# Calling Mr Speaker 'Mr Speaker'

## The strategic use of ritual references to the Speaker of the UK House of Commons

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Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) in the UK House of Commons is a ritual event, governed by a cluster of conventions. Members of Parliament (MPs) must address their remarks to the Prime Minister (PM) through the medium of the Speaker of the House, who is responsible for maintaining order during debates, and determining which MP may speak next. Due to the sacred role of the Speaker and the prevalence of conventionalised conflict avoidance between the PM and those who ask challenging questions, PMQs resembles archaic tribal councils, in which rights and obligations prevail. Yet, the importance of conventionalised indirectness and the sacred role of the Speaker do not correlate with a lack of face-threats and challenges. PMQs represents an aggressive ritual setting in which the ritual roles and rules only offer a façade to package aggression, and indeed may operate as interactional resources whereby participants can even increase the efficiency of their verbal attacks. Thus, PMQs embodies a scene that ritual experts define as 'anti-structural' in character: in this setting, the normative expectation in daily life to avoid conflict is temporarily suspended, to such an extent that conflict has become the ritual norm and is regarded as quintessential to this parliamentary institution.

**Keywords:** Prime Ministers Questions, the Speaker, face-threats, indirectness, conflict avoidance, unparliamentary language

### 1. Introduction

Despite the prevalence of ritual in so many political activities, there has been remarkably little research on the use of ritual language in political contexts (but see Ilie 2010), even within areas such as discourse analysis (although see Gal, e.g.,

Published online: 22 November 2019 *Pragmatics* 30:1 (2020), pp. 64–87.
issn 1018-2101 | e-issn 2406-4238

1989). In the present paper, we aim to contribute to pragmatic research on interactional rituals through an analysis of practices and procedures in the context of British parliamentary discourse, with a particular focus on what is known in the British House of Commons as Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs).

In the United Kingdom, laws are passed by the House of Commons, which is supreme in legislative matters. The Prime Minister (PM) is answerable to the Commons and must maintain its support to stay in power. Every Wednesday at noon while Parliament is sitting, Members of Parliament (MPs) have the opportunity for at least the next half hour to pose questions to the PM on any topic of their choice in PMQs. From a theoretical point of view, what makes the discourse of PMQs relevant to pragmatics-based research on ritual is that it provides insight into the operation of communal and institutionalised ritual practices. On the one hand, PMQs operate within strict rights and obligations, and within an institutionalised veneer of public 'civility' (Smith, Phillips, and King 2010). On the other hand, PMQs is notorious for its adversarial language, variously described as a form of "verbal pugilism" (Bull and Wells 2012), and even as a "bear pit" (Lees 2015). For instance, in this paper we demonstrate that the phrase 'Mr. Speaker' is often deployed in attacks on the PM not to mitigate the face-threat but rather to indicate that a stronger face-threatening utterance is on the way.

In this introduction, we overview this dual character of PMQs, thereby to lay down the foundations for a more detailed language-based investigation of the ritual–pragmatics interface in PMQs. Note that we are not arguing that PMQs are *always* hostile: as Murphy (2014) points out, politeness in a conventional sense – as a pragmatic tool by means of which the participants of an interaction manage to maintain relationships – plays an important role in many scenarios of PMQs. Yet, due to our ritual focus, in this paper we pursue interest in the aggressive side of language use.

### **1.1** PMQs: A ritual practice

In the House of Commons, the presiding officer is known as the Speaker, who chairs the debates, maintains order, and determines which members may speak. The continuous history of the office is held to date back to 1376, to the reign of the medieval English king Edward III (Roskell, Clark, and Rawcliffe 1993). At that time, the Speaker was the MP chosen by the other MPs to quite literally speak on their behalf, in particular, to communicate their decisions to the reigning monarch. This was a dangerous business. Between 1399 and 1535 no less than seven Speakers had their heads chopped off. In modern times, this grisly history is reflected in a ritual whereby the MP newly elected to the office shows reluctance to accept it and is forcibly dragged to the chair by other MPs. Thus, the role of the

Speaker is not only institutionalised, but may also be seen in a Durkheimian sense as *sacred* (Durkheim 1912 [1954]) – as a semi-religious figure initiated into the role through a distinctive rite of passage (Johnson 2011), thereby endowed with particular rights and privileges, as well as with particular obligations. In the context of PMQs, the Speaker has in certain respects powers even greater than that of the PM, for example, rebuking noisy MPs from either government or opposition benches for excessive interruptions, barracking, and general rambunctiousness. Importantly, it is the Speaker who decides who gets to question the PM, and how long the session lasts (recent controversies concerning Speaker Bercow indicate how important is this power). While the PM has the ability to rebuke MPs who are being disorderly, it is only the speaker who is empowered to actually 'do' anything about this.

One of the Speaker's tasks is to preside over PMQs, the central British parliamentary institution and its highest profile parliamentary event. PMQs always begin with the same tabled question to the PM, asking if s/he will list his/her official engagements for the day; thus, like any institutionalised ritual, PMQs are to a certain degree 'scripted' or 'demarcated' (Staal 1979).[1] The Speaker's response to this question is also scripted, i.e. PMQs depart with a ritual sequential chain (Collins 2004). This initial ritual continues, as the called Member can then pose a supplementary question (termed a 'supplementary') on almost anything that relates to the PM's general responsibilities or to some aspect of government policy. The MP is limited to this one supplementary and cannot follow up the PM's response with any further utterance (Harris 2001). However, this is permissible for the Leader of the Opposition, who is allowed up to six questions. Often, only the initial question regarding the PM's engagements is tabled, although MPs can table 'Questions for oral answer on a future day' which the PM would have notice of.

