Decoding the Hidden Voices: A Case Study of Prime Minister's Questions from the Perspective of Pragmatics

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Abstract

Prime Minister's Questions Time, also referred to as PMQs, is a significant component of British constitutional tradition which gives Members of the Parliament (MPs) a weekly chance to question the Prime Minister. For Prime Minister, even though it requires lots of efforts, this form still means more of an opportunity than a challenge in most cases. Based on the transcript of a debate between British Prime Minister and leader of the Labor Party during Prime Minister's Questions Time, this study aims to investigate the specific conversational strategies taken by him to raise his personal prestige and authority of leadership in the debate. The discourse will be discussed from the perspective of pragmatics, including Searle's classification of speech acts and Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) of conversational implicature theory, to decode the voices hidden in the confrontation.

Keywords: Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs), raise prestige, speech acts, the Cooperative Principle (CP), conversational implicature

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Intense debates in House of Commons are believed to be an epitome of British Parliamentary system, among which the Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) is the most typical representative (Qiu Haiyun, 2016). As part of British constitutional tradition, the PMQs takes place every Wednesday when the Commons is sitting. According to the rules, the Prime Minister is restricted to give answers to a series of well-prepared questions posed by Members of the Parliament (MPs) and is not allowed to challenge the opposite side by asking back (Rogers & Walters, 2015). Therefore, it seems that the PMQs is an occasion unfavorable to the Prime Minister. However, the truth is just the opposite. Facing tough questions, the Prime Minister is not rendered speechless. Instead, with detailed and powerful response, the Prime Minister can manage to turn the tables and even further raise his prestige and authority of leadership (May, 2004). In this sense, it is clear that the role of Prime Minister in Questions time is not merely a defender.

As stipulated, ahead of the debate, the Speaker of the House of Commons, also referred to as "Mr. Speaker" by both sides in the debate, will judge whether the questions posed by the opposite side are valuable for discussion (Rogers & Walters, 2015). As a result, within limited time, leaders of the opposition party always raise tough questions right to the point for challenging. By contrast, the Prime Minister, underprepared for the challenge, will use certain utterances to protect his face in the first place and then move on to strategically answer those questions (Bull & Wells, 2012). By using "strategic" utterances, the Prime Minister can not only tackle the difficulties in PMQs, but also achieve more positive results. Since all the utterances can be described in terms of

the actions they perform (Austin, 1976), it is necessary to find out the speech acts the Prime Minister employs in the debate so as to dig out his specific intentions and final purposes in the debate.

While decoding Prime Minister's hidden voices in PMQs, it is inevitable to face indirectness in his speech acts. In other words, the Prime Minister's words tend to convey more than what he means literally, a typical manner of non-cooperation according to Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) of conversational implicature (1975). In this light, a detailed analysis under the CP of conversational implicature will be a sound method to reveal the Prime Minister's specific conversational strategies in PMQs.

1.2 Purposes of the Study and Research Questions

With the combination of speech acts theory and conversational implicature theory under Pragmatics, this study explores how the Prime Minister make full use of PMQs to stand up for himself and fulfill his specific intentions in order to further raise his prestige and authority of leadership. The following research questions are put forward to help decode the hidden voices:

1) What are the specific intentions of Prime Minister in PMQs?

2) What conversational strategy does the Prime Minister adopt to advantage himself?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Speech Acts

The analysis of language had been solely limited to the descriptive qualities of sentences before the emergence of Speech Act Theory. Such statements were claimed to have a truth value and could be analyzed as a true statement or a false one, thus they were referred to as "constatives" (Leech, 1983). By further dividing the statements into "constatives" and "performatives", Austin (1962) suggested a new insight of analyzing the utterances in a given context to find out the actions they perform. However, most utterances, regardless of their inclusion of performative verbs, can be used to perform speech acts, and in doing so to convey the intention of the speaker (Anne, Brian & Svenja, 2020). Therefore, the dichotomy was abandoned due to the realization that the basis on which "constatives" and "performatives" were differentiated was flawed.

Since it can be regarded that all utterances potentially perform a speech act, it is necessary to distinguish different kinds of action within each utterance. With regard to this subject, Austin (1962) proposed three kinds of action, namely "Locutionary Act" (the actual utterance itself), "Illocutionary Act" (the intended meaning of the utterance) and "Perlocutionary Act" (the effect that is achieved through locution and illocution). The speech acts can be contained and realized by statements based on a number of conditions to be met by illocutionary force indicating device (IFID). Specifically, these conditions are referred to as "felicity conditions" with four categories: propositional, preparatory, sincerity and essential (Searle, 1975). With felicity conditions as a foundation, Searle (1976) set up a number of meta-categories of speech acts and in doing so, he suggests a general classification of basic acts:

a) Representatives, which commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition;

b) Directives, which are attempts by the speaker to get the addressee to do something;

c) Commissives, which commit the speaker to some future course of action;

d) Expressives, which express a psychological state;

e) Declarations, which cause immediate changes in the institutional state of affairs and which tend to rely on elaborate extra-linguistic institutions.

