

The question of politeness in political interviews

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This paper examines the question of politeness in political interviews, looking particularly at the use of loaded questions. Comparison is made between the two principal paradigms of politeness, Locher and Watts (2005) and Brown and Levinson (1987). The paper focuses on the interviewing style of Steven Sackur (HARDtalk, BBC) who employs loaded questions in his political interviews in keeping with the analysis of Walton (1991) who argues that loaded questions can function as a 'reasonable' means to constrain the response of an interviewee and in turn further discourse. Sackur employs loaded questions selectively to convey and reinforce a presupposition to which an interviewee is not committed. In so doing, he is able to constrain the contribution of his interviewee. Loaded questions are a linguistic means of (im)politeness used strategically by Sackur to further the discourse of his interviews.

Keywords: (im)politeness, loaded questions, political interviews

1. Introduction

1.1 The question of 'politeness' in political interviews

In an interview (October 25, 2010) with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, on the BBC program HARDtalk, the interviewer Steven Sackur puts a question indirectly to Guterres to which Guterres responds: "I don't think that is fair. Because we don't choose we are sometimes forced to trying to protect people against those that are violating their rights. We are forced to be there and act in the conditions that are possible." The utterance to which Guterres responds is a B-Event Assertion functioning as an indirect request for information.¹ Sackur states,

1. B-Event Assertions are defined by Labov and Fanshel (1977) as events known only to the hearer. Rather than directly querying information from an interviewee, a speaker/interviewer

But not long ago we had a Dutch journalist in that particular HARDtalk chair and this is what she said... Her point becomes particularly relevant. Actually in certain situations, the APR and other international NGO's that work in conjunction with you are making situations worse. You have to work in situations where quote unquote 'bad guys' are heavily involved in camps or refugee situations. You choose from time to time to be complicit, thereby endangering huge numbers of civilians. (Sackur interview with Guterres, October 25, 2010)

Using a B-Event Assertion functioning as an indirect request, "You choose from time to time to be complicit," Steven Sackur asserts that Guterres on the part of the United Nations has been cooperative with 'bad guys' in U.N. refugee camps. Since 2002, The United Nations Refugee Agency has recognized that "armed elements" are present in their camps that not only threaten the lives of refugees, especially women and children, but also engage in recruitment.² What is presupposed by Sackur's B-Event Assertion "you choose from time to time to be complicit" is that there are 'bad guys' or armed elements within U.N. refugee camps with whom the UNHCR can be complicit. We can say further that whether or not Guterres agrees with the B-Event Assertion that the UN is "complicit," the presupposition that 'bad guys' are present in the camps remains. Such a presupposition is also highly face-threatening for Guterres as the head of the UNHCR since according to its own literature, "refugee camps and settlements should have an exclusively civilian and humanitarian character."³ Although Sackur is not calling Guterres a 'bad guy', he is most certainly implying that Guterres is either turning a blind eye to or even facilitating those that would endanger the lives of refugees in UN camps. As the head the UNHCR, Guterres' job is to provide protection for those seeking asylum, not the opposite. In terms of the two principal theoretical paradigms regarding 'politeness', that of Brown and Levinson (1987) or Locher and Watts (2005), he has either threatened the positive face of Guterres without mitigation or he has crossed a line and behaved in a way that is inappropriate in political interviews. The fact that Guterres responds and how he responds is significant. He states, "I don't think that is fair." While he does not directly counter the assertion of complicity made by Sackur, he does nonetheless evaluate Sackur's

can assert his or her own information. Given the degree of relevance of such information to the hearer/interviewee, he or she can respond to this information in 'answer' to such an assertion.

2. See "Conclusion on the civilian and humanitarian character of asylum Conclusion on the civilian and humanitarian character of asylum." No. 94 (LIII) – 2002.

3. See "Conclusion on the civilian and humanitarian character of asylum Conclusion on the civilian and humanitarian character of asylum." No. 94 (LIII) – 2002.

assertion as being 'unfair'. If Sackur's assertion is not 'fair' then we can interpret this in keeping with Locher and Watts as contravening what is expected behaviour between an interviewer and interviewee. Sackur is not observing the normal conventions for political interviews; he is not being 'politic' or 'appropriate' in this particular situation. We could also interpret Guterres' utterance as a protest against impoliteness, specifically attack upon his positive face. When Sackur in turn responds to Guterres by saying "We have to agree to disagree," thus failing to acknowledge any unfairness on his part and in turn constructing the exchange as an unresolved debate, Guterres persists:

No no for those camps as I have said in which you have sometimes terrible violations of human rights because they are attacked by different groups. The same applies when we try to support people to go back home and the same violations occur in their villages. The problem is the same situation is lawlessness which is spread in the territory and our capacity to deal with it is extremely limited.

(Sackur interview with Guterres, October 25, 2010)

Guterres rejects Sackur's construction of the exchange as simply an unresolved debate with "No, no," and then counter asserts in his defense that while lives are endangered in the refugee camps, the cause is "lawlessness." He further claims that the UN agencies in the field are powerless.

1.2 Political interviews

The exchange above provides an example of (im)politeness in political interviews which can be analysed using either of the two dominant paradigms concerning politeness. My concern in this paper is to determine how we can best understand 'politeness' or 'impoliteness' in such interviews. Thus, does impoliteness constitute the violation of a norm in connection to the discursive articulation of power or can it be constructed as the absence of politeness and specific strategies associated with politeness? Further we can ask in keeping with Culpeper 2011, whether there are specific strategies of impoliteness in political interviews and if so what they are and what function they serve in a conversational exchange. My particular focus is on the presence and function of loaded questions in political interviews and whether or not such questions can be considered intrinsically 'impolite' forms.

