

Formulaic Forms of Address as (Im)politeness Markers in Prime Minister's Questions: Margaret Thatcher Versus Theresa May

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Abstract

Prime Minister's Question Time (PMQs) is a political discourse genre with a long and distinguished history. Framed by formulaic forms of address, the exchanges follow a set of turn-taking "rules" that has evolved over time. The study presented here examines the (non)use of honorifics and other polite forms intrinsic to PMQs during interactions between two female Prime Ministers and their respective Leaders of the Opposition: Margaret Thatcher and Neil Kinnock, Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn. From diachronic and gendered perspectives, the study implements a mixed methods framework to address the following research questions: 1) has the use of formal politeness markers decreased over time? 2) Do gender dynamics influence impoliteness strategies in the context of PMQs? 3) In the shift from verbal to written discourse, what diamesic transformations appear in the official parliamentary transcriptions? The self-built corpus includes selected video recordings of PMQs from each of the Prime Ministers' mandates, and the corresponding official transcripts published online by *Hansard*. The audiovisual texts were viewed and examined, the speech was manually transcribed, and then compared to *Hansard's* version. Initial findings suggest that over time, across genders, and in *Hansard's* digital transcripts, the use of politeness forms in PMQ exchanges appears to be diminishing as formulaic expressions are omitted or substituted with pronouns.

Keywords: forms of address, gender, (im)politeness, parliamentary language, political discourse, transcription

1. Introduction

Prime Minister's Question Time (PMQs) has conventionally been viewed as a bastion of linguistic ritual imbued with formulaic (im)politeness forms. Likened to a theatrical performance (Bates, Kerr, Byrne, & Stanley, 2014) in which confrontational exchanges "articulate criticisms and refutations, accusations and counter-accusations, self-justifications and other-condemnations" (Ilie, 2022, p. 72), the language of PMQs has drawn extensive scholarly attention from various disciplinary perspectives (Allen et al., 2014; Bates et al., 2014; Bull & Strawson, 2020; Bull & Wells, 2012; Harris, 2001; Ilie, 2015, 2022; Murphy, 2014 *inter alia*). A consolidated body of research has identified (im)politeness strategies (Bartłomiejczyk, 2019; Bull, Fetzer, & Kádár, 2020; Chilton, 2004; Culpeper, 2011; Ilie, 2015; Murphy, 2014; Pérez de Ayala, 2001 *inter alia*) and even incivility (Walter & Poljak, 2023) as intrinsic to parliamentary debate, while the intersection between gender and language during exchanges in the House of Commons (HoC) is increasingly the object of study (Bonsignori & Filmer, 2022; Cameron, 2021; Cameron & Shaw, 2016; Harris, 2001; Ilie, 2013, 2018; Shaw, 2000, 2011, 2020). The slippage between *Hansard's* transcripts and the exact words uttered during PMQs has also been examined (cf. Shaw, 2018), although mostly from quantitative perspectives. This article builds on our earlier research and presents the results of a preliminary study focusing on the (non)use of honorifics (Machin & Mayr, 2012) and other forms of address inherent to PMQs from a gendered, diachronic perspective. Through the lens of (im)politeness theories (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Culpeper, 2011; Lakoff, 1989; Mills, 2003 *inter alia*), the analysis examines interactions between two women Prime Ministers and their respective Leaders of the Opposition—i.e., Margaret Thatcher and Neil Kinnock; Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn—to address the following questions:

1) Has the use of formal politeness markers decreased over time? If so, does this indicate a general trend towards increased impoliteness in exchanges during PMQs?

- 2) Do gender dynamics influence the (non) use of (im)politeness markers in the context of PMQs?
- 3) What diamesic transformations have taken place in the shift from oral to written discourse in the parliamentary transcriptions of *Hansard* and how might these influence the perception of (im)politeness?

The contribution is divided into six sections: Section 2 outlines the institutional function and the form of PMQs, Section 3 delineates developments in (im)politeness theories and considers how the notion of impoliteness is construed within the context of PMQs, also in relation to gender. Section 4 is dedicated to the data and the methodologies employed and offers an excursus into the diamesic transformations that take place when *Hansard* transcribes the original parliamentary dialogues. Qualitative data on the honorifics and other formulaic expressions used by the four subjects are illustrated and discussed in Section 5. This is followed by two mini-case studies that feature instances of impoliteness manifested by the women Prime Ministers (PM) towards their respective Leaders of the Opposition (LO). Some final remarks and proposals for fruitful avenues for future research are suggested in Section 6.

2. PMQs and Parliamentary Language

PMQs are an important sub-genre of parliamentary discourse, and “[o]ne of the prototypical forms of parliamentary questioning” (Ilie, 2015, p. 5). It is on this occasion that Members of Parliament (MPs)—especially the LO and opposition MPs—have the chance to hold the PM to account on issues for which the government is responsible (Bates et al., 2014; Bull & Wells, 2012). However, it is also true that PMQs are exploited by the Opposition to score points against the government. This is often achieved through sarcastic comments and humour, highlighting the rambunctious nature of PMQs, which are thus often described as a form of infotainment (Bates et al., 2014). Indeed, the lively debates held in the HoC have become very popular among the public, who can book entry to the House of Commons’ Public Gallery to observe.

The question and response sequences are managed by the presiding officer, namely the Speaker, who attempts to maintain order deciding who may speak and when. In theory, the PM does not know exactly what questions will be asked. However, they will be extensively briefed by government departments to anticipate likely subjects that might be broached (Note 1). The LO is granted more time than other MPs, as they can ask up to six questions and are the only interlocutors who can come back with follow up questions.

The occurrence and duration of PMQs have changed over the years. For example, during the Thatcher era, PMQs lasted approximately 15 minutes and took place twice a week. They were then extended to one hour once a week during Berrow’s chairmanship, during May’s mandate. Nowadays, since 4 November 2019 with the new Speaker Sir Lindsay Hoyle, the PM answers questions from MPs in the HoC every Wednesday from 12pm to 12.30pm.

