the PM, whereas the majority of his actions have positive consequences for the country. The mitigation can also be performed by 'congratulating' the politician on the other policy, or 'thanking' him/her for it. This approach to mitigation is related to two of B&L's strategies – seeking agreement and avoiding disagreement (1987: 112ff). Praising another policy implies that the MP is

(initially at least) sticking to a ‘safe topic’; mentioning it in a positive way allows him/her to have at least a semblance of agreement with the PM – perhaps better described as ‘token agreement’ (*ibid.*).

### 3.3.2 Assert that negative consequence of Government action is unintended

(14) *Housing Benefit changes, 27/10/2010 Column 315-6, 30:06*

**Bob Russell (LD):** earlier the prime minister and the leader of the opposition had fun and games over housing benefit cuts. <this is not a laughing matter> for the thousands of children who could well become homeless (0.2) i am confident that this was an unintended consequence (.) because the cost of putting children into bed and breakfasts is far greater than housing benefit [...]

Russell draws attention to the effect of the changes to Housing Benefit, namely that thousands of children could become homeless, an FTA which is stark in its criticism of Government policy. However, as a member of the Government benches, this Liberal Democrat MP seeks to mitigate the FTA and does so by framing the consequence as an ‘unintended’ one, which offers the PM a chance to change the policy for the better. I would suggest that this approach to mitigating the FTA is what B&L had in mind for their strategy ‘minimize the imposition’ (1987: 176). By suggesting the action is unintended, the severity of the FTA is lowered somewhat.

### 3.3.3 Minimise the criticism

(15) *Women in Parliament, 06/02/2008, Column 957, 26:30*

**Margaret Moran (Lab):** [...] given that today is the ninetieth anniversary of women’s suffrage. what more does my honourable friend intend to do to ensure there are more women represented in this place (.) more than the one in five mostly on these benches in honour of those suffragettes and their suffering?

Moran makes an implied criticism that the Labour Government (of which she is a part) has not done enough to ensure that women are fairly represented in Parliament, but in performing the FTA she makes clear that the Government have been working towards this aim (the *more* in ‘what **more** does [he] intend to do’ presupposes that something has been done previously). Furthermore, she also minimises the criticism of her party (and by extension, of the government) as she indicates that most of the women already in parliament are from the Labour party. Criticism can be minimised

by asserting that an issue affects a small number of people, or that it has not caused *major* inconvenience, etc. By minimising criticism, the MP in the excerpt follows the broad B&L strategy of avoiding disagreement (1987: 113); more particularly, the MP does so by hedging his statement.

### 3.3.4 Criticise the opposition

(16) *Teenage Pregnancy, 30/01/2008, Column 309, 09:10*

**Chris Bryant (Lab):** [...] don't we need to do more to tackle these high rates of teenage pregnancy? (.) so that every young person- AND I SEE that the leader of the opposition is sniggering and i don't think he should be sniggering about this THE PEOPLE OF BRITAIN WON'T TAKE HIM SERIOUSLY IF HE DOESN'T TAKE THIS KIND OF THING SERIOUSLY [...]

Another strategy to mitigate the threatening nature of an FTA is to deflect attention from the act by simultaneously uttering a critique the opposition. This type of mitigation relies on the complex participation structure discussed in §2.4. In the current example, Bryant performs two FTAs, the first calling the PM to action and the second directed at the LO (Cameron); the latter FTA against the LO (which casts aspersions on Cameron's personality) plays an important mitigating role in relation to the former, and thus indirectly falls under FTAs performed by MPs towards the PM (and vice versa; the category that I earlier said was my main interest). By threatening Cameron's face, Bryant diverts attention away from the face-threat performed against the PM, thereby mitigating it. We may think of this strategy as 'convey[ing] that S and H are cooperators' (B&L 1987: 125), albeit as an FTA sub-category which B&L did not envisage, since it is not really available in everyday conversation.

### 3.3.5 Make a supportive comment unrelated to the FTA

(17) *Home Repossessions, 30/01/2008, Column 310, 14:40*

**Gordon Brown (Lab, PM):** m-m-mister speaker it's nice to welcome him back (0.2) and and i'm sure and e:rr even his own party may be pleased to see him back in this position of asking me questions

Vincent Cable (the MP who had asked the question to which example 17 is the response) had, until a few weeks prior to this session, been the Acting Leader of the Liberal Democrats and had asked Gordon Brown two questions every week. This was the first occasion for Cable to ask Brown a question since Nick Clegg took over

as party leader. Brown, in welcoming Cable back to asking him questions, shows a form of personal approval of him which arguably minimises the threat inherent in his next act of accusing him of misunderstanding (as seen in example 8, above). This strategy is clearly related to B&L's "Notice, attend to H (his interests, wants, needs, goods)" (1987: 103).

### 3.3.6 Comment on one's respect for the hearer

(18) *Response to D. Blunkett's question on localism, 27/10/2010 Column 308, 10:54*

**David Cameron (Con, PM):** i i umm i didn't know the honourable gentleman (.) who i have considerable respect for. (0.2) i didn't know he was making these arguments all through the last thirteen years [...]

