13

Conflict in political discourse

Conflict as congenital to political discourse

Peter Bull and Anne-Marie Simon-Vandenbergen

13.1 Introduction

In democratic systems, political parties represent different viewpoints on a large number of crucial issues (social, economic, cultural). It is in the nature of the system that in order for their viewpoints to carry weight and to be effective the parties need – through the voices of their representatives – to be heard and believed by the largest possible number of voters. As a result, persuasion is at the heart of political discourse. However, since all parties either want to gain political power through the election process, or at least want to gain enough representation in the legislature to be taken seriously by the parties in power, the political arena is by definition the scene of battles between opposing voices. Rather than looking for commonalities, these voices will highlight the differences between them with one major goal: persuade the electorate of their own “right” and of the opponents’ “wrong”. All parties’ representatives, i.e. all political speakers, hence need to emphasise the strong points of their own programmes and achievements as well as the weak points of the opposition’s programmes and achievements. This leads to clashes between conflicting voices. The public nature of political discourse entails that the stakes for speakers are high: either they convince (part of) the electorate or they fail to do so. All communicative strategies of political speakers will hence be geared towards presenting the best possible image of themselves (as individual representatives of the parties). This requires communicative skillfulness.

13.2 Aim of the chapter

In this chapter, we examine how political speakers in different contexts and genres cope with conflict. While the nature of the conflict is essentially the same in all genres, the ways in which it can surface and can be dealt with varies according to the rules of the genre.

According to Thibault (2003, p.44), “Genres are types. But they are types in a rather peculiar way. Genres do not specify the lexicogrammatical resources of word, phrase, clause, and so on. Instead, they specify the typical ways in which these are combined and deployed so as to enact the typical semiotic action formations of a given community”. It is proposed that
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the modes of political conflict vary according to different genres of communication, hence the importance of analysing conflict in situated context.

For this reason, we want to examine three particular genres: political interviews, debates and parliamentary questions. We will mainly focus on British data, though data from other cultures are also included. By looking at different genres, different types of political parties (notably mainstream/moderate vs. marginal/extremist) and different cultures, we intend to show that while the rules of engagement vary, all communicative strategies find an explanation within the theory of face. We argue that in political discourse face and face management constitute the unifying factor in all occurrences of conflict.

13.3 Theoretical background

Since the 1980s, there has been a growing body of linguistic research on media political discourse, both written and spoken. We propose, along with Simon-Vandenbergen, White and Aijmer (2007), that the majority of studies can be roughly divided in three different groups (although we acknowledge that this is a simplification and may not do justice to research that does not [easily] fit into any of these categories).

In one type of study, the focus is on how language choices reflect ideologies. Researchers working mainly within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis aim at laying bare underlying political outlooks that may not be explicitly expressed in the discourse, but which nevertheless have an impact on the way readers/hearers interpret the messages. The goal of this type of work is to raise awareness of language as an instrument of power and hence potentially of oppression and inequality. As such, these studies have a clear ideological starting-point and purpose. Much of this type of work has been inspired by leading theorists such as van Dijk (1998a, 1998b), Fairclough (1995, 2001) and Wodak et al., (2000), to name just a few.

A second group of studies focus on the mechanisms of interaction and on the ways in which speakers engage in various types of talk. These researchers are interested not so much in laying bare ideologies, as in uncovering how spoken political discourse develops in different contexts such as radio and television interviews and debates. This type of work can be situated within the broader framework of Conversation Analysis and its later developments in a number of variants. Influential researchers in this tradition have been Greatbatch (1992) and Clayman and Heritage (2002).

