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SANDRA HARRIS

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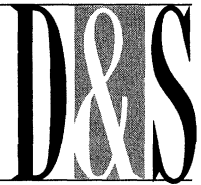
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# Being politically impolite: extending politeness theory to adversarial political discourse



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SANDRA HARRIS  
 NOTTINGHAM TRENT UNIVERSITY

**ABSTRACT.** This article attempts to extend politeness theory beyond informal situations to adversarial political discourse, using Prime Minister's Question Time in the British Parliament as data. Viewing the House of Commons as a 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991) provides a way of exploring concepts of politeness and impoliteness against a set of member expectations. The article argues three main propositions: (1) that much of the discourse of Prime Minister's Question Time is composed of intentional and explicitly face-threatening (or face-enhancing) acts and that these can be analysed in terms of both propositional and interactional levels; (2) that negative politeness features co-exist with the performance of intentional threats to the hearer's positive face and that these can only be understood and interpreted in relationship to Parliament as an institution and the wider political context; and (3) that systematic impoliteness is not only sanctioned but rewarded in accordance with the expectations of Members of the House by an adversarial and confrontational political process.

**KEY WORDS:** *communities of practice, discourse, face threatening acts, impoliteness, institutional discourse, parliamentary discourse, politeness theory, political discourse*

PM: I think we know what the Right Honourable Gentleman is doing – it is exactly the same as he did over the asylum issue – it is pandering to prejudice and it is not a pretty sight.

L of O: That was a nice lecture from Mr Eye-catching Initiative himself – wasn't it – has not the Right Honourable Gentleman's crusade for political correctness gone far enough – he has been told by church leaders to scrap his campaign – he has been told by Parliament to scrap it – he has been told by the public at every opportunity to scrap it – he has packed the other House full of his cronies – and he still cannot get it through the other House.

(Exchange in House of Commons between Prime Minister and Leader of Opposition, 26 July 2000)

### *Introduction: extending politeness theory*

Despite the very considerable literature since the early 1970s, politeness as a theoretical construct remains elusive, resisting precise definition. Yet at the same time, perhaps because of its multifarious nature, its complex social and cultural manifestations and its almost universal relevance to the activities of everyday life, linguistic politeness as a field of study has continued to attract a high degree of interest and to generate further research (see Holmes, 1995; *Journal of Pragmatics*, 1990, 1994; *Pragmatics*, 1999; Watts et al., 1992). Most of this recent research on politeness theory still takes as its starting point Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), whose work has acquired canonical status and exerted immense influence. Following Goffman, Brown and Levinson (1987) focus on politeness primarily as the strategic avoidance of 'face threatening acts'. Their contention that 'it will in general be in the mutual interest of two MPs (Model Persons) to maintain each other's face' (p. 60) has informed a number of researchers to define linguistic politeness along the lines of discourse behaviour 'which actively expresses positive concern for others, as well as non-imposing behaviour' (Holmes, 1995: 4) or, at the very least, which provides 'a means of minimising the risk of confrontation in discourse – both the possibility of confrontation occurring at all, and the possibility that a confrontation will be perceived as threatening' (Lakoff, 1989: 102). Brown and Levinson's (1987) often-cited notions of negative face ('the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others', p. 62) and positive face ('the positive or consistent self-image or personality, crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of', p. 61) have also been extremely influential, if much criticized, especially from a cross-cultural perspective (see Chen, 1993; De Kadt, 1998; DuFon et al., 1994; Flowerdew, 1999; Garcia, 1996; Gu, 1990).

Like Brown and Levinson's own work, much research on politeness has been focused around informal situations, with an emphasis on the linguistic behaviour of speakers as individual agents. In addition, most empirical research involving spoken language data has been concentrated primarily on shorter stretches of spoken discourse, i.e. the single utterance as a face-threatening act on a particular occasion and the response evoked. Though power is a significant component of Brown and Levinson's model of politeness, it tends to be regarded mainly as a 'given' in defining participant relationships rather than as a dynamic in performing interaction. Politeness has also been much less examined in relationship to institutional contexts and/or discourse types other than ordinary conversation. (However, see Perez de Ayala, 2001.)

In her article on 'the limits of politeness', Lakoff (1989) suggests that politeness is, in fact, associated primarily with ordinary conversation, which is functionally centred on interpersonal relationships rather than the exchange of information. For Lakoff, politeness is maximally relevant to defining relationships and only minimally, if at all, to exchanging information. She goes on to propose

that theories of linguistic politeness must be extended to a consideration of the different discourse types associated with certain professional and institutional contexts, and that examining such contexts forces us to see politeness from a different perspective and to foreground different dimensions. Lakoff further contends that linguistic behaviour can be subdivided into three rather than two types (polite, non-polite, rude) and that this subdivision becomes much more visible in institutional settings, where such behaviour is crucially related to the expectations of participants. Hence, she defines *non-politeness* as 'behaviour that does not conform to politeness rules, used where the latter are not expected' (p. 103) and *rudeness* as 'behaviour that does not utilize politeness strategies where they would be expected, in such a way that the utterance can only be interpreted as intentionally and negatively confrontational' (p. 103).

Though Lakoff is not very specific about what such 'politeness rules' actually entail and her threefold definition of discourse behaviour may well be too categorical and inflexible, her suggestion that impoliteness is more than merely the converse of politeness (see Culpepper, 1996) and that different discourse types generate different versions of politeness is an interesting and potentially useful one. Lakoff also sees power and politeness as closely related (but in very different ways from Brown and Levinson) and uses courtroom discourse and psychotherapy as her two extended examples of discourse types that contrast significantly with ordinary conversation.

