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

Alison Sealey, Stephen Bates

Abstract

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

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Keywords

Prime Minister's Questions, Parliament, parliamentary discourse, corpus-assisted analysis, face management, adversarial discourse

Introduction

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

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

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

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

A third characteristic of the discourse which again we focus on here is the constitutive role of language itself in political action. As Chilton and Schäffner (2002: 3) observe, '… political activity does not exist without the use of language … the doing of politics is predominantly constituted in language'. The current study offers a contribution to the political discourse analysis that should, according to Fairclough and Fairclough (2012), help to explain 'how actual

discursive practices contribute to maintaining or transforming a given social order, including existing power relations' (p.12).

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

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

PMQs as rhetorical performance

The roles of the parliamentary actors who ask the questions inevitably influence the kinds of questions they put to the PM. The most prominent questioner is the Leader of the Opposition (LO), whose words account for an increasing proportion of the total number of those spoken in an average PMQs session (from 6.9% in 1979-80 to 15.7% by 2010). By the questions he or she chooses to ask, the LO not only raises important and timely issues but is also expected to boost his/her party's own standing and morale, as well as his/her personal reputation. The following are some examples from our corpus of the entire set of PMQs from 1979 – 2010 (details of the corpus are given below).

From William Hague (Conservative LO) to Tony Blair (Labour PM) 29 October 1997 vol 299:

> Is it not becoming clear that this Government practise [*sic*] politics without values, politics without conscience, and politics without principles? Is not the lesson to be drawn by the whole country the fact that if people trust this Government today they pay for it tomorrow?

The reverse polarity format seen in both these interrogative sentences is a frequent feature of the questions in our data, where the surface form of the question belies its pragmatic intent. Although the question is ostensibly an invitation to the PM to agree with the position taken by the LO, it is quite apparent that this is not so much a question to which an answer is genuinely being sought as a display of the Opposition Party's stance. As Han (2002: 201) observes, it is typical of rhetorical questions that they have 'the illocutionary force of an assertion of the opposite polarity from what is apparently asked.' There are several additional rhetorical features here that are more typical of political oratory addressed to a large audience than dyadic question-answer sequences. These include: the structural triad introduced by 'politics'; the parallel clauses contrasting 'today' and 'tomorrow'; and the appeal to the Aristotelian triad of *ethos* ('values', 'conscience', 'principles'), *pathos* ('trust') and *logos* ('clear', 'lesson'). Space does not permit an extensive discussion of the rhetorical features of political oratory, but various commentators have identified the interweaving of appeals to values, emotions and reason in politicians' persuasive speech (e.g. Gottweis, 2006; Reisigl, 2008).

From Neil Kinnock (Labour Party LO) to John Major (Conservative PM) 19 February 1991 vol 186:

> Why does not the Prime Minister save a great deal of time and the country a huge amount of money by abolishing the poll tax and accepting the Labour party proposal for a modern system of fair rates?

This is another example of a question with negative polarity, in which the LO associates positive quantifiers ('a great deal of time', 'a huge amount of money') and descriptors ('modern', 'fair') with his own party's policy. And indeed, the PM's response demonstrates that he interprets this more as a challenge than a request for information:

> I am sure that the whole country will have listened with interest to the right hon. Gentleman. What a shame that when he announced his proposals in Scotland they did not meet with the acclaim that he expected.

This response has several of the features consistent with the patterns we present below. The focus of the turn is shifted on to the questioner (LO), and represents what he said and thought ('announced', 'proposals', 'expected') as at odds with what is desired ('acclaim') by 'the whole country', thus presenting the LO as both isolated and misguided ('not [what] … he expected'). These remarks are prefaced however by an opening clause that asserts the PM's confidence in his own perception: 'I am sure …'. As we demonstrate below, these references to mental processes play a significant role in PMs' self-representation at PMQs.

Asking questions such as those above, in the context of this institutionalized event, is part of the performance of being LO. Similarly, the other actors in this weekly drama - the MPs, who are either Government or Opposition Backbenchers - perform their roles through posing particular kinds of question. For reviews, see for example Norton (1993) and Wilson (1990), cited in Fenton-Smith (2008); Ilie (2004); Antaki and Leudar (2001); and Bates et al. (2014b: 263). Needless to say, 'unanswerable' questions aimed at provoking the PM to discomfort or evasion tend to be those put by Opposition Backbenchers (OB), whereas those characterised as 'friendly' are more likely to be asked by Government Backbenchers (GB), although these patterns are not invariable (Bates 2014b: 268n).