This mitigation strategy is related to the previous one, but differs in that the speaker directly expresses his admiration or respect for the hearer, i.e. he directly praise the hearer and his personality. The previous strategy can be a supportive comment on a wider range of matters which the speaker would appreciate, for instance praise for their constituency work, or work outside parliament, etc. In this case, Cameron highlights his respect for Blunkett before performing an FTA which remarks on the MP's previous lack of action on the issue raised in the question<sup>7</sup>. This strategy is similar to the earlier quoted B&L's 'Notice, attend to H...' (1987: 103), but is much narrower in scope and attends only to H's desire to be liked and respected.

### 3.3.7 Act as a mouthpiece

(19) *Illegal Gypsy Sites, 27/10/2010 Column 312, 21.55*

**Mark Pawsey (Con):** [...] where local residents have had to put up with illegal developments on their doorstep but they are pleased with the proposals of the coalition government to give local authorities additional powers to deal with this matter (.) will the prime minister acknowledge the wish of my constituents (.) to see those powers being made available at the earliest opportunity?

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<sup>7</sup> An anonymous reviewer suggested there was an element of sarcasm in the PM's utterance. In this instance, I am minded to disagree; the prosodic cues for sarcasm are not present in Cameron's comment (Rockwell 2000) and Blunkett is someone who has advised Cameron in the past on anti-terror legislation (despite being a former Labour minister); hence they have a good relationship.

Here, the MP attempts to have the PM make an undertaking to introduce legislation preventing gypsy developments. However, by framing the issue as a legitimate concern of his constituents, Pawsey distances himself from the FTA since this is ‘the wish of [his] constituents’, and not necessarily his own desire. As a result, this strategy can be viewed as a version of B&L’s ‘Impersonalize S and H’ (1987: 190) strategy: Pawsey seeks to ‘impersonalize the speaker’ by turning himself into a ‘puppet’ of his constituents, who compel the MP to produce the FTA, perhaps contrary to his own desire.

### **3.4 Section Summary**

I have shown in this section that B&L’s (1987) politeness theory can be used to describe some of the interactions which occur at PMQs. Where FTAs are performed, either by backbenchers or by the PM, it is most frequently the *positive* face of the interlocutor that is threatened. These FTAs often call into question the hearer’s personality and policies; such strategies are employed to cast doubt in the mind of the electorate as to whether an MP is worthy of their vote.

## **4 Impoliteness at PMQs**

While in the previous section, I showed that there were many instances of speakers attempting to mitigate the FTAs that they performed, in the present section I set out to show that some MPs not only produce utterances which contain FTAs, but that these FTAs are performed in a highly confrontational and impolite way. As Bousfield & Locher (2008: 3) pertinently note in the introduction to their edited volume on impoliteness, ‘there is no solid agreement in the chapters [of their book] as to what ‘impoliteness’ actually is’. This lack of consensus is not merely restricted to their particular volume, but permeates virtually all the work carried out on impoliteness. As a result, I want to be clear on how I define impoliteness for the purposes of this study. Space limitations prevent me from engaging in a discussion where competing scholars disagree, but Culpeper (2010: §3) provides a good background. For my part, I define impoliteness thus:

Impoliteness is negative (linguistic) behaviour which is interpreted by the hearer to be an attack on his/her face. The speaker exacerbates and makes (very) salient this face-attack in his/her utterance. That attack on the hearer’s face causes the hearer offence.



## 4.1 Impolite linguistic strategies

In the following, I will discuss the most frequently used impoliteness strategies found in the corpus of PMQs sessions. In part, these behaviours correlate with those discussed in Culpeper (2010), but I have adapted or changed some of the labels that he uses because there may be differences in our categorisation. Furthermore, I use different labels because in his paper, Culpeper argues that some of his categories can be considered as inherently impolite, such that they can be thought of as ‘conventionalised impoliteness formulae’ (2010: 3232) – however, it is not in the scope of this article to argue the case for or against inherent impoliteness.

### 4.1.1 Unanswerable questions

(20) *Lisbon Treaty, 18/06/2008 Column 939, 09.30*

**David Cameron (Con, LO):** [...] everyone suspects that he and others in europe are going to make the irish vote again (0.4) will he guarantee that he would never support such an arrogant and high handed move? [...]

Questions of this type put the PM between a rock and a hard place, as it were, since “all possible replies have potentially negative consequences, but nevertheless a reply is still expected” (Bull & Wells 2011: 6). In this instance, an answer of ‘yes’ (i.e. that he (viz., the PM) would guarantee not to try and force the Irish to vote again) would make him accept the LO’s contention that such a move was ‘arrogant and high-handed’, but if he does not guarantee this (i.e. if he answers ‘no’), then he makes himself out to be ‘arrogant and high-handed’. In their paper, Bull & Wells describe such questions as ‘conflictual’ and suggest that the only way for the PM to answer is for him to equivocate, which “in itself can also be face-damaging, because it makes [him] look evasive” (2011: 7).