### *House of Commons as a 'community of practice'*

As an institutional setting, the British House of Commons, and particularly Prime Minister's Question Time, provides a very fruitful and interesting context for exploring notions of polite and impolite behaviour and extending politeness theory. Lakoff characterizes her institutional settings as distinct discourse types. However, given the recent work on 'communities of practice' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1999; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), I would argue that it is more useful to regard the House of Commons as a 'community of practice' rather than merely a discourse type and that this has a number of advantages, which will be explored later.

Lave and Wenger (1991), in their initial work on communities of practice, were interested in what they called 'legitimate peripheral participation', i.e. how newcomers (in the studies they cite these are mainly apprentices) move towards full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community through a process of 'situated learning'. Lave and Wenger stress the development cycles such learning entails and its important relationship to identity/membership and the ways in which changing knowledge, skills and discourse are part of developing one's identity as a full legitimate participant. There is little doubt that the House of Commons can be described as a community of practice in this sense and that new members of the House move from 'legitimate peripheral participation' towards full membership/identity as experienced MPs, ministers, committee members

and, ultimately for a few, Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition, only gradually and over a considerable period of time.

The crucial dimensions of a community of practice identified and developed further by Wenger (1998), i.e. mutual engagement, a joint negotiated enterprise, a shared repertoire of negotiable resources accumulated over time (cited in Holmes and Meyerhoff, 1999: 175) are clearly applicable to the British House of Commons.<sup>1</sup> Judging what is polite against a set of expectations within a specific community of practice thus has distinct advantages, as has been claimed, though these expectations cannot be divorced from the wider social and political world of which they are a part and which informs them. Viewing Prime Minister's Question Time as a systematic and patterned engagement of members within a community of practice makes it possible to:

- (1) take into account the historical continuity of Prime Minister's Question Time, the sense in which, as an activity, it represents discourse practices that have evolved over a long period of time and are still evolving. Indeed the practice of questioning Ministers in the House seems to have originated in the late 17th or early 18th century, though Prime Minister's Question Time in its present form is a fairly recent innovation, dating from the time of Harold Macmillan in 1961;
- (2) foreground the expectations of Members as 'legitimate participants' within the community of practice as a significant aspect of linguistic politeness, governing in an important sense both the linguistic behavioural patterns of the participating members and their interpretation of that behaviour;
- (3) analyse not only longer stretches of discourse but systematic verbal encounters involving the same participants (primarily the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition) over a sustained period of time. Given the rules governing the asking of questions in Prime Minister's Question Time, such encounters have elements of both predictability and spontaneity which provide insight into how politeness and impoliteness are defined and interpreted. Thus though Members speak as individual agents on particular occasions, there is a strong sense in which their linguistic behaviour is constrained and defined not only by their respective political roles but also by the discourse practices of the community;
- (4) set Prime Minister's Question Time as a type of discourse not only within the larger community of practice of the House of Commons but in the context of the wider political process. This is particularly important since Prime Minister's Question Time is now broadcast on both radio and television and published in Hansard, which is recently also accessible on the web, and much of the debate is addressed to this wider, if unseen, audience.

The data upon which this article is based comprise 12 recorded and transcribed sessions of Prime Minister's Question Time between March and November 2000. All the extracts quoted are taken from this database. The purpose of the article is, in summary, to:

- extend politeness theory beyond the more usual informal contexts, including

ordinary conversation, to a more formal setting which has particular significance;

- explore how the House of Commons as a community of practice sets up Members' expectations which inform both the systematic and spontaneous linguistic behaviour of leading Members (mainly the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition) in relationship to perceptions of politeness and impoliteness;
- carry out a pragmatic analysis of exchanges which are intentionally face-threatening or face-enhancing, making use in a critical way of Brown and Levinson's concepts of negative and positive face.

### *Prime Minister's Question Time: formal and informal 'rules'*

Based on the history and shared experience of the House of Commons as a community of practice, Parliamentary debates are subject to sets of both formal and informal 'rules' which have evolved over a long period of time. The formal rules relate mainly to turn-taking and the putting forward of questions. In her recent paper on Parliamentary debates, Shaw (2000) examines floor apportionment and its relationship to the gender of participants. Linking the breaking of formal rules to dominant or powerful speakers, she distinguishes perceptively between legal speech and illegal interventions and argues that women are disadvantaged in being both less willing and less able to engage in illegal interventions in Parliamentary debates.

The 'rules' governing Prime Minister's Question Time are different from those governing ordinary debates, with specified patterns of turn-taking introducing a high level of constraint which makes illegal interventions by Members of the House to gain the floor extremely uncommon and severely limits the number of speaking participants in any one session. On the other hand, because the supplementary questions are not notified ahead of time and can range fairly widely over a number of current topics, there is also a much higher level of spontaneity in Prime Minister's Question Time than in the ordinary debates in the House. Hence, its popularity with broadcasting audiences and the likelihood of this session (unlike most others) being extremely well attended by MPs of all Parties.

Prime Minister's Question Time always begins with the same tabled question to the Prime Minister, i.e. asking if he will list his official engagements for the current day. Indeed, since this is so much a matter of routine, this tabled question is merely referred to by number. For example,

**(a)**

Speaker: Question to the Prime Minister – Dr Stephen Ladyman

MP: Number one, Madam Speaker

PM: Madam Speaker – this morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others in addition to my duties in the House – I will have further such meetings later today

At this point, the Member called upon can put as a supplementary almost any question that relates to the Prime Minister's very general responsibilities or to some aspect of Government policy. However, she or he is limited to this one supplementary question only and cannot follow up the Prime Minister's response with a further utterance of any kind. The Leader of the Opposition is permitted three or four supplementaries to follow up his first supplementary question and the leader of the next biggest party two further supplementary questions. Because the initial tabled question relates only to the Prime Minister's engagements, there is an obvious element of surprise which extends to the supplementary questions, particularly those from the Leader of the Opposition. In fact, Members have the advantage of putting a question to the Prime Minister without notice. This practice of questioning the Prime Minister as it has evolved over time generates a combination of spontaneity and predictability which is engaging both to MPs and to a wider audience beyond the Commons in ways that the ordinary Parliamentary debates often are not.