Because MPs have the advantage of putting supplementaries to the PM without notice, PMQs have the important elements of unpredictability and surprise, and thereby, like any public ritual, also have a sense of drama (Turner 1967; 1992). Of course, this unpredictability only holds for the questions made by the Leader of the Opposition and other MPs who are supposed to oppose the PM – many of the PM's own MPs provide notice (off the record) of what they are going to ask. This dramatic character is liminal and a manifestation of what Turner (1967) calls "anti-structure", i.e. it represents a situation in which what people perceive as 'ordinary' parts of social order are turned upside down. Thus, in many social situations, we are expected to avoid conflict, strive for harmonious relationships with others, and keep verbal conflict to the minimum possible. These social norms

1. The second author would like to express her gratitude to Verena Weber, BA (University of Augsburg, Germany) for having re-edited the Hansard files.

do not apply to PMQs, in which the exact opposite of these norms of social order is expected from the participants. Yet, whilst the social order gets jeopardised in PMQs, this jeopardy is intentional and normative – provided that it is kept within ritual boundaries – and it is exactly this paradox that makes PMQs a prime example of liminal anti-structural ritual phenomena in modern societies (along with other liminal events, e.g. martial arts matches, see Kádár and House forthcoming). In the liminal setting of PMQs, the PM is not necessarily the most powerful party (despite being the head of the government), in that the PM may be subjected to an unpredictable series of attacks, and is expected to 'hold ground', in a similar fashion to public speakers who get heckled (Kádár 2014). Although PMQs has been widely and extensively criticised (e.g., Thomas 2006; Blair 2010), it is arguably a remarkable institution, providing a notable degree of political accountability, whereby ordinary MPs have the opportunity to put questions directly to the head of the government.

In PMQs, there is an expectation that the dialogue should follow a question-response pattern, just as in political interviews (Fetzer 2000). But unlike a broadcast interview, questions in PMQs are posed by other politicians, not by interviewers. This has important implications for the discourse which takes place. As journalists, political interviewers are expected to be more or less 'impartial', and they formulate their conversational contributions accordingly, mitigating the face-threatening potential of their challenges with an appropriate degree of redressive action (Fetzer 2009). Politicians, however, are restricted in their communicative actions by no such constraints. In the British political arena, it is certainly not a moral value to be 'impartial', but rather the other way around, it is part of the moral order (Spencer-Oatey and Kádár 2016): MPs in PMQs can be as partial and as unashamedly partisan as they choose. Having argued thus, as Murphy (2014) notes, backbench MPs still want to get work done on behalf of their constituents, and so this can lead to partisanship being set to one side. Yet, it is safe to argue that MPs can behave in rather arbitrary ways in the PMQs, and they are protected by parliamentary privilege, which allows them to speak freely in the House without fear of legal action on grounds of slander. Thus, a second reason why PMQs may be seen as ritual is because it embodies, in a sense, a distinctive moral order (Kádár 2017); what would normally be regarded as 'inappropriate' or 'unacceptable' in other settings seems to be integral and self-evidently justified by the conduct and procedures of PMQs.

At the same time, MPs cannot simply say what they like. They are expected to observe certain traditions and conventions regarding what is termed 'unparliamentary language' (House of Commons Information Office Factsheet G7, 2004). Specifically, they should not be abusive or insulting, call another member a liar, suggest another MP has false motives, or misrepresent another MP. These ethical

conventions are enforced by the Speaker, who may ask a Member to withdraw an objectionable utterance, and only the ritually sacred person of the Speaker can make such an order. Over the years, Speakers have objected to the use of abusive epithets such as 'blackguard', 'coward', 'git', 'guttersnipe', 'hooligan', 'rat', 'swine', 'traitor', and 'stoolpigeon' (House of Commons Information Office Factsheet G7, 2004).

### 1.2 Mediated address in PMQs

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

Given that the ritual conventions of PMQs lead MPs to engage in language use that might be described as 'gamelike' (see Turner 1967 on the close relationship between ritual and game), it also provides notorious interactional resources for political point-scoring. Indeed, PMQs resemble a game because its participants are allowed to experiment with verbal techniques of aggression to win an upper hand (just as participants of group games such as British Bulldog, a football match, or a judo competition are allowed to physically do what is at their disposal), but only within boundaries that ensure that no harm is caused beyond what is institutionally allowed. This resemblance to competitive sports (which are always ritual by nature) was noted by the late Simon Hoggart (2011), the distinguished political columnist of *The Guardian* newspaper:

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

Political point-scoring in PMQs has been analysed through qualitative analyses conducted by both Harris (2001) and by Bull and Wells (2012). Harris argued, based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness, that much PMQs discourse is composed of intentional and explicitly face-threatening acts (FTAs). In the context of broadcast political interviews, three distinctive forms of FTA have been identified (Bull, Elliott, Palmer, and Walker 1996): threats to the party the

politician represents, threats to individual face, and threats to what were termed significant others. The latter might be political allies (whose face the politician would wish to uphold) or political opponents (whose face the politician might wish to attack). In PMQs, threats to individual face (in the form of personal attacks) have been shown to occur with great frequency (Waddle, Bull, and Böhnke 2019), based on the analysis of interactions between Leaders of Opposition and past five PMs (Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, and David Cameron). Similarly, Cameron's successor as PM, Theresa May, was shown to to make regular personal attacks on the current Leader of Opposition, Jeremy Corbyn (Bull and Strawson 2019).