Since questions are asked by opposing politicians, who “can be as partial and as unashamedly partisan as they choose” (Bull & Wells, 2012, p. 31), criticism and overt attacks on the PM often characterise these dialogic exchanges, which can thus be defined as “adversarial” (cf. Bull & Wells, 2012; Harris, 2001; Ilie, 2022; Shaw, 2000). This trait of PMQs intrinsically breaks with politeness norms, but it also expresses an important and characterising feature of this type of institutional discourse. Indeed, as Ilie (2015, p. 8) puts it, “it is precisely the norm deviations, rule violations, and verbal disruptions that can most clearly reveal various particularities of a parliamentary system”. Nevertheless, MPs are required to observe certain rules and conventions regarding parliamentary behaviour and language.

In PMQs, participants “are identified by means of deictic politeness formulae such as forms of address” (Ilie, 2015, p. 9). Address “denotes a speaker’s linguistic reference to his/her collocutor(s)” (Braun, 1988, p. 7), and in the case of PMQs forms of address are very specific and limited in number due to the institutional nature of parliamentary language (cf. Ilie, 2010)—e.g., *Will the Prime Minister tell us...?*, *Would the right Honourable Lady agree with me that...?*, *Could the right Honourable Gentleman explain...?*, *My Learned Friend, Mr Speaker*, etc. Moreover, MPs address one another using the third person singular, which has a distancing function (Ilie, 2010, 2015). The use of the second person singular *you* is not prescribed. Indeed, according to the document published on the UK Parliament website, the *Rules of behaviour and courtesies in the House of Commons* (2021, p. 10) (Note 2), “Members must always address the House through the Chair. It is wrong to address another Member as ‘you’. This is not just an archaic convention. It is essential in maintaining the civil tone and objectivity of debate. It also avoids personal attacks as opposed to political criticism”. Therefore, the use of polite forms of address with honorific titles has a mitigating function, moderating aggressive and adversarial linguistic behaviour. Indeed, since *you* refers to the Speaker, MPs are expected to address each other with formulaic identity markers based on their role (cf. Ilie, 2010), as indicated in the *Rules of behaviour*:

- ‘the honourable Member for [constituency] (for a Member on the opposite benches)’
- ‘my honourable friend (for a Member on your side of the House)’
- or perhaps ‘the honourable Member opposite’ (where the context makes clear to whom you are referring).

In the following sections, however, it will be shown how such norms are often broken during PMQs, especially by manipulating politeness rules.

3. Impoliteness, Politics, and Gender

A full review of the vast literature on (im)politeness is beyond the scope of this contribution (cf. Culpeper, Haugh, & Kádár, 2017, for a comprehensive overview of [im]politeness studies). Nevertheless, a broad-brush outline of theoretical developments is useful before considering the specificities of impoliteness in parliamentary settings. The term ‘politeness’ in Brown and Levinson’s (1987) early conceptualization “covers all areas of language usage which serve to establish, maintain, or modify interpersonal relationships between text producer and text receiver” (Hatim & Mason, 1997, p. 80). Inspired by Goffman’s work (1967), the notion of “face” is central to the first wave of politeness studies and is defined as follows: “Each individual member of society has ‘face’—that is her/his self-esteem and public self-image, tied up to the idea of embarrassment or humiliation. Face is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction [...]” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61). However, certain face threatening acts (FTA) such as “expressions of disapproval, criticism, contempt or ridicule” or “raising of dangerously emotional or divisive topics, e.g., *politics*, race, religion” may result in a “dangerous-to-face atmosphere” (our emphasis, Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 66). Culpeper (2011) explains, however, that the risk of causing face damage can be reduced by using a politeness strategy, such as the formulaic honorifics required in the context of PMQs. By contrast, face-attack(ing) acts are those “that are judged deliberately nasty and spiteful, where the speaker is assessed by the target and at least some others as purposefully out to disrespect and insult” (Tracy, 2008, p. 173); they do, therefore, cause actual face damage.

While Brown and Levinson’s original model referred to speech acts in conversational interactions, Lakoff (1989) argued that theories on linguistic politeness should extend to discourse genres in professional and institutional contexts where certain expectations apply. She further reasoned that situated communication occurs on three levels: (a) polite, (b) non-polite, and (c) rude. Subsequent research has tended to blur the boundaries between the categories of “rude”, “non-polite” and “impolite” (Note 3), but linguistic transgression as a general field of study has burgeoned in recent years. As Culpeper and Hardaker (2017, p. 199) succinctly put it, “[t]he symbolic violence of language matters”. Since the discursive turn (cf. Kienpointner & Stopfneron, 2017), impoliteness has been construed less in terms of linguistic form than in terms of context, thus challenging the notion that utterances are intrinsically polite or impolite (Kienpointner & Stopfneron, 2017; Leech, 1983). Furthermore, verbal impoliteness depends not only on the speaker’s intention but also on the hearer’s perspective (Culpeper, 2011). Bruti (2022, p. 135) has pointed out that “there are discourses in which conflict talk is more central than collaborative or supportive talk”, and the political arena is an example. Parliament has always been a male dominated forum and therefore viewed as a natural site of verbal aggression (Illie, 2018). However, the gradual yet marked increase in the number of women in the HoC has not yielded the ideological gendered expectation that women would have a “civilizing effect” on parliamentary debate (Bates et al., 2014, p. 274; Shaw, 2020, p. 250).