The PMQs corpus

Records of what is said in parliament go back over 200 years, and the official record is Hansard, about which the government site explains:

> Members' words are recorded by Hansard reporters and then edited to remove repetitions and obvious mistakes but without taking away from the meaning. Reports of the latest proceedings are published online and updated during the day. …
>
> The text of Daily Debates in the Commons and Lords is published online the following morning by 6am and is also available in hard copy. Bound final versions follow, proofread to eliminate any errors that may have occurred in the original.
>
> (Parliament.UK, 2015)

It is obvious from this description that close linguistic analysis is likely to be compromised, to some extent at least, by the approach to transcription taken by those responsible. Previous detailed examinations of the spoken interactions have confirmed that the written record 'filter[s] out "spokenness"', '"translates" into formal, standard English', and makes some utterances more explicit (Slembrouck, 1992: 104, 105). Or, as Mollin (2007: 187) puts it:

> … the [Hansard parliamentary] transcripts omit performance characteristics of spoken language, such as incomplete utterances or hesitations, as well as any type of extra-factual, contextual talk (e.g., about turn-taking). Moreover, … the transcribers and editors also alter speakers' lexical and grammatical choices towards more conservative and formal variants.

In this respect, the very transcriptions could be seen not only as representations of the political processes that occur in parliament, but also as political processes in themselves, given that 'transcription as a practice [is] inherently embedded in relations of power' (Bucholtz, 2000: 1439). Nevertheless, researchers from various disciplinary perspectives have used Hansard transcripts to explore a wide range of issues (Bachmann, 2011; Bates et al., 2014a; Bates et al., 2014b; Bull, 2013; Catalano, 2009; Ellis and Kitzinger, 2002). The data for our own project lies somewhere between the close analysis of specific examples of parliamentary discourse represented by, for example, Antaki and Leudar (2001),

Ilie (2004; 2012), Fenton-Smith (2008), Shaw (2000), and the very large-scale corpus analysis recently undertaken under the auspices of the Samuels project[1]. Whereas that corpus includes all kinds of parliamentary proceedings, we have concentrated, for the reasons explained above, on the relatively stable institution that PMQs has become, particularly since 1979 and the election of Margaret Thatcher (Bates *et al.* 2014b: 258). Indeed, it is probably one of the most ritualistic of the discursive events in the House of Commons. Although there is some variation in both the event and the way it is recorded, as a body of texts, this data-set has an impressive homogeneity for the purposes of identifying patterns in prime ministerial performance and their self-representation of what they do.

Our corpus was compiled by downloading the Hansard transcriptions of all sessions of PMQs between the elections of 1979 and 2010 (i.e. all those under the premierships of Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown). These files were converted from the Microsoft Word originals into plain text format; where occasional minor errors were noticed as we explored the data, these were corrected. We added basic XML markup to indicate the beginnings and ends of individual speakers' turns, as well as tags to distinguish each question, the contributions of the Speaker of the House and so on. This resulted in a corpus of just under 1000 files, comprising 994.5 x (equivalent of) 30-minute sessions, and a total of 4,448,600 words, of which these PMs' contributions comprise 2,175,079 words.

Research questions and methods of analysis

We have established that PMQs is perceived – and experienced by the PM – as an almost gladiatorial contest. At stake for the PM on each occasion is, according to Margaret Thatcher, 'your authority in the House, your standing with your party, your grip of policy and of the facts to justify it' (Moncrieff, 2011). Many of the questions put to the PM are, as Fenton-Smith observes, 'fundamentally judgmental' and are necessarily met, therefore, with a wide 'range of rhetorical avoidance techniques … to fend off the allegations that underlie most of the inquiries' (2008: 114). PMs are thus under great pressure to demonstrate their rhetorical prowess: Tony Blair, for example, reports that he learned to deal with PMQs by 'not so much mastering the facts but mastering the strategy of debate' (Blair, 2011: 111). It is this 'strategy' that we have investigated in a particular way, by looking in detail at the utterances of PMs where they explicitly represent themselves and their actions – that is, in clauses where the first person singular pronoun, 'I', is the subject. Our initial questions are thus:

> Of which verbs is 'I' the subject when PMs answer questions during PMQs?
>
> And which verbs with 'I' as subject are particularly frequent, in positive, modalised and negated clauses?

[1] *http://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/critical/research/fundedresearchprojects/samuels*

As discussed above, PMs are faced with questions which are ostensibly about policy and/or action, but whose illocutionary force is often to call into question the PM's competence, morality, ethics and authority. Conversely, the pragmatic aims of supportive questions, and the answers they receive, are often as much concerned with enhancing the PM's face as with refining policy. This is why we are interested in the ways that PMs' self-representation in 'I' clauses contributes to – or detracts from – the 'resolution of difference of opinion in a reasonable way' that Fairclough and Fairclough (2012: 53) identify as part of a 'normative pragmatics' (c.f. Van Eemeren et al., 2008). A range of commentators over a long period of time has criticised PMQs for being unproductively confrontational. (In addition to Bercow (2010) see, for example, Hoggart (2011); Thomas (2006); Franks and Vandermark (1995: 69); Hurd (1997); Irwin (1988: 82); Lloyd (1976).) Yet, whether by choice, custom, expectation or the manoeuvring of their interlocutors, PMs apparently continue to reproduce rhetorical patterns that contribute to the stigmatised character of PMQs. Our aim here is to identify and analyse the ways in which prime ministerial self-representation constitutes one specific component of the confrontational exchanges that are consistently witnessed in PMQs. Although there may be comparisons to be drawn between the four PMs in the data set, we are not seeking here to compare or contrast them, but rather to identify common, recurring and persistent features of prime ministerial performance – whoever is the incumbent of the office – at PMQs. So our second question is:

> How may the patterns identified in PMs' use of [I+verb] structures represent contributions to the following:
> (a) reasoned argumentation?
> (b) personal face-maintenance or face-enhancement?
> (c) identification with institutional or sociocultural norms?

