

### 3 Women's Linguistic Participation in a Traditional Male-Dominated Forum – The UK House of Commons

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#### 3.1 The House of Commons as a Community of Practice (CoP)

In this chapter, I address the first set of research questions described in Chapter 1: How do women in politics participate in debate forums, particularly in those that are historically male-dominated, and in which women are still vastly under-represented and men over-represented? What are the constraints and obstacles that they face in institutions such as the UK House of Commons, and how can this be illuminated by detailed linguistic analyses of the debate floor? To answer these questions, I begin by describing the CoP of the House of Commons before using the mixed approach of ethnography and different types of discourse analysis to examine patterns of participation in relation to floor apportionment (3.2); adversarial language (3.3); and the use of humour and irony in parliamentary discourse (3.4).

The House of Commons (HoC) at Westminster can be described as a 'traditional' parliament because it is one of the oldest and is arguably the archetypal political legislature upon which many parliaments around the world are based. In relation to gender, it has always been male-dominated, with women first taking up seats in 1918 but their representation only rose to above five per cent in 1987, before almost doubling between 1992 to 1997 from 9 to 18 per cent (Cracknell and Keen 2014). This rose to 32 per cent by the 2017 General Election. This historical pattern of representation, and in particular the sudden influx of women MPs in 1997 into this CoP are of particular institutional significance. At that point of rapid change, the gender regime was disturbed and on entry to the HoC new women MPs were mistaken for MPs' wives and secretaries (Sones et al. 2005), characterised as 'Blair's Babes', and subjected to extraordinary levels of sexist media coverage. Additionally, many of the 1997 intake (of whom 65 were newly elected) claimed that they had a 'less combative and aggressive style' (Childs 2004) in the debating chamber. This connection between gender and the linguistic performance of political actors at this pivotal period in the 1997–2001 parliamentary term is the focus of this chapter.

Figure 3.1 shows the interior of the HoC debating Chamber, with two sets of green benches facing each other. The Speaker's (moderator's) chair, which



Figure 3.1 Image of the House of Commons debating chamber looking towards the Speaker's chair. (Source: Universal Images Group/Contributor/Getty Images.)

resembles a throne, is at the head of the chamber with seat for two officials (clerks) in front of it. Between the benches at the head of the chamber is a table with two 'despatch boxes' on either side which function as lecterns – one for the Prime Minister (who sits on the front bench on the left of the image), and one for the leader of the Opposition (LO) who sits on the front-bench on the right of the image. The most senior members of the government (the Prime Minister and other Ministers) sit on the front bench and are sometimes referred to collectively as 'frontbenchers'. MPs with no additional responsibilities in the government sit behind them and are referred to as 'backbenchers', or junior MPs. This is mirrored on the opposition benches with front-bench 'shadow' ministers and more junior backbenchers.

As noted in Chapter 1, it has been claimed that 'institutions have been organised to define, demonstrate and enforce the legitimacy and authority of linguistic strategies used by one gender – or men of one class or ethnic group – whilst denying the power of others' (Gal 1991). The historical and continued numerical dominance of men MPs leads to the presence of women being 'out of place' in a context that is 'a brutal example of the dominance of a culture of traditional masculinity, and an unmistakably masculine gender regime' (Lovenduski 2014a: 17). This is certainly the case in the House of Commons and is vividly described by Nirmal Puwar:

The position of an MP has been performed as a highly masculinist act. Relations are organised on the basis of patronage, hierarchical fraternising and competitive individual exhibitionism. Gangs, blocks and allegiances are formed to offer support in a system of patronage and combat. Displays of masculinity in the House of Commons are conducted in a spectacular, exaggerated and theatrical manner ... the hero of this

performance is a white male ... this is the template against which the speech, gestures and bodily movements of female and black and Asian bodies are measured. (Puar 2004b: 74–5)

Gendered practices and patterns are therefore underpinned by assumptions of masculinity and constantly reinforced by the exclusion of women. In her detailed ethnographic account of the House of Commons (carried out in 2012–13), Emma Crewe characterises MPs identities and roles as ‘endlessly diverse, navigating many complex, dynamic socio-political worlds’ (2014b: 53). For this reason, as described in detail in Chapter 2, viewing the House of Commons as a CoP acknowledges that individuals belong to multiple, changing communities upon different terms of participation and that gender is seen as just one of the factors that may affect an individual’s membership of, and participation within, any given community. The claim that an individual’s membership of a CoP is ‘peripheral’ or ‘core’ depends upon ‘how successfully an individual has acquired the shared repertoire, or assimilated the goal(s) of the joint enterprise’ (Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999: 176). For women in a male-dominated institution the acquisition of the shared linguistic repertoire involves negotiating the ‘socially ascribed nature of gender: the assumptions and expectations of (often binary) ascribed social roles against which any performance of gender is constructed, accommodated, or resisted’ (Bergvall 1999: 281).

The ethnographic description of the HoC using in situ observations of debates, interviews with MPs and formal records of proceedings, together with academic analyses of the HoC (for example Childs 2000, 2004; Puar 2004a, 2004b; Crewe 2014b; Lovenduski 2005, 2014b) and suggestions about the linguistic style of ‘male-dominated’ institutions (for example Kanter 1977; Brewis 2001; Baxter 2010) all suggest that the distinctive linguistic practices thought to characterise the shared repertoire of institutions like the House of Commons CoP fall into three overlapping categories:

1. Occupying, holding and keeping the ‘floor’.
2. Behaving in a verbally aggressive way, an ‘adversarial style’.
3. Manipulating the serious ‘key’ of debates to a humorous or ironic one.

Each of these aspects will be examined in this chapter using empirical data and the mixed method approach identified in Chapter 2. In addition to the ethnographic data leading to a description of the CoP, the data are taken from a corpus of 60 hours of debate proceedings between 1998 and 2001,<sup>1</sup> allowing a description of the debate floor and the formal and informal rules and norms that govern its apportionment; an overall assessment of the participation of MPs in different types of speaking turn; and the detailed analysis of video transcripts for applied Conversation Analysis across smaller stretches of debate discourse.

### 3.2 Floor Apportionment in the House of Commons

The definition of the floor given in Chapter 2 views it as a way of gaining control over a scarce resource, an 'economy' in which, depending on the context, 'turns are valued, sought or avoided' (Sacks et al. 1974: 701). Although the metaphors of scarcity and a competitive economy may misrepresent the nature of ordinary conversations (Edelsky 1981), they seem appropriate for an adversarial debate in which the debate turns are strictly regulated and the debate floor is sought after for both political and interactional advantage. In the HoC, speaking turns are strictly controlled as MPs are called to speak by the Speaker. An MP must stand to speak, and they should be the only person standing in the chamber when they are speaking as it is not permitted to speak when sitting down, commonly referred to as 'a sedentary position'. When an MP speaks they must address all their comments to the Speaker (moderator) rather than addressing their political opponents directly, and they cannot refer to another MP directly (such as by using a pronoun 'you') but must address them by their title (The Right Honourable Lady, Gentleman etc). Other aspects of HoC interaction will be explained in relation to particular examples discussed below and also in terms of the definition of the debate floor proposed in Section 2.4.1.

It has been suggested that in formal public arenas men are more likely to gain and hold the floor and to speak for longer than women (for example Brescoll 2011; Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014) – see also a more detailed discussion in Chapter 5, with some claims made that women 'leave the floor to men' (Holmes 1995: 193). Therefore, linguistic practices which involve taking, holding and yielding the floor may be one of the ways in which men's and women's terms of participation vary in this CoP. Other factors affecting MPs' access to the debate floor include their status within their party, with the Prime Minister having the most access to the floor as he/she has exclusive rights to respond in Prime Minister's Question Time (PMQs). Ministers and Shadow Ministers and those with particular departmental responsibilities occupy the floor more than back-bench MPs with no particular responsibilities other than representing their constituents. Apart from this distinction between Ministers and back-bench MPs, there are also less formal aspects of status that contribute to the amount individuals speak in debates. For example, some MPs who have been in office for several years have more opportunity to speak in debates than newly elected MPs. This is partly because MPs with more experience of debates understand the procedures better than newly elected MPs, and so may be able to use this knowledge to gain the Speaker's attention more effectively. The ability of an MP to secure a speaking turn may also rest on a number of factors including the relationship of the MP to the Speaker; their reputation as a particularly good orator; or the fact that they have previously held a position of high status.

As noted earlier, the HoC is a forum in which the contributions of Members are strictly controlled by rules about when they can speak. These are enforced both by the Speaker and through the vigilance of MPs in the chamber – who can draw the Speaker’s attention to rule violations by shouting ‘order’ as an appeal to the Speaker to stop the debate on a ‘point of order’. In their study of US televised political debates, Edelsky and Adams (1990) note that these debates consist of an ‘ideal’ form when the rules and procedures are adhered to and the debate offers participants an equal opportunity to speak. The comparison of the operational factors in the turn-taking systems for conversations and debates (see Section 2.3) identified the ‘ideal’ progression of turns in debates, devised in order to ‘permit the equalization of turns’ (Sacks et al. 1974: 730). Alongside this ideal or canonical form there also exists the ‘real’ event in which ‘illegal’ violations of the rules take place. In order to identify the extent to which women and men MPs have control over the debate floor it is necessary to attempt a description of the floor activities taking both the ideal and illegal turns into account.

The ideal progression of debates is restricted so that the system is as fair as possible – enabling speakers to express themselves without interruption and allowing every participant the opportunity to speak. Participants are allotted a speaking turn in advance of the debate if they have particular responsibilities in that specific debate for introducing or opposing a motion. If MPs are not allotted a speaking turn in advance of the debate, MPs must signal to the Speaker that they wish to contribute by standing up at the end of a speech. The Speaker then calls one of the standing MPs to speak in the debate. It will be shown below that this ideal is not adhered to in terms of the turn-taking system of debates and questions times in the HoC, and ‘thus a speech event that should allow everyone an equal chance becomes an event in which prior inequalities (e.g. gender, age and ethnicity) can be re-enacted’ (Edelsky and Adams 1990: 171). The interaction is prone to violations of the rules by MPs who aim to promote their own speech or to undermine the speech of another MP. Example 3.1 below shows a particularly disorderly extract from a PMQ session in July 1998.

Example 3.1 Jane Griffiths’ Question to the Prime Minister (PMQs 01/07/98: Transcript – see transcription conventions on p. XI)

SP = the Speaker; JG = Jane Griffiths (Labour); PM = Prime Minister; MPs = ‘crowd’ noises made by MPs; IMP one MP speaking from a sitting position; (O) = Opposition; (L) = Labour; *Italics* = speech from a sitting position

- 1 SP : ORDER order I must remind the Honourable Lady and the House that  
 2 : the Prime Minister is responsible only for his own government’s policies [(.) and  
 MPs : [cheer  
 3 SP : not for the] the activities of the opposition (.) if she could rephrase her question in  
 MPs : *cheering--* [cheering]

- 4 SP : some way of course I would hear it and I am sure that the Prime Minister is  
 5 : already forming an answer [(.) whereby ha ha ha ha whereby (.) he will enunciate  
 MPs : [Laughter ----- Muttering-----]
- 6 SP : his responsibilities in terms of] policy on these matters (.) Miss Griffiths it is  
 MPs : *muttering*-----]
- 7 SP : your first question in Prime Minister's question time (.) could you rephrase it in  
 IMP : *well done*
- 8 SP : some way th that the Prime Minister is responsible (4)  
 MPs : [Laughter -----Muttering-
- 9 JG (L) : thank you madam speaker I stand corrected (1)  
 MPs : *muttering*-----
- 10 JG (L) : would the would the Prime Minister agree with me that  
 IMP(O) : *muttering*-----
- 11 JG (L) : if (.) the (.) party opposite [(2)]  
 IMP (O) : [NO NO no]  
 MPs : [JEERING-
- 12 SP : quiet QUIET (7)]  
 MPs : *JEERING muttering*]
- 13 IMP (L) : *policy* (1) *policy confirm our policy* (1) *policy*
- 14 JG (L) : [would the would the Prime] Minister agree with me (.) w would he would he  
 MPs : [*muttering*-----]
- 15 JG (L) : share with me in confirming that our policy is to support the poor[est workers  
 MPs : [*cheering*---
- 16 JG (L) : in this country (5)]  
 MPs : *cheering*-----*CHEERING*-----*muttering*
- 17 SP : well done that girl well done ha ha (4) ]  
 MPs : *muttering*-----*LAUGHTER*---*laughter*
- 18 PM : my honourable friend is quite right [ (.) quite right (.) no we (.)] the position of the  
 MPs : [*LAUGHTER*-----*muttering*-----]  
 IMP(O) : [GIVEN ENOUGH TIME]
- 19 PM : government will remain that we support the minimum wage and we look forward t  
 20 : to hearing a position from the party opposite

Example 3.1 starts with the Speaker intervening on a question asked by Jane Griffiths, a Labour MP first elected in 1997 who is asking her first parliamentary question. The main or 'legal' speaking turns are shown as the numbered lines in the transcript, the indented, unnumbered lines and italicised text show illegal interventions. Jane Griffiths' attempts to ask a question of the Prime Minister Tony Blair, immediately before this excerpt starts. Blair and Griffiths belong to the same 'ruling' Labour party in government at the time. Griffiths starts her question with the formulaic 'Would the prime Minister agree with me ...', as she does not intend to challenge the Prime Minister but to reinforce her party's position with her question. Unfortunately, she formulates the question incorrectly and adds 'that the party opposite'. The transcript above starts as the Speaker explains (lines 1–8) that the parliamentary rules dictate that questions to the Prime Minister must be directed towards an area for which the Prime

Minister is responsible and not, as in this case, towards the policies of the opposition parties (for which he is not responsible). The Speaker (a woman, Betty Boothroyd) enforces the rules by explaining to Griffiths that she must 'rephrase' her question (line 3), and the correction is notable for the ironic cheering from MPs that accompany it, and the rather patronising tone of the Speaker who underlines the fact that 'it is your first question' (line 7). The illegal and collective jeering, laughing and muttering occur throughout the extract, including when Griffiths starts to form her question a second time by first thanking the Speaker and pausing (line 9). Then she gives the formulaic 'would the Prime Minister agree with me' a second time (line 10), but also repeats her earlier error by saying 'if the party opposite' (line 11), thereby again asking the Prime Minister about an area for which he is not responsible. The reaction to this repeated error is immediate, with a single opposition MP shouting 'No no no' and sounds of jeering and shouting continuing for nine seconds, despite another intervention by the Speaker to quieten the chamber (line 12). A single MP from Griffiths' own party audibly prompts her to give the correct response and to say 'confirm *our* policy' before Griffiths finally produces the correct form for the question in her third attempt (lines 14–16). Collective, disruptive and ironic cheering accompany the correct completion of Griffiths' question, and the Speaker colludes with this by adding the sexist and patronising comment 'Well done that girl, well done' and laughing (line 17). The Prime Minister's response is also formulaic 'My Honourable Friend is quite right', accompanied by laughter and a single audible complaint from an opposition MP that the question has been 'given enough time'.