### 4.1.2 Personalised negative characterisations

(21) *Lisbon Treaty, 18/06/2008 Column 940, 12:50*

**David Cameron (Con, LO):** [...] now the treaty is half dead on the floor they haven’t got the courage to kill it (0.3) FRANKLY i have seen more spine and leadership from a bunch of JELLYFISH! [...]

Here, Cameron attacks the PM’s leadership in a highly personal and critical way by invoking a stark comparison between a jellyfish (a spineless creature) and Gordon

Brown, whom he wishes to characterise as lacking leadership and ‘backbone’. This is also a strategy that can be used by the PM in his answers to MPs and the LO. As well as using negative comparisons as in (21), the MP may be more stark and use a negative assertion of the form [he/she/the Prime Minister/etc.] [is] [X], where X is an insulting term – utterances of this type run this risk, however, of being deemed disorderly by the Speaker; compare that Erskine May (2004: 444) recommends the use of ‘good temper and moderation’ in parliamentary language.

#### 4.1.3 Unrelenting pointed criticism

(22) *Appointment of Andy Coulson, 06/07/2011 Column 1504, 14:30*

**Edward Miliband (Lab, LO)** [...] and isn't it the case (.) if the public is to have confidence in him he's got to come- the thing that is most difficult (.) he's got to accept that he made a <CATASTROPHIC ERROR OF JUDGEMENT> by bringing ANDY COULSON (0.6) into the heart of his downing street machine!

Here, the impoliteness is not derived from attacks on the hearer's personality (as in the previous example) but instead focuses on the actions of the hearer. The criticism is particularly fierce since the speaker offers no mitigation and the criticism is of actions for which the hearer was directly responsible. Other important elements of this type of impoliteness are its prosodic features – such as increases in volume on words or phrases which are particularly ‘cutting’, or marked emphasis on elements which personalise the attack; thus, in (22), *he* and *him* are stressed to emphasise the PM's personal responsibility in the Andy Coulson affair (see Culpeper et al. 2003 for an account of the relationship between prosody and (im)politeness).

#### 4.1.4 Accusation of hypocrisy

(23) *Child maintenance, 22/06/2011 Column 317, 11:20*

**Jessica Morden (Lab):** thank you mister speaker (0.2) if the prime minister is so serious about tackling the issue of runaway fathers which he said last week, why is he making it harder for single mothers to get maintenance payments by charging them to use the child support agency?

In (23), the MP not only highlights an undesirable government policy, but in so doing shows that this policy clashes with the PM's previous statements on the same issue. By highlighting this discrepancy between the PM's words and actions, the MP attacks

his positive face, by portraying him as untrustworthy. Accusations of hypocrisy have a relatively simple set-up in common; ‘[if the PM thinks X], [then why Y]?’ where X is a summary of the PM’s previous thoughts and Y is the government’s actions; X and Y are contradictory (or at least implied to be so).

#### 4.1.5 Patronise or condescend

(24) *Response to request for policy suggestions, 27/10/2010 Column 306, 03:21*

**Edward Miliband (Lab, LO):** mister speaker mister speaker it’s prime minister’s questions <the clue is in the title> (0.2) he’s supposed to answer the questions!

Condescending remarks in the workplace have been noted to “contribute to an atmosphere of destructive conflict” and their sources have been suggested to range from “sloppy communication [...] to insecurity [on the part of the speaker] to an out-of-control ego” (Johnston 2007: 2). At PMQs, such behaviour is also clearly impolite, since it makes the target seem foolish and again attacks their positive face by suggesting that they are not capable of understanding or following the simplest of matters. In the case of example 24, Miliband patronises the PM by suggesting that he is not even able to understand the format of the parliamentary session which he is taking part in<sup>8</sup>.

## 4.2 Section Summary

Whilst FTAs were most frequently levelled at politicians’ positive face, in cases where these FTAs are performed impolitely, it seems that positive and negative face are just as likely to be attacked by the speaker. In order to explain this, one might argue that the very act of being impolite is what is most salient. Since the speaker is departing from the norm of seeking “to maintain the social equilibrium and the friendly relations” (Leech 1983: 82) associated with polite behaviour, it makes little odds whether s/he attacks the hearer’s positive or negative face; instead, s/he is impolite in whatever way is available.

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<sup>8</sup> By this clever strategy, Mr. Miliband is able to ignore the awkward questions which Cameron has put to him – since his rôle is asking questions, he does not need to provide a potentially face-damaging response.

