

Evasion and hedging in the language of parliamentary Question Time



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ABSTRACT

The paper examines evasion and hedging in the language of parliamentary Question Time in the British House of Commons and in the Australian House of Representatives. It analyses the usage of evasion and hedging, and briefly investigates the relation between these two linguistic phenomena. Moreover, it seeks to test the methodological approach, and the conclusions reached in the previous research, especially by Alan Partington (2003) and Bruce Fraser (2010), and to provide a comparative perspective on the rhetorical culture and communication conventions in the British and Australian Question Time.

KEYWORDS

pragmatics, political discourse, hedging, evasion, parliamentary Question Time, House of Commons (United Kingdom), House of Representatives (Australia)

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the phenomena of evasion and hedging in political discourse. The main aim of the analysis is twofold. Firstly, it seeks to test the typology of the evasion techniques outlined by Alan Partington in *The Linguistics of Political Argument* (2003). Secondly, it explores the relation between evasion and hedging, attempting to verify the findings outlined by Bruce Fraser in *Hedging in Political Discourse* (2010).

In contrast to Fraser and Partington, the paper concentrates on evasion and hedging in a different type of political discourse: the language of the parliamentary Question Time. Moreover, as it examines the Question Time language of two political bodies, the British House of Commons (HOC) and of the Australian House of Representatives (HOR), the paper offers a comparative perspective which aims to point out the differences in the use of evasion and hedging in the two respective parliamentary environments and their rhetorical cultures.

Section 2 briefly explains the notions of hedging and evasion and summarises the main points made by Fraser (2010) and Partington (2003) that are addressed in the study. Section 3 outlines the methodology, the structure of the samples as well as the basic characteristics of Question Time as a specific sub-genre of political discourse. Section 4 presents the summary and interpretation of the results.

2. EVASION AND HEDGING IN QUESTION TIME: METHODOLOGICAL STARTING POINTS

Fraser (2010, 2017) analysed hedging in a set of 2007 press conferences of the American president George Bush concluding that it was almost never used as a means of evasion.



Fraser's findings suggest that hedging in political discourse functions as a neutral device with no impact on the information value of the utterance and that the politicians prefer other ways to avoid answering the question. Partington (2003) analysed the White House press briefings trying to capture the interaction between the press and politicians or their representatives. He outlined and examined a set of rhetorical strategies the speakers use to manage the communication and investigated their usage.

In different sources the definitions of evasion considerably differ. Galasiński (2000) suggests that an evasive answer is such that is semantically irrelevant to the question and, at the same time, deceitful in that it pretends to be relevant. Partington (2003, 235–255) understands evasion as the terminal point at the directness/indirectness continuum of the speaker's choice when answering the question. However, he concedes that capturing the correlation between the directness of the answer and the degree of evasiveness has its limitations. Partington created a typology of *ways of evasion*, or in other words, of evasion techniques adopted by the speakers. In addition, he categorised the evasion techniques into six groups. For ease of reference the types are summed up and described in more detail below:

Ways of evasion according to Partington (2003)

(1) Refusal to answer

- a) on record refusal to answer without justification
- b) on record refusal to answer with justification

(2) Claiming incompetence to answer

- a) lack of knowledge (claim of ignorance)
- b) lack of competence (e.g. *This is a question for a lawyer.*)
- c) outside the responsibility scope (e.g. *This issue should be discussed with a different department.*)
- d) referring the question to another person (e.g. *I will forward the question to Mr. B to answer it.*)

(3) Rhetorical mode, slogans, officialese/diplospeak

- a) officialese or diplospeak
- b) responding by raising a safe topic
- c) generalisation, vague language

(4) Challenging the question, questioner, source

- a) challenging the premise of the question
- d) challenging the authority of the enquirer/questioner
- b) challenging a presupposition of the question
- c) challenging the facts included in the question
- d) challenging the questioner

(5) Evasion by humour

(6) Evasion by claiming the answer has already been answered

Like evasion, hedging is frequently understood and approached in different ways. Fraser (2010, 206–211) defines hedging as a rhetorical strategy which speakers adopt to achieve a specific goal, namely, the attenuation of the full value which the proposition or illocutionary force the utterance would have without hedging. His primary goal was



to establish whether the speakers in political discourse, in fact, use hedging to affect the information or cooperative value of the response. Fraser (2010, 202–203) worked with two basic dichotomies useful for the analysis of hedging in political discourse: *propositional* vs. *illocutionary* hedging and *neutral* vs. *self-serving* hedging. Whereas the propositional hedges mitigate the truth value of the information, the illocutionary hedging items address the force-related aspects of the utterance.