This transcript underlines two important points about participation in the HoC chamber. First, that illegal utterances, both the jeering, laughing and cheering of collective utterances and those that can be attributed to an individual speaker, can affect the legal turns of the main speaker in ways that the canonical debate form does not allow. Although it is not possible to directly assess the effect of the collective laughter, muttering and cheering on Jane Griffiths' turn, ethnographic interviews with new Labour women MPs show that they view this hostile environment 'as very scary, the chamber is designed that way. It is supposed to intimidate you' (Shaw 2002: Interview A). This intimidating atmosphere of public rebuke and ridicule is likely to have affected Griffiths' performance to some degree and may have been mostly responsible for her hesitancy and her failure to reformulate the question correctly in lines 9–11. The transcript also shows how an individual, illegal and supportive intervention (line 13) has a more direct and beneficial effect on Jane Griffiths' legal contribution as it is only after this prompt that she formulates the question correctly.

Secondly, the transcript shows that to achieve a close analysis of the debate floor, it is necessary to account for and distinguish legal from illegal turns in debates. This can be done by referring to D1 (legal) and D2 (illegal) turn-taking systems because they operate under different rules (Shaw 2000). The numbered lines in Transcript 3.1 are the only parts of the interaction that are recognised officially as being part of the debate, and the only part of the interaction recorded in the official Hansard report (as mentioned in Section 2.3). Illegal D2 turns have various forms ranging from a number of MPs shouting, to a single MP directly supporting or challenging a D1 turn. This distinction between the D1 and D2 turns also provides the basis upon which it may be possible to differentiate between an intervention that is characteristic of non-disruptive utterance made in the D2 system and a D2 interruption that directly impinges upon and violates the turn-taking mechanism of the D1 system. Typically, two-part D2 interventions occur when the MP legally holding the floor is interrupted, often by a one-word utterance such as 'rubbish' or 'hear hear', and is shown in Transcript 3.1 above on line 18 when an MP shouts 'given enough time!' after Griffiths asks her question correctly and the prime Minister starts to respond. Although disruptive, this type of intervention does not elicit a response from the legal speaker and so does not directly impinge on the D1 floor, beyond the possible distraction the interjection may incur. However, a three-part D2 intervention is one in which the legal speaker responds to the illegal intervention and thus the D2 interjection directly affects the progress of the D1 floor. This can be viewed as the strongest marker of powerful and dominant behaviour in debate interaction where 'power is accomplished in discourse both on a structural level – through the turn and type of space speakers are given or can get access to – and on an interactional level through what they can effectively accomplish in that space' (Thornborrow 2002: 8). Example 3.2 shows how a combination of D1 legal and D2 illegal interventions can impinge upon the rights of the D1 legal speaker (Shaw 2006).

Example 3.2 Legal and illegal interventions that disrupt the debate discourse (01/03/99, Transcript)

CMP = 'current' or 'legal' MP, IMP = intervening or 'illegal' MP, f = female, m = male, (C) = Conservative, (L) = Labour

- |   |           |   |
|---|-----------|---|
| 1 | CMP f (C) | : it is very significant that this has not taken place (.)                        |
| 2 |           | there is an <u>element</u> in <u>my</u> view of <u>deceit</u> in the way in which |
| 3 |           | this legislation (.) has been protect er presented in this house                  |
| 4 | IMP m (L) | : would the right honourable lady give way  |
| 5 | CMP f (C) | : I will  |
| 6 | IMP m (L) | : (Give way) has the Hon. Lady been <u>asleep</u> for the last two years          |



7 the European Court of Human Rights have ordered us to  
 8 change our laws (.) we have to we have to change the law  
 9 IMP m (C) : rubbish (1)  
 10 IMPm (L) : (Give way cont'd.) the honourable gentleman from his lazing position  
 11 says rubbish (.) unfortunately life is life (.) and life says we've got to  
 12 change the law and we're doing it (.) it's not there is no hidden agenda  
 13 there  
 14 IMP m (C) : of course there is  
 15 IMPm (L) : (Give way cont'd) oh rubbish Winterton (.)you really are  
 16 a silly man (1)  
 17 MPs : (laughter)  
 18 CMP f (C) : gentlemen (.)  
 19 IMP m (C) : no more silly than you  
 20 CMP f (C) : I'm really I'm as aware as he is that there's been a debate on  
 21 the issue from that perspective and that the honourable gentleman  
 22 opposite has made his (.) contribution to some extent but that does  
 23 not alter the fact that we are still here debating (.) what is going in  
 24 this case to be domestic legislation (turn continues)

The woman Conservative MP first allows a D1 legal give way intervention<sup>2</sup> (lines 6–8) on her speech by the men Labour MP. However, this intervention itself is disrupted by a men Conservative MP in two three-part illegal interventions (lines 8–10 and 12–16) that are responded to by the legally intervening men MP (lines 10 and 15). The second of these interventions and its response, accompanied by laughter from other MPs in the chamber, is followed by an appeal for the floor from the woman Conservative MP ('gentlemen' line 18) which is ignored by the intervening MPs and a further two-part illegal intervention is made (with the first part on lines 15–16 and the second part on line 19) before the woman MP finally reclaims her turn (line 20). This extract therefore shows the collapse of the D1 legal floor as the woman MP has given up her turn to a legal intervention on the understanding that the legal floor will be preserved, yet the interactional space is instead occupied by a D2 interaction between the two men. In this way, the egalitarian ideals of the canonical form of the debate (to permit the fair and equal sharing of the debate floor) are hijacked by illegal interventions that remove the speaking rights from the legal speaker.

To assess the participation of men and women MPs in the HoC on the legal floor, turns were counted and classified in a corpus of 60 hours of videos of debate proceedings between 1998 and 2001 (see Appendix A.1.1 for a full list of the events included in the corpus). To undertake this assessment of the participation of the two different groups (women and men), the differential proportions of the two groups must be considered. Table 3.1 above shows that in the 1997–2001 parliamentary term, women accounted for 18 per cent of the politicians in the House of Commons, and men 82 per cent.

Table 3.1 *Table showing the number and percentage of women and men MPs in the 1997–2001 parliament*

Number of women MPs	Number of men MPs	Total number of MPs
120	526	646
% of women MPs	% of men MPs	
18%	82%	100%

Table 3.2 *Table showing the number and percentage of (legal) turns taken by men and women MPs in the whole corpus*

Type of speech event	Number of events	Duration of all events	Total turns	Male turns	Female turns
All debates and question times	59	59 Hours	1926	1609	317
Percentage of total number of turns				83%	17%

When the legal turns were counted and classified, overall women took 17 per cent of all the turns in the whole 60-hour corpus, and men 83 per cent (as shown in Table 3.2 above) and this is close to their 18/82 per cent proportion as groups in the House of Commons at this time.

To assess participation with respect to legal and illegal interventions, a smaller sub-corpus of detailed transcriptions of five debates from the 1998–2001 corpus was examined. These debates were sampled from the 60-hour corpus to give a range of debates on different topics and with different participants. The analysis of this sub-corpus of five debates shows that women made 21 per cent of 'give way' interventions across the five debates, above their 18 per cent representation overall. In contrast, for the illegal D2 turns that were attributable to an MP, men used proportionally more illegal interventions than women (90 per cent overall in comparison to their 80 per cent representation in the parliament). Although the number of attributable D2 turns in the sub-corpus was small, this suggests that women MPs were not using the D2 turns to occupy the debate floor as much as (some) men. Furthermore, of the 41 illegal turns taken in the smaller 1998–2001 sub-corpus, 41% (17) were of the most disruptive three-part D2 turns that impinged upon the debate floor. However, of the four interventions made by women in these debates only one was a three-part intervention that gained a response from the D1 floor (one was a supportive intervention, one

a correction of a reference, and one a response to being directly addressed by the MP giving the speech). This means that men were responsible for all but one (98 per cent) of the most disruptive type of intervention in the 1998–2001 sub-corpus of debates.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from the identifiable interruptions described above, there are many instances of ‘barracking’ (another word for ‘heckling’), or comments in the form of short one or two-word utterances such as ‘rubbish’ (see Example 3.2, line 9). The functions of barracking can be seen as either an attempt to attack the substantive comments made by a speaking MP, or as a tactic to intimidate a speaker in order to make a speech less effective. This second function can consist of extremely personal comments. Although there were no examples of more personal attacks in the corpus of five debates, comments such as ‘you nasty little squirt’ and ‘you pathetic wimp’ were given as examples of barracking by an interviewee (Shaw 2002: Interview B). Anecdotally, ‘sledging’, or saying insults quietly to an MP to undermine them while they are speaking in the Chamber is common, both in the 1998–2001 data and in more recent times: ‘It is sort of playground stuff so if they see any weakness, whether it is about your relationship, the way you look, something that has happened to you in the past, you’ll hear it and it is little snide comments just designed to get in under the radar and put someone off their game – it’s not nice’ (Sarah Champion MP, *Inside the Commons* 2015). As barracking is almost always a type of illegal intervention this data would suggest that women MPs are less likely to barrack than men MPs. Interview data also indicates that this may be the case: ‘If I was saying anything it would be “answer the question”, so women don’t really barrack and if they do it certainly isn’t personal’ (Shaw 2002: Interview A).

There is also some evidence to show that barracking is used *against* women in an explicitly sexist way. For example, one of the women MPs interviewed (Shaw 2002: Interview A) recounts an incident in which Dawn Primarolo (a Minister) was barracked by a group of MPs shouting at her to ‘show us your leg’. The same Minister was also barracked when she answered a question by repeating the answer she had given to the last question. She did this to show the MP asking the question that he could not deliberately misinterpret a question in order to gain a supplementary question on another topic. In response to Primarolo’s answer a Conservative MP shouted ‘stupid woman’ at her, thinking that she had misunderstood the question. On this occasion, the Speaker intervened and the MP who barracked was forced to withdraw his comment. More recently, in 2018, both John Bercow (Speaker of the House of Commons) and Jeremy Corbyn (Leader of the Opposition) have both been accused of using the phrase ‘stupid woman’ against senior women MPs (Cowburn 2018; Elgot and Walker 2018). Interview data suggests it is common for women to be appraised in terms of their intellectual capabilities

in this way: 'Any young attractive woman in the House of Commons is kind of you know an air-head. Which bearing in mind what you have to go through to get into the House of Commons it's a bit you know, but that is the absolute standard' (Shaw 2002: Interview D). This negative stereotyping of women by men according to whether they are intelligent is extremely polarised:

There can be another definition which is super-clever. So you're either a Blair's babe meaning you're just sub-standard or you're a brainy babe (...) You are most likely to just be a Blair's babe but if you can punch your way out of that one you punch your way up to the brainy babes. There's nowhere in-between. (...) It is about women not being able to have the normal range of characteristics. Men can be super-clever, medium clever you know medium thick or thick whereas women have more stereotyped labels. (Shaw 2002: Interview D)

Examples of barracking involving this kind of sexist stereotyping are anecdotally common, and there are examples in the 60-hour corpus of data gathered for this study. An extension of the stereotype that women MPs are 'stupid' is that they are 'clones' and 'Stepford wives' who cannot think for themselves (Shaw 2002: Interview A). In a debate on Manufacturing and Industrial Relations a Conservative MP shouted at Margaret Beckett that she is 'like Dolly',<sup>4</sup> a cloned sheep. This type of sexist barracking is pertinent to the consideration of turn-taking because it may well affect women's success in maintaining a speaking turn. As mentioned above, barracking is a tactic that functions to intimidate a speaker by incorporating personal remarks to make another MP's speech less effective: shouting sexist comments at an MP is likely to have these effects. However, as Example 3.1 shows, barracking is not the only way in which women MPs can be intimidated. Jane Griffiths' question to the Prime Minister shows the hesitancy and confusion brought about by her error, and the laughter of MPs and the patronising remarks of the Speaker add to her inability to make the required intervention. Non-verbal sexist gestures made against women, such as the 'melon weighing' breast gesture have also been reported by MPs (Shaw 2002: Interview A). All these tactics, like the 'hisses, boos, heckles and slow hand claps' made by boys in classroom interaction (Baxter 1999: 219), show that men MPs not only make these illegal interventions more than women, but that women are subject to more obstacles than men in maintaining a speaking turn. This sexist treatment is discussed in detail in Section 5.3 and is a contemporary feature of parliamentary interaction. Cornelia Ilie (2018) finds that women in the HoC are objectified, patronised and stigmatised by a range of such comments. This is also a recurrent finding across parliaments where women speakers have been found to be subjected to more rowdiness and jeers than their male colleagues in different parliamentary contexts. For example, Maria Stopfner (2018) analyses examples of 'heckling' in

Canadian, French and Austrian parliaments and identifies this practice as one that is used to silence women politicians.