Political Interview programmes such as HARDtalk on the BBC have been characterised as "confrontational, competitive encounters" (Mullany 2002, 7). Mullany argues that in "the confrontational nature of the political interview, where 'disagreement, challenges and competition' all frequently occur in interaction,

[these] are perfectly acceptable norms of linguistic behaviour” (7). Although not addressing political interviews as such, Harris, in examining Question Time in the British House of Commons, argues that, “systemic impoliteness is not only sanctioned in Prime Minister’s Question Time but is rewarded in accordance with the expectation of Members of the House [and the overhearing audience] by an adversarial and confrontational political process” (2001, 466). She also argues that such “confrontation is seen as a ritualistic one,” comparing the questions employed in Question Time to ‘ritual insults’. Harris concludes that, “the mitigating linguistic strategies which Brown and Levinson associate with threats to positive face are largely absent. Indeed, threats to the positive face of the Prime Minister in particular are frequently intentionally intensified” (469). Watts also sees political interviews as a type of “confrontational discourse.” In particular he incorporates an analysis of power into his analysis of political interviews: “The politic behaviour of a television interviewer in a political affairs programme such as *Panorama* gives the moderator quite extensive latent power to adversely affect the face of the interviewee. This is even the case if the interviewee has a greater degree of potential power over the moderator by virtue of holding political office” (2003, 221). He argues further that “The struggle over the exercise of power in emergent networks is thus linked inextricably to perceptions of (im)politeness₁ and to the maintenance and violation of politic behaviour” (215). Power in “emergent networks” is taken up in further discussions (Locher and Watts 2008; Watts 2008) focussing on a 1984 *Panorama* interview between National Union of Coalminers president Arthur Scargill and interviewer Peter Emery. Also looking at politeness in political interviews, Odebunmi (2009) sees evidence of “polite, politic and impolite expressions” in political interviews, and thus sees this interview type not as exclusively competitive or confrontational but as containing degrees of confrontation. Lastly, in his own interview with Jeremy Irons, Stephen Sackur comments to Irons, “If you were a politician I’d be asking you tough questions so I’m gonna do it to you as a campaigner” (April 15, 2013). Sackur distinguishes the kinds of questions he asks of entertainers and politicians respectively, indicating that “tough” questions are normally reserved for interviews with political figures.

1.3 Theoretical approaches to (im)‘politeness’

Due to their conflictual nature where ‘tough’ questions predominate, political interviews are a useful linguistic venue for analysis of (im) politeness. I do not wish to review the extensive literature on politeness theory, but to look at the two principal paradigms of ‘politeness’ in politeness theory, that of Brown and Levinson (1987) and that of Watts (2003) and Locher and Watts (2005) with regard to their

application to political interviews.⁴ Brown and Levinson (1987) and Locher and Watts (2005) offer two very different approaches to the study of politeness and impoliteness as such study applies to discourse analysis. Building on Goffman's analysis of 'face' as 'sacred' which Goffman defines both as a constructed "image" in "the full flow of events in an undertaking" (1955, 225) and as a ritual player who "copes honourably or dishonourably, diplomatically or undiplomatically with the judgemental contingencies of the situation" (225), Brown and Levinson's approach expands on and develops Goffman's two strategies of face work: avoidance and correction. They analyse 'face' in terms of wants so that what they term 'positive face' is defined by the want of every member of society to be accepted by others in the society; equally what they term 'negative face' is defined in terms of the want of 'every competent member' to have his or her actions "unimpeded" (324). The most significant aspect of their theory is the attachment of mitigation or repair strategies to possible threats to positive and negative face. These strategies involve both linguistic and non-linguistic mediation. Seeking agreement and avoiding disagreement as positive politeness strategies may be expressed in language, but are not defined as linguistic strategies. Being "conventionally indirect" as a negative politeness strategy, however, is a specifically linguistic strategy. Brown and Levinson distinguish on record from off record strategies that require the flouting of Grice's conversational maxims to effect conversational implicatures. Thus a speaker can go 'off record' by hinting at a desired action rather than requesting it directly (on record, baldly) or go on record with redressive action (through use of an indirect speech act). Brown and Levinson also incorporate an analysis of three "social parameters," social distance, power and degree of imposition, in the speaker's assessment of any given face-threatening action. To a large extent Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness is a speaker-oriented one wherein the speaker assesses the degree of imposition upon or threat to a hearer and strategically decides upon the nature of any modification of his or her own behaviour.

Although Locher and Watts articulate the notion of 'relational work' that broadens 'face-work' from a concentration on face threat and mitigation to that of all social interaction, their theory largely displaces a concern with politeness as such to behaviour that can be described as 'politic' or appropriate. Politic behaviour is defined by Watts as "the sum of individual perceptions of what is appropriate in

4. In a recent discussion van der Bom and Grainger (2015) argue that there have been three distinct 'waves' of scholarship on politeness. In this discussion my concern is to examine the two dominant paradigms of 'politeness', one being speaker-based (Brown and Levinson 1987) and the second being hearer-based (Locher and Watts 2005).

accordance with the habitus of the participants” (2003, 76).⁵ The concept of *habitus* is derived from Bourdieu (1991). Watts defines it as a “set of dispositions to act in certain ways” (149). Further, *habitus* “shapes the ways in which individuals internalise social structures in order to use them in dealing with ongoing interaction” whereby “habitus actually constructs out of those objectivised structures forms of politic behaviour” (149). *Habitus* is not defined as a simple realisation of social practise and behaviour, but as a kind of internal socio-psychological force that “generates practices and actions” (149). What is ‘politic’ is derived or generated from habitus. Politeness and impoliteness are equally derivative concepts, defined negatively, that is, as not being ‘politic’.

As derivative concepts, ‘politeness’ and ‘impoliteness’ do not have content except as it is ascribed to them. Defined as ‘salient’ behaviour, “impoliteness is an observable violation of politic behaviour which is open to negative evaluation,” while “polite behaviour is an observable ‘addition’ to politic behaviour which may be positively evaluated but is open to negative evaluation” (30). A key notion in this analysis is that which is ‘observable’ since Watts (2003) and Locher and Watts (2005) are essentially hearer-oriented approaches. They reject the notion that ‘politeness’ is achieved through explicit strategies on the part of the speaker, and specifically through linguistic strategies. They argue that ‘politeness’ and ‘impoliteness’ are evaluative concepts derived by the hearer in keeping with habitus. *Salient* behaviour is therefore behaviour “perceived to be beyond what is expectable” (19).