- (1) **Propositional hedging:** *However, EU immigration has almost doubled to unprecedented levels in the past two years.* (HOC: 5. 1. 2015, col. 7)
- (2) **Illocutionary hedging:** *There are co-payments in the PBS; there always have been, and those co-payments are supported by all sides of this House, I presume.* (HOR: 11. 2. 2015, p. 525)

Neutral hedging has “no impact on the issue discussed” as in:

- (3) **Neutral hedging:** *Since the tax cuts took full effect in 2003, our economy has added more than 8.3 million new jobs and almost 4 years of uninterrupted growth.* (Fraser 2010, 207)

On the other hand, self-serving hedging serves “to evade answering the question in a straightforward and complete way” as in:

- (4) **Self-serving hedging:** *The plan to withdraw troops will possibly be revised.* (Fraser 2010, 209)

In comparison to Fraser, Partington (2003, 154) outlined two major ways of understanding hedging. From the politeness perspective, hedges are usually understood as items “which modify the force of an utterance”, generally softening it or imbuing it with imprecision to achieve a desirable effect, for instance modesty. The other, grammatical, perspective, relates hedging to modality, defining it as “the speakers’ room for manoeuvre between absolute yes and absolute no.”

The previous research raised many questions about the relation between evasion and hedging. Partington (2003, 146–154) established an overview of the common evasion techniques and motivation types for hedging, which may be of use in the search for functional relations between them. Fraser (2010) worked with the hypothesis that hedging is one of the potential linguistic means of evasion or, in other words, that evasion represents one of the functions of hedging. However, neither of the authors explored the relation between these two linguistic phenomena in detail.

3. QUESTION TIME AS A TYPE OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE SAMPLES

Within the framework of parliamentary democracy, Question Time functions as one of the tools which allow the legislature to exercise its control powers over the execu-



tive branch of the government. However, Question Time is also a political arena in which the government and the opposition fight for power and influence.

In general, Question Time oscillates between straightforward reporting and a standard continuous debate. The course of communication in Question Time is heavily regulated, with different countries adopting different structural models. Extralinguistic factors of this kind also significantly influence the nature of the Question Time language in the British and Australian parliamentary context.

The British parliamentary procedure (Factsheet P1, 2010, 2) contains several types of parliamentary questions: *Questions for Oral Answers*, *Questions for Written Answers*, *Cross-Cutting Questions*, *Urgent Questions* and *Questions to the Prime Minister*. In contrast, the Australian parliament distinguishes only between on notice *Written Questions* and without notice *Oral Questions*. In comparison to the Australian House of Representatives where the procedure imposes a time limit on the answer to every question, the communication conventions of Question Time in the House of Commons allow more space for the enquirers' speech as well as for the interaction between the enquirers and the podium. In addition, unlike Question Time in the HOR, which is always attended by the Prime Minister, this is not the case in the HOC.

The British sample analysed in the text includes the material from two Question Time sessions of the House of Commons (5th–6th January 2015). From the typological point of view, it comprises *Questions for Oral Answers*, *Topical Questions* and *Urgent Questions*. The Australian sample includes Oral Questions from three sessions of the House of Representatives (9th–11th February 2015).

For the purposes of analysis, the text distinguishes three main actors at Question Time: the enquirer, the podium and third parties such as the MPs in the audience or the house speaker. Also, to provide a mainstay for the quantitative analysis, a framework of question exchanges (QE) was created. The structure of both samples is outlined in Table 1.

Word count	HOC (UK)	HOR (AU)
Enquirer	8,042	2,328
Podium	9,980	15,765
Other	117	1,586
Total	18,139	19,679
Number of question exchanges	119	48

TABLE 1. Composition of the HOC and HOR samples.

Each question exchange is made up of a set of the interrogative block and the corresponding response block. An interrogative block may involve several interrogative sentences and additional accompanying speech as in the following example of a question exchange:

- (5) **Enquirer:** *How will these arrangements work in the north-east of England, which has one economic zone—incorporating Durham, Northumberland and Tyne and Wear—but two police authorities and two police and crime commissioners? Does*

the Home Office propose to merge the police authorities and their commissioners or to transfer their functions to a new individual?