The Speaker or moderator is another important role that is integral to the regulatory mechanism of the debate floor. The Speaker's interventions are an important component of the turn-taking system and an analysis of their frequency shows not only which MPs experience interventions and under what circumstances, but also allows a classification of rule-breaking according to which rule-breaking activities are commonly tolerated by the Speaker, and which are not. A detailed analysis of the sub-corpus of the 1998–2001 debates shows that of the 13 interventions made by the Speaker(s) during the five debates, only two were to instruct an interrupting MP not to speak out of turn. This means that most illegal interventions (in this corpus 39 out of 41 illegal turns) are not censured by the speaker and therefore this type of turn is to some degree an accepted part of the debate proceedings. The tolerance of the Speakers towards rule-breaking may partially be explained by the fact that they do not hear everything that is said in the debating chamber and therefore do not always hear illegal interventions. Another reason may be that the Speakers can use gestures and gaze signals to warn MPs that they have noticed their illegal behaviour, and therefore, do not always need to stop the debate in order to reprimand an MP and to curtail 'out of order' speaking turns. However, these considerations do not account for the degree to which the breaking of rules concerning illegal interventions are tolerated by the Speaker. The finding that illegal interventions are largely tolerated by the Speaker is significant because it shows how informal practices, in being permitted, become part of the accepted norms of the institution. Further, if illegal interventions advantage MPs in debates, and men MPs make more illegal interventions than women MPs, then the behaviour of the Speaker can effectively disadvantage women MPs in debates.

Although the amount of data used for this analysis is relatively small, it allows for the identification of possible gendered interactional practices. A further corpus of House of Commons data was analysed in 2009–11 for comparative purposes with the 'new' devolved parliamentary institutions of the UK, discussed in Chapter 4. This comparative data also confirmed the finding that women participated in the legal debate floor in the House of Commons in proportion to their numbers overall. However, like the 1998–2001 corpus, the analysis of the 2010 data found that men were responsible for 97 per cent of all illegal D2 turns. These findings are also borne out by previous research by Carole Edelsky and Karen Adams (1990) and Lyn Kathlene (1994, 1995) who found that men politicians violated turn-taking rules more than women politicians in US televised debates and US state committee hearings, respectively. Similarly, Dionne's (2010) quantitative analysis of HoC committee participation found

that women were significantly less likely to interrupt than men, and conversely, men committee members were significantly more likely to interrupt than female members. She also notes that 'No woman, not even the Chair, ever tried to interrupt another woman (...) no woman aside from the Chair interrupted successfully' (Dionne 2010: 63). However, in contrast to Kathlene's (1994) finding that women spoke less and took fewer turns than men, Dionne found that gender did not seem to play a role in chairs' or members' speaking behaviour (number of turns, length of turns and words spoken) apart from in relation to interruptions.

As shown in the examples in this chapter, illegal interventions serve to interfere with the turn-taking mechanism of the DI, and can be used to criticise or challenge a CMP in a debate. Given that 'power' in this context can be defined as control over the limited resource of the floor, this means that men MPs have more control over the interaction – through illegal interventions – and therefore more power in debates than women MPs. In interviews, women MPs identified illegal interventions and cheering as a male activity in which they did not engage, which further suggests that norms of interaction are different for men and women MPs. This indicates that while men and women belong to the same CoP, they are on different terms of participation according to gender. The norms of men MPs' discourse styles are often pervasive in debates – as their gendered behaviour of contributing illegally to debates is often not censured by the Speaker and therefore has to some degree been accepted as a norm of interaction. The finding that masculine discourse styles are treated as the interactional norm in debates relates to the fact that traditionally women have not been represented in this institution and continue to be under-represented. The fact that this pattern is found in the 1998–2001 corpus, and the 2009–11 data, and continues to be observed in analyses today (see further discussions in Chapters 6 and 8 and Ilie 2018) suggests that these norms are possibly resistant to change over time.

### 3.3 Adversarial Language

#### 3.3.1 Introduction

The HoC is commonly referred to as an adversarial forum and Prime Minister's Question Time (PMQs) is seen as the most extreme display of adversarial politics at Westminster. For this reason, these speech events provide the most fruitful data when trying to establish the linguistic features that contribute to an adversarial style in House of Commons discourse. Once identified in PMQs, adversarial features can be recorded in other speech events, such as Departmental Question Times (DQs). This allows both an assessment of the extent of adversarial speech in the event itself, and also of the individual contributions of MPs.

The reasons for the adversarial nature of PMQs rest on their ritualized role (Lovenduski 2014b) as ‘a high-profile party-competition and a well-known accountability instrument’ (2014b: 134) where the opposition parties are afforded the opportunity of holding the Prime Minister (PM) to account with a degree of spontaneity not possible in other parliamentary speech events. Lovenduski’s insightful description of PMQs as a highly symbolic, ritualised display that is ‘emblematic of the Westminster model of politics’ views parliamentary ritual as behaviour that is carried out normatively without MPs themselves being aware of its relation to the symbolic and the traditional but instead regarding it straightforwardly as ‘the way things are done’ (Lovenduski 2014b: 133). Other characteristics of PMQs include the fact that the media coverage of the event tends to focus on the most adversarial exchanges and this visibility extends to live streaming on the BBC website, live tweets, and headline-grabbing summaries of the main forays between the PM and the Leader of the Opposition (LO). Finally, it is one of the few speech events in which the chamber is full, and the audience of MPs without an official speaking role constantly ‘heckle, harrumph or yah boo and emit “hear hears” during and after each exchange’ (Lovenduski 2014b: 138), often completely drowning out the speakers, as evidenced in the detailed transcription of Jane Griffiths’ question earlier in Example 3.1.

It is often assumed that adversarial norms are masculine, and that women are unlikely, or less likely than their male colleagues to engage in them:

The standard repertoires of adversarial politics are characteristic of behaviour that is more acceptable from men than women. The declamatory, adversarial style of chamber debate favours rhetoric, speechifying, posturing and arcane practice in the House of Commons, rather than co-operation, consensus seeking and real discussion of alternatives. Political practices involving demagoguery, ruthlessness and aggression require qualities that have long been culturally accepted in men but not women. (Lovenduski 2014b: 147–8)

As discussed in Chapter 1 and more fully in Section 5.1, gendered stereotypes about ‘competitive’ masculine and ‘cooperative’ feminine speech styles are pervasive in attitudes towards the speech styles of politicians and concur with an overarching discourse of gender differentiation (more fully discussed in Cameron and Shaw (2016) and in Chapter 5). As a male Liberal Democrat MP stated in 2004:

Women... by nature are more consensual. You know they’re not... they don’t like conflict... and you know the male role has been one of adversarialists. If you look at the House of Commons, unlike most other parliaments, it’s still sort of sixteenth/seventeenth-century adversarialists... we even have facilities to carry swords... everything in the House is about swords... everything tells you that this is male... this is aggressive. And I think... women cannot work like that... in their normal lives, so much to do with, if you like, raising a family and carrying out the job depends very much on

developing different skills which men don't by and large have to develop, and certainly not male politicians'. (Dionne 2010: 86–7)

Women MPs also attest to a gendered, consensual style that is characterised by 'less aggression and more co-operation, teamwork, inclusiveness, consultation and willingness to listen' (Childs 2000: 68). Childs' analysis 'points to notions of acceptable and unacceptable, legitimate and illegitimate forms of language style appropriate to politics. In these oppositions, the former are associated with male language, modes of interaction and men MPs, and the latter with women's language, modes of interaction and women MPs' (2000: 69). It is unsurprising however, given the overarching nature of stereotypical beliefs about gendered speech styles, that interview data with politicians reinforces these dominant gender ideologies about the competitive/cooperative dichotomy relating to gendered male and female communicative speech styles. As discussed in Chapter 1, and in more detail in Chapter 5, there is no empirical evidence for monolithic gendered speech styles.

This section seeks to address the lack of empirical evidence for the claim that women MPs do not engage in adversarial exchanges by first identifying adversarial features in PMQs. Secondly, I systematically score 200 questions and responses from a corpus of Departmental Questions Times (DQs) and PMQs in the 1998–2001 House of Commons corpus in order to identify adversarial and non-adversarial exchanges. Finally, the frequency with which men and women MPs (of different parties and levels of seniority) perform adversarial questions and responses are assessed. As well as contributing to the growing body of research into male and female talk in public contexts, an analysis of adversarial linguistic practices in debates can contribute to the description of the HoC itself as a setting for speech. Although the HoC is frequently referred to as an adversarial forum, this section aims to identify with more precision the linguistic features that make exchanges adversarial. The main questions explored in this section therefore are: What are the adversarial linguistic features in the questions and responses of MPs, and is there variation in the use of adversarial features by men and women MPs of different political parties and seniority?

### 3.3.2 *Identifying Adversarial Features in PMQs*

Research in politics has sought to give accounts of parliamentary questions (Franklin and Norton 1993) and uses PMQs as a measure of legislator's activities and interests (Martin 2014). Analyses of the topics raised in PMQs are also used as a measurement of the substantive representation of MPs with visible minority status (Saalfeld 2011), and in relation to gender (Bird 2005). Lovenduski's (2014b) investigation into the attitudes of MPs and members of the public to PMQs finds that women MPs were significantly more negative



than men about PMQs, that deliberate sexism is common, and that expectations of parliamentary performance disadvantage women MPs because they feel excluded by the prevalent masculine norms. Somewhat surprisingly, women members of the public who were surveyed showed more positive attitudes towards PMQs than men, which leads to the conclusion that 'the attitudes of the audience do not coincide with those of the performers' (Lovenduski 2014b: 157). This finding is partly explained by the expectations of the public being in accord with the public masculinity displayed in PMQs, which 'is a barrier to women MPs and would-be politicians because it underpins an expectation that politics is an activity best performed by men' (ibid: 158). Most significantly for this investigation, Lovenduski concludes that PMQs is a ritual that: 'sustains the traditional masculine culture by continually repeating performances of adversarial confrontation' (ibid: 158).

Previous linguistic research into the adversarial nature of parliamentary questions typically focus on PMQs as an unusual speech event in which im/politeness is central to the interaction (Ayala 2001; Bull 2013; Bull and Wells 2012; Culpeper 1996; Harris 2001; Murphy 2014) and is 'not only sanctioned but rewarded' (Harris 2001). The studies point to the discourse of PMQs being composed of face-threatening acts which can be analysed on both propositional and interactive levels (Harris 2001: 465). Harris finds that while many utterances in PMQs 'can only be interpreted as intentionally and negatively confrontational (...) such utterances do not contravene Members' expectation of politeness strategies' (2001: 468). In this way, the Leader of the Opposition (LO) is expected to engage in threatening the PM's positive face and: '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 inevitably be the place in ordinary conversation' (Harris 2001: 469). The studies therefore point to the unique characteristics of PMQs and this distinctiveness also lies with the form of exchanges between the Leader of the Opposition (LO) and the PM where the LO has up to six supplementary questions after the original questioning turn. This gives opportunities within exchanges for Sinclair and Coulthards' (1975) concept of 'follow-ups' (Bull 2013; Fetzer et al. 2015; Ilie 2015) and different forms of sustained argumentation, including turning the criticism back on the critic or 'turnabout' (Mohammed 2018). PMQs has also been found to consist of particular formulaic responses showing that ritualistic 'templates' of interaction tend towards being self-referential (Sealey and Bates 2016).

Linguistic investigations into PMQs also provide some evidence to show that the adversarial characteristics of the event remain over time, although there is some variation between certain PM and LO pairings. Bates et al.

(2014) use a Hansard corpus to investigate 30 years of PMQs (from Thatcher to Cameron) and find that PMQs becomes more 'rowdy' over time with more interruptions and interventions by the Speaker. They also find an increased tendency towards PMQs being dominated by LOs, and towards more 'unanswerable' questions being posed. Waddle et al. (2019) also agree with this analysis, finding that Cameron used more personal attacks than previous PMs, and also that PMs tend to use more personal attacks over the course of their premiership. However, with the arrival of Jeremy Corbyn as LO in 2015 this trend was found to reverse. The Corbyn–Cameron exchanges showed the lowest proportion of personal attacks, and not just on the part of the LO himself, who had pledged to take a new, consensual approach to PMQs (see Fetzer and Weizman 2018; Bull and Waddle 2019; and Section 6.2.2). There was a three-fold reduction in attacks by Cameron towards Corbyn compared with those he directed at Ed Miliband when he was LO (Waddle et al. 2019: 80). This is discussed further in the analysis of Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn PMQs in Chapter 6.

In the corpus of HoC speech events taken from the 1997 to 2001 parliamentary term, the PMQ exchanges between William Hague, LO, and Tony Blair, PM, exemplify a number of extremely adversarial characteristics. The spontaneity of these longer exchanges present particular problems for the PM, as Blair himself states in his memoir: 'For those thirty minutes ... the prime minister is essentially on the "at risk" register. It is the unpredictability that is so frightening' (Blair 2011). The analyses of these exchanges between Hague and Blair concur with previous descriptions of PMQs (Wilson 1990; Harris 2001; Bull and Wells 2012) which identify the predominant form of questioning turns as having a polar interrogative (yes/no) frame and a series of propositions, pre-suppositions and assertions which seek to gain information or action. These assertions and presuppositions present problems for the PM, as (Wilson 1990) observes: 'If politicians attend to the propositions contained in these pre/post statements they may be seen as trying to avoid the question. On the other hand, if politicians fail to attend to such propositions they may be seen as accepting certain controversial claims as matters of fact' (Wilson 1990: 137). To identify adversarial features of PMQs, the PMQ sessions in the 1997–2001 data corpus were transcribed and the questioning turns were identified as a feature likely to contribute to the adversarial style of the speech event. An example of this is given in Example 3.3 below.