3.1 Gendering Parliamentary (im)politeness

Harris (2001, p. 453) identified PMQs, as “a very fruitful and interesting context for exploring notions of polite and impolite behaviour and extending politeness theory”. For her part, adversarial exchanges in parliamentary settings should be viewed as “*conventionalised aggression*”, or “*institutionally ritualized confrontational interaction*”, and are therefore justifiable (our emphasis). Although hierarchical structures pervade PMQs, with the obvious power imbalance between PM and LO, both can subvert the credibility of the other through “sanctioned impoliteness” (Harris, 2001, p. 466). However, this may still cause offence because legitimation does not necessarily mean neutralisation. From this perspective, evaluating what counts as “justifiably impolite” or “downright rude” becomes extremely difficult. Laskowska (2008) draws a line between ideological utterances that should not cause offence and aggressive ones that focus on, for example, personal characteristics such as intellect, ethnicity, or appearance. Plug (2010, p. 311), on the other hand, refers to “personal attacks” that are “directed not at the intrinsic merits of the opponent’s standpoint or doubt, but at the person himself or herself”, namely an *ad hominem* argument.

Adding the question of gender to the analysis of parliamentary (im)politeness throws up a whole series of

intertwined and complex considerations. Lakoff (1975) first posited that women and men have different verbal communication styles, suggesting that features of women's speech such as indirectness, question tags, hedges and euphemistic swearwords were indications of their lack of power. Furthermore, early studies claimed that women's speech was "naturally" less adversarial, which would obviously impede women in the political arena. The norms of interaction in political discourse could be viewed as masculine norms because men have invented them (Shaw, 2000). In fact, when Shaw (2000) examined floor apportionment in parliamentary debate and its relationship to the gender of participants in the late 1990s, she found that women in parliament had difficulty holding the floor. More than two decades later, the conviction still exists that women are unable to compete with male verbal sparring in the HoC: "There is a widespread belief that many or most women are alienated and disadvantaged by the competitive, adversarial and frequently uncivil style of speech which dominates much political discourse, and which is at odds with their own preference for a speech style characterised by cooperation, consensus seeking and the avoidance of conflict" (Cameron, 2021, p. 25).

Recent research has, however, proved the contrary (Cameron, 2021; Cameron & Shaw, 2016; Shaw, 2020). The notion of a "female communication style" is an ideological construct, just like gender itself. Cameron (2021, p. 31) reports, "beliefs about women's more cooperative and civil political discourse are not substantiated by the evidence of research, which has generally found more similarities than differences in the verbal behaviour of male and female politicians". Shaw (2020) demonstrates, for example, that in exchanges between May and Corbyn during PMQs, the former PM produced more adversarial linguistic features than her LO. Furthermore, May's attempts at humour and irony (cf. Section 5), although rather wooden and rehearsed, were undoubtedly aimed at ridiculing Corbyn (Shaw, 2020), thus falling within the scope of impoliteness, while subverting the normative gender and power dynamics in the HoC.

From this theoretical groundwork, we now move on to discuss the methods and data.

4. Methodology and Data

A mixed method framework was devised for this study to view the data from different perspectives. First, a quantitative analysis was carried out to highlight the main keywords used by the four participants and check the frequency of forms of address and personal pronouns. Instead, the more fine-grained analyses in Section 5 draw on approaches from critical discourse studies (e.g., Fairclough, 1989, 1995; Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012; van Dijk, 2008; Wodak, 2009), which are particularly helpful in revealing how gender, power and discourse intersect in political contexts.

For the purposes of this study, 43 videos of PMQs with Margaret Thatcher (28 Nov 1989–27 Nov 1990), and 36 videos of PMQs with Theresa May (24 May 2018–24 Jul 2019) (Note 4) as PM were examined, focussing on exchanges between the PM and the respective LO—i.e., Neil Kinnock and Jeremy Corbyn, respectively. In both cases, the PMQs analysed were drawn from the last year of each PM's mandate. This methodological decision was made because only one year of televised PMQs was available for Thatcher—i.e., 28 November 1989 was the first televised broadcast of a British "Question Time". Moreover, we only selected PMQs where both the PM and the LO were present. The audiovisual documents were retrieved from the American Cable Television Industry website, namely C-Span (Note 5). The corresponding transcripts were downloaded from the *Hansard* website (Note 6), which is the official report of parliamentary debates made digitally available to the public. Only the excerpts including the exchanges between the PM and the LO were selected and revised so as to include only words that were actually uttered. Such a revision process was necessary due to the differences that emerged from a comparison of the video clip recordings with the official transcripts on the *Hansard* website. The latter usually leave out features of orality such as repetitions, false starts, self-corrections, discourse markers, etc. that nevertheless provide important information about the participants' stance (cf. Section 4.1). For this reason, we transcribed the extracts from the selected videos ourselves, thus producing our revised version of the *Hansard* transcripts. Table 1 shows the dataset, where the number of words is based on our revised version.

Table 1. PMQs dataset

Participants	PMQs N	Period	Duration	N of words
Thatcher-Kinnock	43	28 Nov 1989–27 Nov 1990	02:09:53	15.327
May-Corbyn	36	24 May 2018–24 Jul 2019	06:59:31	60.889

As can be noted from Table 1, despite the higher number of PMQs involving Thatcher and Kinnock, the duration and number of words of PMQs with May and Corbyn considerably exceed the former. In this regard, two facts

must be kept in mind: first, the average duration of a PMQ with Thatcher is approximately three minutes compared to eleven minutes with May, and second, the average length of PMQs when May was PM was about 50 minutes, thus nearly twice the amount of time compared to PMQs during the Thatcher era. The reasons for this apparently uneven dataset can be justified by several factors. Firstly, substantially more floorspace is given to the LO nowadays compared to Thatcher's time; secondly, unlike Kinnock, Corbyn always used the maximum number of questions and supplementary questions; finally, Corbyn's apparently non-adversarial and consensual discursive style entails posing crowdsourced questions "from the electorate" (Shaw, 2020, p. 187), which very often entail lengthy introductory preambles.

Nevertheless, the amount of time granted to the PM and LO exchanges during the PMQ sessions from which they were extracted is approximately the same in Thatcher and May's time, i.e., 20% and 22%, respectively. This makes the two series of PMQs perfectly comparable.