The third group comprises studies which take a functional linguistic approach in a broad sense. These studies examine linguistic choices (lexical, grammatical, prosodic ones) as expressing ideational and interpersonal meanings. The focus is on rhetorical strategies adopted consciously or subconsciously by speakers to cope with the demands of the various genres such as speeches and interviews. These studies share with the first group the viewpoint that linguistic choices are never innocent since they both reflect and create meanings. They share with the second group an interest in how interaction is managed, for instance in the way speakers use language to answer face-threatening questions, deny accusations, or present images of themselves. Some of this research has been directly inspired by Systemic Functional Linguistics and Speech Act Theory, for example, Harris (1991) on answering questions and Fetzer (2007) on challenges in political interviews.

Our own approach is functional in a broad sense. Much of the research by Bull and colleagues (e.g. Bull, 2008; Bull et al., 1996) has been focused on how politicians manage to hold their ground in the context of adversarial questioning, in particular on how
politicians do or do not answer questions. The work of Simon-Vandenbergen and colleagues takes a systemic-functional approach and has been focused on linguistic choices made by political speakers in order to express both commitment and non-commitment (e.g., Simon-Vandenbergen 1996, 1997, 2000; Simon-Vandenbergen et al., 2007). The research by both Bull and Simon-Vandenbergen shares a concern with finding explanations for strategic choices made by political speakers and has – via different routes – found such explanations in concepts of face and face management (Goffman, 1955, 1967b; Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987).

The term “face” loosely means something like prestige, honour or reputation. The word was originally derived from Chinese, but was introduced into social theory by the sociologist Erving Goffman with his article “On face-work: an analysis of ritual elements of social interaction” (1955), and his subsequent book Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour (1967b). According to Goffman, everybody acts out a line, a pattern of interaction whereby they express their view of the situation and themselves. Face is the positive social value a person effectively claims by the line they have taken, facework the actions taken by a person to make whatever they are doing consistent with face.

Goffman’s seminal article provided the inspiration for Brown and Levinson’s (1978, 1987) highly influential theory of politeness, according to which face is important in all cultures – it can be lost, maintained or enhanced. Brown and Levinson (1987, p.62) further distinguished between what they call positive and negative face, where positive face is defined as “the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others”, negative face as “the want of every ‘competent adult member’ that his actions be unimpeded by others”. So, for example, a request to do something may threaten someone’s negative face (by restricting their freedom of action), whereas disagreements may threaten someone’s positive face (by showing a lack of approval). In politeness theory, face maintenance is regarded as a primary constraint on the achievement of goals in social interaction. “Some acts are intrinsically threatening to face and thus require ‘softening’” (Brown and Levinson, 1978, p.24). Hence, communicative actions such as commands or complaints may be performed in such a way as to minimise threats to both positive and negative face.

In the context of the above theories of face, we consider in the next two sections how particular points of conflict arise and are dealt with in two genres of political communication: broadcast interviews (Section 13.4) and parliamentary questions (Section 13.5). Broadcast interviews are a media event; the conversation between interviewer and interviewee is talk produced specifically for the camera, for what has been termed the “overhearing audience” (Heritage, 1985). In contrast, parliamentary questions do not comprise talk produced just for the camera; this is talk which takes place as part of ordinary parliamentary business, but which is also televised and broadcast to the nation (since the televising of the UK Parliament began in 1989). Whereas the focus of Section 13.4 is primarily on how politicians respond to interviewer questions, the focus of Section 13.5 is primarily on the actual questions that are posed to the Prime Minister. These two sections are followed by a third (Section 13.6), which is focused on whether the discursive phenomena identified in interviews with politicians from mainstream political parties can also be observed in the discourse of politicians from both the far right and the far left, based on both broadcast interviews and debates. The findings from all these studies are considered in the final section (discussion and conclusions).
13.4 Political interviews

The focus of this section is on broadcast political interviews. The expression of both commitment and non-commitment (equivocation) by politicians is considered in the overall context of theories of face and face management.