It is partly for this reason that I have chosen to focus on Prime Minister's Question Time as an example of political discourse that is especially relevant to politeness theory. There are also explicitly specified rules governing the content of questions to be placed by Members on the Order of Business, and it is interesting to consider how and to what extent these rules also apply to the non-tabled supplementaries of Prime Minister's Question Time. In addition, there is a much less formalized set of interactional conventions which govern not only Members non-verbal and para-linguistic behaviour, e.g. calling out, jeering/cheering, laughing, standing up, but also the asking of questions. Both of these will be considered in more detail presently.

### *The pragmatics of politeness in Prime Minister's Question Time*

In essence, I would want to argue that an analysis of Prime Minister's Question Time as the quintessential House of Commons debate provides a useful insight into a pragmatic account of politeness theory in three particularly significant ways. Each of these will be considered in turn and in some detail.

*(1) That much of the discourse of Prime Minister's Question Time is composed of intentional and explicitly face-threatening (or face-enhancing) acts and that these can be analysed in terms of both the propositional (e.g. hostile/supportive propositions/pre-suppositions which preface or are built into questions and responses to questions) and the interactional (e.g. modes of address, turn-taking 'rules', non-verbal and para-linguistic behaviour) levels.*

According to a House of Commons circular (1999), a question tabled onto the Order of Business for a Question Time

. . . should either seek information or press for action; it should not offer or seek expressions of opinion, though it may be based on facts, for the accuracy of which the

Member is responsible. Above all it must relate to a matter for which the Minister to whom it is addressed is responsible as a Minister. (p.3, emphasis added).

Wilson (1990) suggests that questions in Parliamentary debates have a 'basic category function' which serves primarily to create propositions, presuppositions and invited inferences through a series of informed steps and that such questions can be – and are – used for either positive or negative effects.

If we examine the syntax of a selection of questions from the Prime Minister's Question Time data, the predominant form is that of a polar (yes/no) interrogative frame followed by a proposition oriented in a broad sense either to information or, probably less frequently, to action, in line with the specifications in the House of Commons circular. However, such questions most often can only be regarded as 'requesting' information (or action) as they seek to elicit the Prime Minister's assent (confirmation, agreement, awareness, etc.) to a set of propositions established by the questioner.

**(b)**

doesn't he have a duty to + proposition (action)

does my Right Honourable Friend agree that + proposition (information)

is he aware that + proposition (information)

will he now tell the House + proposition (information)

would the Prime Minister acknowledge that + proposition (information)

could the Prime Minister confirm that + proposition (information)

will he send a message + proposition (action)

Sometimes both action and information questions are more direct and specific, for example:

**(c)**

Madam Speaker – the Prime Minister has obviously seen the recent audit commission report with its damning criticisms of the inadequate help and poor provision.....for elderly people and people with disabilities.....What is the Prime Minister intending to do about it (action seeking)

**(d)**

Madam Speaker – a year ago the Prime Minister claimed in this House that business taxes were coming down – taking into account yesterday's budget.....will he now give the updated figure for the total increase in taxes on business over the lifetime of this Parliament (information seeking)

In contravention of the House of Commons circular (1999), Members *do* sometimes ask questions which explicitly 'seek expressions of opinion', such as the following:

**(e)**

MP: Does the Prime Minister believe that focus groups are the stuff of leadership



**(f)**

MP: Can it be right that he (Alistair Campbell) goes on getting a £96,000 salary paid for by the taxpayer

The askers of these questions are not called to account by the Speaker, and the Prime Minister proceeds to provide answers as though they merely sought information.

Certainly, there are some questions in Prime Minister's Question Time which do merely seek information or press for action from the Prime Minister in a neutral way, more usually on agreed non-partisan matters such as Northern Ireland. However, the overwhelming majority of Members explicitly and intentionally attempt to threaten (or, somewhat less frequently, to enhance) the face of the Prime Minister, and seeking information or calling for action becomes a means of achieving this aim. This is not to argue that MPs never make 'genuine' requests of the Prime Minister for either information or action, but rather that even genuine requests tend to be constructed in a face-threatening (or face-enhancing) way. Such questions are used, mainly along party lines, to support or undermine the Prime Minister's, and hence the Government's, credibility.

For example, one strategy is to ask a question which contains a request for very specific information prefaced by a series of contextualizing propositions, which the Prime Minister either may not have immediately to hand or want to publicize:

**(g)**

L of O: After three years of the mounting stealth taxes with which the 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

**(h)**

L of O: Three years ago the Prime Minister announced – with another fanfare – the introduction of child curfew orders as another way in which Labour would fight youth crime – will he tell the House – three years on – how many child curfew orders have been implemented

In both these instances, the Leader of the Opposition introduces a proposition with negative elements ('mounting stealth taxes', 'clobbered the hard-working people of this country', 'with another fanfare') followed by a request for very specific information. In each case, he then provides the information himself immediately following the Prime Minister's response that declines to provide it. It is probable in these particular examples that the Prime Minister may well have the information in front of him but does not wish to highlight either the rise in petrol prices (which six weeks later led to a nationwide crisis) or the failure of local authorities to implement any child curfew orders at all during the past three years. Other questions, such as (d) above, may seek to reveal the Prime Minister's lack of knowledge in being able to quote an exact figure, which, once again, the

Leader of the Opposition then goes on to provide himself for the benefit of his wider audience.