Before delving into the data analysis in Section 5, a brief digression on the divergences between the transcripts provided on *Hansard* and our revised version is necessary to clarify the reason why we used the latter in the present study.

4.1 *Hansard* Transcriptions

Hansard has published an official report of proceedings in the House of Lords and the House of Commons since 1909 (Farrell & Vice, 2017). Originally produced in printed format, *Hansard's* parliamentary reports are now also available online via its official website. According to John Bercow, former Speaker of the HoC, the *Hansard* transcriptions "fulfil[s] the vital role of providing for the public, and for Members of Parliament, a full and authoritative account of everything that is said in the Commons and the Lords every day" (2017, p. 7). He goes on to state that "[t]he great skill of the reporters—in the past, as now—is to remain faithful to the Members' words, accurately conveying the nuance of their argument and preserving their speaking style, while also, with the slightest of editorial touches, producing a fluent and readable report that will serve as a working document, a legal record and a historical resource". As linguists, it was the selection, modification, or omission of certain utterances in the transcriptions that interested us—bearing in mind *Hansard's* claim to fidelity. In the following paragraphs, it will be shown how these changes substantially influence the "nuance" of meaning and the "speaking style"—thus the way that meaning is communicated.

A transcript is the graphic representation of talk (Cameron, 2001), which thus implies diamesic variation from oral to written language. Oral data thus undergo selection by the transcriber/interpreter who has to choose which aspects deserve attention and how detailed the transcript needs to be, with the aim of maintaining a balance between readability and accuracy (Tilley, 2003). In a devoted section (Note 7) of the UK Parliament website, *Hansard* is described as a "substantially verbatim report of what is said in Parliament". MPs' words are recorded, transcribed, and then edited to "remove repetitions and obvious mistakes, albeit without taking away from the meaning of what is said". While this form of editing may be considered an intrinsic feature of the transcription process, it has been suggested that transcription is also a subjective "interpretative act" (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; tenHave, 1990) based on the goals of the transcriber. This also affects the *Hansard* transcripts, as will be illustrated in the following paragraphs.

There has been extensive research on the linguistic representation of parliamentary discourse in the Official Reports (OR) of *Hansard* compared to transcripts from original video recordings of debates. The seminal work by Slembrouck (1992) highlights the variability in the representational practices of the OR (cf. Shaw, 2018, for a thorough description) and points out that the main purpose of *Hansard* is to maintain "the obvious properties of a written text" (1992, p. 104; also Mollin, 2007). Subsequent studies on the comparison between official and non-official transcripts (cf. Hughes, 2006; Mollin, 2007; Shaw, 2018 *inter alia*) underline extreme variation and alterations, thus posing questions on the suitability of OR for inclusion in linguistic corpora and for research purposes. Indeed, Mollin (2007) notices a reduction of 18% of tokens in *Hansard* compared to non-official transcripts, with different types of omissions and changes that affect the speakers' style, so much so that she defines OR "not linguistically accurate" (2007, p. 187). However, despite admitting such significant differences, Shaw (2018, p. 119) assesses that "the extent of OR's suitability is entirely dependent upon the type of analysis that is being conducted", stressing the advantages of its use "for large-scale comparative studies over time that are impossible by other means" (2018, p. 111). Also, Antaki and Leudar (2001, p. 470) support the use of *Hansard* as it is recognised by MPs as "the authoritative verbal record of their debates" in the HoC. However, due to all the modifications in the OR detected by the abovementioned scholars, Shaw (2018, p. 119) also posits that it "is not suitable for analyses that focus on linguistic (im)politeness and adversarial exchanges, nor is it suitable for the study of forms of address and pronominal use". To prove this point further, examples on some

crucial differences between the *Hansard* transcripts and our revised version are provided below.

To begin with, Table 2 below shows the difference in number of words between the two types of transcripts.

Table 2. *Hansard* vs. our revised transcripts

Participants	<i>Hansard</i> (N of words)	Our transcripts (N of words)
Thatcher-Kinnock	14.763	15.327
May-Corbyn	59.225	60.887

This difference is not only quantitative, but also qualitative, that is, it can result also from a variation of the words chosen. To illustrate this point, Figure 1 shows an extract from *Hansard* of a PMQ in 1989 featuring Thatcher and Kinnock on the left and our revised version on the right. In the *Hansard* version, contractions are never used (e.g., *it is* vs. *it's*), the word *Government* is always used as a plural noun (e.g., *the Government have* vs. *the Government has*), and honorific titles such as *Mr Speaker* are deleted (cf. Bull, Fetzer & Kádár, 2020, for an extensive analysis on the functions of politicians' use of this form of address and its deletion in *Hansard*). Another important point refers to changes in word order, as in *To privatise that company successfully was a major achievement* vs. *it was a major achievement successfully to privatise this company*). Here, the transcriber felt the need to correct the original statement pronounced by Thatcher, thereby producing a transitivity shift that alters the focus of the utterance from the original *major achievement* to *privatisation*, so that the emphasis is moved from the result to the process, with certain implications in meaning. Finally, adjustments to verb tense can be detected (e.g., *it will happen* vs. *it's going to happen*), with a consequent variation in meaning (cf. Mollin, 2007, p. 206, for the "routinely changed" *will* in OR "from the more informal and less certain" *going to*).