Illustrative techniques for performing FTAs in PMQs were identified by Harris (2001) – for example, asking disingenuous questions to which the questioner already knows the answer. The intended perlocutionary effect of these disingenuous questions was not to obtain an answer, but rather to reframe the question in another context, thereby deconstructing the opponent's argumentation. A more systematic investigation of such techniques was conducted by Bull and Wells (2012), who identified six distinctive ways in which FTAs are performed in questions to the PM, and five ways in which the PM may counter FTAs in replies. The term *face aggravation* (based on Goffman 1967) was utilised to refer to the aggressive use of facework, in which antagonists seek to score points at the other's expense. Overall, Bull and Wells proposed that face aggravation between the PM and Leader of Opposition is not just an acceptable form of parliamentary discourse, but it is both sanctioned and rewarded, a means whereby the Leader of Opposition may enhance their own status. They further argued that PMQs should be regarded as another of the situations identified by Culpeper (1996), where impoliteness is not a marginal activity, but central to the interaction that takes place. In this respect, it shows similarity with other – highly ritual – settings such as army training. Army training involves respect (towards officers) and rudeness (towards 'rookies'), i.e. it provides a ritual scene in which aggression and related face aggravation is a central part of the interactional dynamics.

The prevalence of impoliteness and covert aggression (Archer 2008) operates in noteworthy contradiction to a number of ritualistic conventions governing the discourse of PMQs. In particular, MPs must address their remarks to one another only indirectly through the medium of the Speaker. MPs must also refer to other MPs in the third person (rather than as 'you'), and use formal and honorific titles, such as the 'Right Honourable Gentleman' or the 'Foreign Secretary'. If breached, these conventions are enforced by the Speaker, who may suspend an MP from sitting in the House. So, for example, a left wing Labour MP (Dennis Skinner) was suspended from the House for a day (11 April 2016) because he persistently referred to former Conservative PM David Cameron not as Prime Minister but

as "Dodgy Dave", in relation to a controversy over Cameron's personal tax affairs. This act of suspension is referred to in parliamentary procedure as 'naming', once again an example par excellence of the ritualistic character of PMQs. As Kádár (2017) argues, institutionalised ritual practices tend to trigger meta-definitions, i.e. in many lingua-cultures detailed regulations define how language users should behave in institutional settings where rituals prevail. British parliamentary rituals are prime examples of this phenomenon, as illustrated above by our discussion on the nature of rights and obligations at PMQs.

In the present paper, we define the question-response dynamic of PMQs and the role of the Speaker as the simultaneous recipient/moderator of questions and responses as 'mediated address'. This term refers to the fact that, whereas in other situational contexts the involvement of a mediator and the ritual interactional format might suggest a high degree of formality and deference, in PMQs discourse they are often combined with the strategic use of FTAs. Whereas MPs may be seen to observe their duty of being civilly 'indirect' by addressing one another through the Speaker, this practice may not be indirect in terms of situated pragmatic operation. While Harris (2001) argues that these procedures serve to mitigate FTAs, thereby keeping the discourse within the bounds of acceptable parliamentary language, an alternative view is that in PMQs discourse they may actually work as boosters for FTAs.

What makes this form of interaction so powerful is that it can cast a veil over brutal attacks. Thus, in the following example, David Cameron, then Leader of the Opposition, launched a wholesale assault on former Labour PM Gordon Brown (Bull and Wells 2012, 37):

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

If Cameron's comments had been addressed directly to the PM, it would make this assault much more personal. Such a 'personalised' version of the above attack might look as follows:

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

This latter attack would be regarded as beyond the bounds of acceptable parliamentary language, and certainly, Cameron would have been corrected for not addressing his remarks to the Speaker. Nevertheless, through the use of third-

person language Cameron was arguably able to make a more damning indictment of the PM, whereby Gordon Brown is not addressed personally, but as object of talk.

So far, we have overviewed the ritual characteristics of PMQs. We have argued that, along with the sacred status of the Speaker and the dramatic/liminal and anti-structural nature of these clashes, the pragmatically most significant ritual characteristic of PMQs interaction is that it operates through mediated address, i.e., there is no way for participants to directly interact without the involvement of the Speaker who moderates the interaction in an 'in-between' role. Thus, the Speaker holds 'procedural power' in this ritual game and is empowered to enforce participants to obey its rules.

In this context, the main theme of this paper is specifically on the ritualistic convention whereby politicians in parliamentary debate may only refer to one another in the third person through the channel of the Speaker. Notably, on some occasions, politicians will actually refer to the Speaker as 'Mr Speaker'; the particular focus of this paper is on what communicative functions are served by this explicit reference. In the following section, we discuss the research methodology on which our paper is based.

## 2. Methodology

PMQs provide MPs with the opportunity for backbench MPs to pose one question to the PM, while the Leader of the Opposition may pose up to six questions. The data in this study were drawn exclusively from interactions between the following party leaders:

- The former Leader of the Opposition and Leader of the Labour Party (Ed Miliband) and the former Conservative PM (David Cameron).
- The current Leader of the Opposition and Leader of the Labour Party (Jeremy Corbyn) and David Cameron

The focus on the leaders of the two main political parties can be amply justified in terms of the way in which their interaction has become increasingly central to PMQs. This has been substantively documented by Bates, Kerr, Byrne, and Stanley (2014), who analysed the opening sessions of PMQs for five PMs (Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, and David Cameron) over a 31-year period (1979–2010). For the period of their analysis, Bates et al. found that the proportion of time taken up both by questions from the Leader of the Opposition and the PM's responses had increased, that the Leader of

the Opposition tended to ask longer questions and more of them, and that, in responding to those questions, the PM tended to produce longer responses.