We have used corpus analysis tools, as detailed below, to explore the language of PMQs from a range of perspectives. A small piece of software, XTractor (Heuboeck and Thompson, 2009) was used to extract into separate files all the contributions of particular speakers, or categories of speaker, from any or all PMQ sessions. We used the CLAWS tool to tag the data with the part of speech classes from the basic USAS tag set, for use in some, though not all, of the analyses. XTractor was used to extract, and save as separate files, the contributions made during PMQs by each of the four Prime Ministers. These outputs formed the basis of the initial analysis, but it should be noted that we retain access to the full set of transcripts and can refer back to the more extensive discursive context where necessary. We are of course aware that these utterances are sometimes embedded in longer exchanges (e.g. with the LO), which can be considered from other perspectives (e.g. as follow-ups – Bull (2012).

To answer RQ1, we began our analysis by uploading to AntConc (Anthony, 2014) the four files containing all the contributions during PMQs of the four PMs, tagged for part of speech. We used a range of search strings (e.g. {I_PPIS1 *_V*}; {I_PPIS1 *_RR* *_V*}) to find as many occurrences as possible of utterances by these PMs where 'I' is the subject of a verb. Thus, for example, not only 'I agree' (which occurs 1454 times) but also 'I absolutely agree' (5 occurrences), 'I also

agree' (31), 'I certainly agree' (43) are considered, as are negative constructions such as 'I do not / did not / cannot agree' etc. Further searches identified the lexical verbs associated with all auxiliaries, and we additionally identified the adjectives following 'I am' and 'I was', though there is not space to report those findings here. Even using this range of methods, we were not able to identify every instance of the processes of which the PMs are the agents (such as where 'I do' occurs in sentence final position, for example). As such ambiguous examples comprise only a very small proportion of the data, we do not believe that they significantly affect the results. Nevertheless, we present our numerical data as more indicative than categorical.

Table 1 presents both a list of the structures included in our analysis and some preliminary illustrations of the kinds of clause on which we are reporting. Perusal of these examples already provides an indication of the balance between provision of information and of self-presentation in these utterances.

	Structure	**Notes**	**Examples**
1	I + simple form - present	(excl. auxiliary senses of *be, have*)	I *admire* the right hon. Gentleman's certainty
			I *stand* firm in support of the alliance
			I *have* my criticisms of Israeli policy
2	I + simple form - past	(excl. auxiliary senses of *be, have*)	I *abolished* the binary divide
			I *visited* Prestwick airport 10 days ago
3	I + simple form with adverb - past & present		I totally *condemn* any such personal attacks
			I also *invited* him to stay on
			I gladly *join* my hon. Friend in congratulating Barnet
			I always *knew* that the hon. Gentleman was a man of judgment
4	I *do*	as auxiliary; some modified by adverbs	I *do believe* that the MOD acted in good faith
			I *do* indeed *congratulate* the Wandsworth borough council
			I *do say* this
5	I *did*		I *did hear* the question, Madam Speaker
			I *did notice* with some interest that particular survey
6	I *am* (+ adverb) + -ing verb		I *am explaining* how the Bill arose
			I *am* simply *suggesting* that he is an opportunist
7	I *was* + -ing verb		I *was getting* 150 by way of tax allowance
			I *was pointing out* to the House that we expect the reforms to save 1.3 million tonnes of CO2
8	I *was* + adv + -ing verb		I *was* just *trying* to turn up this letter from him
9	I *have* + verb (pp)	(excl. modal sense)	I *have accepted* that street crime is a problem
10	I *have* + adv + verb (pp)	(excl. modal sense)	I *have* already *explained* the reasons
11	I *had* (+ adv)	(excl. modal sense)	I *had hoped* that the House would understand that
			I *had* optimistically *thought* that the right hon. and learned Gentleman might welcome a third successive fall in unemployment
12	I + modal (incl. modal sense of *have*)		I *could cite* many other examples I *have* to *accept* that they have not been found I *must confess* that I had not noticed an undue amount of secrecy lately
13	I *do* negative		I *do* not *believe* that to be the case
14	I *do* negative + adverb		I *do* not yet *know* whether they do
15	I *did* negative (+ adverb)		I *did* not *agree* with that policy I *did* not *know* the details of the figures I am sorry, but I *did* not quite *get* it
16	I *am* (+ adverb) + -ing negative		I *am* not *proposing* to revoke our present policy in any way

			I *am* certainly not *saying* that.
17	I *have* (+ adv) + verb (pp) negative	(excl. modal sense)	I *have* not *sought* such an assurance I *have* not yet *read* the report myself
18	modal negative		I *can* not *see* what is wrong with that way of proceeding I *would* never *accuse* the hon. Gentleman of being naïve I *will* not *rest* until apartheid is dead

Table 1: Range of structures with 'I' as subject, with examples

These procedures allow us to identify the processes of which these four Prime Ministers report themselves as being the agents – and which kinds of process they distance themselves from. The results are presented in the following section. In the discussion we consider their implications for any attempts by parliamentarians to modify this kind of discourse in light of the norms, at the levels of interpersonal pragmatics, parliamentary institutions and structured social relations, that constrain what PMs say they do.