In further defining these notions, Watts correlates ‘politeness’ to expenditure or a money economy: “Politeness, I maintain, is used to ‘pay’ more than would normally be required in the ritual exchange of speech acts” (115). In the example *Allow/permit me to disagree with you on this point*, Watts argues that this request is polite not because it is linguistically indirect but rather because “the structure requesting permission to make that statement is in excess of what would generally be required of the politic behaviour in a situation in which two people are in disagreement and helps us to classify [the request] as a potentially polite utterance” (197). In Watts’ terms, the speaker is paying more for the request (in words) and his or her utterance is therefore interpretable by the hearer as polite.

With regard to impoliteness, Watts largely correlates impoliteness with power. He several times analyses a political interview between the head of the coalminer’s union during the famous coalminers’ strike of 1984 in Great Britain, Arthur

5. The terms ‘politic’ and ‘appropriate’ are equated terms in Locher and Watts 2005. However, Locher notes that ‘politic’ behavior can be “equated with appropriateness in lay people’s perceptions...It indexes a wide variety of forms of social behavior that include both non-politic and polite behavior” (Locher 2006, 256).

Scargill, and his interviewer Peter Emery (Watts 2003; Locher and Watts 2005; Locher and Watts 2008). In this interview, after asking Scargill whether or not he is “willing to discuss uneconomic pits,” Emery interrupts Scargill during his answer. Scargill in turn responds, “Are you going to let me answer the question.” Watts argues that Emery’s action is a violation of the politic behaviour “in force in a live BBC television interview” (2003, 215). He also argues that it is an expression of the interviewer’s power over Scargill: “Emery’s interruption is an exercise of power in that he affects Scargill in a manner contrary to Scargill’s initially perceived interests” (2003, 215). In turn, Scargill’s response not only explicitly evaluates Emery’s interruption as impolite, but also, according to Watts, reflects a power struggle between the two speakers: “The struggle over the exercise of power in emergent networks is thus linked inextricably to perceptions of [im]politeness, and to the maintenance and violation of politic behaviour” (215). Questions and issues concerning power are therefore integrated into an analysis of impoliteness as a derivative of politic behaviour.

The two theories are different in their approach and focus, the principal difference being that one is oriented to the speaker’s strategic behaviour while the other is oriented to awareness and assessment of what is ‘politic’. But the essential difference between the two is the displacement of politeness and strategies surrounding politeness on the part of the speaker with a concern for habitus generating politic behaviour and politic behaviour’s subsequent derivatives politeness and impoliteness. Although both theories build upon Goffman, they understand face differently and also analyse the relationship between the individual and culture differently.

2. Methodology

2.1 Data

For this analysis of politeness in political interviews, I examine 10 political interviews by Stephen Sackur on the BBC program HARDtalk. These interviews are with Noam Chomsky, November 3, 2009; Hugo Chavez (President of Venezuela), June 14, 2010; Antonio Guterres (UN High Commissioner for Refugees), October 25, 2010; Felipe Calderone (President of Mexico), October 27, 2010; Emma Bonino, June 15, 2011; Shimon Peres (President of Israel), November 23, 2012; Eamon Ryan (Irish Energy and Communications Minister), October 22, 2010; Jean Ping (African Union) March 24, 2011; Khaled Maha’al (Hesbollah), February 7, 2013; Gloria Steinem, February 26, 2013. To provide comparative data, I also examine two non-political interviews by Sackur, one with Jonathan Miller (March 25,

2013) and another with Jeremy Irons (April 15, 2013). Further, I examine two interviews done by another interviewer on HARDtalk, Sara Montague, one with Professor David Harvey (March 3, 2012) and another with Norman Finkelstein (May 13, 2012). I also examine two interviews from the Canadian political program *Power and Politics* by Evan Solomon: Thomas Mulcair (Federal NDP Leader of the Opposition), May 4, 2011); George Galloway (British Independent MP), March 17 2013; and one by Evan Solomon with Noam Chomsky for the program Hot Type (June 17, 2006). Lastly for comparative purposes, I examine an interview by Eddie Mair with the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson (March 24, 2013).

2.2 Requests for information

Since questions or requests for information are the principal linguistic means by which political and non-political interviews are effected, I review the types of requests asked by the interviewer, both direct and indirect. I am particularly concerned with the role and function of what are termed 'loaded' questions and whether their use can generate impoliteness.

Kiefer (1988) articulates what he terms an "epistemic-imperative approach" whereby questions are embedded in imperatives. The hearer is obligated to "bring it about" (imperative) that "I know" (epistemic) (264). Blum-Kulka therefore refers to questions as "control acts" (1983, 147). Within pragmatics, questions are analysed not as a syntactic type ('wh', 'yes'/'no' etc.) but functionally as 'requests for information' such that there is transfer of information from a hearer to a speaker. We can use speech act theory to categorise requests for information into two broad types: direct and indirect requests for information (Macaulay 1996, 2001). Direct requests for information can be subtyped into yes/no requests and open requests. In a direct request, the interviewer directly requests information: "Thomas Mulcair, should the U.S. release pictures of Osama bin Laden as many are demanding?" Yes/No requests are neutral but can also be either positively or negatively conducive in that the specific request made can suggest the nature of the response desired (Kiefer 1988): "Would you agree with me that he is pretty much the most resilient maybe the most indestructible leader in Europe?" After Searle (1991), indirect requests for information can be analysed with respect to the four main felicity conditions for indirect directives: the preparatory, sincerity, propositional, and essential conditions. Invoking the preparatory condition, an interviewer can ask to ask a question: 'Let me ask you some of the things that came up in the documentary.' He or she can invoke the sincerity condition: "I want to ask you about the Olympic Stadium which you were talking about this week"; the propositional condition: 'Will you tell us more?', or the essential condition: "I'm asking you if the Israeli public really believes that."

Apart from these standard indirect forms, interviewers can also employ highly conventionalized ‘think’ forms such as “Do you think that you are encouraging Hamas and the people who support Hamas to change their strategy?”⁶ Such indirect requests invoke a precondition prior to the preparatory condition (able to answer) that queries whether or not the interlocutor has the information requested. Interviewers can also ‘wonder’ as a means of asking questions indirectly: “I’m just wondering if throughout your life you for all the successes ... there was a nagging sense you should be somewhere else.” The interviewer substitutes the verbal act of asking with his or her own mental act of wondering or pondering to convey a proposition to which the interviewer can in turn respond if thought relevant.