Example 3.3 Exchange between William Hague and Tony Blair (PMQs 03/03/99, Transcript)

Key: WH = William Hague PM = Prime Minister MPs = noises made

- 1 WH (...) will the Prime Minister confirm that people waiting in this way of  
 2 whom there are many more in the last two years (.) do not appear on the  
 3 waiting list figures that were published yesterday (1)

- 4 PM Madam Speaker the waiting list figures (.) are published and calculated  
5 in precisely the same way under this government as under the previous  
6 government (.) and we are partly as a result of money over and above what the  
7 MPS [hear hear]  
8 Conservatives promised for the National Health Service (.) bringing waiting  
9 lists down (1)  
10 MPs [hear hear]  
11 WH Madam Speaker they are calculated in the same way and they show that waiting  
12 lists are higher under this government after two years (.) and they show that the  
13 real scandal is the number of people waiting to be on waiting lists (.) [like Mr]  
14 MPs [hear hear]  
15 Nelson (.) which is double what it was two years ago (.) and isn't the truth this  
16 that there are now nearly half a million people waiting for hospital  
17 appointments (.) as a direct result of managing the National Health Service for  
18 the sake of appearances instead of for the sake of patients (.) and aren't the  
19 MPs [hear hear]  
20 government now just spinning the figures and playing with politics instead of  
21 servicing the patients (1)  
22 MPs [hear hear]  
23 PM no Madam Speaker (.) first of all I'm grateful for his confirmation that we  
24 are indeed calculating the figures in precisely the same way as the last  
25 government (.) since his shadow health spokesman has been saying the  
26 MPs [laughter]  
27 opposite for month upon month (.) secondly we have brought down health  
28 service waiting lists after years of rising lists (.) and as for the number of out-  
29 patients (.) I can actually give him the latest figures (.) that during the third  
30 quarter of nineteen eighty-eight nineteen ninety eight ninety nine (.) there  
31 were sixty-eight thousand more treated than in the previous quarter (1)  
32 MPs [hear hear]  
33 WH well I'll give him the figures too Madam Speaker (.) four hundred and sixty  
34 eight thousand people (.) waiting for hospital appointments compared to two  
35 hundred and forty-eight thousand only two years ago (.) they calculate the  
36 figures in the same way but they have moved people who would have been on  
37 waiting lists to waiting to be on the waiting list (.) and the chair the chairman of  
38 MPs [hear hear]  
39 the BMA consultants committee has said it himself he says if all you are  
40 doing (.) is shortening your waiting list for operations and waiting lists to see a  
41 consultant are going up (.) then your proper waiting list is getting longer (.) so  
42 shouldn't he stop spending a hundred and fifty million pounds dragoning  
43 GPs into new bureaucracies (.) and concentrate it on this instead (.) and reduce  
44 MPs [hear hear]  
45 the real waiting lists in our health service (2)  
46 MPs [hear hear]  
47 PM no Madam speaker because he is actually wrong on both counts (.) not merely  
48 are we treating more out-patients than before (.) we are also treating several  
49 hundred thousand more patients (.) so for both in-patient and out-patient lists  
50 we are treating more people (.) in addition from the first of April (.) this  
51 government is going to introduce twenty-one billion pounds extra spending in  
52 the National Health Service (.) having sorted out the mess left behind us (.) by  
53 the Tories (.) that twenty-one billion pounds (.) is opposed by his party (.)  
54 MPs [hear hear]  
55 described as reckless and irresponsible (.) and that is why this country will  
56 trust us not him with the health service

Table 3.3 *Question forms used by Hague in PMQs (3 March 1999)*

- 
- 
- 1) Line 1–3: *Will the Prime Minister confirm that people waiting (...) do not appear in the figures.*
  - 2) Line 15–21: *Isn't the truth this that there are half a million people waiting for hospital appointments as a direct result of managing the National Health Service for the sake of appearances instead of for the sake of patients.*
  - 3) (In the same turn) *Aren't the government now just spinning the figures and playing with politics instead of serving the patients.*
  - 4) Line 42–5: *Shouldn't he stop spending a hundred and fifty million pounds dragooning GPs into new bureaucracies (...) and reduce the real waiting lists in our health service.*
- 
- 

The forms used in the four questions from Example 3.3 are:

- (1) Interrogative request (with *will*) and an embedded clause which is a completed proposition.
  - (2), (3) and (4): Declarative with a negative interrogative frame.
- 
- 

The types of question used in this extract are features of an adversarial exchange, as are the direct refutations that are given as responses. Some types of question are more constraining than others in terms of how easy it is to respond to them or in other words whether they are conducive to a particular response (Harris 1984; Wilson 1990). Table 3.3, shows the question forms that are used by Hague.

The questions in Table 3.3 require a yes/no response and are therefore conducive. Additionally, contracted negatives in the initial position of a yes/no question (in questions 2, 3, 4) are 'used to suggest that the proposition under question is one which is taken to be true (taken for granted)' (Wilson 1990: 141). Wilson suggests that these discourse items can account for the 'leading', nature of questions (1990: 141). Evidence for this is also present in Example 3.3 above as four out of six questions contained negative contractions as part of a negative interrogative frame with declaratives, a structure that Harris (1984) also found to be highly conducive. Another particle evident in question 1 in Table 3.3 is the modal verb '*will*'. This was a feature used frequently in Wilson's (1990: 146) corpus of questions from PMQ sessions. He claims the use of '*will*' makes a refusal difficult for the respondent because *will* is more polite than other modal verbs such as '*can*'.

In this way both the linguistic items used within questions and the form of the questions themselves contribute to an adversarial style in PMQs. MPs cannot ignore very negative assertions made about them or their party, but they must also reply to the final question in a questioning turn. Table 3.4 summarises how Blair responds to one of Hague's turns.

The PM responds to the yes/no question first but gives a 'no' response to a question that is conducive to answering 'yes'. He continues the turn by

Table 3.4 *The assertions, question and responses to one of Hague's turns*  
(Example 3.3 lines 11–31)

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Hague: Assertion 1 – there is no change to the way figures are calculated.
Assertion 2 – waiting lists are higher under this government.
Assertion 3 – people are waiting to be on waiting lists.
Assertion 4 – half a million people are waiting because of poor management.
Question – Aren't the government spinning the figures instead of serving the patients.
Blair: <i>No Madam Speaker</i> . Responds to the final question.
Responds to assertion 1 – agrees with Hague that there is no change.
Responds to assertion 2 – waiting lists are lower.
Responds to assertion 4 – quotes latest out-patient figures to show they are low.

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responding to three of Hague's assertions, separating the points from each other by explicitly calling the first two 'first' and 'second'. It is noticeable that the PM does not respond to Hague's third assertion (that people are waiting to get onto the waiting lists), and Hague picks up on this and targets the subject a second time in his next turn (Example 3.3, line 37). Blair's initial 'no' response is a very direct, unmitigated response to the question which conforms to none of the politeness or face-saving conventions that would be appropriate in less adversarial contexts. This strategy has the effect of strongly negating the proposition in Hague's question. Blair uses this strategy in three of the six questions in the two transcripts and in each case, there is no hesitation or mitigation of the negative response.

In this way, both Hague and Blair use what can be described as adversarial linguistic features in their questions and responses, respectively. Hague uses polar interrogatives and other conducive forms which have limited options for a response. This puts maximum interactional pressure on Blair to grant assent to the presuppositions and assertions with which Hague prefaces his question, whilst negotiating the yes/no response to the question itself and attempting to introduce the topics that show the government in a favourable light. Blair's direct unmitigated responses (expressed indirectly through the Speaker) that do not respect the face needs of his opponent while directly refuting Hague's claims. However, while the form of questions in PMQ sessions reflects the adversarial nature of the speech event, the form does not determine whether a contribution is adversarial. The questions are constructed in predictable, formulaic, ritualised patterns that can be used for confrontational or supportive questions alike. In this way a conducive question form using 'will' as in 'Will my Right Honourable friend take this opportunity to join me in congratulating the workforce?' can be supportive of the Prime Minister or Minister giving the response. For each of the 200 questions in the PMQ and DQ sessions the

Table 3.5 *Table showing the number of questions asked by men and women MPs showing their parliamentary status and political party in a corpus of PMQs and DQ sessions 1998–2001*

Men/women Party	Men					Women				
	Status					Status				
	Low	Mid	High	Total	%	Low	Mid	High	Total	%
Labour	23	33	2	58	29	13	16	1	30	15
Conservative	28	27	22	77	39	1	4	1	6	3
LibDem	0	0	20	20	10	0	0	0	0	0
other	4	1	4	9	4	0	0	0	0	0
Total	55	61	48	164		14	20	2	36	
% of all Qs	28	30	24		82	7	10	1		18

form of the question was noted, and it was found that 160 of the questions (80 per cent) took a conducive form and 40 (20 per cent) a non-conductive form. This concurs with previous findings that the predominant form of PMQs are yes/no questions (Bull and Wells 2012; Fenton-Smith 2008; Harris 2001; Wilson 1990). This means that conducive forms are used for both adversarial and non-adversarial questions (as half the questions were adversarial and half non-adversarial see Table 3.7 and Figure 3.2) and although they contribute to the adversarial nature of question times, the form of the question itself is not a marker of an adversarial question.

The number of questions asked by men and women MPs in PMQ and DQ sessions overall is a marker of the extent to which both groups of MPs participate in the most adversarial speech event in the HoC. Table 3.5 above shows the number of questions in this small data corpus asked in PMQ and DQ sessions by men and women MPs according to their parliamentary status and political party. The parliamentary status of MPs was divided into low status MPs who were backbenchers with no other parliamentary responsibilities; mid status MPs who had some particular responsibilities (for example a select committee member, or a parliamentary secretary to a Minister); and high status MPs who were party leaders, Ministers, Shadow Ministers or opposition spokespersons.

Table 3.5 shows that 82% (164) of questions in the eleven DQT and PMQT sessions were asked by men MPs and 18% (36) of questions were asked by women MPs. In this sample the number of questions asked is exactly in proportion to the representation of men and women MPs in parliament (82 per cent and 18 per cent respectively).

In order to establish how many of these questions were adversarial and having discounted the form of the question as a characteristic that determines the adversarial nature of a question, the detailed examination of the PMQ

sessions identified a predominance of the use of contrasts in the classical rhetorical schema of 'antithesis' which occur both between and within Blair's and Hague's speeches. Antithesis can be linked to a combative political style where 'two contrasting positions are juxtaposed: typically, one position is represented as legitimate while the other is illegitimate' (Charteris-Black 2014: 44). As Adams (1999) observation of televised US political debates, the two speakers construct their opposition to one another by alternating between 'pro' and 'con' attitudes towards a particular topic, which have also been described as 'unbridgeable dichotomies' (Martin 2014: 76). This is evident in Example 3.3 above where the 'up' and 'down' of waiting list numbers is the central claim of each speaker respectively, while another example from a later exchange in the same PMQ session was the 'up' and 'down' of tax rates. The antonyms that orientate the listener towards these contrasts often contain particular word stress. Hague stresses that the waiting list are high on the words 'more' (line 2), 'higher' (line 12), 'double' (line 15), 'up' (line 41), 'longer' (line 41). The PM stresses that they are low on the words 'down' (line 9) and 'more' (line 31). This is one of the standard 'models of argument' that Cockcroft et al. (2014: 66) identify as the 'oppositional model' which functions on the basis of contrasts and has many subvarieties, such as 'contraries' (e.g. good/bad); contradictions (e.g. good/not good); privatives (e.g. blind/sighted) and relatives (e.g. parent/child). For example, in Example 3.3 (lines 17–21), Hague contrasts the government's management of the NHS as being 'for the sake of appearances instead of for the sake of patients' and 'playing with politics instead of serving the patients'.

There are a number of examples in the PMQ sample of these types of contrasts including contrasts between what the government promised to do and what they are actually doing (PMQs 03/09/99), and many contrasts between what 'this government' is doing and what the 'Tory' or 'previous' government did. Typically, a speaking turn ends with a contrast of this kind, for example the PM's final turn in Example 3.3 ends 'that is why this country will trust us and not him with the health service' (lines 55–56); and another final turn ends 'it is this side that is developing (...) the new deal delivering jobs where the Tories delivered despair' (PMQs 03/09/99). Similarly, in the same session, Hague's final turn ends 'before we debate next week's budget isn't it time he started to tell the truth about the last one'. These contrasts are strengthened by the use of pronouns to establish group identities and allegiances in order to emphasise the differences between 'us' and 'them', a category identified by van Dijk (2008) as being particularly relevant to the critical analysis of parliamentary debates. For example, the PM says 'they think it doesn't matter that these families are getting more money' contrasting what 'they' (the opposition) think with what 'we' (the government) think (PMQs 03/03/99).

Another set of features that characterise these exchanges as adversarial is the way in which the speakers describe their opponents and the personal attacks or ad hominem arguments they use to undermine each other. Walton (2009) categorises different types of ad hominem arguments which, regardless of the logical fallacy inherent within them, he claims have a place in political discourse alongside rational deliberation, according to Aristotle's notion of 'ethos'. Ethotic arguments rest on the idea that the best person to give advice on how to proceed in rational deliberation is a 'practically wise person of good character' (Walton 2009: 197). This means that ad hominem arguments pointing out different types of ethotic flaws have an important role to play in political discourse. Politicians must display an ethos that is not elusive otherwise 'there appears to be no consistent set of values she or he stands for a long-term basis' (Walton 2009: 198), but once this ethos is established the politician becomes open to attack. Christopher Reid (2014: 52) analyses the personal accounts of the ways in which Tony Blair (2011) and his advisor Alasdair Campbell (2011) attempted to counter Hague's supremacy in PMQs, showing that their preoccupation lay with providing a 'plausible critique of his character'. Reid cites the rhetorical technique of 'paradistole' to 'describe a trait of character in either a positive or negative sense: courage could be renamed negatively as rashness or rashness could be renamed positively as courage' (Reid 2014: 52).