Results and discussion

To start with a broad overview, it can be seen that the PMs in our data-set use a construction where *I* is the subject of a verb in one of the 'positive' forms outlined above (i.e. rows 1 – 12 of Table 1) a total of 28,514 times. Negated constructions (as in rows 13 – 18) total 2570. This is consistent with findings from other corpus studies (Halliday, 1991; 1993) that have established a probability of 'positive' as around 0.9, contrasted with a probability of 'negative' at around 0.1 – although the ratio of negative constructions in our data is even lower. It should be noted that the partly automated procedures used for identifying 'positive' and 'negative' uses may overlook some subtle distinctions. For example, the string {I_PPIS1 *_RR *_V*} identifies not only instances such as 'I certainly think', but also 'I hardly think'. This occurs in examples such as (1):

> 1. The Olympic Games are based on the concepts of peace and prosperity. I hardly think that either concept will be satisfied at the present time,

where the pragmatic force of 'hardly' is to negate the subsequent clause.

The different verbs used total 482 in the 'positive' list[2], subsequently referred to as 'List A', and 232 in the 'negative' list ('List B'). There are 231 verbs that are used exclusively in positive constructions (i.e. they do not occur in the negative list), and 29 that are used only in negative constructions. That is, in this set of PMQs none of the PMs says that they do *not*, for example: 'applaud', 'comply', 'enjoy', 'investigate', 'resolve' or 'welcome' anything. Conversely, they present themselves as subjects of verbs such as the following only with some kind of negation: 'begrudge', 'blame', 'exclude', 'hide', 'slur' and 'waste'. To illustrate the contexts of such uses, some examples of concordance lines are presented below. Examples 2 – 7 are of verbs with 'I' as subject from List A, i.e. not negated in this data-set.

> 2. I *applaud* Newport, and I *applaud* what my hon. Friend is doing
> 3. I gladly *comply*.
> 4. I *enjoyed* my visit to South Africa and our discussions then.

[2] We exclude *give* and *refer,* which recur numerous times in the formulaic response 'I refer the hon. Member to the reply which I have given previously' and its variants.

5. I have *investigated* the issue.
6. I have been in a dilemma but I have *resolved* it in my own mind
7. Yes, I do *welcome* the reductions in interest rates

Examples 8 – 13 are of verbs with 'I' as subject from List B, that are always negated in this data-set.

8. I *do not begrudge* any of the time that we spend on this
9. No, I *am not blaming* the last Conservative government
10. I *do not exclude* what my Hon. Friend has said
11. I *do not hide* from the House the difficult decisions that will have to be made
12. I *am not slurring* civil servants
13. Of course *I did not waste* my time watching "Panorama" last night

Thus, even from such broad-brush results, we can see the tendency for these speakers to associate themselves with positively evaluated aspects of *logos, ethos* and *pathos* and to distance themselves from negatively evaluated positions and actions. However, some of these examples are rather idiosyncratic. For example, SLUR is a relatively rare item in this corpus, occurring only once with 'I' as subject, in Example 12. For a more representative view of how the PMs represent what they do, we therefore turn now to the most frequent verbs that occur in these structures.

We ranked the verbs in each list by frequency, and converted their occurrences to percentages of the total occurrences in the list. (That is: the verb *share*, for example, occurs 217 times in List A, so out of the 28,514 instances of non-negated verbs with 'I' as subject, it ranks 21st in the list and comprises 0.76% of these constructions. In List B, *share* occurs at rank 30=, comprising 0.39% of the negated constructions.) We know of no other corpus where these structures, with 'I' as subject, have been extracted, so cannot compare our findings with the equivalents in a reference corpus. However, we are able to identify verbs that rank higher in our list than in the frequency list of verbs in the whole BNC (Leech et al., 2001) and vice versa. Examples of the latter are: 'move', 'produce', 'fall', 'buy', 'win', 'develop', 'build', 'involve', 'die' and 'create'. Verbs used frequently with 'I' by the PMs that are not ranked among the top 100 verbs in the BNC are marked with * in Table 2. From this comparison, it is apparent that verbs denoting physical actions are relatively under-represented in our data, whereas there is a greater preponderance of verbs about thought and communication.