A preliminary examination of the interactions between PMs and Leaders of the Opposition suggested that there are two major functions for which explicit references to the Speaker (referred to as Mr Speaker) are used in the discourse of PMQs:

Discourse organisation.
Signalling conflictual situations (also referred to as *critical incidents or critical situations* (e.g., Fetzer 2002, 2006, 2007).

As we will argue in Section 4, discourse organisation includes a set of situations in which referring to the Speaker as 'Mr Speaker' and the other ritual characteristics of PMQ sessions facilitate the efficiency of turn-taking and the organisation of the turn, and thereby the delivery of the politician's contribution.

The function of signalling conflictual situations covers instances when the speaker makes explicit tacit presuppositions in discourse (Fetzer 2002) – bringing them back into the communicative exchange, making them noticeable or observable, and assigning them the status of a potential object of talk; thereby, the discourse may be kept within the ritual boundaries of PMQs. The definition of a conflictual situation is based on the premise that the acceptance of a conversational contribution entails the acceptance of the contribution as a whole, as well as of its presuppositions. The rejection of a contribution, by contrast, does not automatically entail the rejection of its presuppositions. Should (some of) its presuppositions need to be rejected or blocked, the presuppositions need to be made explicit in the first place; only then is it possible to negotiate their communicative status and reject or modify them (cf. Fetzer 1999). As a consequence of this, presuppositions are generally only explicated in conflictual situations. For instance, in a face-to-face interaction, the speaker hardly ever explicitly refers to her or his participation status as a speaker, and only explicates the communicative meaning of indexicals, such as 'now' or 'here', if communication problems emerge.

Adapting Goffman's approach of frame (Goffman 1974) to the analysis of conflictual situations with frames involving "expectations of a normative kind as to how deeply and fully the individual is to be carried into the activity organized by the frames" (1974, 345), frame breaks occur when individuals act in dis-accordance with those expectations. This concept of frame is particularly relevant in the context of ritual (see Kadar and House, in this issue). Frame breaks can be ignored or they can be referred to in more and less explicit ways and thereby be assigned the status of an object of talk. A frame break is a necessary condition for assigning to a situation the status of a conflictual situation. This has been demonstrated for references to the media frame in the topical-sequence section of political interviews,

which are used to boost the pragmatic force of challenging the validity of genre-specific constraints and requirements (Fetzer 2006); we assume that explicit references to the Speaker of the House of Commons have a similar function in particular contextual configurations.

Micro-presuppositions are anchored in a conversational contribution as such and triggered by presupposition triggers, e.g. definitive descriptions, factive verbs, aspectual predicates, implicative predicates, or temporal clauses, while 'macro-presuppositions' specify the discursive constraints and requirements of a communicative-activity-as-a-whole, such as the genre-specific turn-taking system, the number of questions which the Leader of the Opposition may ask the PM in PMQs, or the use of unparliamentary language in PMQs. Those constraints and requirements can also be challenged, and their negotiation-of-validity process follows the same procedure as that of challenging micro-presuppositions. Generally, explicit references to already accepted presuppositions serve as inference triggers, signifying that the participants' communicative performance has not been in accordance with the discursive constraints and requirements of the activity type, as we assume is the case with explicit references to the Speaker of the House of Commons in particular contextual configurations. While the explication of micro-presuppositions initiates a negotiation-of-validity sequence with respect to the participants' rights and obligations, the explication of macro-presuppositions has the communicative function of a regulative device, calling for 'order' and re-establishing the interactional equilibrium.

## 3. Data

Our analysis is principally based on two sets of data. The Miliband-Cameron sessions were selected randomly; those between Corbyn and Cameron represented the first 20 sessions following Corbyn's appointment as LO.

- 20 sessions featuring Ed Miliband and David Cameron (21 March 2012–10 July 2013)
- 20 sessions featuring Jeremy Corbyn and David Cameron (16 September 2015–20 April, 2016)

Each session features 6 question-response sequences between PM and Leader of the Opposition, hence a total overall of 240 question-response sequences.

- In addition, an illustrative example is included from an interaction between Jeremy Corbyn and Theresa May.

The analyses were based on transcripts which are available from Hansard, the written record of parliamentary debates in the House of Commons. Hansard, it should be noted, is edited, i.e., it is not a full verbatim record of parliamentary proceedings, nor is it intended to be – rather "substantially the verbatim report, with repetitions and redundancies omitted and with obvious mistakes corrected, but which on the other hand leaves out nothing that adds to the meaning of the speech or illustrates the argument" (May 2004, 260). Hence, in this study, transcripts were also checked against delivery from video recordings of PMQs, which are available from https://www.parliamentlive.tv. These showed that for the most part references to 'Mr Speaker' are edited out, that is to say, they do not appear in the Hansard record. It should also be noted, however, that verbatim transcripts of PMQs are not available on the Internet, so it is much quicker to re-edit Hansard into a verbatim record, rather than make our own transcripts from scratch.[2]

In each session, instances where the politician referred to the Speaker as 'Mr Speaker' were noted and coded according to whether they fulfilled a discourse-organising function or whether they signalled a conflictual situation.