Similarly, Margaret Thatcher's neutral trait of being 'determined' could be described eulogistically as 'resolute' and dystologically as 'intransigent'. Reid notes that once Campbell and Blair had identified that Hague 'was a debater and not a leader' (Campbell 2011: 235, cited in Reid 2014: 53) and that this could be used to sum up his leadership as someone who had 'good jokes, lousy judgement', then Blair was able to constrain Hague's performances 'since he could not be seen to occupy the rhetorical space in which his adversaries were trying to trap him' (Reid 2014: 54). Reid describes other ways in which ad hominem arguments have been used in PMQs, with David Cameron (PM) alluding to Ed Milliband's (LO) weakness as a leader and as a person without character. In reply, Milliband displayed Cameron's self-confidence as complacency and remoteness, his forthrightness as belligerence (Reid 2014: 55). Features of ad hominem or personal attack arguments are therefore an important element of the adversarial nature of PMQs with personalization functioning to: highlight cognitive differences; equivocate (avoiding an answer by attacking an opponent) and to attempt 'to disarm or deconstruct their opponent via a concentrated attack on aspects of their character' (Waddle et al. 2019: 80).

The two most common forms of ad hominem argument in PMQs are what Walton (2009) classifies as different types of 'direct ethotic argument', one from moral accountability and the other from veracity. Morally accountable arguments can be seen in Example 3.3 above when Blair describes the Conservative government as 'reckless and irresponsible' (line 55). Hague



describes ‘the real scandal’ (line 13) of waiting lists and later in the same PMQ session says Blair ‘failed to answer’ a question and says that the government have raised taxes ‘by stealth’ implying morally unacceptable forms of deceit. Claims from veracity are also common. Hague describes Blair as ‘spinning the figures’ (line 20) which implies some form of deceit in relation to the ‘real’ figures. Speakers often claim ‘the truth’ of their positions and in doing so imply the falsity of their opponent’s positions, as in Example 3.3, line 15, Hague claims ‘isn’t the truth this ...’. Other claims to veracity on the same PMQ session (03/03/99) include Hague referring to ‘the actual truth of what the CBI say’, and asking ‘who is telling the truth him or the CBI?’ One of the rules of the HoC is that MPs are not allowed to say that other MPs are lying, but this is one of the most common implications made about opponents. In the PMQ session (03/03/99) Hague says that the PM ‘told the House business tax had come down and it is an indisputable fact that it has gone up by billions of pounds’, and he says that it is time that Blair ‘started to tell the truth’.

For the purposes of describing the features of adversarial language, in addition to these two direct ethotic arguments from moral accountability and veracity, it was noted that there are often generic personal attacks that do not necessarily fall into either of these categories such as one speaker saying the other’s claim is ‘complete and utter rubbish’ (PMQs 03/03/99). These types of generic attacks that cannot be straightforwardly attributed to morality or truthfulness were therefore viewed as a third feature of the adversarial nature of the personal attack argument particularly common in PMQs.<sup>5</sup> In addition to this, the final adversarial feature noted in the PMQ exchanges is the rhetorical strategy of hyperbole where opponents or their actions are described in a deliberately aggravated, exaggerated way. This is a feature that ‘dramatically raises the stakes in political debates’ (Martin 2014: 81). In Example 3.3, Hague says that Blair should stop ‘dragooning GPs into new bureaucracies’ (lines 42–3), and Blair refers to ‘the mess’ (line 52) left behind by the Conservative government. Later in the same PMQ session Blair says that ‘the Tories delivered despair’ (PMQs 03/03/99).

Categories of adversarial language were therefore identified inductively by close examination of the PMQs data in the corpus. This method of determining categories is necessarily flawed and instrumental in arriving at an applicable model of adversarial features that can be used across different speech events to establish the adversarial nature of exchanges. One problem is that the categories are not mutually exclusive and in some cases an utterance belongs to more than one category (for example, an utterance can use contrasts and hyperbole and make an argument from veracity at the same time). In other cases, the classification of, for example, a morally accountable action relies on contextual information which may have a range of possible

interpretations. In cases where the categories overlapped, each adversarial characteristic was counted separately. The categorisation was carried out as consistently as possible, accounting for the context of the utterance to interpret the meaning to ensure that within this corpus of data, utterances were classified consistently.

To identify whether the questions asked by MPs in this data set were adversarial or not, the use of the adversarial features described here were noted for each question and response. Seven adversarial categories were used, these were: opposing stances between MPs (such as the 'up and down' or 'pro and con' stances); positive and negative contrasts (typically between the actions of the speaker's party and the opposing party); the use of personal pronouns to strengthen these contrasts (such as *we*, *they*, *them* and *us*). Secondly, hyperbolic, aggravated descriptions; generic *ad hominem* arguments or personal attacks, and direct ethotic *ad hominem* arguments from morality and veracity. The presence or absence of these features allowed a question or response to be classified as adversarial or non-adversarial. An example of the way in which I recorded the data is shown in Table 3.6.

As Table 3.6 shows, the men Conservative MP uses three different types of adversarial features in his question. One '+' in the grid represents one or two instances of the particular feature, a second '+' was given if there were more than two instances of a feature. If a question contained one or more of the features in any of the seven different categories it was counted as being adversarial. This method of accounting for adversarial features also meant that it was possible to give each question and response an adversarial score out of fourteen (the maximum number of adversarial points possible).

Out of the 200 questions in the corpus of PMQ and DQ sessions, 101 were adversarial (containing one or more of the seven adversarial features described above) and 99 non-adversarial (containing none of the seven adversarial features). Because this particular sample is very balanced, the numbers in each category in Table 3.7 also represent approximate percentages of the total number of adversarial questions asked. The figures show that 92 adversarial questions were asked by men and 9 by women. This means that only one adversarial question out of every eleven was asked by a woman MP and 10 out of eleven by men which is disproportionate to the one fifth of seats occupied by women and four fifths occupied by men. Most of the adversarial questions (56) were asked by Conservative MPs, 32 by Labour MPs and 12 by Liberal Democrat MPs. Out of the adversarial Conservative questions only 2 were asked by women MPs (although they made up 8 per cent of the party), whereas women Labour MPs asked 7 of the Labour adversarial questions which is just under the one to four ratio of women to men in the Labour party as a whole. However, this still means that out of the 30 questions asked by women Labour MPs only seven (23 per cent)

Table 3.6 *The way in which adversarial features were classified*

	Question function	Question form	Contrasts		Description				
			p/c	+/-	pp	Hyperbole	Generic	Direct ethotic	
MP									
Swayne	Criticises government	<i>will the PM take time</i>							
Con. male		<i>out of his ... day to ...</i>				++	+		+
<i>S.C. Member</i>									
PM response	Defends policies/attacks		+	+				+	
	<i>Con.</i>								

Table 3.7 Table showing the number of adversarial questions asked by men and women MPs according to their political party and status

Men/women Party	Men				Women			
	Status				Status			
	Low	Mid	High	Total (%)	Low	Mid	High	Total (%)
Labour	9	15	1	25	3	3	1	7
Conservative	18	18	18	54	0	1	1	2
LibDem	0	0	12	12	0	0	0	0
Other	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Total (%)	28	33	31	92	3	4	2	9

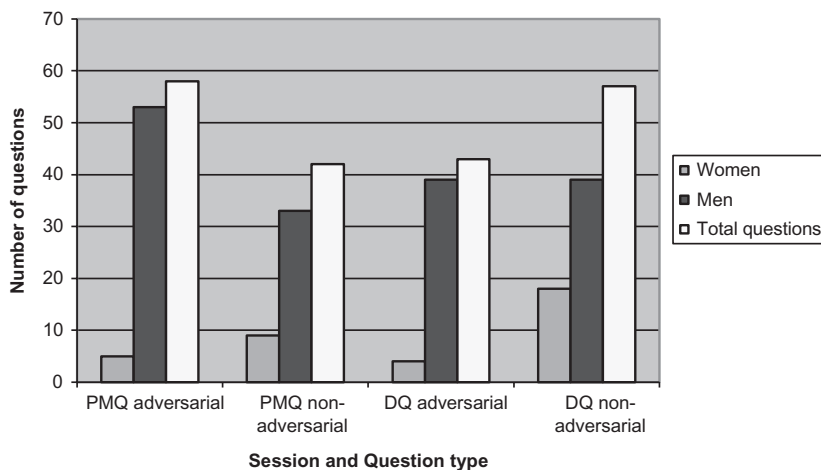


Figure 3.2 Graph showing the number of adversarial and non-adversarial questions asked by men and women MPs in PMQT and DQT sessions.

were adversarial whereas out of the 58 questions asked by Labour men, 25 (43 per cent) were adversarial. This is a substantial difference which cannot be accounted for simply by differences in status groups between men and women Labour MPs.

The number of adversarial and non-adversarial questions asked by MPs differed in PMQs and DQT sessions. Figure 3.2 shows the numbers of adversarial and non-adversarial questions asked by male and female MPs in the different sessions. It shows that out of the 200 questions asked in PMQs and

DQ sessions, PMQs contained more adversarial questions (58) and fewer non-adversarial questions (42), whilst the DQs contained more non-adversarial questions (57) and fewer adversarial questions (43). This shows that out of the two types of session and as predicted, PMQs were more adversarial than DQs. In PMQs, men MPs asked more adversarial questions (53) and fewer non-adversarial questions (33), whereas in DQs men MPs asked the same number of adversarial and non-adversarial questions (39). Out of the questions asked by women MPs in PMQs, 36 per cent were adversarial and 64 per cent non-adversarial (five adversarial and nine non-adversarial), and out of the questions women MPs asked in DQT sessions, only 18 per cent were adversarial and 82 per cent were non-adversarial (four adversarial and 18 non-adversarial questions).

As shown in Table 3.6, each question was given an adversarial score out of a possible maximum of fourteen points according to the use of different adversarial features. Out of the adversarial questions asked by men MPs, most of the questions contained one or two adversarial points. Conservative men asked the most adversarial questions with eight questions containing four or five adversarial points. A few exceptionally adversarial questions (of between seven and fourteen points) were all asked by William Hague in PMQs, so this suggests that this number of adversarial features are not typically used in adversarial questions but are contingent on Hague's style and probably his LO role.

The data also suggests that higher status MPs ask questions that are more adversarial than those asked by low status MPs. This is particularly evident in the questions asked by Conservative men, as those who were low status asked questions with between one and four points. Whereas the mid status conservative men asked questions with between one to six adversarial points. This is also evident in the questions asked by Labour men, with the low status MPs asking questions with one to three points and the mid status MPs asking questions with one to four points (although mid status MPs asked nearly twice as many questions as low status MPs). In the Liberal Democrat party adversarial questions were only asked by high status MPs and most of these were asked by the leader of the party. Out of the nine adversarial questions asked by women MPs, six of them were questions with only one adversarial point. One low status women Labour MP asked a question with four points, and one Conservative woman Minister asked a question with eight adversarial points. The number of questions asked is so small that it is difficult to interpret these results further than to say that there is evidence that at least two women MPs ask very adversarial questions.

The responses that the PM and Government Ministers give to questions in PMQs and DQs provide more evidence about the ways in which MPs use adversarial features. In PMQs, the PM gave 62 adversarial responses to 100

Table 3.8 *Table showing adversarial and non-adversarial responses by senior and junior MPs in DQ sessions*

Men/women Adversarial/ Non-adv.	Men			Women		
	Adversarial	Non- adversarial	Total (%)	Adversarial	Non- adversarial	Total (%)
Status: Senior	26	26	52	6	15	21
Status: Junior	6	15	21	1	5	6
Total	32	41	73	7	20	27

questions. As 58 adversarial questions were asked in PMQ sessions, the PM's responses included four responses that were not prompted by an adversarial question. These four responses were replying to Labour MPs who had asked questions that praised their own government, to which the PM agreed, and then went on to criticise Conservative policies. With the exception of these replies to supportive questions, the number of adversarial features in the PM's responses corresponded to the number of adversarial features in the questions. For example, in the exchanges between Hague and Blair, the PM responded to Hague's questions with an equal or greater number of adversarial features than were contained in the question. Additionally, the direct, unmitigated response of 'no' identified above only occurred in these highly adversarial exchanges between the PM and the LO.

The responses in DQs were much more variable than those in PMQs as different Ministers and junior Ministers are responsible for responding to questions within particular DQs. Table 3.8 shows the numbers of adversarial and non-adversarial responses by different men and women Ministers according to their positions as senior or junior Ministers. The table shows that 52 per cent of responses were given by senior Ministers who were men and 21 per cent by junior men. Senior women Ministers also gave 21 per cent of responses and junior women Ministers only 6 per cent of responses.

The same number of junior men and senior women Ministers' responses were adversarial (6), and only one out of the six responses given by junior women Ministers was adversarial. These figures show that senior men MPs give the most adversarial responses and junior women MPs the least adversarial responses as a proportion of the total number of responses that each group gave. This suggests that it is possible that variation in the number of adversarial responses does relate to the gender of the Ministers

with men MPs giving a higher proportion of adversarial responses and women Ministers giving a higher proportion of non-adversarial responses. Additionally, the fact that there was a difference in the number of adversarial responses given by junior men and women Ministers compared to senior men and women Ministers (as a proportion of the total number of responses each group gave) suggests that the variation of adversarial features is related to the seniority of MPs.