## 5 Quantitative results and discussion

### 5.1 FTA production by MPs

Looking at the rates of FTA production across the two parliaments (Brown's and Cameron's) showed that it made little difference to MPs if they were performing FTAs against Brown or Cameron – the frequencies for each type of FTA remained relatively constant. As a result, I combined the results from the sessions where Brown was PM and Cameron was PM to give results which were hopefully more reliable (because of the larger figures involved). Figure 1 shows the rates at which MPs produce FTAs:

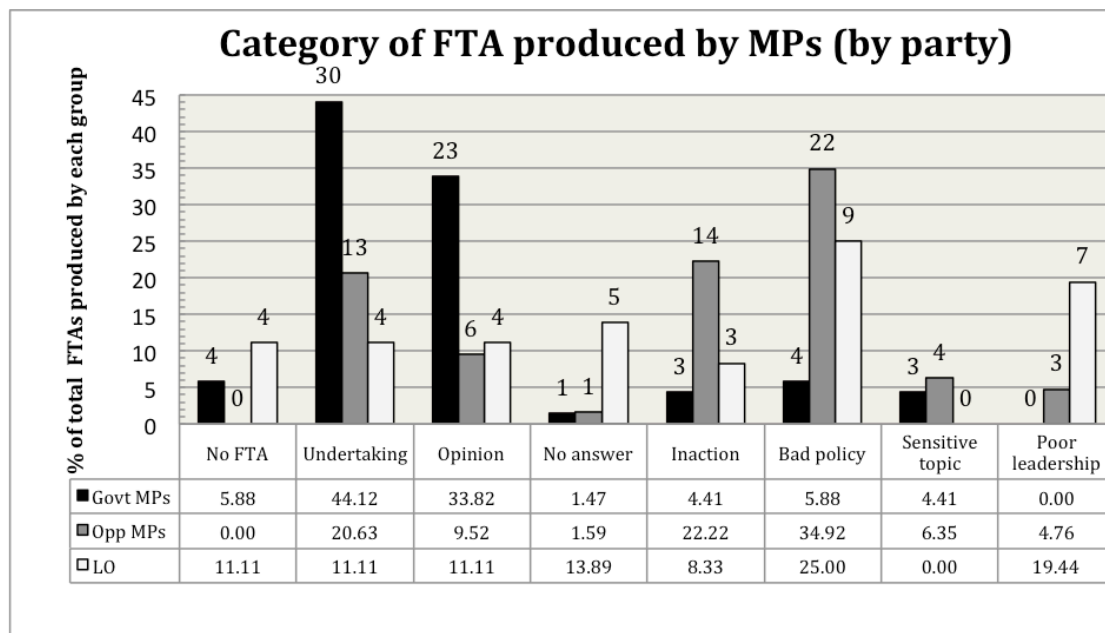


Figure 1: FTAs as produced by each group of MPs (numbers above columns indicate raw figures)

Figure 1 highlights some key differences in the utterances produced by the different groups of MPs. Firstly, we can see that 5% of government MPs' questions do not contain any FTAs. Such turns are primarily used to find out information from the PM regarding constituency matters. Perhaps more surprising is the frequency with which the LO fails to produce an FTA (more than once in ten questions). Closer inspection shows that these turns are all requests for information on overseas conflicts involving the Armed Forces (Libya & Afghanistan). One might speculate that the reason FTAs do not appear in these contexts is that the LO seeks to project a statesmanlike image to the electorate, and performing an FTA regarding these matters may seem petty and

opportunistic. This speculation is supported by Clayman et al. (2007: 36) who find that journalists eschew assertive questions when asking the U.S. President about matters of foreign affairs and defence and instead are relatively deferent, which they suggest is a result of journalists wanting to “rally ’round the flag”.

The FTAs most frequently produced by government MPs are those asking for an undertaking and seeking the PM’s opinion. I would argue that these FTAs are inherently less face-threatening than the others that I have discussed (put another way: the weight of the imposition is relatively low), since it is part of the PM’s rôle to offer his opinion and undertake to perform actions. Furthermore, we find that these FTAs are often used to invite the PM to criticise the opposition – they may be worded so that the PM can show that his opinion differs from the opposition (where this would be favourably viewed by the electorate), or undertake to do something which the opposition have ruled out, and so on.

The more threatening FTAs – the ones which directly criticise the PM’s performance or personality – are performed virtually exclusively from the other side of the chamber. Opposition MPs are particularly keen on drawing attention to government inaction or bad government actions. These FTAs not only allow them to highlight perceived government ineptitude, but also it gives them the opportunity to offer an alternative course of action to the viewing public; in a sense it can be seen as a chance to offer a mini ‘party election broadcast’, potentially making their party more inviting to the voting viewer.

The LO’s use of FTAs is more varied, but noticeable is his tendency to attack the PM’s leadership. Clearly, the act of criticising the PM’s leadership is designed to imply to the electorate that the LO would be a more successful PM.

#### **5.1.1 How MPs produce FTAs**

Figure 2 shows how the FTAs in the corpus are produced, dependent on the MP’s place in parliament.