## 4. Analysis

Overall, it was found that all explicit references to the Speaker could be coded as either discourse organisational or conflictual, hence the data were collapsed into one table to allow sufficient observations for a 2×2 chi square. A Fisher's Exact test (one-tailed) was utilised, because the expected frequency of one of the cells fell below 5 (Siegel and Castellan 1988, 103–111). This analysis was not statistically significant, but given that the expected frequency in that one cell only just fell below 5 (4.9), a second analysis (Pearson's chi square) was also calculated. This did show a significant effect ($p. < 05$), from which it was concluded that an interaction, whereby explicit references to the Speaker were used more by the Leader of the Opposition in conflictual situations, was marginally significant.

A number of illustrative examples are given below of how addressing the Speaker can be discourse organisational, or conflictual.

### 4.1 Discourse organisation

Due to the ritual nature of PMQs, there are recurrent moments in the sessions when the Speaker is referred to as 'Mr Speaker'. This is highly conventionalised and not in any sense conflictual. In the following example, the Speaker calls Jeremy

2. On demarcation in language rituals, see more in Kádár (2013).

**Table 1.** References to Mr Speaker for Ed Miliband/David Cameron, and Jeremy Corbyn/David Cameron

| | | | | | Totals | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **EM** | **DC** | **JC** | **DC** | **LO** | **PM** |
| Interaction rituals | 24 | 3 | 40 | 2 | 64 | 5 |
| Conflictual | 163 | 12 | 96 | 6 | 259 | 18 |

(EM – Ed Miliband; JC – Jeremy Corbyn; DC – David Cameron; LO – Leader of Opposition; PM – Prime Minister)

Corbyn to speak in the House ("I call Jeremy Corbyn" [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear!"]). Corbyn acknowledges the allocation of turn with this formulation:

(1) Thank you, **Mr Speaker**. It is nice to get such a warm welcome, and may I wish all Members, as well as all members of staff in the House, a Happy New Year? (Hansard HC Deb, 11 January 2017, col. 295)

In early January, such felicitations are conventional and customary, and as such may be seen as conventional in nature. Note that in giving the Leader of Opposition an opportunity conventionally to greet others also facilitates the organisation of the discourse, as the Speaker ratifies the first politician to make a question to the PM.

The acknowledgement of an allocated turn supplemented with an explicit reference to the Speaker may also be utilised to support the formation of alignment between a politician and his electors (cf. Kadar and Zhang 2019). This is the case in Extract (2), in which Jeremy Corbyn first acknowledges the allocation of turn and thus the right to speak with the ritual expression of gratitude towards the Speaker. This former acknowledgement is recurrent and ceremonial, so it is part of the ritual dynamics of the PMQs. However, in this turn Corbyn performs another act of thanking realised with the performative verb 'to thank' and expands the more strategic expression of gratitude to his electors in the Labour Party:

(2) Thank you, **Mr Speaker.** *I want to thank* all those who took part in an enormous democratic exercise in this country, which concluded with me being elected as leader of the Labour party and Leader of the Opposition. We can be very proud of the numbers of people who engaged and took part in all those debates. (Hansard HC Deb, 16 September 2015, col. 1037)

Explicit references to the Speaker may also serve simply to clarify as to who the intended addressee is. In the following example, Jeremy Corbyn pays tribute to the late Gerald Kaufman, a former Labour MP whose funeral Corbyn had just

attended. He refers to a message from the Speaker which was conveyed by the rabbi at the ceremony.

(3) He [i.e., Gerald Kaufman] was a champion for peace and justice in the Middle East and around the world. Yesterday at his funeral, **Mr Speaker**, the rabbi who conducted the service conveyed your message on behalf of the House to his family, which was very much appreciated.

(Hansard HC Deb, 1 March 2017, col. 277)

In this case, the explicit reference to Mr Speaker disambiguates the referential domain of the second person pronoun of "your message". It is notable that this is one of the few occasions that Hansard actually records the reference to Mr Speaker (usually they are omitted), presumably to ensure that the text is intelligible to the reader.

Explicit references to the Speaker of the House of Commons with a discourse-organising function have the function of accepting the macro-presuppositions of the discourse of PMQs and thereby recognise the ritual character of the event.

### **4.2** Conflictual situations

However, as the data analysis above shows (see Table 1), explicit references to the Speaker were significantly utilised in those contexts in which the Leader of the Opposition challenged the PM's policies and deconstructed their argumentation. The following two extracts are from PMQs (15 November 2015). Extract (4) is from the fifth question asked by the Leader of the Opposition, while Extract (5) is a follow-up question, realised as his sixth and final question in this particular question-and-response sequence. Unlike their discourse-organising functions, which usually occur turn-initially, if acknowledging turn allocation, or turn-medially, if disambiguating referential domains, the conflictual-situation signalling function of explicit reference to the Speaker is also anchored in the turn-medial position. However, it additionally requires a negatively loaded context, imbued by syntactic, morphological, and semantic negation, which is frequently intensified with adverbials or, in the context of PMQs, interruptions and other kinds of disruptive behaviour (*printed below in italics*). Frequently, the loaded context also contains quotations with a challenging force (cf. Fetzer and Bull 2019).