For the next part of the analysis, we draw on the categories proposed by Fellbaum (1998) for an initial classification of the verbs in our lists. These are the broad semantic domains used in the WordNet system (Princeton University, 2010), which classifies verbs as denoting: motion, perception, contact, communication, competition, change, cognition, consumption, creation, emotion, possession, bodily care and functions, social behaviour and interactions. Other classifications are available, of course, but, as we show below, the predominance of particular kinds of verbs would have been similarly apparent; for example, the category of 'cognition' in WordNet broadly corresponds with 'private verbs' (Biber, 1991), 'psychological verbs' (Leech, 1983) and 'mental process verbs'

(Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). The 30 most frequent verbs in List A are the following, classified using the WordNet categories.

Rank	Verb	Raw frequency	%	Semantic category
1	hope	2414	8.47	emotion / cognition
2	think	2301	8.07	cognition
3	say	2224	7.80	communication
4	believe	1982	6.95	cognition
5	agree	1945	6.82	communication
6	be	1462	5.13	stative
7	understand	1113	3.90	cognition
8	know	943	3.31	cognition
9	make	691	2.42	*multiple senses*
10	have	690	2.42	*multiple senses*
11	tell	617	2.16	communication
12	preside*	545	1.91	social
13	point out	509	1.79	communication
14	look	440	1.54	perception
15**	see	425	1.49	perception / cognition
16	assure*	412	1.44	communication
17	remind*	289	1.01	cognition / communication
18	congratulate*	283	0.99	communication
19	repeat*	247	0.87	communication
20	thank*	240	0.84	communication
21	share*	217	0.76	*various senses – stative, possession, communication*
22	confirm*	214	0.75	cognition / communication
23	ask	206	0.72	communication
24	welcome*	201	0.70	possession / communication
25	note*	196	0.69	communication / perception
26	take	194	0.68	*multiple senses*
27	want	179	0.63	emotion
28=	answer*	175	0.61	communication / cognition
	pay (*usually 'tribute'*)	175	0.61	communication
30=	explain*	166	0.58	communication
	like	166	0.58	emotion / cognition

** For a detailed analysis of SEE in PMQs, see Reber (2014)

Table 2. The 30 most frequent verbs in List A, showing rank, raw frequencies, percentages and broad semantic categories; * denotes a higher rank in our data than in the BNC.

By adding together the proportions of the items classified in each category – which, it should be noted, allows for double counting of some items (so that *note,* for example, is included in the totals for both 'communication' and 'perception')

– it emerges that approximately one third of these frequent verbs are in the semantic domain of cognition, and nearly as many in that of communication. Some way below these come emotion and perception, while the other categories of the WordNet taxonomy are almost entirely absent.

The same calculations were used for List B.

Rank	**Verb**	**Raw frequency**	**Percentage**	**Semantic category**
1	think	423	16.46	cognition
2	know	283	11.01	cognition
3	believe	266	10.35	cognition
4	accept	187	7.28	cognition
5	agree	163	6.34	communication
6	see	88	3.42	perception / cognition
7	give	80	3.11	possession / communication
8	say	70	2.72	communication
9	comment	50	1.95	communication
10	want	49	1.91	emotion
11	read	39	1.52	cognition
12	be	33	1.28	stative
13	confirm	26	1.01	cognition / communication
14	hear	25	0.97	perception / cognition
15	wish	24	0.93	emotion / cognition
16=	answer	23	0.89	communication / cognition
	intend	23	0.89	cognition
18	promise	21	0.82	communication
19=	do	20	0.78	*multiple senses*
	go	20	0.78	*various senses – motion, social, change*
21=	doubt	19	0.74	cognition
	have	19	0.74	*multiple senses*
	tell	19	0.74	communication
24	make	17	0.66	*multiple senses*
25	understand	16	0.62	cognition
26=	add	15	0.58	communication / change
	discuss	15	0.58	communication
28=	expect	11	0.43	cognition / communication
	propose	11	0.43	communication / cognition
30=	find	10	0.39	*multiple senses*
	get	10	0.39	*multiple senses*
	regard	10	0.39	cognition / perception
	share	10	0.39	*various senses – stative, possession, communication*
	take	10	0.39	*multiple senses*

Table 3. The 30 most frequent verbs in List B, showing rank, raw frequencies, percentages and broad semantic categories. Shaded rows show the verbs that are not among the most frequent in List A / Table 2.

The preponderance of verbs in the semantic domain of cognition is even higher in this set, totalling approximately 56%, using the same method of calculation, which allows for double counting, with the 'communication' domain at nearly 19%. In the following sections, we explore in more detail three of the verbs that are most frequently used with 'I', namely THINK, UNDERSTAND and SAY, to illustrate the part played by these dominant themes of cognition and communication in the prime ministerial performance of argumentation, face management and negotiation of norms.

Cognition: THINK

As is revealed by the illustrative examples below, with THINK - a high-ranking verb in both lists - as the node word, PMs providing answers in PMQs make extensive use of this polysemous item. Examples 14 – 22 are all of utterances where 'I' is the subject of THINK, not negated.