13.4.1 Face management as an explanation for equivocation

In several studies of media political interviews, the development of the investigative or even adversarial mode of interviewing has been analysed (e.g. Greatbatch, 1986). This involves interviewers putting pressure on political interviewees to give straightforward and clear answers to the questions, even though in doing so the interviewees may risk losing face. According to Jucker (1986), political interviewees are more likely to be asked face-threatening questions than non-political interviewees; he lists 13 ways of threatening the interviewee’s face, which are used more or less frequently by journalists. One explanation for this interviewer style is that challenging interviews are more interesting to the listener, and more newsworthy. Also, interviewers are understood to have a warrant to behave in this way as representatives of an inquisitorial public. In this mode of questioning, interviewers often confront the interviewees with the opponents’ viewpoints, with contradictions between present and past statements, or with inconsistencies between promises and declarations on the one hand and facts on the other.

Research has also revealed that political speakers have developed strategies for coping with this type of questioning. For example, they may shift the agenda (Greatbatch, 1986) or their responses may become deliberately indirect and evasive (Harris, 1991; Jucker, 1986). Jucker points out that hedging devices are typically used as means of reducing commitment. If one says, “I think that x is the case”, the speaker cannot be held to account if it appears not to be the case. In contrast, if one says, “It is the case”, this makes an unqualified assertion which may be proven wrong. More recent studies include Fetzer’s (2007) analysis of challenges in political interviews, in which she also found that hedging (e.g. with the discourse particle well) is a frequently used strategy.

The most comprehensive studies of how political interviewees deal with questions have been carried out by Bull and his colleagues (in particular, Bull, 2003; Bull and Mayer, 1993). On the basis of 33 television interviews with prominent politicians of the major mainstream parties in Britain, these studies show that “equivocation” is the norm rather than the exception, and that there is – in other words – serious ground for the popular intuitive belief that politicians are evasive, woolly, and indirect (Bull, 1994). The term “equivocation” has been defined as “the intentional use of imprecise language” (Hamilton and Mineo, 1998, p.3), or “non-straightforward communication […] ambiguous, contradictory, tangential, obscure or even evasive” (Bavelas et al., 1990, p.28). In addition to a detailed classification of different types of equivocal response, Bull provides a powerful explanation for their occurrence. We shall first summarise in broad lines the most important results from these empirical studies and then provide an interpretation in terms of facework and face management.

If we define “replies” as responses to questions in which the requested information is given, “non-replies” are responses in which the politicians fail to give any information requested in the question and “intermediate replies” are those responses which fall somewhere in the middle. This last category comprises “answers by implication”, “incomplete replies” and “interrupted replies” (Bull, 1994). From three studies of 33 television interviews with British politicians, an average reply rate of only 46 percent was found (Bull, 1994).
(Reply rate refers to the proportion of questions that receive an explicit reply, i.e. excluding both intermediate replies and non-replies.) Similarly, in an independent study of a different set of political interviews, Harris (1991) found a reply rate of 39 percent. In comparison, televised interviews with non-politicians show a markedly different pattern. The late Diana, Princess of Wales, in her celebrated interview with Martin Bashir (20 November 1995), replied to 78 percent of questions (Bull, 1997). Louise Woodward, the British au-pair who was convicted for the manslaughter of eight-month-old Matthew Eappen, replied to 70 percent of the questions in an interview (22 June 1998) with Martin Bashir (Bull, 2000). Monica Lewinsky replied to 89 percent of questions posed by Jon Snow (4 March 1999) in an interview concerning her affair with President Clinton (Bull, 2000). The mean reply rate of 79 percent across all 3 interviews was significantly higher than the 46 percent in the 33 political interviews referred to above (Bull, 2003, p.114).

A typology of different forms of equivocation has been devised (Bull, 2003; Bull and Mayer, 1993), from which 35 different types of equivocation have been identified, based on the analysis of both intermediate replies and non-replies. We here restrict ourselves to summarising the 12 superordinate categories. Thus, politicians may respond in one of the following ways: ignore the question, acknowledge the question without answering it, question the question, attack the question, attack the interviewer, decline to answer, make a political point, give an incomplete reply, repeat the answer to a previous question, state or imply that the question has already been answered, apologise or interpret the question literally where it was clearly not intended as such. As an illustration,1 we will look at some subordinate types of the category “attacking the question”:

**Extract 13.1**
The question is factually inaccurate, for example:

*J Dimbleby:* In the present circumstances do you think that those 2 million or so pensioners who rely on the basic state pension have enough to live a decent life?