The frequency of certain type of speech acts used in a discourse can reflect the tendency of the actions the speaker prefers or intentionally shows. In addition, in practical classification, the notion of indirectness of a speech act can never be ignored. Whenever the locution is apparently at odds with the illocution of an utterance, the sentence contains an indirect speech act. Both Austin and Searle note that most utterances are indirect as the illocutionary force is not reflected in the sentence form (Anne, Brian & Svenja, 2020). Therefore, if we fail to dig out the indirect speech acts while merely sorting out the direct ones into the five abovementioned groups, we will go far away from the true voice hidden in the utterance. Based on this, a quantitative analysis of Prime Minister's speech acts in a debate in PMQs, including both direct and indirect ones, will present a clear tendency of his ambition in his speech and show how he conveys his real intention in his refutation.

2.2 Conversational Implicature

When utterances convey indirectness, as discussed in the previous part, it is important to disambiguate this type of indirect meanings. It requires an establishment of a sound process from which we can infer the meaning beneath the surface. Such processes are often linked to a set of principles that form part of the background knowledge of the speaker and hearer (Grice, 1975; Leech, 1983). Only with a thorough consideration of the

context, background and the indirect intentions can hearers get from what is said to what is meant, from the level of expressed meaning to the level of implied meaning. According to Grice, the implied meaning, namely implicature, can be categorized into two sorts: conventional implicature and conversational implicature (1975). For conventional implicature, the same implicature is always conveyed regardless of context while for conversational implicature, what is implied varies according to the context (Genny, 2013). For example, in PMQs, MPs often pose questions about "No.10", a sign which is recognized to represent Prime Minister as it names No. 10, Downing Street, where Prime Minister lives. Thus, it is a conventional implicature accepted by almost all British people.

When it comes to conversational implicature, Grice introduced four conversational maxims and the Cooperative Principle (CP) (1975). He suggests that in conversational interaction, people work on the assumption that a certain set of rules is in operation. In order to be efficient in conveying information, all people are presumed to be cooperative in interaction with others. Under CP, four maxims are formulated as listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Grice's categories of cooperative principle and relevant maxims (Grice, 1975)

Category	*Maxims*
Quantity	1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange).
	2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
Quality	Try to make your contribution one that is true:
	1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
	2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
Relation	Be relevant.
Manner	Be perspicuous:
	1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
	2. Avoid ambiguity.
	3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
	4. Be orderly.

By complying with CP and its maxims, the speaker allows the hearer to draw assumptions about the speaker's intentions. In this way, CP is widely applied to exploiting both written and spoken texts. However, people sometimes may not fulfill these maxims in certain context. Right within Grice's consideration, he summarized five ways of non-observation of a maxim: a) flouting a maxim; b) violating a maxim; c) infringing a maxim; d) opting out of a maxim; e) suspending a maxim (1975).

Among the five maxims, "flouting" and "violating" are the most common cases, especially in political discourses. When a speaker flouts a maxim, s/he blatantly fails to observe a maxim, not with any intention of deceiving or misleading, but because the speaker wishes to prompt the hearer to look for a meaning which is different from the expressed meaning (Genny, 2013). When a speaker violates a maxim, he unostentatiously fails to observe a maxim. Under such circumstances, s/he "will be liable to mislead" (Grice, 1975). In different contexts, the maxims are disobeyed intentionally by the speakers to realize his certain purpose. Then it is valuable to find out the non-observation cases of maxims under CP followed by PM. In this light, his conversational strategies will be revealed and then help to explain how he manages to raise his prestige and authority of leadership during a debate which seems to disadvantage him.

3. Methodology

In the first part, this study will adopt a comparative method based on the data collected from the 10-minute PMQs debate from the perspective of the speech acts. Both direct and indirect speech acts will be involved in the study. In this part, we aim to present the Prime Minister's ambition and find out his specific roles, apart from a defender, in PMQs. In the second part, this study will analyze the discourse according to the four maxims of Cooperative Principle to explore Prime Minister's conversational strategies contained in the debate by way of non-observation of maxims. With the combination of the two parts, we will finally solve the question: what conversational strategy does Prime Minister adopt to raise his prestige and authority of leadership during the fierce debate in PMQs?