Using Labov and Fanshel’s (1977) analysis of A-, B-, A-B- or D-Events, we can also distinguish another type of indirect request for information. Assertions within speech act theory can function indirectly as requests: ‘It’s cold in here’ (‘Close the window’). D-Event Assertions which convey a disputable assertion, and which, if understood as relevant by the interviewee, can function as indirect requests for information and can be responded to: “You had growth but now you do not have growth. In fact, you’re the only Latin American country which this year as well as last year is not growing at all in this recession.” B-Event Assertions convey information about the interviewee, which again, if understood as relevant, generate response: “You threw out the two people who wrote the report so it could seem that whenever people are critical of your record you do not accept it.” A-Event (an event known only to the speaker) and A-B-Event (shared between speakers) assertions are rare in this data. There is only one example of an A-Event in the data: “I haven’t heard you yet give an example of a communist society for which you consider a benefit and a good thing.” All such assertions can function as indirect requests for information if they are used to generate a response or ‘answer’ from an interviewee.

2.3 Loaded questions

Apart from direct and indirect requests for information, interviewers can also make requests for confirmation. More significantly, in political interviews, is the presence of what are termed ‘loaded questions’.⁷ A loaded question is defined by

6. Note that a request for information that asks what the interviewer thinks is direct: “What do you think of the mindset that produces a comment like that?”

7. Within the framework of philosophy, Walton uses the formal term ‘question’ rather than ‘request for information’. I shall analyse ‘loaded questions’ functionally as ‘requests for information’, which in turn can be both direct and indirect.

Walton as “one where the respondent is not committed to the presupposition [or some part of the presupposition] of the question” (1991, 340). Walton explains that participants in argument attach themselves to a set of propositions that are made through assertions. In a ‘question-answer’ or ‘request for information-response’ sequence where one participant requests information, the request becomes a vehicle for asserting propositions on the part of the speaker (proponent) as well as achieving commitment to this assertion on the part of the hearer/respondent: “a *presupposition of a question* is defined as a proposition that the respondent becomes committed to in giving any direct answer to the question” (338). In a loaded question, the respondent is not only *not* committed to the presupposition conveyed by the question/request for information but also may be committed to its antithesis. Loaded questions can also convey more than one such presupposition. Stalnaker (1973) argues that “the basic presupposition relation is not between propositions or sentences, but between a person and a proposition. A person’s presuppositions are the propositions whose truth he takes for granted, often unconsciously, in a conversation, an inquiry, or a deliberation. They are background assumptions that may be used without being spoken – sometimes without being noticed – for example as suppressed premises in an enthymematic argument, or as implicit directions about how a request should be fulfilled or a piece of advice taken” (1973, 447).⁸ Stalnaker’s notion of a “pragmatic presupposition” is consistent with Walton’s since for both the truth of a presupposition rests with the ‘person’. Although a presupposition may be triggered by a factive verb (‘knows’, ‘realise’), an implicative verb (‘forget’, ‘manage’), a change of state verb (‘stop’, ‘began’), an iterative (‘came again’), temporal clauses (‘be MV-ing’), clefts, comparison and contrasts, counterfactual conditionals, questions, and possessives (Levinson 1983, 167–227), the presupposition triggered must also be accepted as true by the hearer. While this is non-controversial in the case of most triggered presuppositions, in loaded questions, the truth of a presupposition is controversial. The purpose of a loaded question is to effect the hearer’s acceptance of a presupposition triggered or generated by the speaker.

The classic example of a loaded question understood to be fallacious is ‘Have you stopped beating your spouse?’ Such a request for information is not positively or negatively conducive. If the respondent answers ‘yes’ or ‘no’, the presupposition that the respondent has been beating his or her spouse is accepted a ‘true’ by the respondent, and places the respondent in the position of incriminating him or herself. In a situation such as a trial in court the respondent could avoid such incrimination if he or she has already acknowledged having beaten his or her spouse. Thus Walton notes,

8. The literature on presuppositions is extensive. I shall not try to review it here, nor the several issues within discussion of presupposition. Here I use only Stalnaker’s original definition of “pragmatic presupposition” in comparison to Walton (1991).

“it is more accurate to say that a fallacy can arise where the question ... is used in a particular context of dialogue in a problematic way that is open to criticism in relation to that context” (341). According to Walton, such questions are fallacious not because they “trap or trick” the respondent, but because they are “designed as a trap or trick” (344). Their purpose or function is to trap or trick a respondent into committing to the truth of a particular presupposition. According to Walton, the respondent can avoid such commitment if he or she addresses the presupposition and repudiates it (‘I never beat my spouse’) or responds to the request for information with a request (‘Why do you ask such a question?’). Their function, according to Walton, to move discussion forward or to an agreed-upon end. They engage both participants in a dialogue in a combative but cooperative exploration of ‘thorny issues’.

3. Findings

For political interviews, my findings indicate the Stephen Sackur relies largely on direct requests and assertions to generate response from his interviewees. Of the 234 requests for information examined in this data set, 84 direct requests at 36% and 112 assertions at 48% were his preferred means of requesting information. Conventional indirect requests and ‘think’ forms were little used. Assertions were favoured over direct requests by a percentage of 12%. Loaded questions were also used at a low rate with 15 being used at 6% overall. Nonetheless we see the use of loaded questions on a consistent basis. In all but two interviews, Sackur asks one loaded question per interview. Only in two interviews, one with Jean Ping, and a second with Noam Chomsky, does he employ more. Loaded questions are thus part of Stephen Sackur’s linguistic repertoire as an interviewer on HARDtalk.