In Extract (4), Jeremy Corbyn challenges PM David Cameron's previous response to his request for information as not appropriate, using slightly attenuated syntactic negation ("not absolutely sure") boosted with an afterthought ("no doubt"). The explicit reference to the Speaker occurs in this negatively loaded context and indicates a transmission from the Leader of the Opposition's

comment on the inappropriateness of the PM's answer while at the same time introducing a chain of counter-arguments which deconstruct the PM's argument regarding cuts to police numbers. In (5) the PM's response is challenged, this time not by the Leader of the Opposition himself, but rather indirectly through a quotation from an ordinary citizen (cf. Fetzer and Weizman 2018) directed towards the PM. This conflictual situation is signalled by interruptions from other MPs, which are followed up by the Leader of the Opposition with an explicit reference to the Speaker and the ultimate challenge formulated as a yes/no-question ("Will the Prime Minister be able to tell us" with the implication "or will he not?"). Both references to the Speaker index the macro-presuppositions of the discourse of PMQs, signalling that challenges with a strong pragmatic force may be forthcoming while at the same time appealing to the Speaker as a mediator that their formulation is in accordance with the constraints of the ritual exchange:

(4) I am *not absolutely sure* where the money is coming from following the Prime Minister's answer, but *no doubt* it will come. **Mr Speaker**, London has been targeted by terrorists before, and this weekend's events in Paris have focused attention not just on London but on other cities throughout the whole of Britain. Policing plays a vital role in community cohesion, gathering intelligence on those who might be about to be a risk to all of us, *but that is surely undermined* if we cut the number of police officers by 5,000. Does the Prime Minister agree with the commissioner of the Metropolitan police, Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe, who said: "I genuinely worry about the safety of London if the cuts go through on this scale"? (Hansard HC Deb 18 November 2015, col. 668)

(5) I have a question from a taxpayer, *actually*. His name is John and he says – *[Interruption.]* And he says, **Mr Speaker**, that at a time when we are experiencing the *greatest threats from terrorism ever faced*, our police office numbers and their resources are *being cut* and he goes on to say that "Demands on the police have been increasing steadily as budgets are slashed, increasing stress on officers. Couple that with detrimental changes to their pay, terms, conditions and pensions, it's no wonder that morale in the police force is so poor that 1 in 3 are considering leaving the force." *Will the Prime Minister be able to tell us whether community policing and other police budgets will be protected or not in next week's autumn statement?* (Hansard HC Deb 18 November 2015, col. 668)

According to the official Treasury data, the Home Office's overall budget fell from £12.6bn in 2011–12 to £10.9bn in 2015–16 (a real terms cut of 18 per cent). According to a House of Commons Library briefing, if one excludes staff on a career break or maternity/paternity leave, the true strength of the UK's 43 police forces in March 2016 was just 118,779, the weakest since March 1985 (*The Independent*, 5 June 2017). Given that following the general election of 2010, David Cameron

formed a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats, both the above questions can be regarded as attacks on government policy, specifically with regard to cuts in police budgets and in levels of staffing. In both instances, Corbyn prefaces the attacks by referring explicitly to the Speaker.

A further example can be seen in the following interchange between Jeremy Corbyn and Theresa May, in which he made an extensive attack on the government's mismanagement of the NHS [National Health Service]. As has been the case with Excerpts (4) and (5), explicit references to the Speaker are embedded in a context imbued by syntactic negation ("cannot provide", "not concerned", "not getting"), morphological negation ("unsafe") and semantic negation ("so overstretched", "lack of care", "prevent", "shortage", "state of emergency", "blighting", "fewer"), and multiple interruptions. It is after these interruptions that the Leader of the Opposition refers explicitly to the Speaker, drawing his attention to this inappropriate form of interaction, thereby acting in discordance with the constraints of the interaction ritual:

(6) Yes, let us look at the national health service and let us thank all those who work so hard in our national health service, but also recognise the pressures they are under. Today, a Marie Curie report finds that nurses are *so overstretched* they *cannot provide* the high-quality care needed for patients at the very end of their lives. The *lack of care* in the community *prevents* people from having the dignity of dying at home. There is a nursing *shortage* and something should be done about it, such as reinstating the nurses' bursary. **Mr Speaker** her [i.e., Theresa May's] government has put the NHS and social care in *a state of emergency*. Nine out of ten NHS trusts are *unsafe*, 18,000 patients a week are waiting – [*Interruption*] **Mr Speaker**, I repeat the figure: 18,000 patients a week are waiting on trolleys in hospital corridors 1.2 million often very dependent – [*Interruption*] **Mr Speaker** it seems to me that some Members *are not concerned* about the fact that there are *1.2 million elderly people not getting the care they need*. The legacy of her government will be *blighting* our NHS for decades: *fewer* hospitals, *fewer* A&E departments, *fewer* nurses and *fewer* people getting the care they need. We need a government that puts the NHS first and will invest in our NHS.

(Hansard HC Deb, 22 February 2017, col 1016)

Corbyn's attack on the government record took place in the context of a report from the British Medical Association, according to which the NHS is "at 'breaking point' with a decline in the number of hospital beds leading to delays and cancelled operations" (*The Guardian*, 20 February 2017). Notably, Corbyn's attack includes three references to Mr Speaker, and a further indication of its conflictual nature is reflected in interruptions from Conservative MPs.