4. Analysis and Results

4.1 Types of Speech Acts in PMQs

In the ten-minute debate in PMQs, Boris Johnson, Prime Minister and Keir Starmer, leader of Labor Party had a fierce confrontation concerning government's response against coronavirus, Prime Minister's own behavior during lockdown and the implementation of infrastructure construction plan. During the process, both sides convey different speech acts for their own respective purposes. Based on this debate with over 100 sentences contained in their utterances, we can find out a total of 48 speech acts raised by Prime Minster and 53 speech acts raised by leader of opposite side (Table 2). Both sides contain a part of indirect speech acts. For Prime Minister, 24 indirect speech acts are hidden in his utterances; for Starmer, leader of opposite party, only 8 indirect speech acts are proposed (Table 3). While generalizing the data, Prime Minister's purposes of participating in the debate come much clearer.

Table 2. Frequency distribution of direct speech acts types in 10-minute debate

direct	representative	directive	commissive	expressive	declaration
Johnson	38 (20 for <u>boasting</u>)	7	3	0	0
Starmer	38	14	0	1	0

Table 3. Frequency distribution of indirect speech acts types in 10-minute debate

indirect	representative	directive	commissive	expressive	declaration
Johnson	0	11	11	2	0
Starmer	1	5	2	0	0

As summarized in Table 2 and Table 3, both sides show different purposes while conveying their speech acts. For Starmer, leader of the opposite party, his intention is much more concentrated. As for the most frequently used speech acts for Starmer's side, we can see that 38 out of 53 speech acts are representatives, declaring the negative facts concerning the government's behavior. In indirect speech acts, he adopts 5 indirect directives, showing his challenge to Prime Minister. From the analysis of speech acts, Starmer's role in the debate is quite clear, which is set to reveal the non-action of the government and to pose challenge to Prime Minister.

Excerpt 1:

Johnson (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker. We're getting on and we are delivering on the people's priorities. We're putting record investments into the NHS on top of the 34 billion with which we began, and then the 97 billion that we put in to fight COVID.

Excerpt 2:

Johnson (Prime Minister): We have more doctors, more nurses working in our NHS than at any time in the history of that magnificent organization.

Excerpt 3:

Johnson (Prime Minister): What we are doing is massive. We rebuild hospitals.

Excerpt 4:

Johnson (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, it is the biggest program of hospital building this country has ever undertaken. It's been made possible by this people's government.

Compared with Starmer's, Prime Minister's intention is of more complexity. As regulated, Johnson is not allowed to raise questions. Then in his speech acts, 20 out of 38 direct representatives are to boast his achievement and performance (as is shown in Excerpt 1-4), and thus he creates both refutation to Starmer's challenge, and promotion for his own powerful authority of leadership. Besides, Prime Minister is more adept at adopting indirectness. The indirect speech acts Johnson used are much more than Starmer's. As for indirect speech acts, Johnson adopts 11 indirect directives, requiring the opposite leader to stop posing challenges unfavorable to him and 11 indirect commissives, showing his care and promise for the public. Therefore, Prime Minister's intention and ambition in the debate can be unveiled: Johnson aims not solely to defend himself in PMQs. Rather, he not only protects his own administration, but also challenges the opposite leader's position and function and showing his care and promise for the public. As a result, for Prime Minister, PMQs is more of an opportunity for him to raise his own prestige, belittle other political parties and win the public's trust. His real

voice behind his refutation is much more ambitious and complex.

In short, the analysis from the perspective of speech acts theory helps clarify the truth:

a) Although both sides employ indirectness to fulfill their respective purposes in the debate, Prime Minister is much more skillful and ambitious than the opposite leader.

b) For opposite leader, the only concentrated purpose is to challenge the Prime Minister, thus he tends to use more direct representatives and indirect directives to emphasize the poor performance of Prime Minister.

c) For Prime Minister, he intentionally views PMQs as a chance to show off his own achievement and raise his own prestige. Therefore, he tends to use more direct representatives for boasting, a number of indirect directives to challenge the opposite leader and meanwhile use indirect commissives to show his care and promise for the people.

d) All the indirect speech acts, concerning his defense, challenge and promises, combine to help Prime Minister make his refutation fairly more efficient than expected.