*Thatcher:* But they don’t have to rely on the basic state pension.

**Extract 13.2**
The question is objectionable, for example:

*J Dimbleby:* The one you didn’t mention were books and magazines does that mean they’re the ones that might be […]

*Thatcher:* No you’re going to tr you’re going yes and that’s exactly a typical question.

**Extract 13.3**
The question is based on a false alternative, for example:

*Day:* Which would you regard as a greater evil a coalition between Thatcherism and the Alliance and others or letting in a Thatch a Kinnock minority government committed to socialism and unilateral disarmament?

*Thatcher:* I do not accept I do not accept that that is the alternative.

*Day:* Supposing it was?

*Thatcher:* I think you have possibly posed a false alternative.
Given the ample proof for avoidance of commitment as a strategy frequently resorted to by political interviewees, the question arises how to explain this. The proposed answer lies in the nature of the broadcast political interview itself. A major distinctive feature is that the talk is actually enacted for the audience of radio listeners or television viewers. Both interviewer and interviewee keep the so-called “overhearing audience” (Heritage, 1985) constantly in mind when addressing each other. For the interviewers, the potential benefit of a successful performance is high status among their fellow journalists and advancement in their careers. The interviewer must therefore keep a balance between posing interesting and pertinent questions, while preserving neutrality. For the politicians, the potential benefits are that the interviews give them a platform for political propaganda, for expounding their programme and achievements to the audience, thereby hoping to convince the electorate of their party’s superiority over other parties. Thus, the stakes are high for both parties involved in the talk.

Furthermore, interviews are organised in strictly regulated turns: it is the interviewer’s role to ask questions and the interviewee’s role to answer them. Interviewers will tend to go as far as they can without losing neutrality in asking “tough” questions. This makes for interesting television. A tough interview may be seen as one with a large proportion of conflictual questions (Bull and Elliott, 1998).

According to a theory proposed by Bavelas at al. (1990), equivocation typically occurs in situations characterised by what they call “avoidance-avoidance” or “communicative conflicts” – the so-called Situational Theory of Communicative Conflict (STCC). These are situations in which all possible answers have negative consequences for the respondent, but nevertheless the interviewer and the audience expect a response. For example, in Extract 13.3, the interviewer acknowledged that both the alternatives he presented to Thatcher are bad solutions from her point of view (viz. “Which would you regard as a greater evil […]?”). Thatcher would not want to choose publicly between the two; she would not want to talk about defeat before the elections. Yet some kind of response is expected. Her solution in this case is logical: the alternative is a false one, hence there is no need to choose.

The STCC has been further developed and theoretically elaborated in terms of the concept of “threats to face” (Bull et al., 1996; Bull, 2008). From this perspective, equivocation occurs when the least face-threatening option for an interviewee is either a non-reply or an incomplete reply. Furthermore, politicians may be seen as “three-faced”: they have to defend their personal-political face, the party face and the face of significant others (Bull et al., 1996). This last group includes for example the electorate, a colleague, a friendly country or other positively valued people or institutions. On the basis of what has been termed the “face-threatening structure of questions” (Bull et al., 1996; Bull, 2008), it is possible to predict the direction of responses in political interviews; arguably, this is crucial in a theoretical model which explains the mechanisms of talk in mass audience political interviews. It follows that all the options which fall under the umbrella of equivocation may be seen as strategies adopted by skilful speakers in contexts where they are the best option from a face-saving point of view. No negative value judgement needs necessarily be attached to the strategies as such. What is equally important, however, is that facework also explains explicit replies in the same way: when an explicit reply is the best way of presenting a positive impression of themselves, then the speakers will opt for such a response.