Table 1. Requests for Information/Stephen Sackur (political)

Interviewees	Direct Rs	Conv Indirect Rs	Assertions	‘Think’ forms	Loaded	Total
Guterres	7	0	15	0	1	23
Calderone	9	0	8	5	1	23
Ping	15	3	12	0	5	35
Chomsky	12	0	14	0	2	28
Kaled Maha’al	6	2	10	2	1	21
Steinem	11	1	9	2	1	24
Peres	6	2	10	2	1	21
Bonino	7	0	18	3	1	29
Ryan	3	0	7	1	1	12
Chavez	8	1	9	2	1	21
Total	84/36%	9/4%	112/48%	14/5%	15/6%	234

If we compare Sackur's requests for information in political interviews with those in non-political interviews, in the case of two celebrities, Jonathan Miller, a stage director, and Jeremy Irons, an actor, we get a somewhat different distribution. Sackur continues to favour direct requests and assertions in making requests for information, but in contrast to his distribution of requests for information in political interviews, he relies much more on assertions. Of the 57 requests for information in this set, 11 at 19% are direct requests, while 38 at 67% are assertions. This is largely explained by the increase in B-Event Assertions that convey information about the hearer also known to the speaker. Focus in these interviews is on the lives of his two interviewees. Loaded questions account for only 2% of the questions asked since one such question is asked of Jeremy Irons when he is asked about his commitment to the cause of waste reduction.

Table 2. Requests for Information/Stephen Sackur (HARDtalk-non-political)

Interviewees	Direct Rs	Conv Indirect Rs	Assertions	'Think' forms	Loaded	Total
Jonathan Miller	3	0	20	5	0	28
Jeremy Irons	8	0	18	2	1	29
Total	11/19%	0/0%	38/67%	7/12%	1/2%	57

We can look further at one other interviewer for HARDtalk, Sarah Montague. In her two interviews with political theorists, Norman Finkelstein and David Harvey, she also relies principally on direct requests and assertions to request information. She employs only one loaded question at 1% in questioning Norman Finkelstein. Given that I look at only two interviews from Montague, it is difficult to determine if she employs loaded questions with greater frequency than Sackur. However, we can say that they are part of her interviewing repertoire if not extensively in evidence.

Table 3. Requests for Information/Sarah Montague (HARDtalk-political)

Interviewees	Direct Rs	Conv Indirect Rs	Assertions	'Think' forms	Loaded	Total
Norman Finkelstein	7	1	22	0	1	31
David Harvey	18	0	18	2	0	38
Total	25/36%	1/1%	40/58%	2/3%	1/1%	69

We can look lastly at two other interviewers, the British interviewer Eddie Mair, and the Canadian interviewer, Evan Solomon. Eddie Mair's interview with Boris Johnson the Mayor of London on March 24, 2013 for the BBC was considered particularly aggressive and hard-hitting ("Boris Johnson caught in a bicycle crash of an interview with Eddie Mair," *The Guardian*, March 24, 2013). Evan Solomon's interview with Thomas Mulcair (May 4, 2011) the then deputy leader of the Federal

New Democratic Party made headlines in Canada (“NDP MP Thomas Mulcair questions Bin Laden pictures,” *National Post*, May 5, 2011) largely because Solomon questions Mulcair’s understanding of the American narrative concerning the death of Osama Bin Laden. With regard to requests for information, we see the same pattern of use with Eddie Mair and Evan Solomon that we see with Steven Sackur and Sara Montague. These interviewers rely primarily on direct requests and assertions to request information of their interviewees. However, there is a heavier reliance on direct requests than on assertions with both these interviewers. Mair poses 19 direct requests at 73%, while Solomon poses 26 at 65%. What is interesting is that although both are considered ‘tough’ interviewers who have generated news headlines with their interviews (Mair’s went international), neither employs loaded questions. We have two few interviews from each of these interviewers to determine, but for purposes of comparison with Sackur, loaded questions do not appear to be part of their repertoire.

Table 4. Requests for Information/Eddie Mair (political)

Interviewee	Direct Rs	Conv Indirect Rs	Assertions	‘Think’ forms	Loaded	Total
Boris Johnson	19	2	4	1	0	26
Total	19/73%	2/8%	4/16%	1/4%	0/0%	26

Table 5. Requests for Information/Evan Solomon (political)

Interviewee	Direct Rs	Conv Indirect Rs	Assertions	‘Think’ forms	Loaded	Total
Thomas Mulcair	4	0	1	0	0	5
George Galloway	6	0	3	0	0	9
Noam Chomsky	16	0	10	0	0	26
Total	26/65%	0/0%	14/35%	0	0	40

What the overall findings indicate is that loaded questions are part of Stephen Sackur’s repertoire as a political interviewer, but that they are not necessarily a part of the repertoires of other interviewers doing the same work. We can say that they are a ‘marked’ feature of the register of political interviewing since they have a low rate of use. The question then is why Sackur uses them and does their use convey impoliteness, intentional on Sackur’s part or experienced on the part of his interviewees.

4. Discussion

If we examine loaded questions in the interviews done by Sackur, they are clearly a ‘marked’ feature. They are employed at 6% in the Sackur data set for political interviews. They also appear to be ‘marked’ given that two other political interviewers do not employ them. This data set is limited, but there are no loaded questions in Solomon’s three interviews, and none in Eddie Mair’s. We can explore their use from two perspectives: Are they intentionally ‘impolite’ from the speaker’s perspective and are they understood as ‘non-politic’ or ‘impolite’ from the hearer’s perspective? In one consideration we can ask if they are strategically used as face-threatening forms to generate response or we can ask if they are perceived to deviate from the accepted norm of political interviews (and are thus an expression of the speaker’s power to violate norms).

4.1 Johnson interview with Mair

We can compare Mair’s interview with Boris Johnson to Sackur’s interview with Felipe Calderone. In Mair’s interview with Boris Johnson, he confronts Johnson with certain allegations about his past behaviour that have been raised in a documentary about Johnson. He then poses the following series of requests for information:

What does that say about you Boris Johnson? Aren’t you in fact making up a quote lying to your party leader and wanting to be part of someone being physically assaulted?⁹ You’re a nasty piece of work aren’t you.

(Mair interview with Boris Johnson, March 24, 2013)

Mair’s first request is rhetorical. There is a presupposition that is triggered by the request itself: ‘there is something that can be said about Boris Johnson’. A negative response, however, is implicated. The second request is a direct yes/no request that is positively conducive. The request, “aren’t you in fact making up a quote,” triggers the presupposition that Johnson has made up a quote. The expected answer is ‘yes’. The last request is a D-Event Assertion functioning as an indirect request for information, followed by a request for confirmation. This assertion has the strategic purpose of provoking response from Johnson since it conveys a negative assertion about him as a human being. The D-Event assertion has direct relevance for Johnson who does indeed respond.