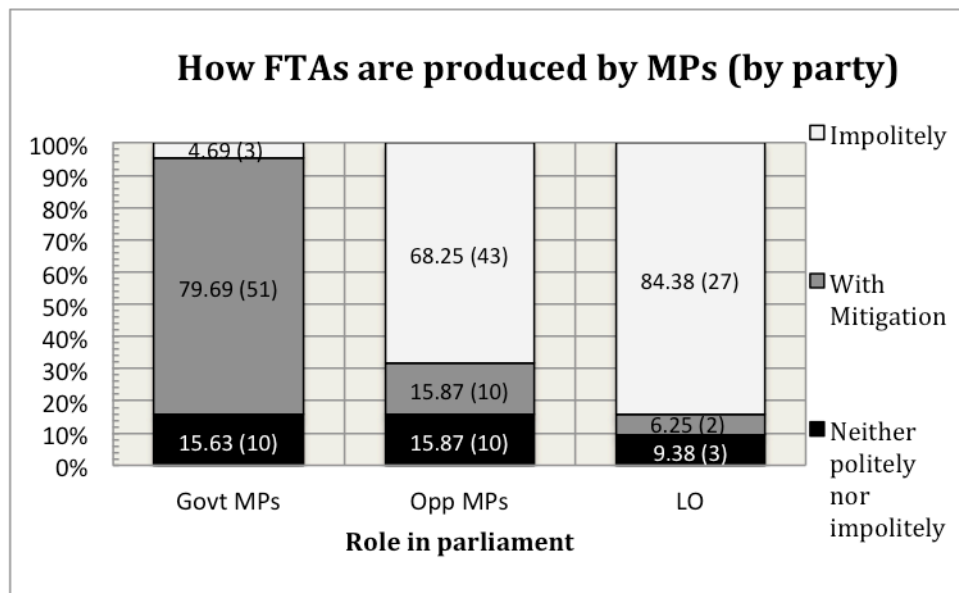


Figure 2: Use and non-use of (im)politeness strategies by questioners (numbers in brackets are raw figures)

As one may expect, the vast majority of the FTAs produced by government MPs are carried out with mitigation. I think that it is safe to assert that this is not only because government MPs do not want to come into conflict with the PM (as to do so would not only hinder their chances of progression in the party), but also because MPs are aware that a divided party does not play well to the public. These factors also explain why there is such a low rate of impolite utterances in this group. Further analysis shows that all of the instances of impoliteness are produced by government MPs, best described as mavericks, or by others as ‘The Awkward Squad’ (Marshall-Andrews 2011).

The rates for opposition MPs and the LO could also have been anticipated, with impolitely put FTAs forming the largest proportion of their utterances. As noted earlier, part of the purpose of the opposition is to criticise the government in order for the PM’s party to lose favour with the electorate – doing this impolitely *may* make that criticism seem more salient. One, perhaps unexpected, difference between the opposition backbenchers and the LO is the rate at which they do *not* carry out FTAs impolitely (MPs: ~32%, LO: ~15%). I would suggest that this is because the backbenchers still have constituency problems which could be resolved by the PM; asking for help impolitely in these instances would be unlikely to make the PM support their cause.

### 5.1.2 Use of mitigation strategies

I have chosen to look more closely at how government MPs use mitigation strategies – since the frequency of polite behaviour amongst opposition MPs and the LO is too low to allow for a more detailed analysis of their usage.

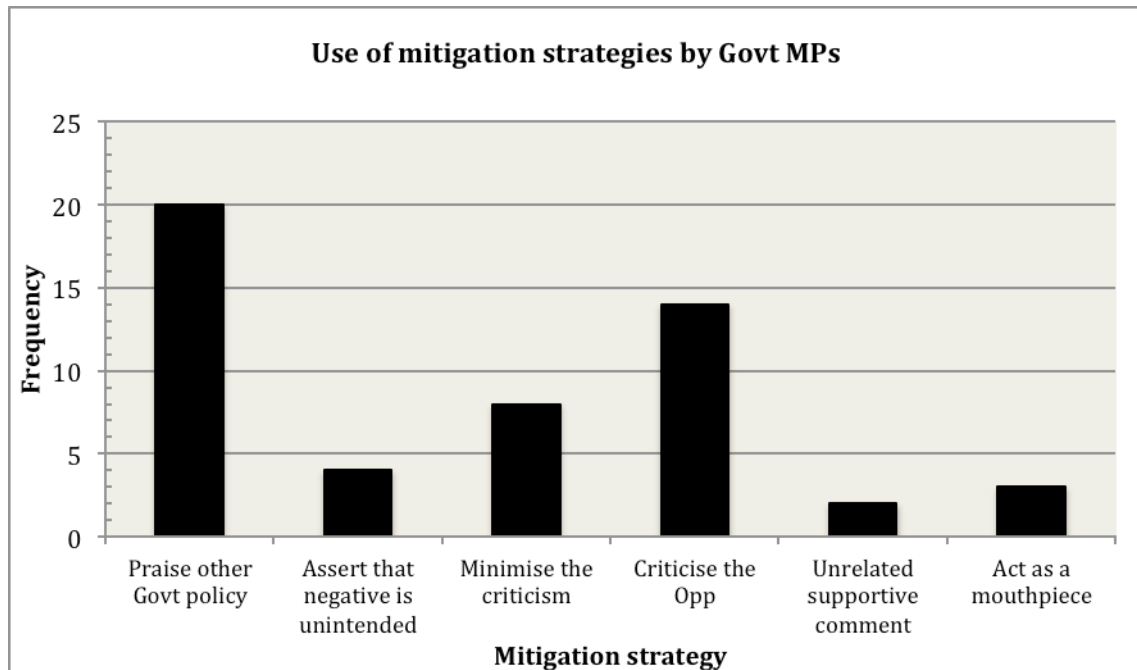


Figure 3: Breakdown of mitigation strategy usage by government MPs

Figure 3 shows that the most frequently used politeness strategy is to praise other government policies. This strategy allows the MP to deflect attention away from their FTA on to the positive impact of the PM. Criticising the opposition is also a common feature – it allows an MP to indicate to the electorate that s/he believes the current government is the ‘best bet’ for the country. Since government backbenchers only perform two types of FTA (in substantial numbers), it is not possible to say whether particular mitigation strategies are preferred for FTAs which are more face-damaging – additional data would be helpful here.