The two main questions addressed in this section asked whether linguistic features that comprise an adversarial style can be identified in parliamentary Question Time Sessions; and whether the use of these features varies between men and women MPs from different parties and from different status groups. It was shown that there are identifiable linguistic features that make question time exchanges adversarial. These features include the use of contrasts within and between MPs' turns, and the way in which MPs describe their opponents, particularly using *ad hominem* arguments. The systematic analysis of 200 questions from PMQ and DQ sessions show that while men and women MPs asked the same number of questions as a proportion of the representation of these groups in the HoC, men asked more adversarial questions than women MPs. This finding was also evident in the responses given by Ministers in DQ sessions as women Ministers gave fewer adversarial responses than men. The use of adversarial features also varied according to the party membership and the status of MPs within the parliamentary hierarchy. Most of the adversarial questions were asked by Conservative MPs, reflecting their party's position as the main opposition to the government. Labour MPs asked fewer adversarial questions, yet they had different choices in terms of the function of their questions as many Labour MPs chose to ask questions that contained no adversarial features and that praised the government (their own party). Although these questions do not contain the adversarial characteristics identified above, these types of questions contribute to the 'deep structure or rhetorical situation of PMQs itself' (Reid 2014: 45) as they overtly support one party in relation to another. As the Labour party had the highest proportion of women MPs and it was Labour MPs, not Conservatives (with a low proportion of women MPs) who praised their party in this way, this may partially explain why women MPs asked fewer adversarial questions overall. This could be investigated further by examining the frequency of adversarial questions asked when the Labour party is in opposition as possibly the number of adversarial questions asked by women Labour MPs (or any party with proportionally higher numbers of women than the Conservative party) would increase with their oppositional role. However, this factor does not account for the lower number of adversarial responses given by women Ministers

compared with their male counterparts because the results for women MPs' adversarial questions and women Ministers' adversarial responses are both lower than those for men, and this suggests that gender is a factor affecting MPs' use of adversarial features. All of these points are suggestive rather than indicative of findings, as the numbers used for this study were small, and only used as a guide for qualitative interpretations of the ethnographic enquiry.

The suggestion that most women MPs who asked questions did not adopt an adversarial linguistic style in question times bears out claims made by earlier language and gender researchers (such as Coates 1994; Holmes 1992, 1995; Tannen 1984), and from leadership studies (Eagly and Steffen 1986) that women avoid using a 'typically competitive, argumentative and verbally aggressive style' (Holmes 1992: 131). However, as mentioned in Chapter 1, women's discursive styles in public contexts can be viewed as a way of managing 'socially ascribed expectations that pull in opposite directions' (Walsh 2001: 274) when acting agentively or authoritatively in public contexts. In this way, Judith Baxter suggests that girls find it hard 'to speak effectively in public contexts because of the powerless ways they are positioned in the classroom (and the world) by the discourse of gender differentiation' (1999: 232). The expectation not only that women will speak consensually, avoiding adversarial language, but that women will 'civilise' traditionally male-dominated professions is an assumption contingent on the belief in gendered linguistic styles and can be viewed as one of the obstacles that women face when entering politics. As explained by Dahlerup (1988), women are caught between at least two conflicting expectations: firstly, they must prove that they are similar to and just as capable as men politicians, and secondly, they must prove it makes a difference when women are elected (1988: 279). The 'civilising difference' expectation and the possible consequences for women of behaving in counter-stereotypic, adversarial ways are explored in Section 5.1 and in the case studies in Chapters 6 and 7.

Apart from these social expectations that are thought to constrain women's behaviour, the data also points away from the generalisation that 'women do not use adversarial language'. This is because *some* women use adversarial language in their questions and responses and one Conservative women MP scored eight adversarial points for a single question, which was the highest adversarial score of any question other than in the Hague/Blair PMQ exchanges. This suggests that there are differences between women MPs' use of adversarial features. Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May's performances at PMQs, and those of Harriet Harman, Angela Eagle and Emily Thornberry (standing in for different Prime Ministers and LOs on different occasions) attest to the fact that women proficiently fulfil this role, and do so using the



extreme adversarial norms of the event. Harriet Harman states that when she took part in PMQs, she acted confrontationally in accordance with the expectations of her party, saying 'I had to do it that way' (Lovenduski 2014b: 151). Theresa May's adversarial language in PMQs is explored in more detail in Chapter 6 and the extremely adversarial repertoire of Hillary Clinton and Julia Gillard are discussed in Chapter 7. These studies of women leaders, along with the analysis conducted here suggest there is no *straightforward* relationship between gender and adversarial language: there are no clear-cut differences with respect to gender and there is variation in the use of adversarial features within the groups of men and women MPs. Some men use non-adversarial language and some women use extremely adversarial language. The complexity of the use of adversarial language may also be impacted by other intervening factors, such as seniority and party affiliation, with an MPs' position as a senior or junior politician and as a member of the governing or opposition party being an important factor in whether they perform confrontational rhetoric as part of their parliamentary role.

### 3.4 Changing the 'Key' of Debates

#### 3.4.1 Introduction

One of the most striking characteristics of the House of Commons is that although it is an extremely formal, regulated forum in which serious debate takes place, there are many examples of humorous exchanges, banter and ironic gestures. These non-serious exchanges can be viewed as having particular functions, and as a departure from the official norms of serious debate in which a humorous or ironic 'key' (Hymes 1972a, 1974) replaces the usual gravitas of debate proceedings. The ability of MPs to manipulate and change the 'key' of a speech event from its serious norm to a marked humorous or ironic tone is likely to construct them as powerful participants in the debating chamber. This section focuses on the functions of humour and the extent to which it is gendered in this CoP: do men and women engage in humorous exchanges, and are they equally positioned as targets of humour? Additionally, I identify the practice of 'filibustering' as a fundamentally ironic rule-breaking practice that exploits the serious 'key' of debates in order to gain political advantage. The full 60-hour data corpus of video recordings from the 1998 to 2001 corpus is used for this analysis, which comprises not only the debates and Question Times used in the previous sections, but all the different types of speech event which occur in the debating chamber, including Private Member's Debates, Private Notice Questions, Statements by Government Ministers and Opposition Debates.<sup>6</sup>

3.4.2 *Humour in House of Commons Debates*

Within the 60-hour 1998–2001 data corpus described above there are many instances of humorous exchanges. The frequency with which humorous talk occurs is in some ways surprising, as it has been suggested that whilst humour is pervasive in casual conversation, it is typically less frequent in formal contexts (Adelswärd 1989; Mulkay 1988; Holmes and Marra 2002). This suggests that humour has particular functions within the context of HoC debating chamber. Additionally, humorous talk in this sample of parliamentary discourse is mostly produced by men rather than women MPs. This section aims to identify humorous talk, thereby adding to the ethnographic description of the systems of shared understandings of the CoP. I also discuss the gendered nature of the construction of humour in the HoC, which I analyse in greater detail when considering homosocial bonding in Chapters 5 and 6.

Assuming laughter can be linked to humour, many of the instances of laughter in the HoC are produced within adversarial exchanges. For example, when Tony Blair attacks the LO, William Hague, in PMQs, it is common for members of his party to laugh and cheer at every point scored by Blair against his opponent. These personal attacks and political jibes are regarded as examples of 'humorous talk' for the purposes of this analysis, and this humour is seen as an integral part of the adversarial attack. The laughter of MPs in these exchanges is part of the verbal assault upon an opponent, rather than a spontaneous response to a humorous utterance. Example 3.4 shows that although Ian McCartney's comment about his own accent and Michael Fabricant's hair (on line 5) is clearly intended to be humorous, it does have an adversarial function as well. The humour is offered as a response to a serious question, so it serves to change the 'key' of the debate, evade the question and also to belittle the content of the question and the questioner. What is unusual about this type of humour (compared to the other types of adversarial personal attacks studied in the previous section) is that the topic (Fabricant's hair) is ridiculous, and that it is accompanied by a self-deprecating remark by Ian McCartney about his own accent.

Example 3.4 Trade and Industry Questions (1) (02/04/98, Transcript)

MF = Michael Fabricant (Conservative), IM = Ian McCartney (Labour Minister)

- 1 MF: what does the chairman of the low pay commission say about what the  
 2 minimum wage should be in Northern Ireland say (.) compared to  
 3 south east United Kingdom (1)  
 MPs: [hear hear]  
 4 IM: I'll I'll deal with the Honourable Gentleman (.) if he doesn't mention  
 5 my accent I won't mention his hair (6)  
 MPs: [laughter]  
 6 IMP: It's not his hair (4)  
 MPs [laughter]

- 7 IM: m my Honourable (1) my Honourable friend er from a sedentary  
 8 position er (.) mentioned it is not his hair (.) I would not be so so cruel  
 9 as to suggest such a thing (2)
- MPs [laughter]
- 10 IM: er er c c could I say to the Honourable gentleman (.) he is trying hard  
 11 to to defend the indefensible (.) the truth of the matter is (.) that the  
 12 British people want the National Minimum Wage to meet the needs (turn  
 13 continues)

In this example, the self-deprecating reference may be a strategy which allows him to ridicule an opponent whilst making the humour seem more acceptable because he is also directing it at himself. It could also be that the use of humour in these examples actually indicates a degree of cross-party solidarity. The nature of McCartney's humour diffuses any real hostility and emphasises that both he and his opponent are on the same level. In this way, the use of humour may signal a shared membership (over-riding party political differences) in which adversarial norms are understood to be an accepted superficial enactment of the differences between MPs. This solidarity between men MPs may also be one of the ways in which the fraternal networks (Walsh 2001) and the culture of the 'gentleman's club' is perpetrated. Other possible functions of this type of exchange may be as a 'time buying' strategy where the humorous talk allows the responding MP time to construct a reply. McCartney also appears to be inviting the audience of other MPs to respond to his humour as he leaves time, for laughter at the end of his turn. Within this time the humour can also be developed by other MPs. This is shown clearly in Example 3.4 where an MP intervenes illegally to collaborate with the humour (line 6) which is then responded to by McCartney (line, 7–9).

Humorous talk may also function to keep the attention of the MPs in the chamber. Just as collective illegal interventions (such as cheering and shouting) serve to involve the audience in what is being said, so humour and the response of laughter serves to direct MPs' attention towards the content of speeches. An example of how humour arrests the attention of MPs occurs in the same Question Time session when McCartney returns once more to the humour originated in Example 3.4. This is shown in Example 3.5.

Example 3.5 Trade and Industry Questions (2) (02/04/98, Transcript)

IM = Ian McCartney (Labour Minister)

- 1 IM: I put a question to the Honourable Gentleman (.) do you know of any  
 2 country in the world (.) who have introduced a National (.) a National  
 3 minimum wage for hairdressing that has stopped those in that country  
 4 from having a haircut (.) it is absolute nonsense to suggest that people  
 5 MPs [laughter]

6 people (.) will lose will lose out by the introduction of a National  
 7 Minimum Wage (3)  
 8 MPs [laughter]

Here, some twenty minutes after the extract represented in Example 3.4, McCartney alludes to hairdressing and 'having a haircut' (line 4), but it is not until line 7 when he completes the turn that the other MPs in the chamber fully comprehend the allusion. The humour is not as overt as that in Example 3.4, but as it does serve to gain the attention of the MPs at a point in the day when there is a lot of talking and movement in the chamber because PMQs is about to start.

The fact that instances of humorous talk most commonly begin in the first utterances made by a new speaker also suggests that it may have a time-gaining or attention-gaining function. Humour can be seen as a way of allowing a new speaker to set up a speaking turn – both to organise what they are going to say and to make sure that the audience is listening. Example 3.6 shows an example of this 'setting up' function.

Example 3.6 Amendments to Crime and Disorder Bill (22/06/98, Transcript)

VC= Vernon Coaker (Labour backbencher)

1 VC: can I first of all Mr Deputy Speaker apologise er to the House for the  
 2 fact that er that er I too missed er much of the er contributions from the  
 3 respective front benches (.) er and could I ask the Home Secretary  
 4 whether it is possible to have such an anti-social behaviour order on  
 5 some of our train companies (laughs) so so that we can actually arrive  
 6 on time and er when we plan to and when we plan to do (.) er on a on a  
 7 serious point can I just very much agree (turn continues).

Another common feature is that these types of interactions often stretch over several turns and are constructed between different MPs. Often a Question Time session will have an intertextual running topic which is exploited for humorous purposes, as with the joke about Fabricant's hair in Examples 3.4 and 3.5. Another example of this occurred in PMQs when the Prime Minister began by listing his engagements for the day which included an appointment to be interviewed on the 'World Wide Web'. This is alluded to throughout the session. Firstly, Dennis Skinner MP starts his question to the Prime Minister 'When I was surfing the internet today ...' which creates much laughter from MPs. The Prime Minister responds to this by saying that he had come across a website called 'meet your heroes live' which included Dennis Skinner 'Madonna, the Wombles and the Spice Girls' which is also responded to with laughter from MPs. Finally, Hague uses the running joke in an adversarial way when he says that he's not surprised the Prime Minister needs two

weeks to prepare questions for the internet sessions as he certainly cannot answer them live. The intertextual and homosocial functions of these running jokes are discussed further in the contemporary analyses of HoC PMQs in Chapters 5, 6 and 8.