Johnson provides the following response/ ‘answer’:

9. Johnson is reputed to have lied to his then Conservative Party leader about a phone conversation in which he encouraged a friend to physically attack a reporter.

If we had a long time and we don't I think you'd find that they aren't wholly fair. And the final thing you've raised which is the case of my old friend Darius. Yes it was certainly true that he was in a bit of state and I did humour him in a long phone conversation from which absolutely nothing eventuated and uh there you go. I think if any of us had our phone conversation bugged ah they might people say all sorts of fantastical things.

(Mair interview with Boris Johnson, March 24, 2013)

In his response, Johnson avoids any personal counter-attack of Mair. He does not accuse him of being unfair or impolite. However, he does strategically counter-assert that in a full discussion Mair would reconsider his assertions such that "they [accusations] aren't wholly fair." Johnson avoids challenging Mair's authority as an interviewer; instead, he constructs a time line in which Mair would see matters as he sees them. Johnson also provides the cover explanation that he was humouring his friend Darius in a phone conversation. He further complains about having his phone bugged. Because Mair has provided Johnson with deniability through his use of a yes/no request and a request for confirmation, Johnson is able to respond to Mair's assertions through a series of his own assertions: that Mair would in time share his view of events (claim to common ground), that he was humouring his friend and not facilitating him, and that his phone has been bugged. He engages in what Goffman terms 'the corrective process' (1955, 219). He uses his response to remedy the content of the assertions made by Mair and thus neutralize them.

We can understand this exchange as one concerning politeness from a Brown and Levinson perspective since in their terms Mair explicitly threatens Johnson's positive face. There is absolutely no mitigation of face threat and thus no evidence of strategic politeness. We can also understand this exchange as concerning politeness from a Locher and Watts perspective since although Johnson does not explicitly state his objection to Mair's line of inquiry, or indeed accuse Mair of being unfair, he nonetheless constructs Mair's questions as being "not wholly fair" and in turn he defends himself, so engaging in face-work. His defense is extremely adroit because he first claims common ground with Mair and then redefines himself not as a thug and a liar but as a friend and as a victim. Johnson is able to respond and indeed is invited to do so by Mair's yes/no request and his request for confirmation.

4.2 Calderone interview with Sackur

In Stephen Sackur's interview with Felipe Calderone (October 27, 2010) direct requests for information and D-Event assertions functioning as indirect requests are also present. However, we also see evidence of what Walton terms "loaded questions" that function somewhat differently. The principal focus of Sackur's interview

with Calderone concerns the “levels of violence” in Mexico during Calderone’s presidency, particularly with respect to the impact of drug cartels on the psyche of the country. In discussion of the several thousands of civilians and numerous mayors who have been killed, Sackur employs a D-Event Assertion as an indirect request put to Calderone that “Civic society is under serious threat in this country.” This assertion has direct relevance for Calderone since if civic society is under threat in Mexico, Calderone as president must take some responsibility for such a threat and in turn respond to the assertion. Calderone does respond to Sackur but not by referencing current death tolls in Mexico but rather by focusing attention on its economy: “Latest figures show our economy is growing at 7%. Exports are up and the outlook is bright” (Sackur interview with Felipe Calderone, October 27, 2010).

Given Calderone’s deflection of Sackur’s request for information, Sackur has no other option except to repeat his assertion/request:

You can interpret the figures in different ways but there is no doubt but there are those who look at nations around the world and see with Mexico a particular threat to the stability of your country. Even Hillary Clinton stated that there is an insurgency in your country that is a lot like Columbia 20 years ago.

(Sackur interview with Felipe Calderone, October 27, 2010)

Sackur’s first utterance is a D-Event Assertion functioning as an indirect request for information: “there are those who look at nations around the world and see with Mexico a particular threat to the stability of your country.” He restates his previous assertion/request: “Civic society is under serious threat in this country.” However, Sackur also chooses to expand on this assertion by quoting Hillary Clinton: “Even Hillary Clinton stated that there is an insurgency in your country that is a lot like Columbia 20 years ago.” As with Mair’s indirect request put to Boris Johnson “you’re a nasty piece of work, aren’t you?”, Sackur is using this expanded assertion/request to provoke his interviewee Felipe Calderone into a more coherent response. The assertion, “Even Hillary Clinton stated that there is an insurgency in your country that is a lot like Columbia 20 years ago” triggers two presuppositions, one, through ‘even’, and the second through a comparison between Columbia and Mexico. The particle ‘even’ presupposes the remarkableness of the speaker in making this particular assertion. It is not expected that the American Secretary of State would compare Mexico with Columbia. Further, Clinton’s comparison of Mexico to “Columbia 20 years ago” triggers the presupposition that Mexico is a society in chaos with the subsequent presupposition that such chaos has resulted from an “insurgency.” Mexico is no longer a stable society. What Sackur implicates a second time is that Calderone bears some responsibility for this situation since he is Mexico’s president. Whether or not Calderone agrees or disagrees that there

is an actual insurgency in his country like that in Columbia twenty years before as maintained “even” by Hillary Clinton and restated by Sackur, what is presupposed by Sackur is that there is nonetheless something very wrong in the state of Mexico and that Calderone has something to answer for. Mair is certainly attempting to get Boris Johnson to respond by asserting that he’s a nasty piece of work, but as unpleasant as this assertion may be to Johnson, Mair’s indirect request does not constrain Johnson to the truth of his assertion. Mair doesn’t have to say ‘Yes, I am’. In contrast, Sackur’s assertion/indirect request is designed both to get Calderone to respond to his assertion/request and to accept the presupposition which is attached to the effect that Mexico is a dysfunctional state. If Calderone accepts the presupposition that Mexico has been destabilized, he must in turn accept his own role in this destabilization. Sackur’s second assertion/request is a loaded question.