01. 28 Nov '89	Mr. Kinnock	Is the Prime Minister aware that today's report from the National Audit Office shows that the Government sold Rover for at least £60 million less than it was worth? Will the Prime Minister now make a public apology for that gross incompetence?	Mr Speaker, is the Prime Minister aware that today's report from the National Audit Office shows that the Government sold Rover for at least £60 million less than it was worth? Will the Prime Minister now make a public apology for this gross incompetence?
	The Prime Minister	Apart from the year in which it sold Jaguar, Rover had not made a profit since 1976. To privatise that company successfully was a major achievement and the Government struck the best deal that they believed possible in all the circumstances of the sale.	Mr Speaker, apart from the year in which it sold Jaguar, Rover had not made a profit since 1976. It was a major achievement successfully to privatise this company and the Government struck the best deal it believed it could in all the circumstances of the sale.
	Mr. Kinnock	Does the Prime Minister not recall that it is the second time in two years that the Government have short-changed the British public by selling off assets? It happened with Royal Ordnance, it is happening with Rover and tomorrow it will happen on a monstrous scale with the sell-off of water. When are the Government going to stop asset-stripping the country?	Mr Speaker, doesn't the Prime Minister recall that this is the second time in two years that the Government has short-changed the British public by selling off assets? Mr Speaker, it happened with Royal Ordnance, it's happening with Rover and tomorrow it's going to happen on a monstrous scale with the sell-off of water. When is the Government going to stop asset-stripping the country?

Figure 1. Transcript from *Hansard* vs. our revised version – Example 1

Another example is shown in Figure 2. Apart from the deletion of *Mr Speaker*, reformulations are employed. In this case, *Hansard's* positive polarity replaces Kinnock's negative polar question (NPQ), e.g., *Does the Prime Minister* vs. *Doesn't the Prime Minister*, thus modifying the speaker's pragmatic intention. A negative polar question is generally used when the speaker wants confirmation of something that they believe is true, thus conveying a bias towards a particular answer, i.e., an NPQ indicates that the speaker previously expected a positive answer, whereas a positive polar question signifies a neutral expectation (Silk, 2020). Politicians often deliver NPQs exploiting prosodic features such as an exaggerated interrogative intonation, thereby adding to the adversarial style of the speech event (Shaw, 2020). In the case in point, Kinnock wants an admission from Thatcher that she has indeed forgotten what she said "a few short weeks ago"—i.e., clearly an admission she would never make. Moreover, the verb *remember* is changed into *recall*, thus producing a shift in register from informal to formal. Finally, this extract shows that in the *Hansard* transcript additions are also present. The first is an explicit reference to an Official Report with the relevant hyperlink, to clarify the point in question, and the second is the indication of interruption caused by other MPs. As regards these two points, our revised version of the transcript obliterates them both for two reasons: first, because we decided to transcribe only uttered words and, second, not to alter the word number. However, since we felt it was important to point out when participants were interrupted by others while speaking, as an indication of either consensus or dissent, we opted for the use of the symbol // (cf. Figure 2, extract on the right).

Mr. Kinnock	<p>Does the Prime Minister recall telling me just a few short weeks ago that she thought:</p> <p>"The community charge will be very popular?"—[Official Report, 22 March 1990; Vol. 169, c. 1231.]</p> <p>Does she still believe that, and if she does, why is she sending her Ministers off in every direction, desperately searching for an escape route from the poll tax?</p>	<p>Mr Speaker doesn't the Prime Minister remember telling me just a few short weeks ago that she thought: "The community charge will be very popular?" Does she still believe that, and if she does, why is she sending her Ministers off in every direction, desperately searching for an escape route from the poll tax?</p> <p>Mr Speaker, the community charge is a much fairer charge than rates //</p>
The Prime Minister	<p>The community charge is a much fairer charge than rates—[interruption.]</p>	

Figure 2. Transcript from *Hansard* vs. our revised version – Example 2

Hansard transcripts are also characterised by the use of acronyms even when the extended version is uttered (e.g., *NHS* instead of *National Health Service*), abbreviations (e.g., *her hon. Friend* vs. *her honourable Friend*) and by the addition of MPs' names within parentheses—e.g., *her hon. Friend the Member from Bromsgrove (Sir H. Miller)*. Last but not least, in *Hansard* modal verbs are often changed for no clear reason, as in Corbyn's question in the PMQ on 5th September 2018 *Will the Prime Minister enlighten us as to what these "countervailing opportunities" actually are?*, where modal *will* is preferred to modal *could*, which was actually used by the LO. This, again, has some pragmatic implications and produces a change in meaning: a request introduced by *will* is an exhortation for a promise and sounds less polite and more direct than one introduced by *could*.

After comparing the official transcripts from *Hansard* with our revised versions, the paper analyses the latter to highlight (im)politeness features through the (non)use of formulaic expressions.

5. Analysis

This section is devoted to the quantitative (cf. Section 5.1) and qualitative (cf. Section 5.2) analysis of the data retrieved from the revised version of the transcripts.

5.1 Quantitative Analysis

The first step was to carry out a quantitative analysis of the revised transcripts by using Wmatrix software (Rayson, 2009) to highlight keywords and key domains by comparing the two subcomponents, namely Thatcher-Kinnock vs. May-Corbyn. Such an analysis can be visually summarised by the word clouds created in the software for each of the four participants under investigation (cf. Figure 3). Word clouds are graphic representations of word frequency in which words that occur more often in a text appear in a larger format. Figure 3 shows the keyword results found in the main topics discussed by the two pairs, which also represent the 'hot topics' of their times, namely inflation and the poll tax in Thatcher and Kinnock's PMQs, and austerity and Brexit in May and Corbyn's PMQs. These word clouds also indicate that honorific titles clearly stand out and have an extremely important role in PMQs (cf. words circled in red).



Figure 3. Word clouds

Focussing specifically on forms of address and formulaic expressions, some comparisons can be made between the two women leaders and between their respective nemeses. Thatcher often uses the title *Mr Speaker* at the beginning of her turn (69 occurrences) and its variant *Mr Speaker, Sir*, while May hardly ever uses it (only 4 occurrences). When addressing the LO, both Thatcher and May generally maintain the “third person” rule of address and use the honorific *Right honourable Gentleman* (96 and 302 occurrences, respectively). In May’s case, it is often preceded by the formulaic expression *...say to the Right honourable Gentleman* (106 occurrences) in all of its variants such as *Can I (just) say... / I (really) have to say... / I (also) say to... / I would (also) say to... / Let me say...* However, on two occasions both Prime Ministers address their respective LO directly with the second person singular pronoun *you* (cf. examples in Section 5.2), thus violating the politeness norm imposed in this institutional context.