The functions of humour within debates therefore fall into two broad categories. First, humour has an organisational function whereby it helps to start an MP's speech, or it keeps the attention of the listeners. Secondly, the use of humour has a range of functions related to the nature of the humorous mode itself. According to Mulkay (1988) 'humorous' and 'serious' can be thought of as distinct modes where 'humorous' is the subordinate mode. Mary Crawford claims that:

The key to understanding how people accomplish serious interactional goals through this subordinate mode of discourse is the recognition that people can use humour to convey messages that they can then deny, or develop further, depending upon how the message is received by the hearer. Because it is indirect and allusive, the humour mode protects the joker from the consequences that his or her statement would have conveyed directly in the serious mode. (1995: 134)

This idea of the humour – allowing the speaker to 'get away with' more than is possible in the serious mode or 'speak "off the record"' (Eggins and Slade 1997: 156) – is particularly pertinent in debates where the whole speech event is a competitive arena. Opponents can score more points by using humour than they can by using the serious mode alone. Whilst humour can be used to score points against opponents it can also function to minimise the threat to the 'positive face' (Brown and Levinson 1987) of participants. This means that whilst using humour to score points against a participant, their membership within the social group is not necessarily threatened and may even be strengthened. In addition to minimising a participant's accountability for their actions, humour can also allow taboo topics to be included in conversations: 'When the taboo topic is framed as a joke it does not become part of the "real" discourse' (Crawford 1995: 134). There is evidence to suggest that humour is used in debates to allude to taboo topics. Sexual activity and sexist jokes are frequently referred to in HoC debates, as discussed further in Section 5.3.

Having outlined some of the possible functions of humorous talk in debates and Question Times it is now possible to consider the frequency of the use of humour by MPs as shown in this study's collected data. For some MPs humour forms part of their personal rhetorical style. Most of the occurrences of humorous talk by men MPs were by Dennis Skinner, Donald Dewar and Ian McCartney. These three MPs all had high status within the parliament as Dewar and McCartney were Ministers at the time the debates took place, and

Skinner was a long-standing MP with a reputation for speaking forcefully in parliament. It is clear that the use of humour varies greatly between speakers, and it may be that an MP's position within the parliamentary hierarchy in terms of rank and prestige is a factor in the frequency with which they produce humour. Although this is difficult to ascertain because Ministers and high-status MPs get more speaking turns in debates and Question Times than back-bench MPs, evidence from other settings also provides support for a link between humour and status. Ruth Laub Coser (1960) and Franca Pizzini (1991) undertook research into humorous talk in mixed-sex hierarchical settings (a psychiatric work group and a maternity ward). Coser found that humour followed the staff hierarchy of rank and prestige, with those at the top using more humour and often directing it downward. Pizzini also found that the initiators and targets of humour mirror the hospital hierarchy. Additionally, Ruth Coser found that whilst women staff members demonstrated a capacity for humour they deferred to men who produced 99 out of 103 witticisms at staff meetings. As Crawford notes 'Men made more jokes; women laughed harder' (1995: 144). Pizzini noticed that nurses who joked amongst themselves failed to do so in the presence of doctors. Also, when humorous remarks were initiated by someone low in the hierarchy, the intended recipients 'let them fall into silence without laughing', preventing the humour from disrupting the status quo (1991: 481). Similarly, in data corpus of debates very few instances of humorous talk were produced by women MPs. Apart from a few humorous adversarial exchanges produced by women Ministers in Question Times, there was only one example of a joke made by a woman back-bench MP. This is shown in Example 3.7 below.

Example 3.7 Prime Minister's Question Time (01/07/98, Transcript)

MM = Margaret Moran (Labour backbencher)

- 1 MM: will my right Honourable Friend join me in congratulating all of those  
 2 who signed a deal this week er an iniv innovative leasing deal (.) which  
 3 will bring one hundred and seventy million pounds worth of private  
 4 investment and four and half thousand jobs to Luton airport (.) a deal  
 5 which will retain that airport in public ownership despite all of the  
 6 efforts of the previous government (.) will he look to ways of  
 7 extending this public private partnership arrangement to other areas of  
 8 the public sector (.) and when he is next asked whether he has wafted  
 9 in from paradise (.) as I'm sure he often is (.) will he be able to  
 10 honestly answer (.) no Luton airport

Here, the woman MP uses humour at the end of her speech by alluding to a 1970s television commercial which mentioned Luton airport (lines 9–10). While she is speaking there is a lot of noise in the chamber, so it may be that

she is using humour here to attract the attention of other MPs. As in Pizzini's research; however, the response to her joke is minimal – only a few MPs respond to her joke with laughter.

In attempting to explain the differential use of humour by men and women, previous research has found that women's humour in conversations is more often context bound and 'jointly created out of the ongoing talk' (Jenkins 1985: 138) and less often performance-related than male conversational humour. In another study of what makes people laugh in conversations, Ervin-Trip and Lampert (1992) observe that women's comments were judged to increase camaraderie and empathy. In the same mixed-sex study, men were found to be more likely to initiate a humorous key than women, whilst women were more likely to collaborate and build upon someone else's humorous remarks than men (Ervin-Trip and Lampert 1992). In their study of self-deprecating humour, Ervin-Trip and Lampert found that the self-deprecations of the men were often exaggerated, unreal or false – 'a kind of Walter Mitty fantasy' (1992: 115) – and that men's remarks often took the form of 'flip wisecracks' rather than the personal, true anecdotes more often produced by women.

Whilst the research outlined above was carried out on informal conversations rather than more public arenas, the performance element of men's humour seems particularly relevant to the HoC and public speaking in general. Also, if women's humour tends to be supportive and collaboratively produced it runs against the adversarial norms of the HoC, making it questionable whether the HoC is a place where this type of humour is feasible. However, given the evidence that professional men and women use a range of linguistic styles that are coded masculine and feminine, it may not be that women somehow *cannot* produce this type of humour, but instead women may be deterred from doing so because of the way it is received by the audience. As Ervin-Tripp and Lambert point out 'laughter is a spontaneous index of affect which is rewarding enough to get people to make jokes and other humorous moves in order to evoke laughter' (1992: 108). Recall that Pizzini found that humour made by low status participants was not responded to and thus, the status quo was maintained. Perhaps, the male-dominated HoC recognises the value of male humour and offers this 'reward' of laughter to men. Women's humour may not be valued or recognised as belonging to the dominant discourse, so the reward of laughter is not forthcoming. Thus, there would be little incentive for women to contribute humour. A Labour woman MP refers to the difficulty of creating humour when she says 'you have to feel very much at your ease when you are making a joke otherwise you are taking a risk' (Shaw 2002: Interview D). She also says that 'It's all very well for the men to be cracking jokes as they're amongst their own but women are in a much more hostile territory'.

The identification of women being in 'hostile territory' links to the description of women in public institutions having an 'interloper' status (Eckert 1998). As mentioned earlier, men MPs' humour may signal cross-party solidarity which may further marginalise women MPs. Although superficially this humour consists of adversarial exchanges of 'one up-manship', these exchanges depend upon a background assumption of cooperation. As Deborah Cameron observes: 'even if the speakers, or some of them, compete, they are basically engaged in a collaborative and solidary enterprise (reinforcing the bonds within the group by denigrating the people outside it)' (1997a: 58). Alternatively, men MPs may be using the collaborative enterprise of humour to engage in a type of verbal duelling where points are scored (Cameron 1997a). Either way, this co-operative competition appears to be between men and not between women in the HoC. The same senior Labour woman MP is explicit about the gendered nature of humour:

I think that when you are making a joke you are asserting the way that you are as at home as anyone else and it kind of just doesn't work. It just looks phoney because everybody knows that women are not as at home, unless they are Margaret Thatcher. If you are Prime Minister you've got so much else in terms of your command of the situation so she would make jokes and put people down in a humorous way. But you don't have the underdogs cracking a joke basically and women are the underdogs'. (Shaw 2002: Interview D)

Whether 'underdogs' in terms of status or gender this analysis of humour suggests that MPs' use of humorous talk differs according to both these factors. The use of humour in general can therefore be viewed as a gendered linguistic practice in debates as women MPs seldom used humour in their speeches, and they did not engage in sexist humour. Sexist humour denigrates women outside the (male) group and reinforces the dominant male culture in debates. This practice is discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

### 3.4.3 *Irony and Rule Breaking – Filibustering*

'Filibustering' is the process by which a group of MPs from one party attempt to speak for so long in a debate that there is no time left for the debate to be resolved, or no time left for the following debate to be started. It is a tactic which plays with and challenges the debating rules for political gain. As mentioned in 3.4.1, it is also a process which adopts an ironic or covertly humorous key. The occurrence of filibustering is infrequent – there are only three instances of this process in the sixty-hour 1998–2001 data corpus. The overwhelming majority of MPs participating in the filibusters are men, so this is another gendered linguistic practice that was not typically undertaken by women MPs.



This analysis of filibustering is closely related to the analysis of floor apportionment undertaken in Section 3.1 of this chapter. Example 3.8 below shows an example of filibustering taken from a Private Member's Bill debate. In this case, the Conservative men who engineer the filibuster do not oppose the amendments to the Fireworks Bill that have been proposed. Their aim is simply to ensure that there will be no parliamentary time left for discussion of the Private Member's Bill next on the agenda. The amendments under discussion are extremely minor changes to the wording of the Fireworks Bill. Usually, these amendments would be passed swiftly. The Speaker reads out the amendment number, and asks 'Ayes to the right' (the government bench) who would respond 'aye' (indicating their agreement to the amendments), and then call out 'Noes to the left' (to the opposition bench) to which opposition members would remain silent if they agreed with the amendments, or shout 'no' if they disagreed. If the response is 'no' from the opposition, then the amendment must be debated. There is nothing to stop the opposition bench from shouting 'no' to the amendment (simply to waste parliamentary time) even though they agree with the amendments.

In the same way at the end of the debate, the Speaker asks the same question to both sides of the House. If the opposition shout 'no' again, the MPs have a 'division,' requiring a formal vote. In this Fireworks Bill, the opposition shouted 'no' at the end of the debate on each amendment which forced a division on each one and therefore wasted more time. When the votes were counted it was found that 50 MPs voted for the amendments and none voted against. Therefore, the opposition had forced a vote to take place even though they did not want to vote against the bill. This practice plays with the rules that are in place to ensure the democratic process is fair. For example, any MP can shout 'no' to an amendment and then change their mind and vote for it in the division. This rule is exploited because opposition members know they are going to vote *for* the amendment when they shout 'no'. Example 3.8 below shows an example of this filibuster in process.

#### Example 3.8 Private Member's Bill: Fireworks Bill (03/07/98)

DM = David Maclean (Conservative backbencher) SP = Deputy Speaker

- 1 DM: now one accepts that when you draft something like the explosives act  
 2 er er drafted er or passed into law in eighteen seventy five (.)  
 3 pyrotechnics and explosives change from time to time (.) new ones get  
 4 invented and (.) relatively harmless materials wh wh and regulations  
 5 SP: order order (.) I'm listening with patience to the Right Honourable  
 6 Member (.) but I must remind him that the scope of the amendment  
 7 to which he is speaking (.) is whether or not (.) regulations made under  
 8 clauses one two or fourteen three (.) should be subject to the affirmative  
 9 resolution procedure (.) that point (.) and that point only (.) Mr Maclean

- 10 DM: thank you Mr Deputy Speaker I I shall er er concentrate purely on that(.) I was  
 11 trying to make a point and I'm sorry I didn't make it precisely enough or or clearly  
 12 enough (.) that regulations (.) may be a sensible way to deal with the changes in  
 13 (.) f er explosives or fireworks technology which take place one wouldn't expect  
 14 to bring in a new act of parliament (.) any time er [or an affirmative]  
 15 SP: [there's no point] in the Right  
 16 Honourable Member repeating his error (.) Mr Maclean (.)  
 17 DM: Mr Deputy Speaker (.) the question before us the was whether the  
 18 Minister (.) if he uses his powers to amend the explosives act or the fireworks act  
 19 (.) should be subject to the affirmative or the negative er procedure (.) the  
 20 Lordships have said that the affirmative procedure er would be better in this case  
 21 (.) er I take the view (turn continues)

In this speech David Maclean is in flagrant disregard of the debate rules. He is discussing general matters about procedure in an attempt to prolong the debate rather than discussing the amendment (whether the Secretary of State should be able to use an affirmative or negative resolution procedure if emergency changes need to be made to the implementation of the Bill). The Deputy Speaker intervenes to attempt to stop the filibuster (on lines 5–9 and 15–16) but fails to stop the MP from prolonging his speech. David Maclean shows very little respect for the Speaker's authority as is shown when the Speaker intervenes (lines 5–9) saying that he is 'losing patience' with the MP for talking about matters outside the amendments under consideration. Maclean replies by apologising for not making what he was saying 'clear enough', implying that it is not he who is at fault, but rather the Speaker for misunderstanding what he was saying. The Speaker asserts his authority by intervening again to ask that the MP 'does not repeat his error' (line 16).

The ability to resist and challenge the Speaker's authority can be viewed as the strongest expression of an MP's dominant behaviour in debates. It is clear that the process of filibustering is undertaken by MPs who regard themselves as being powerful enough to disregard the Speaker's interventions. Furthermore, the tone of these filibustering speeches is highly ironic. This irony exploits the fact that everyone in the chamber is aware that the MP is breaking the rules, but nothing can be done to stop him. An example of this ironic tone is the repeated emphasis on the 'importance' of what everyone present knows is an utterly unimportant amendment. Maclean exaggerates the usefulness of the amendment by saying that the Lords have 'done a service to the people of this country' by recommending the changes. This type of ironic statement is treated as humorous by the other MPs taking part in this filibuster. During Maclean's speech, the video recording clearly shows another MP, Eric Forth, laughing and sniggering when Maclean makes an obvious deviation from the topic of the amendment and when he defies the Speaker's interventions. Forth attempts to cover his laughter by hiding behind the 'order papers' and putting his hands in front of his mouth, but his

amusement at the situation is clear. This covert humour is a highly collaborative enterprise in which the amusement is shared by the MPs taking part in the filibuster.