Self-presentation through the expression of non-commitment can thus be seen as one side of the coin; when it is in the best interest of the speaker to express non-commitment, they will do so. In the next section, we look at the expression of commitment as an equally important strategy for presenting a desirable political face.
13.4.2 Face management as an explanation for the expression of commitment

Non-commitment as a face-saving strategy may be expressed by markers of modal uncertainty (such as “may”, “possibly”, “I think”, “I suppose”), by certain discourse markers announcing there is no straightforward answer (such as “well”, “actually”) or by other words weakening the force of the assertion such as quantifiers such as “some”, “a few”. In contrast, commitment can be expressed by direct replies as well as by lexical and grammatical markers of certainty. It appears that presenting a face of authority, of confidence and of knowledge is as important a strategy to political speakers as avoiding commitment. In fact, a closer look at “I think” has shown that in political argumentation it functions much less as a hedge than as a marker of authority (Simon-Vandenbergen, 1998, 2000). Simon-Vandenbergen (1996) showed how linguistic choices may contribute to turning interviews into instruments of propaganda: political speakers strive to present an image of intellectual power in order to gain or retain social power (see Kress and Hodge, 1979, p. 99, on the notions of social and intellectual power). This involves showing that one knows more than the opponent. Since interviewers often confront the interviewee with the opposition’s viewpoint, interviewees will try to use their turn to convince the audience by making assertions with the highest degree of confidence. Expressions of cognitive certainty and confidence in the truth of the assertion include a variety of choices, all cooperating to convey the meaning “I know” or “This is true”. The choices are basically of two superordinate types: speakers refer to so-called “objective” sources to provide external evidence for the claim, or they simply state or presuppose that the claim is true. Simon-Vandenbergen (1996) lists four major types of references to sources of knowledge: rationality and common sense, factual evidence, hearsay or majority opinion.

The following example is of the first type. The topic is the government’s inner-city programmes, and the question is whether or not there should be some sort of contract compliance with firms to make sure they employ local labour. The interviewee is the coordinator of the Conservative government’s inner-city programmes, and this is his response:

Extract 13.4
First of all we have got to concentrate much more on small firms and obviously we’ve been doing that an awful lot in the last year and in the last eight years […] No one in their right mind is going to imagine that the very large companies in the UK, whether it’s in Liverpool, Manchester, London or wherever, are going to increase their share of the labour market because of modern technology and higher productivity per man.

(BBC Radio 4 interview, June 1987)

The response starts with a statement of policy (i.e. the government’s policy to attract small firms) and goes on with a rejection of Labour’s alternative, which is to persuade large companies to employ local labour. Labour’s commitment to spend large sums of public money to attract private investments into the inner cities is dismissed as nonsense (see the words in italics), which is implicitly contrasted with the rational policy proposed by the Government. This contrast between the world of imagination (Labour policy) and rational thinking (Tory policy) is further expressed in the remainder of the speaker’s turn:

If you were to look at it on the other side of the coin and imagine that some subsidiary of GEC [General Electric Company] or ICI [Imperial Chemical Industries] or some
other household name are simply going to just set up in an area, I think you'd be on the prayer mat for a very long time.

Putting across one's own viewpoint as common sense without giving arguments is a tactic frequently employed by political speakers to create or maintain an asymmetrical power relationship in the discourse (see also Hall et al., [1978] and Fairclough [1988] on putting across the voices of the powerful as voices of common sense).