Podium: *It is entirely up to the local community to decide what it wants. If we look at other parts of the country, we can see that West Mercia and Warwickshire are working closely together. If the police authorities in the right hon. Gentleman's area wanted to merge, they would need to put their business plan to us. It is not only the big cities that could come together; such proposals could involve rural areas as well. (HOC: 5. 1. 2017, col. 3)*



4. RESULTS

The structural differences between the samples reflect the dissimilar Question Time regulations in the House of Commons and the House of Representatives. Most importantly, the average length of the response blocks in the HOR (335 words) was significantly greater than in the HOC (84 words). In addition, the speech of the third parties, e.g., the house speaker, was more extensive in the HOR sample.

Moreover, the enquirers' speech in the British sample include a higher number of interrogative sentences (176) than in the Australian sample (64). Most of the interrogative sentences in the HOR sample are constituted by requests which expect the speakers' commitment to the truth value of their sentences such as requests for information, opinion or confirmation of information (56; 87.5%). In the British sample, their percentage is considerably lower in spite of their higher absolute number (118; 67.1%). The remaining interrogative sentences in the British sample uttered by the enquirer include requests emphasising attitudes that exceed the limits of pure statement of information such as requests for approvals, disapprovals, pledges of support, etc. (43; 24.4%). The number of such questions in the Australian sample is significantly lower (6; 9.4%). Both samples also include other types of questions such as requests for action or rhetorical questions (HOC: 15; 8.5%, HOR: 2; 3.1%).

Types of questions	HOC (UK)		HOR (AU)	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
a) truth-value oriented	118	67.1%	56	87.5%
b) attitude-manifesting	43	24.4%	6	9.4%
c) others	15	8.5%	2	3.1%
Total of interrogative sentences	176	100.0%	64	100.0%
Average response block length (in words)	84		335	
Question exchanges (number)	119		48	

TABLE 2. Question exchange data analysis of the samples.

4.1 EVASION IN THE QUESTION TIME OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS (UK) AND THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES (AU)

The evasion techniques outlined by Partington (2003, 234-255) were used fairly frequently at Question Time in both the House of Commons and the House of Representatives. In total, 100 instances of evasion were identified in the British sample. Here,



the podium made use of at least one evasion technique in 59 (49.6%) out of the total of 119 question exchanges. In the additional 16 instances (13.4%), the evasion techniques were used but, in the overall context of the communication, did not negatively affect the general quality of the answer due to context or other factors.

As in the HOC sample, evasion also constituted an important rhetorical strategy at Question Time in the House of Representatives of Australia. The total number of evasion techniques in the Australian sample amounted to 5 and they were identified in 32 of the 48 analysed question exchanges. In 17 cases (35.4%), the question exchange contained more than one evasion technique and in 19 of the HOR question exchanges (39.5%) the evasion affected the information quality of the answer. In the remaining 13 cases (27.1%), the rhetorical formulas of evasion techniques did not affect the quality of the answer due to the context or other factors.

(6) Enquirer: *The Minister does not have much to say about card crime, which is up by a quarter, or online banking fraud, which is up by 71%. More and more people shop online, particularly over Christmas and the new year, but Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary found that just 2% of police had any training in cybercrime. When will the Government stop being so complacent about crime that is still rising?*

Podium: *I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place. Up to now, cybercrime has been a lesser interest. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that the trend among all people now is to buy online, but I would say that what is illegal offline is also illegal online. Policing cyberspace is just as important as policing the streets, and that is what our police force is doing. (HOC: 5. 1. 2015, col. 10)*

Question Time in the HOC generally did not digress from the subject-matter under discussion. In contrast, in the HOR it appears to be a common phenomenon that after answering the question, the podium uses the remaining allocated time to make a *de facto* political statement or to attack their political opponents. This fact is reflected in the significant role of evasion by challenging the enquirer or the political opponents (35; 67.3%) typically by means of attacking the incompetence of the previous government.

The analysis identified a broader range of evasion techniques in the British sample. However, when projected against the number of question exchanges included in each of the two samples, evasion, especially of the challenge-based type, appears to be more common at Question Time in the HOR (AU) than in the HOC (UK). The overall distribution of the encountered types of evasion is given in Table 3. Instances of evasion by humour or refusal to answer were identified in neither of the samples.

In contrast to the British Question Time, the Australian sample did not include evasion by claims of incompetence to answer the question or evasion by claiming that the answer has been already given. A narrower range and the specific composition of the evasion techniques in the Australian sample may be attributed to the different procedural regulations and to a greater degree of politicisation of the discourse as illustrated in example 7.