4.2 Conversational Strategies Adopted by Prime Minister in PMQs

As Prime Minister defines himself as a defender of his own administration, a challenger against his opponents as well as a champion of his people, it seems a mission impossible to realize all the three targets during such a short debate under the restrictions. Nevertheless, in most cases, Prime Minister manages to turn the tables and is fully expressive to his own will by disobeying certain maxims of Cooperative Principle (CP).

Excerpt 5:

In this round, Starmer, leader of the opposite party, questions Prime Minister about whether he held a Christmas party during lockdown period. By raising this question, Starmer aims to reveal the 'double standards' established by Prime Minister.

Starmer (MP): …As millions of people were locked down last year, was a Christmas party thrown in Downing Street for dozens of people on December 18th?

Johnson (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker. I've said what I've said about No.10 (No. 10 Dawning Street) and the events of twelve months ago. But since he asked about what we're asking the country to do this year, Mr. Speaker, which I think is, frankly, a more relevant consideration. And the important thing to do, Mr. Speaker, is not only to follow the guidance which we have set out, but also when it comes to dealing with the Omicron Variant to make sure that, as we've said that you wear a mask on public transport and in shops…

Excerpt 5 shows that in the interaction, Prime Minister flouts both the maxim of quantity and the maxim of manner. By offering less related information about party as required, Prime Minister aims to avoid revealing the truth that he really held a Christmas party in which a plenty of people gathered and disobeyed the rules his government set up. By failing to give a definite answer in a clear way, Prime Minister intends to shift the topic in a smooth way. As the opposite leader questions about the lockdown rules, Prime Minister grasps the topic and moves on to talk about the updated response against coronavirus variant "Omicron". The transition of the topic will convince the public that Prime Minister and his cabinet are caring for the people against the dynamics of coronavirus and weakens the influence of his own Christmas party. Therefore, in this round, based on the flouting of maxims of quantity and manner, Prime Minister avoids a direct confrontation with the opposite leader regarding the Christmas party while raising his prestige by updating the prevention and control of variant virus.

Excerpt 6:

In this round, Starmer, leader of opposite party, moves on to challenge Prime Minister about his promise of building 40 new hospitals. As suggested by Cabinet, the project of hospitals reaches a stagnant stage. Starmer requires Prime Minister to respond to his poor performance about this promise.

Starmer (MP): Mr. Speaker. At the last election, the Prime Minister promised to build 40 new hospitals, P10 of his manifesto. With waiting lists so high, Prime Minister, it's a very, very important commitment. Now the Cabinet Office and the Treasury have checked on progress, and next reported that they've reached a damning conclusion. I know the chancellor have seen that, they've concluded that the project is a red flag because it's unachievable. Prime Minister, is that true?

Johnson (Prime Minister): No. Mr. Speaker, he plays politics and asked frivolous questions. We're getting on and we are delivering on the people's priorities…We are helping to build another 40 new hospitals with an injection of 36 billion pounds of investment, which that party voted "against"!

In Excerpt 6, apparently, Prime Minister flouts the maxims of quality and manner. Although he directly gives a negative answer to the question about the project, the answer is lack of evidence. What's more, Prime Minister doesn't provide more information about the progress of the project. By saying that "he (Starmer) plays politics

and asked frivolous questions", Prime Minister distracts the hearers' attention. Although the following utterance is still related to the project of hospital, Prime Minister adds "which that party voted 'against'!" to transfer the focus from the project to the action of Labor Party. In this way, he flouts the maxim of manner and successfully conveys his challenge against the opposite party. This utterance, though being a direct representative of a fact, contains both a defense of Prime Minister and a challenge to his opponent. Therefore, Prime Minister again turns the tables and puts himself at a positive stance.

Excerpt 7:

In this final round, Starmer, leader of opposite party, gives a conclusion of his own challenge. He summarizes Prime Minister and his government's failure in political performance. After Starmer's speech, other MPs give applause to praise his successful challenge to Prime Minister. However, when Prime Minister begins his own refutation, again, the situation changes.

Starmer (MP): …His mates were found to be corrupt. He (Prime Minister) tried to get them off the hook. Downing Street throws parties during lockdown. He says, not a problem. He promised to be no tax rises, then he put up tax. He promised to be a real revolution in the North. Then he cancelled the trains. He promised no one would have to sell their home for care. Then along came his working class dimension tax. Isn't this the truth, Mr. Speaker, that any promise from this Prime Minister aren't worth the manifesto paper they're written on?