Extracts (7), (8), and (9) are from PMQs, 4 November 2015. They illustrate the orchestrated interplay between the discursive functions of explicit references to the Speaker and their contextual embeddedness. The first explicit reference to the Speaker supplemented with an expression of gratitude has a discourse-organisational function, acknowledging turn allocation. This is followed up with an on-record challenge by the Leader of the Opposition, making explicit with a performative ("I note") embedded in a highly negative context ("not offered whatsoever", "crisis") the PM's lack of responsiveness in his prior turn, which is acting in discordance with the discourse's macro presuppositions of providing appropriate responses to questions. The challenge is ratified by disruptive behaviour, commented on by the Speaker, calling for order in (8) and thereby making explicit the code of conduct in the House. The Leader of the Opposition continues with his turn in (9), again with an explicit reference to the Speaker embedded in a highly loaded context imbued with syntactic negation ("will not answer the question"), signifying a potential conflict, in that the PM is acting in discordance with the macro-presupposition that he should provide appropriate answers to questions. The reference to a negated hypothetical future action by the PM may count as the communicative action of a threat, in particular against the background that the Leader of the Opposition provides an answer to this hypothetical question with a quotation from an expert source; this leads to another on-record challenge formulated as an either-or question:

(7) **Thank you, Mr Speaker.** *I note* that the Prime Minister *has not offered any comment whatsoever* about the *winter crisis* of last year or about what will happen this year. *[Interruption.]*

(8) Order. The Leader of the Opposition is entitled to ask questions without a barrage of noise, and the Prime Minister is entitled to answer questions without a barrage of noise. That is what the public are entitled to expect.

(9) **Mr Speaker,** if the Prime Minister *will not answer questions* that I put, *then I quote to him the renowned King's Fund, which has enormous expertise in NHS funding and NHS administration.* And I quote: "the National Health Service cannot continue to maintain standards of care and balance the books … a rapid and serious decline in patient care is inevitable unless something is done." May I ask the Prime Minister which is rising faster – *NHS waiting lists or NHS deficits*? (Hansard HC Deb, 4 November 2015, col 959)

Explicit references to the Speaker are not only produced by the Leader of the Opposition, but the PM also makes use of them, albeit less frequently. The following Excerpts ((10), (11), (12) and (13)) are from PMQs, 13 January 2016. In (11), The PM is responding to a question from the Leader of the Opposition (10). In

that question, the Leader of the Opposition's explicit reference to the Speaker is realised in the initial position of his turn, which makes it a prime candidate for a discourse-organising function. However, in this instance, the turn-allocation is not supplemented with an expression of gratitude, as would have been the case if the turn had been allocated by the Speaker. Furthermore, Corbyn's explicit reference to the Speaker is embedded in a negative context and a quotation from an ordinary citizen. For these reasons, it is assigned the function of signalling a conflictual situation.

The same function is utilised by the PM in (11). Again, the explicit reference to the Speaker occurs in a negatively loaded context with syntactic negation ("not going to be able to deal with", "is it not interesting"), morphological negation ("nothing") a question ("isn't it interesting, Mr Speaker"), which is repeated, and dialogically formulated challenges as conversational quotations along the lines of "I say – you say" which assign Labour the role of being "conservative" and thus the party which is against changes and wants people to remain poor ("stay stuck in poverty").

(10) **Mr Speaker,** I notice that the Prime Minister *did not give any guarantee* to leaseholders on estates. I have a question to ask on behalf of a probably larger group on most estates. A tenant by the name of Darrell asks: "Will the Prime Minister guarantee that all existing tenants of the council estates earmarked for redevelopment will be rehoused in new council housing, in their current communities, with the same tenancy conditions as they currently have?"

(11) We *are not going to be able to deal with these sink estates* unless we get the agreement of tenants and unless we show how we are going to support homeowners and communities. *Is it not interesting*, **Mr Speaker**, *isn't it interesting,* **Mr Speaker,** to reflect on *who here is the small "c" conservative* who is saying to people, "Stay stuck in your sink estate; *have nothing better than what Labour gave you after the war*."? We are saying, "If you are a tenant, have the right to buy; if you want to buy a home, here is help to save; if you are in a sink estate, we will help you out." That is the fact of politics today – a Conservative Government who want to give people life chances, and a Labour Opposition who say "*Stay stuck in poverty*". (Hansard HC Deb, 13 January, 2016, col 850)

In (13), the PM responds to the Leader of the Opposition's fifth (penultimate) question of their question-and-response sequence (12). His explicit reference to the Speaker is realised turn-medially, and as has been the case with all of the turn-medial references to the Speaker, their function is that of signalling a conflictual situation. In (13), it is not a direct challenge about Labour's policies but rather the claim that Jeremy Corbyn owns a home. [Corbyn is referred to as the Right Honourable Gentleman, in line with the House's code of conduct]. This claim could be

interpreted as a reference to the politician's private sphere of life and thus as not in full agreement with the macro presuppositions of the discourse of PMQs, thereby as not fully appropriate. Here, the explicit reference to the Speaker in combination with the redressive action "let us put it like this" mitigates the force of claim and the forthcoming challenge formatted as a question (a format which is the privilege of the Leader of the Opposition only) – "what is the Right Honourable Gentleman frightened of?":

(12) I hope that that word "hope" goes a long way, because research by Shelter has found that families on the Prime Minister's living wage will be unable to afford the average starter home in 98% of local authority areas in England – only 2% may benefit. Rather than building more affordable homes, is the Prime Minister not simply branding more homes affordable, which is not a solution to the housing crisis? Will he confirm that home ownership has actually fallen since he became Prime Minister?