Type	HOC (UK)			HOR (AU)		
	Number	%	Instances per QE	Number	%	Instances per QE
Challenging the question, enquirer...	36	36.0	0.31	35	67.3	0.73
Rhetorical mode	29	29.0	0.24	10	19.2	0.21
Topic management evasion	24	24.0	0.20	7	13.5	0.16
Claims the answer has been already answered	6	6.0	0.05	—	—	—
Claims of incompetence to answer	5	5.0	0.04	—	—	—
Total	100	100.0	0.84	52	100.0	1.10
Question exchanges	119			48		

TABLE 3. Evasion types in the Question Time of the HOC and HOR.

- (7) **Enquirer:** *My question is to the Prime Minister. I refer to the Liberal member for Brisbane's perceptive comments yesterday: "We cannot govern ourselves in an internal climate of fear and intimidation. And that is the unacceptable situation we have endured for the past five years." Does the Prime Minister agree with the member for Brisbane?*
Podium: *I certainly agree that it is time to get on with government. It is time to get on with government. ... So this is a government which is getting on with what is right for the people of Australia. We have a plan to improve our economy. All members opposite have is one long, loud complaint—no answers, just a complaint. (HOR: 9. 2. 2015, p. 78)*

In general, Partington's evasion categories can be successfully applied to analyse the Question Time language. Evasion by rhetorical mode and challenge-based evasion were both frequent in the Question Time context and the evasion techniques corresponded to those outlined by Partington. Evasion techniques in the rhetorical mode involved vague and general language followed by officialese as well as empty politeness formulas such as agreement with the question or the enquirer.

When challenging the enquirer, the podium in both samples also tried to evade answering the question by turning to political attacks and accusations of the opposition or the previous governments. The two following examples allow for comparison between the HOC and the HOR environment.

- (8) **Enquirer:** *But what is the Home Secretary doing to identify the 50,00 failed asylum seekers that the Public Accounts Committee has said her Department has failed to identify?*
Podium: *I think it is a bit rich for Labour Members to stand up in the Chamber and complain about the immigration system when many of the problems that we are dealing with have been inherited from the last Labour Government's failed immigration policy. (HOC: 5. 1. 2015, col. 3)*



- (9) **Enquirer:** *My question is for the Prime Minister. Since the Prime Minister has promised that 'good government starts today,' when is the Prime Minister going to scrap the GP tax, the \$100,000 fees and the \$6,000 cuts to families? When is the Prime Minister going to tell the truth—that in fact absolutely nothing is changing?*
Podium: *The big lie came from members opposite going into the last election, when they told us that the deficit would be \$18 billion. That was the big lie from members opposite, who went into the last election telling us that the deficit would be just \$18 billion. It turned out to be \$48 billion.*

Honourable members interjecting—

The Speaker: *The member for McMahon will desist.*

Podium: *A \$30 billion budget black hole that they knew about, that they would not tell us about and that they created. ... (HOR: 10. 2. 2015, p. 334)*

Type	HOC (UK)			HOR (AU)		
	No.	%	Instances per QE	No.	%	Instances per QE
Challenging enquirer's authority, competence or honesty of intention	13	36.1	0.11	9	25.7	0.19
Accusation of previous government, political attack on opposition	13	36.1	0.11	26	74.3	0.54
Challenging the premise of the question	5	13.9	0.04	—	—	—
Challenging the facts included in the question	5	13.9	0.04	—	—	—
Total	36	100.0	0.30	35	100.0	0.73

TABLE 4. Challenge-based evasion in the Question Time of the HOC and HOR.

The use of political attacks and accusations is one of the basic differences between the evasion in press briefings and the evasion at Question Time and needs to be reflected in the typology. In general, challenge-based evasion involving political attacks is more common in Australian Question Time. However, the HOC sample includes a broader range of challenge-based evasion techniques that in addition to the political attacks and enquirer-related factors target also the content-related aspects of the question as in:

- (10) **Enquirer:** *... The chief inspector's latest report on British citizenship applications shows that, on the Minister's watch, scant regard was given by the Department to checks on criminal behaviour, fraud or immigration status. Since that report's publication, what steps has the Minister taken to check histories and remove citizenship, if appropriate? Will he instigate proper investigation and record keeping? If he will not, a future Labour Government will.*