> 14. I *am thinking* of the small business that is looking for funds for investment or the small firm with an overdraft that wants the help that a bank can usually give. *I am thinking* of the mortgage holder who wants to buy the next home or the first-time buyer

Example 14 contains two of the three occurrences in our data of the structure 'I am thinking', where the continuous aspect connotes a more-than-passing concern. The PM's reported thoughts, in each of these parallel sentences, are of a section of the population, which is individualised by the use of singular noun phrases, while maintaining their generality with the definite article ('the small business', 'the small firm', 'the mortgage holder', 'the first-time buyer'). The empathetic stance towards their situation is implicit in the qualifying descriptors ('looking for funds', 'wants' 'help', 'give'). Here, then, 'I + am thinking' connotes a stance of empathy (*pathos*) with a third party who is not present but for whose interests the PM represents himself as speaking.

The scale of meanings of 'I think' is discussed by Aijmer (1997), who shows how it can function as a speech-act adverbial, a discourse marker, a pragmatic element or modal particle. In some contexts, she observes, '"I think" permits extensions of meaning involving the speaker's attitude to the hearer or to the message' (p.3). Examples from our data of 'I think', in the simple present, and 'I thought', in the simple past, are presented in 15 – 19.

> 15. I *thought* that it was an extremely interesting speech
> 16. I always *thought* that Michael Barber was a very sound man
> 17. I am primarily responsible for our contribution, which I *think* is right and proportionate
> 18. I certainly *think* that everyone should avoid expressions that give offence to those who are on the receiving end of such expressions
> 19. If the report is true, I *think* it a great waste of the ratepayers' money

In these examples, it is the PMs' judgements that are introduced. While 'I think' may be an expression of uncertainty (as in 'I think the bus is about due, isn't it?'), Holmes (1990) rejects the assumption that it necessarily has this function, maintaining that it may serve as a marker of 'certainty (epistemic modal meaning) and reassurance (affective meaning)' (p.199). Noticeable in the examples above are evaluative items and intensifiers, including 'right and proportionate', 'a great waste', 'extremely interesting', 'very sound', 'avoid offence'. In such utterances, these PMs not only convey what they claim to think (*logos*) but manage simultaneously both to imply that their opponents are mistaken and to invoke their own alignment with societal norms (*ethos*). In addition, PMs contribute to the identification and establishment of such norms: their prime ministerial authority is potentially bolstered by and also inflects ('everyone should'; 'I am primarily responsible') their individual assessments of what is 'right and proportionate'.

Our findings are consistent with those of Simon-Vandenbergen (2000), who identifies sentence-initial 'I think' in political interviews as serving to introduce judgements and evaluations, rather than marking uncertainty. In other words, the superficially cognitive verb *think* serves in this context as a tool of face management, to maintain speakers' authoritative stance and align them with supposedly shared values.

20. I *think* that we all know that the roots go very deep
21. I *think* the hon. Gentleman to be fair knows exactly what the situation is
22. I *think* that the aim of rail privatisation will undoubtedly be maintained

As Fetzer and Johansson (2000: 245) observe, citing Verhagen (2005: 106), 'I think' invites the hearer to adopt the speaker's perspective. In 20, the PM's thoughts are linked with what 'we all know', and in 18, the PM opines about 'what everyone should do'. Intensifiers reinforce the implication of certainty ('exactly', 'undoubtedly').

Examples 23 – 27 are of utterances where 'I' is the subject of THINK - negated.

23. I *do not think* that that is clear at all.
24. I must tell him that *I do not think* it appropriate for teachers to take industrial action at the expense of those tests.
25. I really *do not think* that the first part of the hon. Gentleman 's question warrants an answer.
26. I have glanced at the Daily Mirror. I *did not think* that it was worth doing more than that.
27. I *never thought* that we could keep all colleges of education going.

The negation of mental verbs such as 'I think' has been attributed to 'the avoidance of bluntness', (Tottie, 1991, cited in Aijmer, 1997: 21), a mitigation of the potential confrontation arising from bald disagreement with an interlocutor. Some of these examples could be interpreted in this way, although they also contribute to the sense of enforced – even ironic – politeness attached to this particular discursive genre. The deontic modal, 'I must tell him', suggests the reluctant fulfilment of an obligation, while 26 is the PM's response to this

question from the LO: 'Talking of encouragement from the press has the right hon. Lady had an opportunity during her busy day to read the magnificent May Day issue of the Daily Mirror? Has she given instructions - I trust that she has - that it should be read by all members of her Cabinet, wet or dry?' The PM's use of 'glanced' and the dismissive 'I *did not think* that it was worth doing more' contrast the PM's evaluation of the topic with that of the LO, thus potentially reinforcing her standing within both the House of Commons and wider society.

Cognition: UNDERSTAND

Another verb that is superficially in the 'cognition' category, and that features in both lists, is UNDERSTAND. In the following examples, the PMs preface a sharing of factual information with a minor mitigation that potentially absolves the speaker of responsibility for its accuracy. At the same time, 'I understand' signifies the PMs' access to prior knowledge, available to them before it is known by others, so highlighting their authority and standing.