Calderone responds in the following way:

You want to quote authorities in United States you need to quote President Barack Obama who went out of his way to refute the quote of Hillary Clinton. *Do you have the quote of Barack Obama there?* (my emphasis)

No, but it is important to do to the people all the comments about what is happening. *We do not have an insurgency movement* (my emphasis). They are criminals if I can say that they are in the business of power, they are acting of course against the law. We have to reinforce the law.

(Sackur interview with Calderone, October 27, 2010)

According to Walton (1991), one can respond to a loaded question with another request for information or one can address the presupposition attached and challenge it. Calderone does both. In his response to Sackur, Calderone poses his own request addressing Sackur’s use of “even Hillary Clinton”: “Do you have the quote of Barack Obama there?” He counters one authority with another and indeed a higher authority. Calderone then addresses the comparison Clinton has set up between Columbia “20 years ago” and Mexico to the effect that there is an insurgency in his country. Lastly he responds to the presupposition attached to Sackur’s D-Event Assertion that Mexico has become a failed state. Calderone characterises those jeopardizing the stability of the Mexico as “criminals.” He reinforces this assertion through an explicit rephrasing that “they are acting against the law.” This assertion on Calderone’s part carries its own presupposition: that Mexico is a lawful and stable society in which criminals are pursued. Calderone therefore counters one presupposition with another. In disagreeing with a comparison between Mexico and Columbia, Calderone counters the specific assertion concerning insurgency and he partially addresses the presupposition attached. He is able to construct Mexico as a law-abiding and thus stable society. But unfortunately for his own

counter-argument, he also asserts “they [drug cartels] are in the business of power.” In asserting that the drug cartels are “in the business of power,” Calderone in fact acknowledges that their impact is far greater than engagement in illegal activity. If Mexican drug cartels are “in the business of power,” they have an impact on the overall civic functioning of the society and thus the overall political reality of the country. Through this assertion Calderone undermines his previous argumentation and goes a long way to accepting the original D-Event Assertion made by Sackur that “Civic society is under serious threat in this country” along with its presupposition that someone/something has threatened Mexico with the implicature that he, Calderone, has played some role in such action.

4.3 Impoliteness

Both Mair and Sackur are strategic in their behaviour as interviewers. However, are they also ‘impolite’? In his analysis of verbal threats employed by police officers in Stendhal Germany, Limberg (2008) notes that verbal threats are not inherently impolite and that none of the targets in his data explicitly assess the police threats as ‘impolite’. However, given that “a verbal threat is: (i) an extreme form of face-attack, uttered intentionally to manipulate the target’s behaviour [beyond the institutional norms]; and (ii) perceived by the target as restricting [or manipulating] one’s action-environment, then it is suitable to use the lexeme ‘impoliteness’ [or a similar term] in this context” (2008, 176). This definition of ‘impoliteness’ derives from Culpeper’s 2005 definition of impoliteness which “comes about when: (1) the speaker communicates face-attack intentionally, or (2) the hearer perceives and/or constructs behaviour as intentionally face-attacking, or a combination of (1) and (2)” (38).¹⁰ Limberg also references Wartenberg (1990) who constructs power as a dynamic in which there is negotiation, action-restriction and a presumed conflict of interest. Although it is difficult to define power in precise terms, and even more difficult to correlate it strictly to impoliteness, where there is conflict of interest, or in Watts’ terms, perceived self-interest, and where there is a restriction of action in Brown and Levinson’s, politeness or that which is politic is compromised. Such compromise takes place when ‘sanctioned’ police threats give

10. Culpeper subsequently modifies this definition: “Impoliteness is a negative attitude towards specific behaviours occurring in specific contexts. Situated behaviours are viewed negatively – considered ‘impolite’ – when they conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they ought to be... Various factors can exacerbate how offensive an impolite behaviour is taken to be, including for example whether one understands a behaviour to be strongly intentional or not” (2011, 23).

rise to actual or implicit threats from the targets of police threats (Limberg 2008), and equally it takes place in both Mair's questioning of Boris Johnson and with Sackur's questioning of Calderone. For both Johnson and Calderone there is face threat, bold on record for Johnson and attached to presuppositions for Calderone. Where we see a difference is in the area of restriction of action. Sackur's loaded question is designed to get Calderone to accept the presupposition that Mexico is a destabilized state and that he, Calderone, bears some responsibility for this. Thus, although Calderone is pressed into answering an assertion/request rather than being able to deflect it, he is also made to address the personal implications of Sackur's request for information. In asserting that the drug cartels in Mexico are in "the business of power," he himself triggers the presupposition that there are limitations to his own power as President of Mexico since he too is in "the business of power." Johnson, though accused of being a nasty piece of work, is able to reconstruct himself as a friend and even as a victim rather than as someone who lies and encourages violence towards others. In both exchanges there is conflict of interest, and some degree of 'negotiation', but in Sackur's exchange with Calderone the purpose of his loaded question is to restrict Calderone's verbal action. Sackur provokes Calderone into responding to his D-Event Assertion and in turn acknowledging the limitations of Calderone's own power and thus the fact of political instability in his own country.

4.4 Guterres' interview with Sackur

Such strategic verbal behaviour, which we can construct as 'impolite', is also evident in another interview by Sackur with an international politician: Antonio Guterres, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Addressing conditions in refugee camps, Sackur puts the following indirect request to Guterres:

But not long ago we had a Dutch journalist in that particular HARDtalk chair and this is what she said... Her point becomes particularly relevant. Actually in certain situations the APR and other international NGO's that work in conjunction with you are making situations worse. You have to work in situations where quote unquote 'bad guys' are heavily involved in camps or refugee situations. *You choose from time to time to be complicit, thereby endangering huge numbers of civilians* (my emphasis).
(Sackur interview with Guterres, October 25, 2010)

Sackur provides a long prologue to his indirect request for information that in this case is a B-Event Assertion: *You choose from time to time to be complicit, thereby endangering huge numbers of civilians*. What is presupposed by this assertion is that there are 'bad guys' in U.N. refugee camps and that further the U.N. knows that there

are ‘bad guys’. More seriously ‘choose’ triggers a presupposition of deliberate complicity on the part of the U.N.¹¹ Although Sackur is not directly calling Guterres a ‘bad guy’, he is most certainly constructing the U.N. and its High Commissioner for Refugees as something akin to a bad guy by virtue of the deliberate choice it has made.