Also common are questions that construct implicatures or build in presuppositions which are face-threatening to the Prime Minister:

**(i)**

Doesn't he find it deeply disturbing that the Trade Secretary is a classic example of this all mouth and no delivery Government (presupposition)

**(j)**

Will the Prime Minister promise straightforwardness and honesty in future health announcements (implicature – that past announcements have not been honest and straightforward)

The latter example is particularly interesting, since House of Commons debate 'rules' prohibit Members from accusing each other of lying. A direct accusation will result in severe sanctions, with the Member being expelled from the Chamber by the Speaker unless she or he immediately retracts the accusation. Questions which centre on truth-telling do occur fairly frequently, especially in exchanges between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition:

**(k)**

L of O: No one any longer believes the Prime Minister's fiction about the Government's figures, let alone his fiction about the Opposition's figures.....

PM: The Right Honourable Gentleman said that we were making up figures about his spending cuts pledge.....he said these figures were made up but they are not....

Both participants make lexical choices in their utterances which refer to 'fictions' and 'making up' rather than 'lying' and 'dishonesty'. The accusation of fictional figures is also displaced onto the Government in the Prime Minister's response, which refers to 'we' rather than 'I', and later

**(l)**

L of O: The Government cannot even tell the truth about the duty on a litre of petrol which again identifies the Government as the agent and uses a negative construction ('cannot even tell the truth') rather than making a positive accusation (telling lies). Such exchanges, though clearly intended to be face-threatening, do not apparently breach either the rules of debate or the discourse expectations of Members of the House.

A number of exchanges also centre on the metalanguage of asking and answering questions:

**(m)**

L of O: I'm asking him a question to which he has not given an adequate answer – as everyone who is watching knows

**(n)**

L of O: So now I've answered his question – let's have an answer to mine

**(o)**

L of O: Now that we have had the old propaganda – let us have an answer – can the Prime Minister give a guarantee that he will prevent regulations to which he is opposed and to which British small businesses are opposed – yes or no

Despite the fact that most 'questions' are heavily weighted with either built-in or surrounding propositions (or both), there is a clear awareness of the question/answer framework which governs the session. This is frequently referred to explicitly, mostly by Members of the Opposition in order to call the Prime Minister to account for not providing answers. This becomes a further face-threatening strategy, along with occasional terms of abuse. These are sometimes directed to the Prime Minister as an individual ('Mr Eye-catching Initiative himself', 'the man of all gags and no policy') but more often aimed at the Government ('his divided and shambolic Government').

The frequent reference Members make to the question/answer format poses some interesting *interactional* issues. In Prime Minister's Question Time, what actually constitutes a question? Are the questions of individual Members invariably equated with single turns? Although both these things seem clearly specified in the Commons circular governing the tabling and asking of questions, the informal interactive conventions in the House appear to be less straightforward.

I have suggested that the prototypical form of a turn in Prime Minister's Question Time is a series of propositions followed by a question frame (is he aware that, will he assure the House that) + a final information or action seeking summarizing proposition. But, in actuality, there are a number of variations on this prototype which very frequently occur. As has been mentioned, MPs are limited in Prime Minister's Question Time to a single turn; they cannot follow up the Prime Minister's response to their questions with a further turn. However, an MP's turn may contain more than one question. Sometimes a turn consists of two co-ordinating interrogative clauses, for example:

**(p)**

Will the farmers' summit tomorrow in 10 Downing St be rather more substantial than that {the cancer summit} – and will they go home with something more than a photo opportunity and a copy of the Prime Minister's speech

A turn can also take the form of a series of independent interrogative clauses, for example:

**(q)**

Does my Right Honourable Friend recall meeting GPs from the primary care group in my constituency last week – was he impressed – as I was – by their great success and the real changes that they are now able to achieve for patients as they move towards trust status – is not the last thing that GPs and their patients need is a return to the divisive two-tier system that we inherited from the Tories

Occasionally, an MP's turn will contain both an action oriented and an information oriented interrogative frame + proposition:

(r)

Now that the Home Office accepts that it costs more to police rural areas – can my Right Honourable Friend assure the residents of rural Staffordshire that Staffordshire police will get more money – does my Right Honourable Friend agree that wherever people live in Britain – they should be entitled to a police service that is consistently good

Both of the above interrogatives are also good examples of face-enhancing questions, which provide the Prime Minister with the opportunity in his response to expound on recent positive Government policies.

Clearly, the rules of the Commons *do* define a 'question' to the Prime Minister as a form of interrogative, and in fact, in the data, every backbench MP's turn contains at least one interrogative form, and no Member's turn contains more than three such forms. Very many MPs' turns do, however, contain two or three independent and consecutive interrogative clauses, and the unarticulated interactional convention seems to permit up to three interrogative clauses per turn, focused on a topic which is established by way of built-in or prefacing propositions. The result is that the exchange between MPs and the Prime Minister is very clearly structured around questions and answers, however many interrogatives are embedded in the Member's question/s and whether or not the Prime Minister's answer supplies the information requested. Each Member's 'question' comprises a single turn, as does the Prime Minister's response.