Podium: *Contrary to what the right hon. Gentleman just stated, the chief inspector was clear that criminal record checks had been carried out in all cases that were examined. ... We are still clearing up the mess that they put us in and we are focused on turning the ship around.* (HOC: 5. 1. 2015, col. 3)

The second noteworthy difference concerns the treatment of topic narrowing, generalisation and change by the podium. Partington (2003, 242) introduces *raising a safe topic* as one of the evasion techniques within the scope of the rhetorical mode evasion. However, due to the procedural regulations and communication conventions, changing a topic is generally not acceptable in the Question Time context. There is, of course, a blurred boundary between bringing up a new topic, and narrowing and generalisation but, rather than raising a completely new topic, the podium makes use of subtler topic-management techniques which include counter-argumentation, introducing new positive perspectives or topic generalisations or narrowing and other semantic processes.

It is thus justifiable to establish topic management as a separate type of evasion utilizing a set of specific evasion techniques. Following the analysis, the paper works with two basic topic management evasion techniques: *raising a new safe topic* and *perspective reprojction*. The primary motivation behind the perspective shift is not to discredit the question or to change the topic but to convince the audience, by arguments or a change in connotation, presupposition, refocusing of attention or other semantic phenomena, about a different view of the issue under consideration than suggested by the question. In the example below, the podium avoids the answer by refusing a negative presupposition embedded in the question and then refocusing on the positive aspects of the government’s policy.

(11) Enquirer: *Italian Ministers told the European Scrutiny Committee that increasingly people coming on boats and being rescued from them are refugees from areas such as Syria, not just economic migrants. When will the Government sign up to the UN programme so that we do our fair share, like other countries?*

Podium: *This country is doing its fair share in many different ways through the direct aid that is being provided—£700 million that is directly affecting and benefiting the lives of hundreds of thousands of people—and the asylum that is being granted through the vulnerable persons relocation scheme. We are also working overseas with countries affected to create a long-term settlement of this issue, as well as confronting the organised crime that exploits the vulnerable.* (HOC: 5. 1. 2015, col. 12)

Type	HOC (UK)			HOR (AU)		
	No.	%	Instances per QE	No.	%	Instances per QE
Perspective reprojction	17	70.8	0.14	6	85.7	0.09
Raising a new safe topic	7	29.2	0.06	1	14.3	0.02
Total	24	100.0	0.20	7	100.0	0.11

TABLE 5. Topic management evasion in the Question Time of the HOC and HOR.



The data suggest that evading the answer by topic management is generally more common in the HOC whereas in HOR Question Time it seems to be rather restricted and frequently disallowed / objected to according to the procedural regulations. Any overt and recognisable change of topic is thus fraught with the danger of being met with displeasure by the audience and, consequently, with the intervention of the Speaker. This fact affirms that there is generally more space for continuous discussion at Question Time in the HOC than in the HOR.

4.2. HEDGING AND EVASION AT QUESTION TIME IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS (UK) AND THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES (AU)

Having analysed the press briefings of the U.S. department of state, Fraser (2010, 207–211) concluded that hedging in political discourse was rarely used for evasion. To verify Fraser's findings in the Question Time language, the text examined the function of modal expressions as these constitute one of the key groups of potentially evasive hedging devices such as in: *It might have been John.* or *This is possibly true.*

Both Question Time samples included a considerable number of hedging items. In the British sample, 103 propositional and 98 illocutionary hedges were identified. In the Australian sample, the total amounted to 139 propositional and 108 illocutionary hedges. Adjusted to the different word counts of the podium's speech, the data suggest that the British MPs are slightly more likely to use both propositional and illocutionary hedging (HOC: 1 hedging item per 49.6 words, HOR: 1 hedging item per 63.8 words).

The HOC sample included 169 modal expressions (verbs: 98.0%, adverbs: 4.2%, adjectives: 1.2%, nouns: 0.6%) and the HOR 240 modal expressions (verbs: 93.8%, adjectives: 3.3% adverbs: 2.9%). At both British (122; 72.2%) and Australian (189; 78.7%) Question Time, the modal expressions were used predominantly in their basic meanings such as *can* for expressing ability or *shall* for obligation. In the remaining cases (HOC: 47–27.8%, HOR: 51–21.3%), the modal expressions functioned as hedging items.

The use of modal hedges was motivated predominantly by politeness-related factors rather than by evasion.¹ Three politeness-related areas can be mentioned to explain the function of modality expressions as hedges.

