

# PMQs more 'please and thank you' than 'Punch and Judy'

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The Punch and Judy politics image of Prime Minister's Questions is not an accurate one, according to a University of Manchester linguist.

From his analysis of randomly chosen PMQs sessions, James Murphy says a significant minority of opposition MPs speak politely at Prime Minister's Questions.

When David Cameron and Gordon Brown were at the helm, he finds, backbenchers in the governing party were polite 80 per cent of the time, while the figure for those in opposition was 16 per cent – much higher than anticipated.

"PMQs is known for its knockabout adversarial style, but this is only true up to a point," he said.

"It seems that MPs on all sides of the house realise that being polite is more likely to elicit a favourable response from the PM – and that means it's easier to get things done."

[Politeness](#) is also a feature of the responses given by both Gordon Brown and David Cameron. While the [public perception](#) of Brown may be that he is abrupt, a more [systematic analysis](#) of the data suggests a different side to him.

The PhD researcher based in the University's School of Arts, Languages and [Cultures](#) said: "At PMQs, both Brown and Cameron are,

unsurprisingly, unfailingly polite when answering their own MPs. To do otherwise may indicate a rift within the party.

"In response to questions which are worded in a neutral way, Brown answers consistently politely.

"Cameron, in contrast, answers impolitely on around a half of occasions. This suggests a mismatch between Brown's linguistic performance at PMQs and the public's perception of him."

According to Murphy, the way MPs ask questions is not so different from the way we interact on a day to day basis, where even the most innocuous of questions has the potential to have an impact on our [social relationships](#).

One of the reasons PMQs is viewed as highly confrontational, he says, is that the exchanges between the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister receive by far the most attention.

He said: "The Leader of the Opposition asks questions impolitely 85% of the time. Part of the reason for this is that impoliteness makes the criticism of the Prime Minister and his government more prominent.

"There are, however, times when the Leader of the Opposition asks questions politely. This is usually to ask questions on a 'serious' topic, such as the situation in Afghanistan. Asking in a non-partisan way may be a means of projecting a Prime Ministerial persona."

Murphy transcribed videos of six sessions; Hansard (Parliament's official record) he says, is likely to miss, or 'clean up' key phrases and cannot record the way a phrase is uttered, for instance, whether it uses an aggressive or condescending tone of voice.

There are objective, routine ways of expressing politeness, he adds, many of which appear in questions asked at PMQs, including:

- An element of praise for a policy precedes (or follows) criticism of it.
- Government failures are described as being unintentional or the fault of others.
- The criticism is minimized or muted
- Criticism of the PM is deflected by attacking a third party.
- The questioner comments on a positive personality trait of the PM.

Government MPs:

- 80 % asked questions politely
- 5 % asked questions impolitely
- 15 % were neither polite nor impolite

Opposition MPs:

- 68 % asked questions impolitely
- 16 % asked questions politely
- 16 % were neither polite nor impolite

The Leader of the Opposition:

- 84 % impolitely
- 6 % politely ('Serious' topics such as war and floods.)
- 10 % neither polite nor impolite

The full paper, '(Im)politeness during [Prime Minister's](#) Questions in the UK Parliament' is available. It is to be published in the journal *Pragmatics and Society*.

Provided by University of Manchester

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