Exchanges between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition work slightly differently, since the latter is allowed according to the House circular three or four supplementary questions. In reality, the number of turns taken by the Leader of the Opposition varies between three and six. All of these turns contain at least one interrogative clause, with the Leader of the Opposition's turns tending to be slightly longer than ordinary Members, often with a substantial number of built-in propositions. For example, in one session the Leader of the Opposition takes six turns, containing 13 independent interrogative clauses. This session is particularly interesting, since towards the end of this Prime Minister's Question Time, one Member raises an issue with regard to the number of questions that have been put to the Prime Minister. The Speaker responds as follows:

(s)

S: .....in any case the Honourable Gentleman is quite wrong – we may have reached question 7 on the order paper – but he has perhaps forgotten that the leader of his Party put six questions – so that is seven plus six

This seems to confirm both that questions are equated with turns and that the Leader of the Opposition is permitted up to six turns. Also, since this is an interchange rather than simply a single question followed by a response, the Leader of the Opposition is able to pursue a particular topic at some length. It's

perhaps understandable that it is this part of Prime Minister's Question Time that tends to attract media attention and is often broadcast in extract form on the news.

In comparison with most formal institutional contexts, there is a very high level of tolerance of what Shaw (2000) calls 'illegal interventions', i.e. jeering, cheering, calling out, laughter, etc. All of these are permissible, with the Speaker quite frequently having to call for 'order', and the ultimate sanction of Members being expelled from the House is very rarely exercised. Applause is not permissible, and in Prime Minister's Question Time, while Members' interactive interjections sometimes interrupt a particular speaker to the point where she or he cannot be heard, this behaviour does not enable unauthorized speakers to obtain the floor. Indeed, sometimes the Prime Minister and other Members who have the floor do refer explicitly to Members' illegal interventions:

**(t)**

PM:	[	.....was it our Party or the Right which in government doubled rates ( )	Honourable Gentleman's Party the national debt – had interest
CMPs:	]		(jeering and calling out)
S:		Order – stop it	
PM:		It's the comparison that conservatives members do not like.....	

**(u)**

PM:	Of course I'm delighted that a thousand people have started on the new deal programme in my Honourable Friend's constituency – and nearly 500 of them have gained jobs
CMPs:	[ ( ) (jeering and calling out)
PM:	For those Conservative members who are shouting – I shall repeat that they would abolish the new deal.....

This type of interactive behaviour would be unacceptable in most other formal institutional contexts – courts, classrooms, conferences, televised debates – especially those which have explicit turn-taking rules, and either sanctions would be invoked or a marked breakdown in communication could occur. I shall return to this point later.

The second general proposition that I would want to argue is as follows:

*(2) that negative politeness features co-exist, often in the immediate discourse context and sometimes in the same utterance, with the performance of intentional threats to the hearer's positive face and that these can only be understood and interpreted in*

*relationship to the institution of Parliament and the wider political context, including the televising of Parliamentary debates.*

Brown and Levinson (1987) clearly distinguish between acts which threaten negative and positive face (p. 65) and associate a number of particular speech acts with the two types of face. For example, they propose that acts such as orders, requests, suggestions, threats, offers, promises, etc. pose a threat to the hearer's negative face while acts such as accusations, insults, challenges, expressions of criticism and/or contempt are explicitly identified with threats to the hearer's positive face. Brown and Levinson go on to examine in detail the specific linguistic strategies which realize positive and negative face respectively. Their attribution of absolute politeness values (positive, negative) to particular linguistic strategies and speech acts clearly raises certain problems (see Hernandez-Flores, 1999; Mao, 1994), calling into question whether such a clear distinction between positive and negative face is, in fact, a useful one.

Indeed there are undoubtedly many discourse contexts, including much casual conversation, where positive and negative politeness strategies are very likely to co-occur. In the light of this, the Prime Minister's Question Time data are particularly interesting but in a different way, since negative politeness features, i.e. those which attempt to *avoid impoliteness*, appear to co-exist with the performance of deliberate threats to the hearer's positive face, i.e. acts which are clearly *intended to be impolite*. For example,

(v)

S: Mr William Hague

L of O: Madam Speaker – we have got used to the Prime Minister dodging questions at these sessions – but we have not been used to it's becoming more pathetic as the questions go on – the fact is that he went to Amsterdam – signed away this country's legal rights by accident and came back with a letter saying 'Don't worry about it' – that is not very good for a lawyer – is it – after all this – is it not obvious that assurances that he offered to businesses about European regulation before the election are like the assurances he gave to students and to people with pension funds – absolutely worthless

PM: Madam Speaker – after the past couple of weeks – I think business prefers our position on Europe to that of the Conservatives – I simply say to the Right Honourable Gentleman that we not only got a good deal for this country in Europe – we managed to set the country on a different path in our relations with Europe that allows us to play a leading part in Europe – not to be perpetually isolated in Europe....

In order to question the Prime Minister, an MP must be called upon by the Speaker and his or her question addressed formally to her,<sup>2</sup> as is the response of the Prime Minister. This mode of address, whereby the Prime Minister is never addressed directly either by name or as 'you' but always in the third person (and must respond in kind) is clearly a distancing strategy, which heightens the

formality of the interaction in a way which is almost invariably associated with negative politeness. Moreover, as this extract exemplifies, Members of the House are not referred to by name except when they are called upon by the Speaker to ask a question, and MPs normally preface their questions (and the Prime Minister his responses) with an explicit address token to the Speaker of the House. The Prime Minister is referred to by all participants as 'the Prime Minister' or, less frequently, as 'my Right Honourable Friend'. Other Members are referred to as 'Honourable (or Right Honourable) Gentleman/Lady (or Friend)', depending on the status and gender of the particular Member. Ministers are also frequently referred to by their titles, e.g. the Foreign Secretary, the Secretary for Education, or the Right Honourable Secretary for Trade and Industry. This practice again would usually be regarded as marking a high degree of deference and depersonalization, associated primarily with formal contexts and identified as a feature of negative politeness which usually both distances interactants and denotes mutual respect.