As regards the two LOs, Kinnock and Corbyn, both address their questions to the PM through the Speaker, and use the title *Mr Speaker*, thus respecting the “third person” rule of the House—i.e., 107 and 349 occurrences, respectively, corresponding to 2,22% and 1,21% out of the total of their words. However, this means that Corbyn’s use of the honorific title *Mr Speaker* is reduced by approximately 50% compared to Kinnock. What happens when they address the PM is also significant. Kinnock sometimes uses the extremely formal honorific *Right honourable Lady* (17 occurrences). Corbyn, on the other hand, never uses the phraseme. Kinnock more frequently refers to Thatcher as *Prime Minister* (127 occurrences), but mostly uses the third person singular pronoun *She* (139 occurrences). Corbyn uses the same two forms of address, but in the reverse order in terms of frequency, thus counting 349 occurrences of *Prime Minister* and 233 of *She*. Figure 4 below describes in percentages the frequency of honorifics and personal pronouns in PMQs comparing all four participants. The percentage is calculated for each speaker out of the total number of words uttered by them (e.g., for May, the total number of words is 28,184, while for Kinnock it is 26,702). Overall, it can be noted that Thatcher and Kinnock seem to use honorifics and titles more frequently than May and Corbyn. This might be due to their discourse styles, but also to changes in the dynamics of institutional discourse that have evolved over time. It must be also pointed out, however, that this is just the result of a quantitative analysis, which is not able to give us a full picture. Indeed, the pragmatic use of the honorifics will only emerge in context and by considering other semiotic codes, both verbal and nonverbal, such as prosodic features, gestures, facial expressions, gaze, body posture, etc., which contribute to meaning making and allow us to fully understand the (im)politeness intent (cf. Bonsignori & Filmer, 2022).

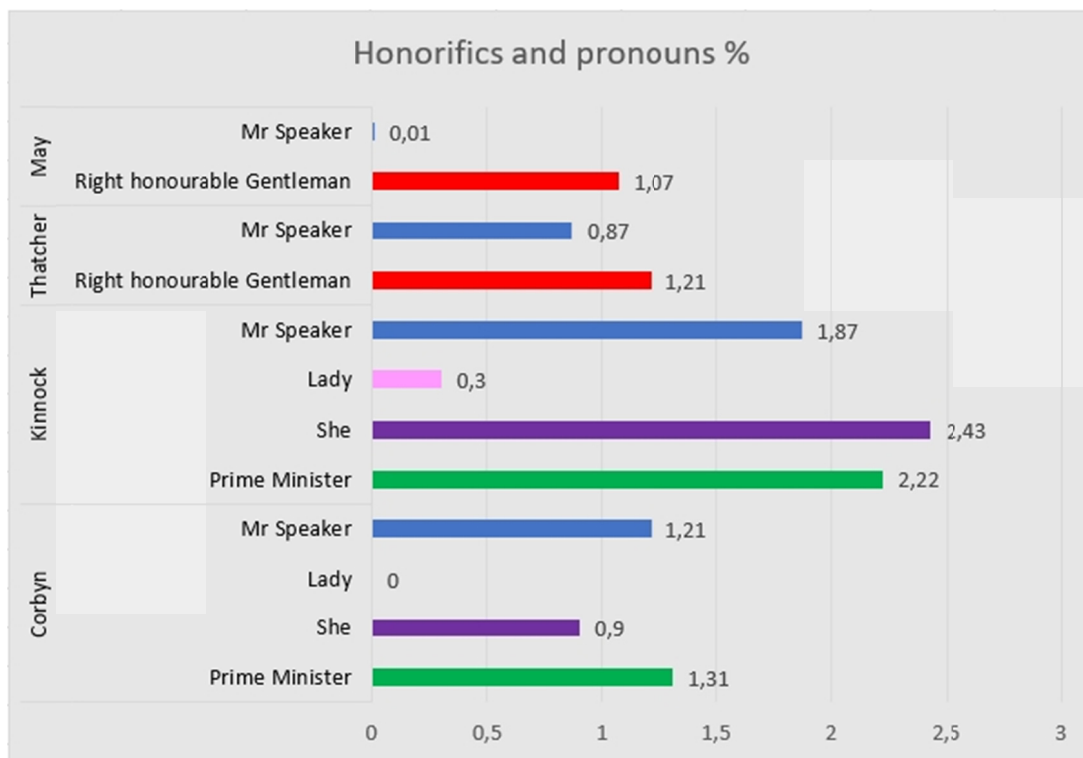


Figure 4. Honorific titles and personal pronouns in PMQs

The following section focuses on four communicative acts that illustrate how impoliteness dynamics emerge in exchanges between the two pairs of participants under analysis.

5.2 Qualitative Snapshots—the “You” Factor

As mentioned earlier, the timeframes analysed deal with the leaders’ final year in government and therefore, in both cases, the PMQs were particularly combative. The (im)politeness strategies (cf. Section 3) adopted by the speakers will be viewed here from two perspectives: ritualised politeness forms and discursive impoliteness. For each PM two examples are discussed in which the women leaders break the convention of third-party distancing when addressing the LO. This is a highly unusual phenomenon. In fact, each PM makes the verbal misdemeanour only twice in the period analysed. From a theoretical viewpoint, the question begs: does this communicative act fall within the realm of acceptable impoliteness in the context of PMQs, or is it to be considered a blatant transgression of unwritten (im)politeness rules in parliamentary debate?