The second example of a filibuster takes place in the third reading of the Finance Bill in July 1998. As in the Fireworks debate, this Bill would normally be passed very quickly but on this occasion the government are responsible for the filibuster. This is extremely unusual because filibustering is normally thought of as a weapon of the opposition used to oppose government legislation. In this case the government were filibustering their own proposed legislation in order to decrease the amount of time available to be spent on the next-scheduled debate: the Lords' amendments to the Teaching and Higher Education Bill which proposed the introduction of student loans. This was a highly unpopular policy and many Labour and opposition MPs (and the House of Lords) disagreed with its introduction. It is possible to identify that a filibuster is taking place because of the extreme length of the speeches; the number of Speaker's interventions instructing the speakers to stop discussing irrelevant matters; and references to the filibuster made by other MPs who do not agree with it. This is shown in Example 3.9 when Alex Salmond explains his reasons for not giving way to a government MP.

Example 3.9 The third reading of the Finance Bill (1) (01/07/98, Transcript)

AS = Alex Salmond (SNP Party Leader)

1 AS: I'm not giving way to the Honourable Member and I'll tell him exactly  
 2 why (.) there is more than a suspicion (.) on this side of the House (.)  
 3 that Government Members are extremely anxious not to move onto  
 4 the next debate (.) on student loans (.) now I don't make any comment  
 5 about House of Commons tactics (.) I've used them myself (.) but the  
 6 Honourable member will forgive me (.) if I don't assist them in  
 7 delaying an embarrassing debate (.) on student finance which many  
 8 members in the Labour Party don't want to see (turn continues)

Here the filibuster process and the reasons behind it are explicitly mentioned to expose the government's tactics. Interestingly, Salmond admits to deploying 'the tactic' himself, showing how embedded these rule-breaking practices are in the institutional culture. He expects and receives no censure for this admission, and his statement shows how informal practices such as overt rule-breaking can become part of the accepted 'way things are done' in the institution. The Conservative MP Nicholas Soames also tries to draw attention to the filibuster in a 'point of order'. This is shown in Example 3.10.

## Example 3.10 The Third Reading of the Finance Bill (2) (1/07/98)

NS = Nicholas Soames (Conservative backbencher); DS = Deputy Speaker

- 1 NS: Mr Deputy Speaker (.) would you not agree that we are witnessing a  
 2 sustained and concerted (.) filibuster on on this Bill (.) and and and is it  
 3 not the case (.) Mr Deputy Speaker that such practice is to be deplored  
 4 by the Chair  
 5 DS: order (.) the Chair is only aware of speeches which are in order or not  
 6 in order (.) and er er speeches that I've been hearing have been in order  
 7 (.) except where I have chosen to er correct them (.) er it has been  
 8 known for debates on the Third Reading of the Finance Bill to go on  
 9 for several hours

In this example Soames attempts to draw attention to the filibuster – itself a somewhat ironic move as he is known for taking part in them himself. His attempt to appeal to the Speaker exemplifies the circular argument with which most points of order are turned down (if something was said in a speech then in must be ‘in order’ or the Speaker would have ruled it out of order at the time). Despite attempts like these to stop the filibuster the government prolonged the debate for two hours and forty minutes. The main participants in the filibuster are men back-bench MPs, in particular Christopher Leslie MP and Derek Twigg MP. However, unlike the Fireworks Bill filibuster some women MPs participate. Example 3.11 below shows an intervention made upon Christopher Leslie's speech by Helen Southworth, a Labour back-bench MP.

## Example 3.11 The third reading of the Finance Bill (3) (01/07/98)

HS = Helen Southworth CL = Christopher Leslie (Labour backbencher)

- 1 CL: speaking for myself I am often confused by my own tax affairs (.) and now I can  
 2 pick up a telephone (.) and speak to a friendly voice on the other end (.) a friendly  
 3 tax officer on the other end of the line (.) er er explain er my predicament and (.)  
 4 hopefully get a very simple and er common-sense solution to my situation (.) and  
 5 this will be available very shortly to the the wider part of the population (.) er a  
 6 pilot study is being undertaken in terms of er telephone claims for the Inland  
 7 Revenue (.) and this is I understand a Bill making provision to start this off in  
 8 Scotland (.)  
 9 HS: will my Honourable Friend give way  
 10 CL: yes I will (.)  
 11 HS: does my honourable friend agree that this is one of the many measures that this  
 12 government is considering and beginning to implement (.) that is reducing the  
 13 burden on industry and on business (.) and that reducing that burden is very  
 14 important to business (.) and once again that we are listening and taking action (1)  
 15 CL: well that's right (.) one of things that businesses complain to me about in my  
 16 constituency (.) is the endless form-filling (turn continues)

This transcript shows Christopher Leslie's filibustering turn, which is intervened upon by the Helen Southworth (line 9). Although the intervention is

not very long it serves to give Christopher Leslie another topic with which to prolong the debate. Southworth is therefore participating in the filibuster by being part of the group of MPs who are sustaining each other's speaking turns. However, Southworth does not give a speech so her participation in the filibuster is limited. One other woman Labour MP, Louise Eilman, takes part in this filibuster by making a speech. However, her speech is extremely short in comparison to those made by her male colleagues: hers is seven minutes long whilst Christopher Leslie's speech is fifty-one minutes long. Women MPs therefore participate in a supporting role and men MPs lead this filibuster. This debate on the Finance Bill was proposed by two women Ministers, Helen Liddell and Dawn Primarolo. Although Helen Liddell was the Minister responsible for introducing and summing up the debate, neither she nor her Ministerial colleague (Dawn Primarolo) took part in the filibuster. Their speeches were concise, and they did not intervene upon filibustering Labour colleagues to prolong the debate. Indeed, in all three examples of filibustering in the data corpus, front-bench politicians from all parties did not participate. Back-bench MPs presumably took responsibility for the filibuster because front-bench MPs cannot be seen to be participating in the dubious pursuit of time-wasting.

Based on these examples of filibustering it is possible to claim that filibustering is a linguistic practice which is mainly undertaken by men. Interview data also suggests that filibustering is viewed by some women MPs as a male practice. One woman MP suggests some reasons for this:

Because women have been the pressure for making the House of Commons more rational, sort of making the debate more coherent and more transparent, having an argument where there is one but not having an argument where there isn't one. Because women have been in the forefront of the hours changing and because for women time is a commodity which it is not for men then filibustering is a bit of a contradiction in terms for women. (Shaw 2002: Interview D)

Participants in a filibuster disregard the Speaker's authority, the debate rules and the legislative process. The participants themselves often show evident amusement and active enjoyment in the process. These linguistic practices are highly collaborative examples of the way in which the 'key' of a speech event may be changed to a non-serious tone for a particular political advantage.

### **3.5 Discussion – Gender and Rule-Breaking in the 1998–2001 House of Commons Corpus**

The question posed at the beginning of this Chapter was: How do women in politics participate in debate forums, particularly in those that are historically male-dominated, and in which women are still vastly under-represented and men over-represented? What are the constraints and obstacles that they

face in institutions such as the UK HoC, and how can this be illuminated by detailed linguistic analyses of the debate floor? The analysis of floor apportionment showed that the official or legal contributions of women MPs (both allocated speaking turns and 'give way' interventions) are proportional to their representation in the institution, and both women and men are in theory subject to the same official rules. There is therefore nominal equality between men and women MPs in terms of participation, and women MPs are not disadvantaged as speakers in a straightforward way in this CoP. This finding was not predicted by previous research on gender and participation in public speech events. For example, Lyn Kathlene's (1994, 1995) research on floor apportionment in US state legislatures found that men took more turns than women in committee hearings, and Edelsky's (1981) research on male and female participation in university faculty meetings similarly found that men took more turns than women. Apart from this equality of participation in the legal floor of the HoC at this time, there are some substantial differences between the linguistic practices of the two gender groups and it is possible to argue that these differences disadvantage women MPs. Men dominate the illegal floor by making illegal interventions that can also encroach upon the legal floor. This means that men make more interventions than women MPs overall, and this practice constructs men MPs as more powerful participants as they assume their entitlement to break the rules. Additionally, women MPs appear reluctant to adopt the most adversarial forms of parliamentary discourse, and as adversarial language is highly valued in this context this may disadvantage them. It is possible that women MPs in their reluctance to use adversarial language are missing the opportunity to be seen as effective speakers by their superiors, and this may disadvantage their political advancement. Finally, women seem to be excluded from or marginalised by certain practices that involve the manipulation of tone – like joking and filibustering. These practices seem to reinforce 'fraternal networks' (Walsh 2001) through cross-party solidarity between men. These practices also assert a high level of competence and confidence with arcane parliamentary procedures. As with rule-breaking practices, the fact that these practices are used mainly by men constructs women as peripheral members of the CoP.

Therefore, the differences in the linguistic practices of men and women MPs show that gender was a salient factor affecting their terms of participation within the HoC CoP in the 1997–2001 term. These gendered linguistic practices appear to construct women as peripheral members because rule-breaking activities, adversarial language, and humour are practices mainly or wholly undertaken by men. One possible explanation for these differences could be that women consciously choose to behave differently by rejecting

the male, elitist, old-fashioned traditions of the Commons. An alternative explanation is that the different behaviour of men and women MPs is a result of coercive forces within the CoP which mean that women are made to feel like ‘interlopers’ (Eckert 1998) in the community – subject to negative sanctions such as sexist barracking and negative stereotyping. Penelope Eckert (1998) suggests some explanations for women’s adherence to norms and rules. She reports the findings of her research on phonological variation in two CoPs of US high school adolescents (‘Jocks’ and ‘Burnouts’). This study showed that it was girls (rather than boys) in the two CoPs who were responsible for using the most standard variants in the CoP which valued standard language, and the most non-standard variants in the CoP which valued non-standard language. She concluded that: ‘the constraints on girls to conform to an exaggerated social category type are clearly related to their diminished possibilities for claiming membership or category status’ (1998: 73).

This conformity may be realised by other forms of linguistic behaviour (including turn-taking) and related to different types of CoPs. Eckert argues that women moving into prestigious occupations and especially elite institutions ‘are generally seen as interlopers and are at greater pains to prove that they belong’ (1998: 67). With this ‘interloper’ status, women are more subject than men to negative judgements about superficial aspects of their behaviour (such as dress, or style of speech). The observation that women are interlopers who are subject to the negative effects of gender stereotyping can be related to Kanter’s (1977) idea of tokenism, and Yoder’s (1991: 183) observation that studies of tokenism in gender inappropriate occupations have found that women ‘experience performance pressures, isolation, and role encapsulation, but men do not’. Eckert suggests that the way in which women can ‘prove their worthiness’ is ‘meticulous attention to symbolic capital’ (1998: 67). She notes that: ‘While men develop a sense of themselves and find a place in the world on the basis of their actions and abilities, women have to focus on the production of selves – to develop authority through continual proof of worthiness’ (1998: 73). Women MPs’ avoidance of rule-breaking (or meticulous adherence to the rules) can therefore be viewed as one of ways in which women MPs make sure they are ‘beyond reproach’ in a CoP which views them as ‘outsiders’. It is likely that both these explanations play a part in explaining men and women MPs’ differential linguistic practices. In an analysis of the marginal position of women priests in the Church of England, Clare Walsh finds that their position is partly the effect of their own belief in women’s ‘civilizing difference’, and partly the effect of sexist reactions to them by male priests and by the media. Walsh finds that ‘what *is* clear is that their language and behaviour is more likely than those of male colleagues to

be fractured by competing, and often contradictory, norms and expectations' (Walsh 2001: 201).

In interviews, women MPs identified practices such as barracking and cheering as male activities in which they consciously did not participate. They also expressed the belief that women MPs behave differently from men: 'we're doing things differently and we know we're doing things differently' (Shaw 2002: Interview A). However, some of the interviewees expressed contradictory attitudes in this respect. Having identified 'male' practices and stating women did not engage in them, this interviewee also claimed that they had to 'ape the men's behaviour because that's the only way you're going to get anywhere'. There is also evidence to suggest that there are differences between individual women MPs, as some of them embrace the masculine norms of the HoC and adopt these 'male' linguistic practices: for example, one extremely adversarial question is asked by a senior woman Conservative MP. The fact that women MPs do not have consistent reactions to the avoidance of these 'male' linguistic practices suggests that women MPs' *choice* of non-participation in these practices cannot fully explain the differences found.

Some women MPs overtly recognise their status as that of 'interloper': 'my strategy is to try and be an insider. When quite clearly I was never going to be an insider in the House of Commons my strategy was to build up my strength outside' (Shaw 2002: Interview D). Women MPs are constructed as outsiders by sexist barracking, which is common (see the more detailed discussion in Chapter 5), and their exclusion from cross-party exchanges expressing solidarity. This may serve to strengthen the 'fraternal networks' (Walsh 2001: 301) against women MPs. Negative sanctions outside the chamber are also pertinent, as the media characterisation of the women MPs who were elected in 2007 as 'Stepford wives', 'clones' and 'Blair's babes' clearly had an effect on the women themselves, and the theme was taken up and used against them through barracking within the chamber. The imposition of these negative sanctions upon women MPs may mean that they can only pay 'meticulous attention to symbolic capital' rather than attention to their actions and abilities to prove their worthiness (Eckert 1998: 67–73). This has also been viewed as the double bind between being professional and being feminine: 'When a woman is placed in a position in which being assertive and forceful is necessary, she is faced with a paradox; she can be a good woman but a bad professional, or vice versa. To do both is impossible' (Lakoff 1990: 206). These coercive forces may therefore result in women MPs avoiding rule-breaking or norm-challenging practices to satisfy the requirements of their 'interloper' status by being 'beyond reproach' with respect to the formal CoP rules. Whether for personal



advantage or for strategic political gain such as the self-consciously political rule-breaking behaviour of the NIWC (Walsh 2001: 117), an understanding of the way in which language, gender and power are constructed in these public contexts can give women a clearer basis from which to consider undertaking the ‘critical acts’ that promote institutional change. In Chapter 4 I broaden this analysis to scrutinise participation in much newer CoPs – the devolved institutions of the U.K.