However, instead of attributing their certainty to some source of knowledge, politicians also frequently express commitment without giving any type of evidence for their claim. In one subtype of this category, cognitive certainty is simply emphasised through the use of modalised opinion (such as by “certainly”, “obviously”, “It is the case that”); in another, it is de-emphasised and presented as presupposed. There are several linguistic resources to construe a state of affairs as “to be taken for granted”: certain formulations which treat propositions as generally agreed upon and therefore not at stake argumentatively. It has been pointed out that it is much more difficult to attack a proposition which is presupposed than one which is asserted (Caffi, 1998); first, it must be recognised before it can be attacked, and secondly such an attack comes across as face-threatening (Caffi, 1998, p.753). This might explain the widespread use of presupposition by political interviewees, in attempts to ward off critical questions or counter-arguments.

Extract 13.5 below illustrates one subtype, where the proposition is made dependent on a so-called “factive predicate”, i.e. a verb which presupposes the existence of its complement. The extract comes from an interview with the UK Energy Secretary about the report of the Select Committee on the safety of nuclear energy, in particular at the nuclear plant at Sellafield. The interviewer refers to a statement in the report that Sellafield is the biggest single source of radioactive discharge in the world, and here is the Energy Secretary’s response:

Extract 13.5
The use of emotive phrases like that I deplore.

(BBC Radio interview 4, March 1986)

By embedding the noun phrase in italics as the complement of the predicate “I deplore” the reasoning is compressed with the aim of “imposing an unexamined consensus” (Kress and Hodge, 1979, p.35). It is, in other words, taken for granted that the statement in the report is “emotive”, i.e. not rational and hence not true.

Simon-Vandenbergen et al., (2007) examined presupposition and “taken-for-grantedness” in British, Flemish and Swedish data and found that similar tactics were used in all three cultures. The English and the Flemish data belonged to the genre of “panel interviews”, where a number of participants with varying stances on particular issues act jointly as interviewees with the interviewer as chair (see Clayman and Heritage, 2002; Greatbatch, 1992). Such interviews resolve the journalist’s problem of reconciling the expected neutral stance with critical and investigative questioning, as the panellists, typically representing different parties, will openly disagree with each other when they are asked the same questions. In this way conflict arises, while the journalist can maintain his role of moderator.

A favourite adverb to express “taken-for-grantedness” is “of course”. Research has shown that it fulfils various useful functions in political argumentation (Simon-Vandenbergen, 1992; Lewis, 2004). Its function depends on an interplay of placement (turn-initial, within turn, free-standing), intonation as well as context. We here focus on just one of these
functions, namely acting as a dialogic “put-down”: the speaker presents the interlocutor as having dealt inappropriately with informational or evaluative material. The interlocutor is presented either as having made an irrelevant contribution (because it is self-evident, known by the present speaker and hence does not contribute to the issue), or as having failed to take into consideration some universally known evidence. For a detailed analysis we refer to Simon-Vandenbergen et al., (2007). Extract 13.6 is an illustration:

**Extract 13.6**

*Dimbleby*: What do you make then of the point that Peter Hitchens was making – making to the effect that marriage is fundamental to the belief of the church and fundamental to its identity, as he believes it also to be in a coherent civilised society?

*Bryant*: Of course marriage is absolutely essential to a coherent and a good society and for the vast majority of people it’s the way they’re going to live their lives but there are some people, like myself, who are gay or are lesbian who are never going to have the opportunity of marriage, who might want to live in a long trusting loving relationship and I think the church should be helping people to do that rather than making it more difficult.

In Extract 13.6, the speaker (Bryant) does not simply concede the prior speaker’s point about the social role of marriage, but the use of “of course” construes it as self-evident and beside the point at issue. The opponent is thus implicitly and cleverly presented as lacking insight into the real problem, as less knowledgeable. “Of course” clearly serves an oppositional function and contributes to the speaker’s image of one who has superior knowledge.

In sum, expressions of commitment serve to present politicians as powerful, in charge, knowledgeable and responsible. Within the same turns, opponents are portrayed as lacking the necessary qualities and knowledge. Such commitment choices complement the picture of the evasive politician who relies on hedging and non-committal statements. Both commitment and non-commitment are understandable as facework. In fact, commitment expressions can be seen as a key component of intermediate and non-replies: while avoiding a direct reply, speakers may need to boost the impact of their message through forceful language.