### 5.1.3 Use of impoliteness strategies

Looking at the impoliteness strategies used by opposition benches where there is a large enough data set, we again encounter differences between the backbenchers’ and the LO’s utterances.

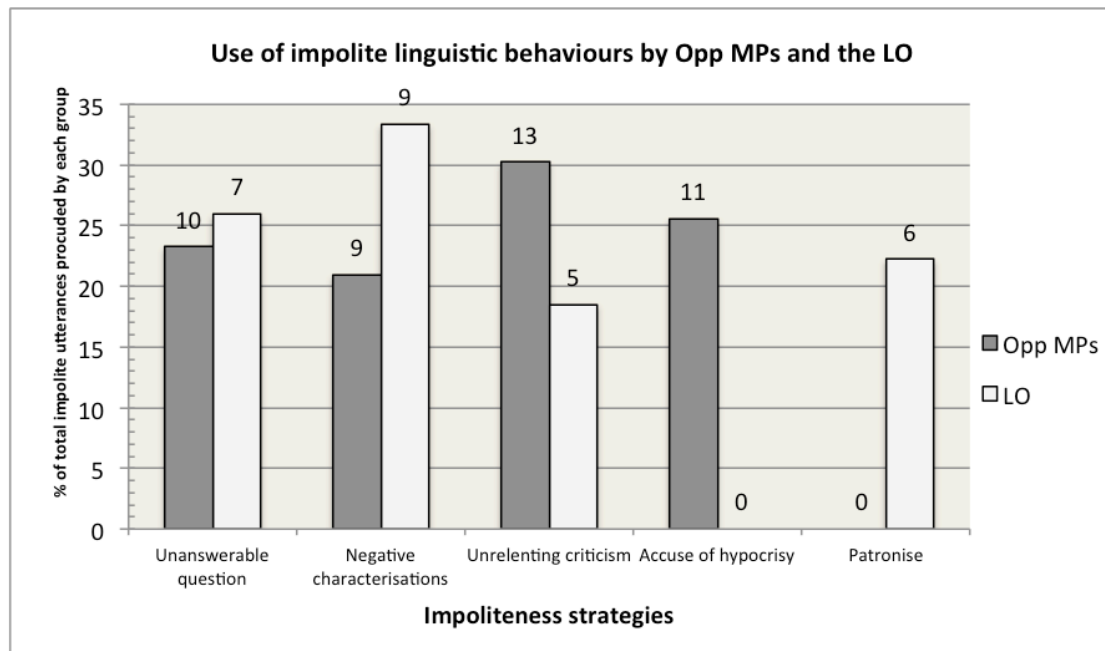


Figure 4: Comparison of opposition backbencher's and LO's use of impoliteness strategies

Figure 4 shows that the LO favours the use of negative characterisations – using this strategy significantly more than do backbenchers. I would suggest that this stems from the fact that the LO is often compared directly to the PM, so any damage that he causes to the PM’s image may increase his own relative standing with the electorate. Backbenchers are not subject to such direct comparison (at least not as frequently), thus are impolite in this way less often.

The discrepancies between the rates of patronising the PM and accusing him of hypocrisy are also interesting to note. I think a plausible explanation for backbenchers not using the strategy of patronising the PM in the corpus is their relative lack of power against him, which makes it difficult for them to ‘talk down’ to him. This is less of a consideration for the LO, who, although he does not have power, seeks it. That the LO chooses not to accuse the PM of hypocrisy strikes me as odd (especially as this is a strategy favoured by his party-mates). A tentative explanation could be that the LO does not want to leave himself open to the self-same charge that he has levelled against the PM.