However, as the above extract illustrates, the use of indirection and third person syntactic forms as a mode of address, and the reference to titles rather than names of Members to whom reference is made, is obviously meant to ensure that debates have a certain level of formality. In addition, the operation of a set of formal turn-taking rules, whereby speakers must be nominated and are restricted to a single turn of a pre-specified type (question), also reinforces negative politeness strategies, which for Brown and Levinson emphasize distance and indirection. Brown and Levinson (1987) do acknowledge that negative and positive politeness strategies can be combined within a single interactive event but suggest that the effect of such combining is 'to move the speaker and addressee back and forth between approaching and distancing in the interaction' (p. 231). Indeed, Brown and Levinson have very little to say about impoliteness, since the focus of their work is predominantly on the avoidance or mitigation of face-threatening acts.

By way of contrast, in Prime Minister's Question Time negative politeness strategies co-exist not only with positive politeness strategies but, more importantly, with intentional threats to positive face. In the extract above, the Leader of the Opposition puts forward a number of deliberately damaging propositions:

- that the Prime Minister refuses to answer questions (accusation)
- that his failure to answer questions is ever more evident (contempt)
- that he has signed away the country's legal rights (criticism)
- that he is not a good lawyer (ridicule)
- that his assurances are not valid ones (challenge)

Moreover, these propositions are intensified by means of deliberately insulting lexical choices, i.e. 'dodging questions', 'pathetic', 'absolutely worthless'. Though the particular speech acts realized by the above utterances are open to debate, it is certainly arguable that all of them can be identified generally with Brown and

Levinson's characterization of threats to positive face, and that far from incorporating mitigating features, the face threats are intentionally intensified.<sup>3</sup> This is often the case when the Prime Minister is questioned by Members of the Opposition and in particular by the Leader:

(w)

L of O: Now that we have one faction of the Cabinet – the Trade Secretary – the Foreign Secretary – the Agriculture Minister and the Northern Ireland Secretary – who want the Government to campaign for joining the Euro – and now another faction – the Chancellor – the Home Secretary – and the Education and Employment Secretary – who want to keep it quiet and join by stealth – when will the Prime Minister get a grip – end the Cabinet confusion – and stop his Cabinet ministers fighting like ferrets in a sack

Here again deferential and distancing titles are combined with a colloquial and deliberately face threatening set of propositions and an insulting characterization of Cabinet ministers 'fighting like ferrets in a sack'.

In addition, positive politeness strategies that invoke solidarity can also co-exist with intentional acts which threaten positive face, though the transition from solidarity to conflict is often explicitly marked. For example:

(x)

L of O: I join the Prime Minister in his tribute to Australia and ask him to join me in welcoming to the Palace of Westminster five Australian Prime Ministers – including the present Prime Minister – Mr Howard.....does he (the Prime Minister) share the hope that the ties between our two great countries will be as strong throughout the next hundred years as they have been in the past hundred

PM: I am delighted to join in those sentiments.....we will be delighted to honour them here in this country

L of O: Australians are straightforward people – so let me ask the Prime Minister a straightforward question – does he remember announcing a new Government policy last Friday – to a chorus of derision – something he must be getting used to these days – in what was billed as a major announcement he said that drunken and violent thugs would be picked up by the police – taken to a cashpoint and asked to pay an on-the-spot fine – can he tell the House which person in the Government came up with that brilliant idea

Here the Leader of the Opposition marks the transition from the jointly expressed solidarity in welcoming the Australian Prime Ministers to the House to the resumption of conflict over party-political issues by creating a link between the 'straightforwardness' of the Australian people and asking the Prime Minister a 'straightforward' question. The 'question' refers to the ridicule in the media which the Prime Minister experienced following his suggestion that drunken and disorderly youths be subject to on-the-spot fines. The Leader of the Opposition's question not only refers to an incident, which in itself constitutes a serious face



threat to the Prime Minister, but also incorporates several further face-threatening propositions, i.e.

that the policy was greeted with derision

that the Prime Minister must be used to being treated in this fashion

that the policy was a 'brilliant idea' (said with ironic tone of voice, implying the opposite)

The conjoining of statements which explicitly invoke solidarity (i.e. almost always non-political or non-partisan issues) with those which are intentionally face-threatening (i.e. party-political issues) is fairly common, and the transition from one to the other, as here, is often brief.

Such transitions are not what Brown and Levinson (1987) are referring to when they speak of 'moving the speaker and addressee back and forth between approaching and distancing in the interaction' (p. 231), when negative and positive politeness strategies co-occur. That Members of the House understand without difficulty such sharp transitions between the expression of solidarity and conflict and can interpret their significance as is intended by the speakers comes back again to House of Common debates taking place within a well-established community of practice. That the overhearing audience can also interpret the meaning of such discourse practices, however uncommon these may be in ordinary conversation, can only be understood in view of their experience of the wider political process, including the televising of Parliamentary debates (see Franklin, 1992, for a general discussion) and the frequent broadcasting of extracts from Prime Minister's Question Time on the news.