5.2.1 Thatcher and Kinnock – Spontaneous Impoliteness and Verbal Ticks

The first exchange analysed here (22 May 1990) is between Kinnock and Thatcher on the frequently and heatedly debated question of poll tax, six months before the PM resigned:

(1)

Kinnock	Yes, Mr Speaker , and after that disposable income has been obtained, people are then faced with doubled VAT, higher charges and now the poll tax , which is the reason why, as the Prime Minister should admit, <i>she</i> is charging the highest burden of taxation of any Government in history. Why is the Government and the Prime Minister so reluctant to claim what is truly theirs — the record for being the biggest taxers ever?
Thatcher	<u>You</u> would put up taxes, all right. // I doubt very much whether the British people want to go back to 83p in the pound on earned income and 98p in the pound on savings income, or to have their taxes put up, as I understand the Right Honourable Gentleman would like to do.

Kinnock’s claim that Thatcher was responsible for the highest tax burden in history is clearly strong provocation for a Tory government whose fiscal conservatism advocates tax cuts rather than tax hikes. It is a clear FAA, a deliberate attempt to cause feelings of humiliation or embarrassment, here through irony. As mentioned

previously (cf. Sections 2 and 3), this type of adversarial badinage is to be expected during PMQs. Nevertheless, even if impoliteness is predictable in a specific communicative context, this does not mean there will be no offence. In fact, Thatcher’s reply is very revealing. In a moment when the PM is under pressure, politeness forms slip and institutional formulaicity is overlooked as she makes a bald on-record accusation that makes no attempt to save Kinnock’s face. Furthermore, forgetting the maxim of third person indirectness, she does not address her accuser through the Speaker. She performs a direct FAA with the retort “*You* would put up the taxes, all right.” However, this on-record FAA is mitigated later in the same statement when she returns to the formal honorific, *the Right Honourable Gentleman*. This instance of PMQ impoliteness would appear to be a momentary and spontaneous lapse on the part of the PM, who nevertheless quickly recuperates and falls back into familiar parliamentary patois.

The second example with Thatcher and Kinnock occurred while debating the UK’s entry into the European Monetary System (15 November 1990) and took place just days before Thatcher resigned:

(2)

Kinnock	Mr Speaker , my question was specific [...]. Is the Prime Minister telling us that there were no resignation threats on the issue of the Madrid conditions?
Thatcher	I am telling you that the exchange rate mechanism undertaking is very long standing. The Right Honourable Gentleman will have heard from the Dispatch Box many times that we would join when the time was right; we did join when the time was right, and no one has really been able to criticise that with validity.

In the HoC tradition, Kinnock indirectly challenges the PM through the Speaker, while performing an FTA by repeating the simple yes/no question to which the PM had previously failed to respond. Thatcher is clearly ruffled by the LO’s insistence for a straight answer. She re-joins with a bald face-attacking strategy directly addressing Kinnock, “I am telling *you*...”, breaking away from the politeness code of the HoC. Once again, this appears to be a momentary lapse on the part of Thatcher, and she immediately returns to the form of address required in the House.

5.2.2 May and Corbyn—Sarcasm, irony and impoliteness

The first example examined here between May and Corbyn was extracted from the last PMQs before the Christmas break on 19 December 2018. In response to Corbyn’s claim that the Government was “dithering” over voting on its revised Brexit deal, May strategically diverts attention from the question at hand (Bull & Strawson, 2020) with a scathing parody of Corbyn’s own vacillations. To the howling derision of the Opposition benches and great amusement of the rest of the House, the PM recites what is clearly a scripted mock-pantomime dialogue of the “oh yes he did” “oh no he didn’t” genre.

(3)

May	I have to say to the Right Honourable Gentleman it’s a bit rich him to stand here and talk about dithering. Let’s see what the Labour party did this week. They said that they would call a vote of no confidence, then they said that they wouldn’t. Then he said he would, then it wasn’t effective // I know that it’s Christmas //
Speaker	Order. Members must not shout at the Prime Minister. // Order. Calm yourselves. Try to get into the Christmas spirit. If you cannot do that, at least listen to the Prime Minister.
May	Thank you, Mr Speaker. They said they’d put down a vote of no confidence, then they said they wouldn’t, then they said they would, then they did it but it wasn’t effective. I know it’s the Christmas season and the pantomime season, but what do we see from the Labour Front Bench and the Right Honourable Gentleman? He’s going to put a confidence vote. Oh yes, he is! “Oh no he isn’t!” I’ve got some news for him. I’ve got some advice for the Right Honourable Gentleman: look behind you . They are not impressed, and neither is the country.

In terms of formulaic politeness, May begins her turn by respecting the third person rule in Parliamentary politeness, referring to Corbyn as *the Right Honourable Gentlemen*. However, simulating the pantomime formula, the PM warns the LO against the “enemy” and enunciates in pantomime tradition, “Look behind *you*” in a gesture of faux camaraderie. As Shaw (2020) has already noted (cf. Section 3), May is not a natural performer. Although the rehearsed “sketch” gained approval from the Conservative benches in the form of rowdy laughter, May’s overt *ad hominem* ridiculing of Corbyn as an indecisive and ineffectual leader can only be construed as impolite. According to Culpeper (2016), to establish whether linguistic impoliteness has caused

offence, the addressee’s emotional reaction should be manifest. This can be evinced by reciprocating the impoliteness, commenting on it, or by some non-verbal indicators. May’s FAA visibly irritates Corbyn as he mutters “stupid woman” in a bald, on record response. Ensuing interventions in the House during the same sitting of PMQs and media meta-debates discussed whether he did or did not in fact say “stupid woman” (Elgot & Walker, 2019) (Note 8) or whether the utterance was indeed, sexist, rude, or both (Note 9). Corbyn’s (m)utterance was not recorded in the official transcripts by *Hansard*. Yet, by lip reading what Corbyn says the evidence would indicate that “stupid woman” is what emanates from his mouth. As an example of “unparliamentary language”, this communicative act caused offence to the millions of women and provoked a series of intertextual media debates in the ensuing chains of discourse (Fairclough, 1995).