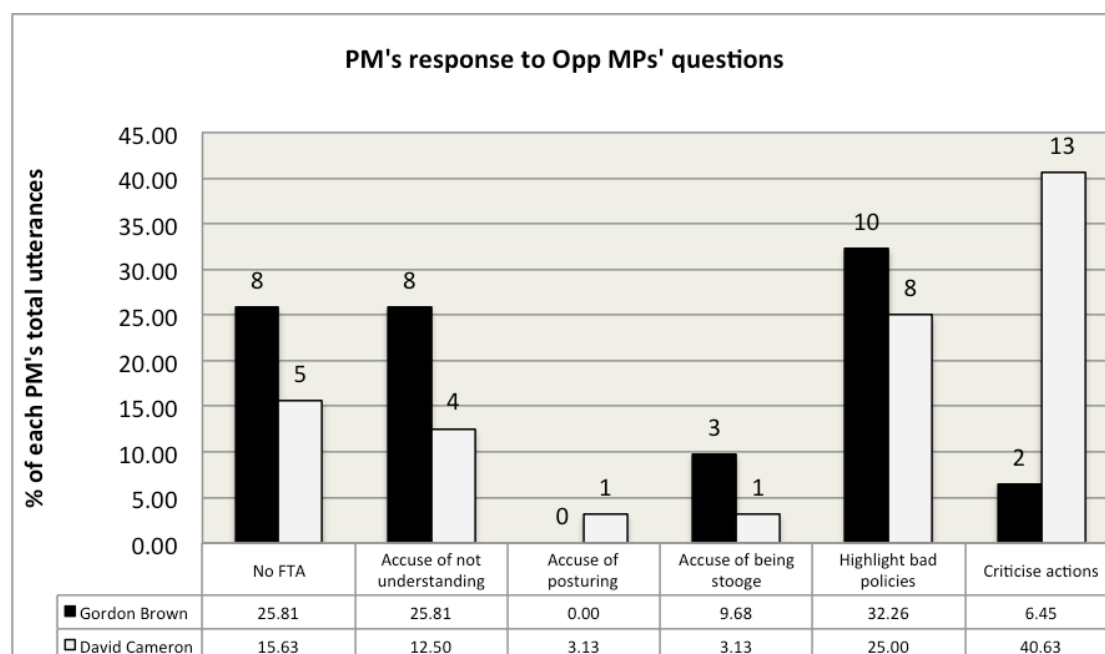
## 5.2 How the PM responds to questions

Looking at how David Cameron and Gordon Brown field questions at PMQs, we find both similarities and differences in their linguistic behaviour. The most noticeable similarities are in how they respond to their own backbenchers. Both Cameron and



Brown perform no FTA in approximately nine out of ten utterances. The only FTA that they do produce against these MPs is to accuse them of having misunderstood.

Arguably, the more interesting results come from analysing how the two PMs respond to questions from across the floor of the Commons.



**Figure 5: Comparison of Gordon Brown's and David Cameron's use of FTAs to opposition backbenchers**

Figure 5 shows that there is a great deal of variation in how Brown and Cameron respond to opposition backbenchers. An explanation for the differences in the rates of *highlighting bad policies* and *criticising actions* is perhaps the easiest to provide. In his own PMQs sessions, Brown highlights bad policies more than Cameron does, because at that time (when a General Election could have been called at any time), the opposition had more policy ideas in circulation; by contrast, during the Cameron PMQs sessions, when an election seems to be some way off, the Labour opposition are proposing very little. A similar explanation can be found for the major difference in rates of 'criticising actions'. The Labour opposition currently has thirteen years of actions which Cameron could potentially criticise. By contrast, at the time of Brown's PMQs sessions, the Conservative opposition had been out of power for over a decade, so any actions for him to criticise were hardly current. Furthermore, it was less likely that the backbenchers he could criticise were even MPs at the time of those actions, let alone were involved in devising them.

The differences in how the PMs respond to questions from the LO were less marked and the number of utterances in this category (36) is too small for me to comfortably speculate about.

### 5.2.1 The relationship between question and response

A detailed look at the way in which the PM answers questions (i.e. his use/non-use of mitigation and impoliteness strategies) shows that a potentially significant factor in his replies may be the degree of (im)politeness of an MP's question. The following table helps to demonstrate this:

Raw data shown in brackets. (Columns for each PM may not total 100% due to rounding)			Nature of MP's question			
			<i>No FTA</i>	<i>With mitigation</i>	<i>Neither politely nor impolitely</i>	<i>With an impoliteness strategy</i>
Nature of PM's response	<i>No FTA</i>	Gordon Brown	<b>100%</b> (4)	86.67% (26)	<b>66.67%</b> (6)	10.53% (4)
		David Cameron	<b>100%</b> (4)	78.78% (26)	<b>50.00%</b> (7)	14.29% (5)
	<i>With mitigation</i>	Gordon Brown	<b>0%</b> (0)	6.67% (2)	<b>33.33%</b> (3)	2.63% (1)
		David Cameron	<b>0%</b> (0)	21.21% (7)	<b>14.29%</b> (2)	2.86% (1)
	<i>Neither politely nor impolitely</i>	Gordon Brown	<b>0%</b> (0)	6.67% (2)	<b>0%</b> (0)	18.43% (7)
		David Cameron	<b>0%</b> (0)	0% (0)	<b>21.43%</b> (3)	20.00% (7)
	<i>With an impoliteness strategy</i>	Gordon Brown	<b>0%</b> (0)	0% (0)	<b>0%</b> (0)	68.42% (26)
		David Cameron	<b>0%</b> (0)	0% (0)	<b>14.29%</b> (2)	62.86% (22)

Figure 6: How (im)politeness of questions affects the (im)politeness of the PM's response

Firstly, and as one might expect, questions which do not contain an FTA are responded to without an FTA. Questions of this nature are usually requests for information and this information is provided as straightforwardly as possible.