This leads me to the third proposition that I want to argue:

*(3) That systematic impoliteness is not only sanctioned in Prime Minister's Question Time but is rewarded in accordance with the expectations of Members of the House (and the overhearing audience) by an adversarial and confrontational political process. Hence, even the most serious face-threatening acts rarely, if ever, occasion a breakdown in interpersonal relationships nor are they intended to.*

The British House of Commons, while probably not unique, is very clearly based on adversarial discourse practices.<sup>4</sup> Systematic impoliteness, in the form of utterances which are intentionally designed to be face-threatening, is not only sanctioned but rewarded. Members of Parliament as a community of practice clearly perceive that the main role of the political opposition is to oppose, i.e. to criticize, challenge, ridicule, subvert, etc. the policies and positions of the Government. The adversarial nature of Parliamentary discourse is most evident and is symbolically epitomized in Prime Minister's Question Time in the once-a-week linguistic interchange between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. Indeed, the latter is likely to regard his reputation as a skilful and effective adversary as a significant measure of his political success in his role as Leader, whereby he can best enhance his own 'face' by threatening that of the Prime Minister. By being seen to challenge the face of the Prime Minister, he attempts to subvert or undermine the credibility and competence of the

Government as a whole. This manifestation of an adversarial and confrontational political process has been heightened and intensified by the televising of Parliament (see Franklin, 1992, and previous discussion), which allows both performers not only to be heard but also to be seen as adversaries, stepping confidently up to the dispatch box in rapid succession.

There is also, perhaps, a sense in which this confrontation is seen as a ritualistic one:

(y)

- MP: Thank you Madam Speaker – having just heard the predictable routine from the Leader of the Opposition – the man of all gags and no policy – and before we
- LMPs: (laughter)
- MP: hear the predictable routine from the Leader of the Liberal Democrats
- LMPs: (more laughter)

The literature on ritual insults is well established, and a number of researchers remark on the ways in which the exchange of insults and abuse can be used to maintain or even create solidarity and that such rituals are often also gender related (see Holmes, 1995; Kasper, 1990). Certain groups, mainly young males (Kuiper, 1991; Labov, 1972), engage in aggressive and competitive linguistic behaviour, including insults, ritualistically as a positive politeness strategy. Certainly, as Shaw (2000) argues, women in the House of Commons appear to be much less comfortable with the illegal interventions in debates which such rituals often entail, as has been mentioned, and the majority of participants in Prime Minister's Question Time, including all the current leading performers, are indeed male. As is also the case with other groups who trade in ritual abuse, it is significant that the prevalence of serious face-threatening acts in Prime Minister's Question Time (and probably in the House in a more general sense) only very rarely, if ever, leads to a breakdown either in communication or in interpersonal relationships.

But there are also significant differences between House of Commons debates and the less formal settings which the literature of ritual insults mainly deals with. For the Prime Minister to allow himself to become overtly angry during the course of the debate would be seen by both the Opposition and by his own party as a significant loss of face, and his most effective course of action is not to engage in an exchange of insults at all, which tends to heighten the sense of the debate as a political game in which he has more to lose than to gain, but to shift the agenda onto the positive achievements of the Government, taking a serious rather than a bantering tone. Moreover, it is arguable that the solidarity generated is primarily a party-political one, as each side cheers its own and jeers the other. For the challenger, wit and humour used to ridicule, as a strategy to threaten the Prime Minister's positive face, are generally speaking more effective than overtly aggressive linguistic behaviour.

However, seeing Prime Minister's Question Time in the light of the literature concerned with ritual insults is only partially helpful and illuminating. Returning to Lakoff's (1989) threefold division of linguistic behaviour into *politeness*, *non-politeness* and *rudeness*, these categories too prove less than completely satisfactory in terms of a theory of politeness which can explain the particular set of discourse practices governing Prime Minister's Question Time. As noted earlier, Lakoff defines *rudeness* as 'behaviour that does not utilize politeness strategies where they would be expected, in such a way that the utterances can only be interpreted as intentionally and negatively confrontational' and *non-politeness* as 'behaviour that does not conform to politeness rules, where the latter are not expected'. Neither of these defines the nature of Prime Minister's Question Time, where certain negative politeness rules do apply very stringently and are expected and adhered to by Members in a way which rules out her *non-politeness*. And although many utterances in House of Commons debates can only be interpreted as intentionally and negatively confrontational, defined by Lakoff as *rudeness*, such utterances do not contravene Members' expectation of politeness strategies. The Leader of the Opposition is expected according to the discourse practices of the House to engage in threatening the Prime Minister's positive face.

Nor is it particularly helpful to divide discourse into two very generalized generic types: the *informative* (concerned with clarity) and the *interactive* (concerned with politeness) (Lakoff, 1989: 102). Though one can undoubtedly argue that institutional discourse is generally more oriented towards information exchange and the propositional content of utterances, the affective and interpersonal function of language in Prime Minister's Question Time is highly visible and defines in a significant way the performative nature of such discourse practices. Lakoff cites the case of the lawyer interrogating a witness in cross-examination as an example of a generic type of 'rule-governed rudeness' where face-threatening acts are deliberately employed to provoke the addressee into an uncontrolled outburst. But if this is indeed an example of sanctioned impoliteness, it is also a very risky linguistic strategy for the lawyer, since the power imbalance is likely to be such that the jury may well sympathize, even identify, with the less powerful witness if the lawyer becomes too linguistically aggressive.

The sanctioned impoliteness in Prime Minister's Question Time is of a different order for several reasons. First of all, unlike the witness, the Prime Minister is very unlikely to lose control when challenged by the Leader of the Opposition, however aggressively. Secondly, the power relationship is reversed, with the less powerful participant being the challenger in the House of Commons. Hence, the sanctioned impoliteness of face-threatening acts addressed to, arguably, the most powerful person in the country becomes, conversely, an occasion of interest and enjoyment. The overhearing audience is unlikely to empathize to any great degree with the Prime Minister and much more likely to find his discomfiture entertaining, just as the media find it newsworthy. Systematic and sanctioned impoliteness is likely to be judged both by the Members of the House of Commons and the overhearing audience as providing the Opposition MPs with the means to

challenge the power and policies of the Government explicitly, released in context from the constraints of being Brown and Levinson MPs (Model Persons) whose mutual and primary interest it is to maintain each other's face.