The first and most frequent is the mitigation of face threatening acts that threaten the face of the speaker, the enquirer or both as in:

- (12) **Podium:** *The decision was an attempt in certain ways to help some passengers, but with hindsight Finsbury Park was never really an option for main trains to terminate, and perhaps that should not have been done.* (HOC: 5. 1. 2015, col. 25)

Secondly, the modality expression was used merely as an empty politeness formula which, in fact, contributed to the rise of sarcasm as in:

- (13) **Podium:** *He might want the Russians to compete—the Putin class subs.* (HOR: 11. 2. 2015, p. 523)

1 The article follows the politeness paradigm set in Brown P. and S. Levinson (1987).



Thirdly, the modality expressions with hedging value mitigated the informational content of the utterance. In this case, we could expect evasion to be one of the key motives behind the linguistic choices of the speakers. However, rather than to avoid delivering the requested information or action, the podium sought to express modesty or protect their face from future harm should the variable prove inaccurate.

(14) Podium: *That is to support those universities that are in areas where there is limited capacity to expand their revenue base and they are probably not doing the expensive research that would allow them to take full advantage of the government's reform agenda. (HOR: 10. 2. 2015, p. 78)*

Type	HOC (UK)		HOR (AU)	
	Number	%	Number	%
Mitigation of a face threatening act	32	18.9	39	16.3
Information/commitment mitigation	14	8.3	9	3.7
False politeness/sarcasm	1	0.6	3	1.3
Neutral use	122	72.2	189	78.7
Total of: modal verbs, adverbs, nouns, adjectives	169	100	240	100

TABLE 6. Modal expression hedging by function.

5. CONCLUSION

In both the House of Commons (UK) and the House of Representatives (Australia) evasion emerges as a significant feature of the language of parliamentary Question Time. The most frequent evasion types in the Question Time contexts in both Houses include challenge-based evasion and the rhetorical mode, in particular vagueness and general language. The use of evasion in the HOC and HOR differed in two main aspects. On one hand, challenge-based evasion such as challenges to the question or the enquirer or politically motivated attacks on previous governments or opposition are more prominent in the HOR than in the HOC. On the other hand, the language of HOC Question Time uses a wider range of evasion sub-types and a significantly higher ratio of evasion by topic management.

In contrast to the press briefings and press conferences examined by Fraser (2010) and Partington (2003), the Question Time language contains a considerable degree of evasion involving counter-argumentation, polemics and even purely politically motivated verbal attacks. This shows that Question Time in general shares features with standard political debate. Consequently, the data complement Partington's list of evasion types and techniques by the category of evasion through topic management, which includes not only evasion by raising a new safe topic but also evasion by providing a new positive perspective on the topic. In addition, the analysis identified a coherent group of evasion instances within the range of chal-



lenge-based evasion, namely accusations and political attacks on the opposition or the previous government.

In general, the findings of this study confirm the conclusion reached by Fraser (2010, 212) that hedging motivated by evasion is not generally used in political discourse. However, the data suggest that hedging items at Question Time are not completely without function as the speakers use hedging for other purposes connected with rhetorical style, face management, and power and influence in communication in general.

Last but not least, the application of Partington's and Fraser's approaches pointed out several significant differences between the rhetorical culture of Question Time in the House of Commons (UK) and House of Representatives (Australia). In the HOC, the speech of the podium and the speech of the enquirers take a roughly equal amount of the allocated time. In contrast, Question Time in HOR was dominated by the podium with a high number of intrusions by Australian MPs in the audience, which could and often did result in expulsion of the MPs from the session by the Speaker.

One of the contributing factors might be the absence of the Prime Minister in general Question Time. However, the language tactics of both the enquirer and the podium in the British sample appear more complex and may eventually result in a lower degree of *de facto* answered questions. In contrast, the language of Question Time in the HOR is less formal and more straightforward and the general level of acceptable "familiarity" among the Australian MPs is higher than in the United Kingdom. HOR Question Time frequently diverts from the subject-matter and turns into to a *de facto* political debate. This characteristic is, however, not absolute and does not necessarily entail that the British MPs would be more responsive to the questions of the enquirers. The opportunity to win public space and audience for a politically motivated speech might also very well encourage the Australian MPs to answer quickly and to the point whereas the more subtle, complex and flexible communication conventions provide the British MPs with more space to dodge, evade or hedge.

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