28. I *understand* that an answer will be given later this afternoon
29. I *understand* that interest will be paid from the date of accrual
30. I *understand* that it will deal with a wide range of issues
31. I *understand* that at 3.30 today a United Nations resolution will be tabled
32. I *understand* that France will make a considerable contribution to that

In 'I' constructions, 'understand' is frequently intensified in expressions of empathy with the questioner or the wider audience. Mollin (2009) has noted this as a particular characteristic of Tony Blair's discourse, but at PMQs it is used by other PMs too and can thus be seen as a component of prime ministerial face management.

33. I totally *understand* the concern that my hon. Friend raises.
34. I do *understand* the hon. Gentleman 's concerns.
35. I well *understand* people's anxieties.
36. I *understand* entirely that that is no comfort to the workers in Halewood
37. I *understand* fully the traumatic experience that is involved for any family
38. I *understand* how difficult it is for people at the moment

In all these cases, the object of the PMs' understanding is something troublesome – 'concern(s)', 'anxieties', 'no comfort', 'traumatic experience', 'difficult' – and the PM projects empathy but by cognitive means. In the following examples, there is a blurring between the cognitive, epistemic (*logos*) and the affective, evaluative (*pathos, ethos*) meanings of 'I think'.

An OB asks:

> Is the Prime Minister not worried about the reported links between cancer and nuclear installations?

The PM's reply is:

> 39. The report to which the hon. Gentleman is referring has been, or will be, placed in the Library of the House when it is available. In fact, its production has been accelerated so that it can be available before the debate on Sizewell. *I understand* that many people have interpreted it totally differently. Its purpose is to find out the facts and it is for others to make the assessment

In response to an OB's question about nurses' pay, the PM responds, after a preamble:

> 40. We have also significantly increased the pay of many nurses over the past few years some pay has increased by as much as 25 per cent. *I understand* that it is always possible to do more, but I ask the hon. Gentleman to take into account what we have done for all nurses, not simply those affected by the new allowance.

UNDERSTAND is not so frequently negated. Examples 41 – 43 are of utterances where 'I' is the subject of UNDERSTAND - negated.

> 41. I *do not understand* why the right hon. Gentleman finds difficulty with it.
> 42. I *cannot understand* for the life of me why the Conservative party is against these guarantees that we give to every patient in the country.
> 43. With the greatest goodwill in the world, *I cannot understand* why, year after year, Opposition Members have voted it down.

In each case, a contrast is drawn between the PM and one or more members of the Opposition. A failure to 'understand' implies that the issue is not simply one on which there are differences, but that the opposing view is incomprehensible. Appeals outwards, to implied 'right thinking' norms, may also be evident (e.g. 'every patient in the country').

These PMs, then, deploy verbs that seem to denote cognitive processes while drawing implicitly on norms and values that are shared with their supporters but lacking in their opponents. This is one contributory factor in the adversarial tenor of PMQs, and another example of the subtle management of face and authority.

Communication: SAY

One of the most frequent verbs that PMs use in PMQs to report what they do is SAY. It occurs in most of the constructions identified, most frequently in the simple past, where it often serves as an explicit repetition of a response: 'as I have said' occurs 62 times; 'as I said earlier' 30; and 'as I said a moment ago' 20. There are also numerous instances of 'as I said in the House / to the right hon. Member / Gentleman yesterday / last week / a moment ago', etc. In such cases, an implied challenge to Prime-Ministerial authority is rebuffed, as the PM reiterates his or her position. For example:

> 44. As *I said* to the right hon. Gentleman last week, we have made the single largest investment in education that any Government have ever made. Before the Budget, he asked for a 500 million programme of school repairs over the Government 's lifetime ... We gave double that amount, but the right hon. Gentleman now criticises us for not giving enough.

Metalinguistic commentary features throughout this example. The PM begins by reminding the audience of an answer already provided; references are then made to what the MP 'asked for' and 'criticises'. A similar pattern is evident in this example (metalinguistic items italicised):

> 45. As I *have already said*, it is *absolute nonsense* to *suggest* that the measure will deprive people of their proper pensions. It will not.

And indeed, commentary on their own and others' acts of communication are found in many of the examples in which SAY features, as shown in Examples 46 – 52.

46. All I *am saying* is let us have that *debate* based on the facts
47. I *am saying* what President Obama and the other leaders *have said*
48. I take great offence, if I *may say* so - and I *do say* so - at his *remarks* about the Foreign Office
49. I *cannot comment* on the first or the third, but *I can say* of the second that it is completely untrue
50. Even with the spirit of Christmas, I *must say* that the right hon. Gentleman *is talking* nonsense
51. *Having said* that, I *have to say* that it is not always easy to do so.
52. *Word for word*, I *shall say* exactly what the hon. Gentleman *asked* me

These examples support the conclusion drawn from her detailed analysis of a single session of PMQs by Ilie (2012: 132), that:

> … micro-level metadiscursive speech acts indicate that both the questioner and the respondent seek to challenge the justifiability and effectiveness of each other's macro-level political acts in order to influence the audience's perception and understanding of their actual political goals.