In the second May-Corbyn sample (17 July 2019), the LO’s first question to the Prime Minister is an indirect act, asking why the Government’s performance on climate change was not considered adequate by an all-party Commission.

(4)

Corbyn	[...] Why did the all-party Environmental Audit Committee accuse the Government of “coasting” on climate change?
May	[...] Before the right honourable Gentleman stands up and parades himself as the champion of climate change, the champion of the people or the defender of equality and fairness, he needs to apologise for his failure to deal with racism in the Labour party. [...] This is your legacy Mr Corbyn ... You still haven’t opened your eyes... You still haven’t told the whole truth... You still haven’t accepted your responsibility... You have failed... the test of leadership. Apologise now!

A bald, on-record FAA, the PM’s response to Jeremy Corbyn is a form of covert equivocation (Bull & Strawson, 2020). It gives the impression of having responded, but not in fact to the question that Corbyn had asked. Instead, May’s diatribe aims to divert attention from Corbyn’s claim that the government’s policy on climate change was ineffective. This was the penultimate PMQs before May resigned, which might also explain her blatant transgression of parliamentary politeness forms. Her lapse into direct verbal sparring epitomises the evident animosity between PM and LO that had accumulated over the months. Although she begins her attack by referring to Corbyn as *the Right Honourable Gentleman*, she quickly switches to a direct, frontal attack (“This is *your* legacy, Mr Corbyn”), dropping all formulaic parliamentary politeness, and in an unprecedented verbal assault repeats *you* four times, thus breaking the “direct address” taboo. She culminates with four accusations, one of which is also against parliamentary politeness rules. The reproachful statement *you still haven’t told the whole truth* is practically a charge of lying (cf. Section 3). She concludes with the imperative *Apologise now!* which not only breaks PMQ etiquette but also plays on the asymmetrical if unusual power balance between woman PM and male LO. The extraordinary outburst provoked further chains of discourse (Fairclough, 1995) across (social) media genres and was considered a triumph for May in her twilight days in Office.

6. Conclusions

The preliminary findings offer some revealing, if initial, insights on our research questions while indicating avenues to pursue for further research. Firstly, the comparison between the original *Hansard* transcripts and our revised version highlights the editing they undergo, thus indicating the importance of checking the original video documents, especially for critical discourse analysis and politeness studies, as Shaw (2018) has pointed out. Secondly, in terms of ritualised politeness during PMQs, specifically, the use of forms of address and honorifics, several phenomena have emerged. It can be noted that, unlike Thatcher, May never uses *Mr Speaker* to begin her turn. Furthermore, Corbyn never utters the polite, if archaic and sexist title, the *Right Honourable Lady*, preferring the gender-neutral honorific *Prime Minister*. Kinnock, on the other hand, used it occasionally. Overall, the quantitative analysis carried out shows that May and Corbyn tend to use fewer honorific titles compared to Thatcher and Kinnock. However, at this stage, it is difficult to establish whether this is due to a tendency over the years to reduce the use of the more archaic formulae, or to personal preference, communication style, or idiolect (cf. Section 5.1). Nevertheless, in heated exchanges it appears clear that in both cases (i.e., Thatcher-Kinnock and May-Corbyn) the general trend is to avoid polite forms of address altogether and resort to pronouns such as *she* and *he*.

In terms of gender dynamics, May’s aggressive impoliteness towards Corbyn is considerably more intense than Thatcher’s moderate verbal attacks. The latter resorts to the proform *you* only when under extreme pressure and without the insistent tones of May. Thatcher was far more subtle, undermining Kinnock with understated irony

and sarcasm rather than explicit rudeness.

With regards to gender stereotypes, politeness, and politics, May's FAAs confirm the findings of Cameron and Shaw (2016, cf. Section 3) and Shaw (2020), who found the verbal behaviour of women in Parliament is now aligned with that of their male counterparts. At the turn of the millennium, Harris (2001) pointed out how women have difficulty maintaining the floor in the HoC. May's linguistic performance would indicate that this is no longer the case, although her repartee is rehearsed. Both examples where she adopts face-threatening *you* proform in her rhetoric had been clearly prepared beforehand, and is thus premeditated, deliberate impoliteness. Her verbal performances, however, as Shaw (2020) points out, are unconvincing and awkward. Thatcher, on the other hand, broke with the HoC rules of politeness with occasional slips addressing Kinnock directly as *you* in spontaneous exchanges in reaction to his provocation. A closer study of prosody and multimodal elements would shed light on this. Other future investigations might examine Liz Truss's (im)politeness strategies to complete the trilogy of Tory women PMs, while a study on the Deputy Labour Leader, Angela Rayner's lively confrontations with former PM Boris Johnson would provide valuable insights on Labour women's approach to oppositional language in PMQs.

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Authors contributions

The research was carried out jointly by the two authors who contributed equally to the study. However, Veronica Bonsignori was responsible for drafting sections 2, 4, 4.1, 5, 5.1 and 6, and Denise Filmer drafted sections 1, 3, 3.1, 5.2, 5.2.1, and 5.2.2. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Notes

Note 1. Retrieved from <https://www.parliament.uk/about/how/business/questions/>

Note 2. Retrieved from <https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/rules-of-behaviour.pdf>

Note 3. Cf. Blousfield (2010); Kienpointner (1997); see Culpeper and Hardaker (2017) for a brief discussion on terminology.

Note 4. May announced her resignation on 24 May 2019, but her resignation to the Queen was on 24 July 2019, that is, on the day of her last PMQ.

Note 5. Retrieved from <https://www.c-span.org/video/?465624-1/question-time>

Note 6. Retrieved from <https://hansard.parliament.uk/>

Note 7. Retrieved from <https://hansard.parliament.uk/about>

Note 8. Retrieved from

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/dec/19/jeremy-corbyn-accused-of-calling-theresa-may-a-stupid-woman>

Note 9. Retrieved from

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