## Conclusions

(1) Much of the research on politeness theory has in the past been focused on ordinary conversation and informal settings, where the interpersonal function of language is regarded as being predominant. Extending the theory to institutional contexts and more formal generic types of discourse generates different versions of politeness (and impoliteness), which are closely related to but not the same as institutional norms. As a significant 'formal' and institutional setting, Prime Minister's Question Time is as much defined, in terms of its discourse practices, by the interpersonal function of language as by the informational, and a pragmatic analysis of these discourse practices makes this clear, particularly as such practices can be examined over a period of time, with substantially the same participants.

(2) Lakoff (1989) argues for the importance of participant expectations in extending the limits of politeness theory and the crucial role that such expectations play in judgements concerning what is *polite*, *non-polite* and *rude* linguistic behaviour. Although it has been more useful to regard the House of Commons as a community of practice rather than a particular generic type of discourse and the definitions proposed by Lakoff are too restrictive and over-categorical, the expectations of British MPs define and constrain what is regarded as acceptable linguistic behaviour in the House along with specified Parliamentary rules relating to the asking of questions of the Prime Minister. Such expectations are informed by informal and established interactional conventions in a significant way. It is these expectations which enable Members of the House as a community of practice to interpret intentional face-threatening acts as an important component of an adversarial and confrontational political process in such a way that they do not lead to either a breakdown in communication or in interpersonal relationships, as would almost inevitably be the case in ordinary conversation.

(3) A pragmatic analysis of Prime Minister's Question Time demonstrates the difficulties both of assigning absolute politeness values to particular speech acts and of any ultimately meaningful separation between negative and positive face as linguistic strategies, requiring mitigation. Not only do positive and negative face strategies co-occur, often within the same utterance, but 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. Such deliberate face threats co-occur with negative face strategies which are usually associated with deference and distancing.

(4) Finally, a close look at the particular version of adversarial political discourse practised in the British House of Commons emphasizes the difficulty, if it needs

emphasizing, of identifying and making explicit a set of even 'some' politeness universals. Much of the criticism of Brown and Levinson has been directed at their attempt to universalize (some) politeness strategies across diverse cultures. What Kasper (1990) argued a decade ago probably still applies:

For the time being, politeness models appear to be more useful if they do not aspire to be generalizable to any attested contextual configuration but are confined in range to contexts with some well-defined commonalities. (p. 213)

Despite the cross-cultural element in Brown and Levinson's own empirical work, this is probably most obviously true in relationship to cross-cultural comparisons. But Kasper also points out that the impact of discourse type on politeness investment has been subject to less systematic and strenuous examination, and, indeed, posing politeness 'universals' which are valid across diverse communities of practice may well be an equally challenging task. However, even if we are unlikely ever to come up with a single model of politeness which is commensurate to the myriad complexities and variations of human interaction, applying and extending models such as Brown and Levinson's is a worthwhile and illuminating exercise which can tell us a great deal about why MPs do not behave like MPs (model persons) in the British House of Commons but choose instead to be politically impolite.

#### NOTES

1. Although I am arguing that the British House of Commons meets Wenger's (1998) definition of a community of practice, there would appear to be some clear differences about how men and women experience the discourse practices associated with the House. As Shaw (2000) points out, masculine MP discourse styles are pervasive in debates and, as a result, 'men and women belong to the same "community of practice" but in different terms according to gender' (p. 416). It's worth noting, however, that Mrs Thatcher has often commented that she enjoyed Prime Minister's Question Time (when she was Prime Minister) and had a reputation as a very able and combative performer, though this doesn't negate Shaw's point.
2. These direct address tokens are edited out of the official Hansard transcription record, along with certain other performance features, i.e. jeering, cheering. Comments by individual MPs are mostly subsumed under 'interruption' in Hansard.
3. Brown and Levinson (1987: 66) identify the following speech acts as threats to the Hearer's positive face: criticism, contempt, ridicule, accusations, insults, contradictions, challenges, disagreements. Most of these speech acts are closely related, and a number substantially overlap. Brown and Levinson do not define or attempt to distinguish them with examples. Identifying a particular utterance as a realization of a specific speech acts thus requires a large measure of subjective judgement, as I have suggested. However, the point here is that they are all characterized by Brown and Levinson as a threat to positive face.
4. It is interesting to note that when the British House of Commons was first televised, House debates became very popular with members of the United States Congress. Different interactional norms clearly apply in Congress, where intentional face-threatening speech acts are much less acceptable and the mode of discourse less explicitly adversarial. For a useful discussion of European parliamentary debates, see Van Dijk (2000).

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SANDRA HARRIS is Head of the Department of English and Media Studies and also the Dean of Graduate Studies at Nottingham Trent University. She has a longstanding interest in institutional and strategic discourse and is the author of *Managing Language: the Discourse of Corporate Meetings* (1997) and *The Languages of Business: an International Perspective* (1997, with Francesca Bargiela) and has contributed a large number of articles in this field to various journals and edited collections. She is also a member of the national executive committee of the UK Council for Graduate Education. ADDRESS: Department of English and Media Studies, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham NG11 8NS, UK. [email: [sandra.harris@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:sandra.harris@ntu.ac.uk)]