Guterres responds in the following way:

I don't think that is fair. Because we don't choose we are sometimes forced to trying to protect people against those that are violating their rights. We are forced to be there and act in the conditions that are possible. But in those situations you mentioned they are not camps and ah what we have witnessed recently.

(Sackur interview with Guterres, October 25, 2010)

In this exchange, Guterres explicitly protests that Sackur's indirect request is not fair. However, he does not personalize by saying that Sackur is unfair. In keeping with Locher and Watts, we have an explicit linguistic indication from the hearer that the speaker's contribution deviates from that which is politic. In Brown and Levinson's terms, Sackur's indirect request is ‘impolite’ by virtue of the assertion that the U.N. is deliberately ‘complicit’ or working with and not against ‘bad guys’ in refugee camps. The assertion is positive face-threatening: the work of the U.N. is characterised negatively. However, as a loaded question, Sackur's indirect request also threatens Guterres' negative face, or in Wartenberg's notion of power, his freedom of action. Guterres is able to address the first presupposition of deliberateness triggered by the implicative verb ‘choose’. He states, “Because we don't choose we are sometimes forced to trying to protect people against those that are violating their rights.” Guterres' use of ‘force’ is extremely odd. He also continues to use this verb: “We are forced to be there and act in the conditions that are possible.” What is presupposed by Guterres' assertion is that someone is forcing the U.N. to be present in its own camps. This is a remarkable statement. It may not present the U.N. as being deliberately complicit with unsavoury elements within its own camps but it nonetheless constructs the U.N. as being non-agentive and thus very weak. Guterres continues his defense by stating that the U.N. must “act in conditions that are possible.” ‘Possible’ in this utterance triggers its own presupposition that conditions are not optimal and thus that there are limitations to what the U.N. can do in its own camps. What is implicated is that ‘bad guys’ in U.N. camps have considerable power to affect and endanger refugee lives. While Guterres is able to refute the presupposition that the U.N. is deliberately conspiratorial with ‘bad guys’ in its own camps, the role he constructs for the U.N. is hardly inspiring since the U.N. is presented as

11. See Karttunen (1971, 355). Karttunen distinguishes between ‘choose’ as an implicative verb and a non-implicative verb.

being non-agentive (someone ‘forces’ the U.N). Moreover, “act[ing] in conditions that are possible” is open to interpretation, even that from time to time the U.N. is deliberately complicit with the negative elements within its own camps. Guterres can only counter with a technical point that the situation in question does not occur in camps. The presupposition remains, however, that in some place under the U.N.’s authority, ‘bad guys’ are able to function without very much constraint on the part of the U.N. Sackur is able to get Guterres to acknowledge that ‘bad guys’ are a significant presence in the U.N.’s camps and while the U.N. may or may be deliberately complicit with them, it is able to do very little to constrain them. Guterres may see Sackur’s loaded question as “unfair,” but it nonetheless forces him to acknowledge the limitations of the U.N.’s power in its own camps. Therefore Sackur constrains Guterres with respect to the content of his response.

5. Conclusion

In keeping with Walton (1991), Sackur uses loaded questions as a strategically ‘impolite’ means of furthering discourse. In her discussion of questions used in parliamentary question time in Great Britain, Harris includes loaded questions in her typology of questions (e.g. “After three years of the mounting stealth taxes with which his Government have clobbered the hard-working people of this country – will the Prime Minister now tell the House what the price of a litre of petrol was when he took office – and what it has increased to today” [2001, 458]). She compares such questions to ritual insults. Ritual insults are viewed as non-face threatening by virtue of their absence of truth value.¹² However, it is not the case that parliamentary questions necessarily lack truth value, although they are understood as being part of a linguistic game played by parliamentarians during question time. They can be understood as being ‘politic’ within this context. Walton (1991) also examines loaded questions in the context of parliamentary discourse. Unlike Harris, he does not view such questions as ritualistic or part of a linguistic game. He sees such questions as ‘reasonable’ or ‘unreasonable’ with respect to their intent to move the discourse forward by getting the interlocutor either to respond to a previously unanswered point or request for information or to “pre-empt the answerer’s reasonable range of replies” (1991, 154). Sackur uses loaded questions (requests for information) in precisely this way in his political interviews: to generate response and to further a point or assertion he has made to an interviewee. With regard to

12. See Labov 1972

both Calderone and Guterres, he engages them in the acknowledgement of unpleasant facts, for one the presence and effect of destabilization from drug cartels in Mexican society, and for the other the presence and effect of negative elements within international refugee camps along with the U.N.'s response to such elements. His strategic purpose is 'reasonable' rather than 'unreasonable.'

Sackur's use of loaded questions is a linguistic means of achieving strategic impoliteness. Although the content of the presuppositions attached to the assertions/indirect requests for information is face-threatening, the strategic purpose of these requests is to constrain response. Such loaded questions limit the range of possible response on the part of an interlocutor and get agreement about a specific proposition or assertion. In his interview with Calderone, Sackur uses a loaded question to refocus topic in his interview (from the economy to that of violence in Mexico) and to get commitment to a specific presupposition attached to his question. Walton understands loaded questions as being 'fallacious' precisely because they are not open (1991, 339). However, he also understands that they can be tactically employed in a 'reasonable' way. Walton's understanding of loaded questions is closer to Wartenburg's notion of freedom of action or to Brown and Levinson's notion of 'negative face' as a right to non-distraction (1987, 61). Sackur uses loaded questions to distract or move Calderone and Guterres from their original positions. Calderone is forced to acknowledge the limits of his own power as President of Mexico. Guterres can provide only weak defense of the presupposition that the U.N. deliberately cooperates with 'bad guys' in its own camps. Further Guterres' own argument to possibility leaves the door open to such a hard interpretation. It is also important to note that use of loaded questions in Sackur's interviews is a marked feature. He uses such questions only very selectively in order to further the discourse of the interview as he sees it. His use of strategic impoliteness is thus highly constrained in terms of his goals as a political interviewer.

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