(13) There is a *challenge* in helping people to buy their own homes. That is what Help to Buy was about, which Labour *opposed*. That is what help to save was about, which Labour *opposed*. *Is it not interesting that the right hon. Gentleman did not answer the question about the 1.3 million housing association tenants*? I want what is best for everyone. *Let us put it like this*, **Mr Speaker**. *The right hon. Gentleman owns his home*; I own my home. Why should we not let those 1.3 million own their homes? *Why not? What is the right hon. Gentleman frightened of?* (Hansard HC Deb, 13 January, 2016, col 851)

Explicit references to the Speaker are generally edited out in the official transcript of parliamentary debates (Hansard), as they do not seem to contribute to the information content of the conversational contributions. This quantitative and qualitative analysis of explicit references to the Speaker has shown that they index the macro presuppositions of the discourse of PMQs, targeting the participants rights and obligations as regards (1) turn allocation and turn-taking, (2) participant-exclusive rights and obligations to ask questions for the Leader of the Opposition and provide responses to the questions for the PM, (3) appropriateness of their conversational contributions as regards content and formulation, and (4) possible infringements on the interaction-ritual constraints. It has been shown that the discursive function of explicit references to the Speaker depends on their positioning in the turn and on their local contexts. If they are positioned initially and supplemented by expressions of gratitude, they fulfil a discourse-organisational function, acknowledging turn allocation. If they are realised medially and their embedding context is imbued with negativity, quotations, interruptions and other forms of disruption, they signal a conflictual situation.

## 5. Discussion

According to Harris (2001), ritual procedures of parliamentary discourse are often combined with FTAs and their communicative function of challenge. In this context, she argues they serve to mitigate FTAs, thereby keeping the discourse within the bounds of acceptable parliamentary language. In the case of the instances of discourse management as analysed and illustrated above, the notion of mitigating devices would not be relevant, because neither of these practices require any mitigation.

Notably, however, explicit references to Mr Speaker were used significantly more in the case of conflictual situations by the Leader of the Opposition than by the PM. If such references are understood as a mitigating factor, then they might be expected to occur more in conflictual situations, given that such situations are in themselves potentially face-threatening. Alternatively, such references may not mitigate the force of the FTA, but instead actually indicate that a stronger FTA is forthcoming. If the prime role of the Leader of the Opposition is to attack the government, it is also the case that the Leader of the Opposition has far less power than the PM. Referring to Mr Speaker and thereby drawing his attention to the fact that their formulation of a challenge (with the content that the government has failed in some way) might be seen as some kind of regulatory device – for example, drawing attention to equivocation by the PM, or failing to meet the legitimate concerns of the electorate, that is being accountable for their political decisions and politics to the electorate. Rather like a litigant appealing to the judge in a court case, the Leader of the Opposition may be seen as calling the PM to account, complaining about the PM's performance to a third party. What is more, the Leader of the Opposition thereby indirectly draws the attention of other political stakeholders and the members of the public to the foregrounded criticisms.

In the Introduction, it was proposed that the question–response dynamic of PMQs and the role of the Speaker as the simultaneous recipient/moderator of questions and responses might be conceptualised as 'mediated address', in particular against the background of PMQs not only being political discourse, but mediated political discourse produced and targeted towards the ratified media audience (Fetzer 2006). Furthermore, not only must the interactants communicate indirectly with one another through the Speaker, they must also refer to one another only in the third person. This has some interesting implications. While at one level, because the politicians do not confront one another directly this may reduce interpersonal conflict, at another level it may actually intensify it, because the politicians are thereby freed from the necessity to use politeness strategies to soften their face-threatening acts – they may use what is termed by Brown and Levinson (1987) as 'bald on record'. Of course, this 'exemption' to use politeness

strategies is not valid to all aspects of PMQs but only to cases of ritual aggression. For instance, one may refer to questions relating to (inter)national tragedies where it would be unseemly for a questioner to abandon politeness strategies. Yet, as far as debates in PMQs are concerned, the contextual constraints and requirements and the conventions as regards the activity-specific use of language and activity-specific address forms of the communicative activity of PMQs discourse allow for higher degree of directness in the linguistic realisation of these challenges. This is because they do not need to consider the direct communication partner but rather refer to a neutralised distanced other: a 'he' or 'she', but not a 'you'.

## 6. Conclusions

Elsewhere, the interaction between PM and the Leader of the Opposition has been likened to a form of 'verbal pugilism' (Bull and Wells, 2012). To pursue this metaphor further, the role of the Speaker may be likened to that of a referee in a boxing match, who is there to ensure fair play, that there are literally no 'blows below the belt', which in the context of PMQs might, for example, refer to instances of unparliamentary language, and excessive interruptions. Thereby, the obligation on the politicians only to interact with one another indirectly through the use of third-person language may be seen as a mitigating device keeping the conflict within objects, but not subjects of talk, and thus within manageable limits.

At the same time, in talking about one another only in the third person, the politicians may be freed from expectations to soften their criticisms through various forms of face-saving strategies. This is why PMQs represent a prime example of anti-structural ritual engagement, in which the order of interaction fundamentally changes from what is customarily regarded as 'ordinary', 'harmonious', and so on and so forth. Indeed, referring explicitly to the Speaker – and the role as a mediator and referee – may actually facilitate the formulation of almost unmitigated challenges and thus attacks on a political opponent. These attacks are of course typically expected to occur, as per the ritual nature of PMQs. From this perspective, referring explicitly to the Speaker can be seen as a strategic feature of oppositional politics, foregrounding criticism but still acting in accordance with the contextual constraints of parliamentary language. In short, calling Mr Speaker Mr Speaker can be seen very much as a means of conducting political opposition.

## Funding

This work was supported by grant: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia (HU) (LP2017/5, awarded to Daniel Kadar and a grant from the German Israeli Foundation for Scientific Research and Development (GIF Grant I-153-104.3-2017) awarded to Anita Fetzer.

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## Publication history

Date received: 26 April 2019
Date accepted: 9 October 2019
Published online: 22 November 2019