Next, we can see that when MPs ask questions politely (i.e. with the use of mitigation strategies), the PMs return this politeness, by either not performing an FTA at all (which Brown does more than Cameron), or by performing an FTA with similar mitigating techniques.

The results for responding to questions worded neither politely nor impolitely showed some differences between the two PMs (though on a note of caution, the frequency of

these questions was lower). The most common way for either PM to deal with these FTAs is to avoid performing an FTA themselves. The only other strategy employed by Brown is to perform an FTA with mitigation. Cameron, on the other hand, mirrors the behaviour of the questioner on three occasions, in addition to responding impolitely twice. Those two instances are in response to the LO, which may indicate that even if the LO asks questions in a less threatening way, the PM still views them (because of the LO's position) as more serious, and as a result comes out 'all guns blazing', as it were.

The final column shows that impolite questions most often receive impolite answers. This sort of tit-for-tat behaviour is to be expected in the political setting; if the PM did not 'fight back' against MPs who rudely threaten his face, he may leave himself open to the accusation of being (politically) weak. The occasions on which both PMs respond in a less aggressive way – i.e. by not performing an FTA – are usually in response to impolite questions from government backbenchers. Going on the offensive against members of the same party (or of the government – at least in the case of Cameron, who leads a Coalition) could indicate that there are serious rifts on the government benches. Choosing to perform FTAs without impoliteness may also be a strategy employed by the PM in order to show that the MP's attack was ineffective; were he to retaliate by being impolite, it could appear to the viewer as though the MP has 'got up his nose'. By choosing not to 'rise to the bait' he may limit the damage of the MP's impoliteness.

These findings provide empirical evidence for Culpeper's suggestion that (im)polite behaviour is reciprocated in interaction (2011: 203ff). Culpeper provides numerous instances of impoliteness being responded to with impoliteness, and also comments on the British tendency to reciprocate politic 'thank yous' over a number of turns. The results found here show that it is not just politic and impolite behaviour that is reciprocated, but also *polite* behaviour (i.e. the non-routine linguistic behaviour). It seems that there is an expectation in this type of parliamentary discourse (and perhaps in other types of talk) that the behaviour of the questioner is reflected by the responder.

The fact that the differences in the linguistic behaviours of Cameron and Brown are so limited is perhaps most noteworthy. I would suggest that the format of PMQs is very restrictive as far as the PM is concerned. Whilst a pre-planned speech gives the PM the opportunity to show his personality in his discourse, PMQs is an arena that Prime Ministers often fear<sup>9</sup>, and in which they often simply want to survive. As a result, it seems that PMs are minded to simply follow the rules set out by parliamentary authorities such as Erskine May and by the example of their predecessors – which then leads to a lack of real variety in linguistic behaviour.

### 5.3 Section Summary

I would suggest that the important results to take from this section are the following:

- a) Rôle in parliament impacts on the readiness of MPs to carry out FTAs, with the LO eschewing FTAs in the case of serious , and government MPs shunning them in order to maintain good relations with the PM; by contrast, opposition MPs perform FTAs in all of their questions.
- b) Rôle in parliament is a factor determining how FTAs are produced: government MPs usually use mitigation strategies, opposition MPs frequently are impolite but also avoid impoliteness in a number of instances, and the LO is nearly always impolite.
- c) The PM mainly performs FTAs against members from across the floor of the Commons.
- d) Differences in Brown and Cameron’s linguistic behaviour are likely to stem from the differing contexts of their premierships, rather than from their attitudes to PMQs.
- e) In his response, the PM most often mirrors the (im)politeness of the question he is answering.

## 6 Conclusion

In this paper, I have described a variety of ways that MPs and the PM can threaten one another’s face at PMQs. I have also shown that mitigation strategies form part of members’ linguistic repertoire and are used to minimise the threats contained in their utterances; as a result I think Harris’ (2001: 469) conclusion that “the mitigating

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<sup>9</sup> See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/oct/27/history-pmqs-prime-ministers-commons> [accessed: 28/01/2012] for the opinion of a number of PMs of the session.

linguistic strategies [described by B&L] are largely absent' is unsound. It is my view that because we do find mitigation strategies at PMQs, B&L's (1987) work still stands up to scrutiny – even within the formal, institutional context of Parliament, an arena which their theory originally did not consider.

However, I have also shown that impoliteness is often a feature of opposition MPs' questions, whereas it is never used by *loyal* government backbenchers. The PM, on the whole, will only use impolite behaviour in response to impolite questions. Furthermore, I have found that in the sessions analysed, the PM infrequently performs FTAs against members of his own party (and coalition partners in the case of Cameron), but that when he does so, he performs the FTA with mitigation.

Naturally this investigation has had limited scope. I have not been able to explore the complex nature of participant structure (Goffman 1981; Levinson 1988), nor have I been able to investigate the frequency and nature of flattery and praise in a systematic way. Future studies would do well to look at these areas.

On the whole, though, I believe that the present study has provided some novelty to the field of political discourse analysis and has shown that, although Punch & Judy politics forms a major part of PMQs, politeness still has its place in the House of Commons.

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