(Applause)

Johnson (Prime Minister): The right honorable gentleman dribbles on, dribbles on irrelevantly about wallpapers, parties, playing politics. And by the way on that, I'm told when the Deputy Leader and Secretary of State for the Future was told that she wasn't invited (to Starmer's Christmas party). She denounced it as idiotic, childish and pathetic. Mr. Speaker. They're getting on with factional inviting. We are delivering for the people of this country. Today, cutting tax for the lowest paid people in this country, one, as a result of our universal credit, changes 1.9 million families getting 1000 pounds more in their pay packets this year. Biggest program of early infrastructure this century: three new speed lines and we are fixing social care. They have no plan. And don't forget, their resort to absolutely every problem is either to take this country back into lockdown or to open up to uncontrolled immigration. … If we listened to "Captain Hindsight", we'd all still be knocked out!

Excerpt 7 can be considered as the most heated round of this debate in PMQs. Both sides are severely influenced by emotional elements. Confronted with Starmer's fiercest challenge, Prime Minister flouts the maxim of relation by transferring the topic from his political performance to the actions taken by Labor Party. Then he forms a comparison between both sides by listing the achievements of his administration and highlighting the negative response of the opposite side. In this way, Prime Minister takes a counterattack against the opposite leader and defends his own authority of leadership. It is worth noting that, by flouting Cooperative Principles and specific maxims, Prime Minister never gives direct feedback about his failure in keeping promises.

In short, showing uncooperative manner and flouting specific maxims can help Prime Minister express his own will. In such a short and heated debate, flexible application of non-observation of maxims is a frequently used solution for Prime Minister to tackling the troubles. More often, by flouting the maxims of manner and relation, Prime Minister controls the focus of the debate and manages to realize his multiple purposes of defending his government, challenging the opponents and convincing the public in the meantime.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzes a 10-minute debate occurred in PMQs between Boris Johnson (British Prime Minister) and Keir Starmer (leader of opposite party) to decode the real voices hidden in Prime Minister's refutations. In the study, a progressive method is adopted to explore how Prime Minister can change the unfavorable situations to him and even raise his prestige and authority of leadership during the debate.

First, to decode Prime Minister's hidden intention in PMQs, the study explores the text based on Searle's Speech Act Classification Theory and finds out the specific roles Prime Minister set for himself:

a) By using a large number of direct representatives, Prime Minister attempts to boast his own achievements.

b) By hiding a part of indirect directives, Prime Minister aims to challenge the opposite leader and to require other MPs to stop posing frivolous questions.

c) By adopting several indirect commissives, Prime Minister shows his care and promise for the people.

d) As shown by the data, compared with speech acts adopted by opposite leader, Prime Minister forces himself to accept multiple roles. Instead of merely refuting what has been challenged, he uses indirect speech acts to clarify the weakness of opposite party and update the following promises for people so as to raise his prestige and convince the public that he is a powerful leader with sound ability to manage the government.

Next, in the analysis of several excerpts from the debate, this study explores the specific conversational strategies adopted by Prime Minister. Faced with straightforward challenges regarding his lockdown behavior, new hospital project and a general assessment of government's performance, Prime Minister blatantly flouts the maxims of manner and relation to avoid revealing unfavorable facts and moves on to the topic that helps prove his credibility. By flexibly transferring the non-observation of maxims under CP, Prime Minister takes a control over the focus of the debate to win himself a positive stance and meanwhile retort his opponent powerfully. Specifically, we can generalize his strategies taken as follows:

   a) When asked unfavorable questions, Prime Minister flouts the maxim of manner as his first choice. By avoiding giving a direct answer, he may exaggerate his own achievements regarding the topic to weaken what he fails to do for the people.

   b) When faced with a summary of the poor performance under his administration, Prime Minister flouts the maxim of relation to prevent from leaving the public a negative image. In the meantime, he attempts to make a comparison between his government and the opposite party's action as a way to distract public attention and pose direct challenge against his opponents.

   c) When questioned about a suspending project, Prime Minister flouts the maxim of quality to first reaffirm his promise for the public. Under such circumstances, the first attempt for him is to convince his people of his credibility. Therefore, although he offers information that lack evidence, his positive answer will help confirm his authority of leadership.

All in all, through the analysis from the perspective of pragmatics, we can have a clearer picture of Prime Minister's ambition and conversational strategies taken in PMQs and figure out why he will not disadvantage himself in such a fierce situation. Base on the study, the public will raise their awareness of identifying those strategic responses from Prime Minister and have a more rational assessment of Prime Minister and his government's performance. In this light, it is valuable to conduct more detailed and quantitative studies on the basis of abundant corpus regarding PMQs and decode Prime Minister's real voice in a deeper sense.

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