The most frequent negated form of SAY is 'I cannot say', which occurs 37 times. One of its functions is as a deflective device, as in Examples 53-56, when potential face threats to the PM arise either from a difficult question or from an admission of being unable to answer a question.

53. I *cannot say* offhand exactly which aspects require primary legislation and which do not require legislation
54. I *cannot say* what will be the result of the four inquiries
55. I *cannot say* the exact amount
56. I *cannot say* exactly how quickly that will happen

However, when 'I cannot say' is an indication not of a lack of knowledge, but of institutional constraints on sharing knowledge held only by a privileged minority, prime ministerial authority is potentially reinforced, as in these examples:

57. As my hon. Friend will be the first to appreciate, I *cannot say* anything more at the present time
58. I *cannot say* what is in the pre-Budget report

These examples are PMs' responses to OBs querying the effect of measures in forthcoming Budgets. Both refusals to 'say' are mitigated by a contrastive clause: 'but I do urge him to look at [a different report]'; 'but we are determined to support the extra development work'. And in the following, the PM claims to be constrained in what it is possible to say by the shortcomings of the Opposition:

59. I give the right hon. Gentleman credit for being consistent in his policies - something that I *cannot say* about the Opposition.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of a range of occurrences of 'I + Verb', we have identified patterns in prime ministerial self-representation in their responses to questions posed during PMQs. We have highlighted how these patterns relate to argumentation, face management and the norms of this political institution, as well as those of the wider society. The consistency in the ways that these four PMs represent themselves using the 'I + Verb' structure points to some robust patterns in prime ministerial discourse.

We have found limited reference in our data to practical actions taken, in comparison to reports of thoughts and words. Rather than developing deliberative debate, prime ministerial contributions to PMQs are often self-referential, including much talk about talk. We suggest that this self-referentiality is, at least in part, a pragmatic response to an event that is both high-profile – within Parliament and wider society – and (usually) highly combative. All questions posed during PMQs are potentially face threatening; even when the questions are friendly, the PM must still demonstrate a command of events and facts or lose face, while noisy barracking – both organised and spontaneous – is institutionalised. So in managing this genre of rhetorical exchange, PMs integrate into their recounts of their thoughts and words evaluations that enhance their own standing while undermining that of their opponents. Substantive topics, even though often brought up by questioners as a device to attack the PM, are diverted when PMs (whether intentionally or otherwise) make themselves, rather than those topics, the focus of their answers. This self-referentiality in PMs' discourse often goes hand-in-hand with allusions to their identification with presumed societal norms. Thus, prime ministerial utterances within PMQs may be attempts to project not only authority and command within and beyond the Chamber but also empathy and representativeness.

The consistency of the patterns we identify is no accident, of course. We suggest that there are several ways in which change, even if desired by some of the actors concerned, is difficult to effect. Firstly, there are the explicit rules, conventions and sanctions that govern parliamentary behaviour, including how actors are permitted to speak (e.g. MPs are addressed not directly but always through the Speaker). Secondly, there are the less apparent ways in which discoursal norms and expectations are reinforced. Dunleavy et al. (1993: 276) have identified 'institutional shifts' as much more influential on shaping patterns in PMs' answers to questions than 'personality effects', while both sociologists and discourse analysts have pointed to the subtle ways in which institutions sustain and replicate patterns of (communicative) behaviour. We are thinking here of notions such as the 'set of already established "templates" of action based on the inherited circumstances of the past that are continually reproduced in the present', proposed by Layder (1997: 107); and the 'recurrent ways of talking [that] … provide familiar and conventional representations of people and events, … by providing pre-fabricated means by which ideas can be easily conveyed and grasped' (Stubbs, 1996: 158). More specifically, Hoey's theory of lexical priming (Hoey, 2005), and Sinclair's notion of 'the idiom principle' (Sinclair, 1991) may well be relevant to some of the formulaic patterns we find in our data. Thus, the historical weight of the discourse of PMQs has effects at the interpersonal, the

institutional, and the societal level. The prime ministerial discursive style which emerges, then, both constrains and enables particular incumbents in their negotiation of PMQs and impacts on the way that politics and politicians are perceived.

PMQs, as noted above, was not highly regarded in the period covered by our data, and this is a perception that persists today. Finlayson (2015) has suggested a paradoxical dimension to the issue of public disillusion with politicians generally. In an era when 'the public' has direct access to what politicians say, via radio and television (and more recently other media), there is pressure to appeal to this imagined, heterogeneous constituency by 'play[ing] it safe, repeating bland phrases and saying not very much at all'. In other words:

> In trying so hard to present themselves as good, connected and in-touch, politicians end up talking about themselves and each other in a way that demonstrates just how disconnected they really are.

This article has identified some of the patterns in prime ministerial language during PMQs that contribute to its paradoxical character. On the one hand, within the Chamber, these institutionalised patterns help PMs to cope or flourish in a high-pressure, ritualised setting. However, despite a concern to portray empathy with the electorate, the language of PMQs, including the ways PMs represent themselves there, may be a contribution to public disengagement from formal politics.

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