### 13.5 Parliamentary questions

A second context in which face and facework have been shown to be of importance is that of parliamentary questions. Debates between opposing politicians are often characterised by what has been termed “face aggravation” (from Goffman, 1967b). This is a form of adversarial conflictual discourse, in which politicians seek to make one another look bad, or constrain one another’s freedom of action. As an illustrative example, face aggravation will be considered in this section of this chapter in the particular context of Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs) in the British House of Commons.

In the UK, laws are passed by the House of Commons, which is supreme in legislative matters. The Prime Minister (PM) is answerable to the Commons and must maintain its support to stay in power. PMQs is the central British parliamentary institution and its highest profile parliamentary event. Since 1997, it has taken place for at least half an hour every Wednesday while Parliament is sitting, and allows Members of Parliament (MPs) from any
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political party to pose questions to the PM. Although PMQs has been widely and extensively criticised (e.g. Blair, 2010; Thomas, 2006), this a remarkable institution, providing a degree of political accountability which might well be the envy of the citizens of many less democratic states across the world.

Both PMQs and broadcast interviews are characterised by question/response sequences. However, there is a notable difference: whereas questions in broadcast interviews are posed by professional political journalists, those in PMQs are posed by other politicians. This has important implications for the discourse of both situations. Political interviewers as journalists are expected to be impartial. For example, according to the editorial guidelines of the BBC, “impartiality lies at the heart of the BBC’s commitment to its audiences”. Politicians in contrast are restricted by no such constraints. MPs can be as partial and as unashamedly partisan as they choose. Furthermore, MPs in Parliament are protected by parliamentary privilege, which allows them to speak freely in the House without fear of legal action on grounds of slander.

At the same time, MPs cannot simply say what they like. According to parliamentary custom, they are expected to observe certain traditions and conventions regarding what is termed “unparliamentary language”. Specifically, they should not be abusive or insulting, call another member a liar, suggest another MP has false motives or misrepresent another MP. These conventions are enforced by the Speaker of the House (who chairs the debates). Thus, the Speaker may ask a Member to withdraw an objectionable utterance. Over the years, Speakers have objected to the use of abusive epithets such as blackguard, coward, git, guttersnipe, hooligan, rat, swine, traitor and stoolpigeon (House of Commons Information Office Factsheet G7, 2004). A Member who refuses to comply with the Speaker may be suspended from the House (referred to in parliamentary procedure as “naming”).

Thus, in PMQs, MPs must orient both to the expectation that the dialogue should follow a question-response pattern, and refrain from unacceptable unparliamentary language. However, within these constraints, they are still allowed a great deal of scope to attack and criticise their fellow MPs (including of course the PM). In doing so, they may employ considerable ingenuity to remain within the conventions of acceptable parliamentary language. For example, the former Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill once famously substituted the phrase “terminological inexactitude” for the unacceptable term “lie” (House of Commons Information Office Factsheet G7, 2004).

Indeed, PMQs has become notorious for its political point-scoring. When David Cameron became Leader of the Conservative Party (6 December 2005) he pledged to put an end to “the Punch and Judy politics of Westminster, the name calling, backbiting, point scoring, finger pointing” (Punch and Judy is a traditional popular British puppet show, which features domestic strife and violence between the two central characters, Mr Punch and his wife Judy). Subsequently, Cameron admitted that he had not kept this pledge, blaming the adversarial nature of PMQs (29 April 2008). Again, according to the late Simon Hoggart (2011), distinguished political columnist of The Guardian newspaper, “Prime Minister’s Questions is increasingly like an unpleasant football match, in which the game played publicly is accompanied by all sorts of secret grudge matches, settlement of scores and covert fouls committed when the players hope the ref [referee] is not looking”.

The most substantive analysis of PMQs to date was conducted by Bates et al., (2014), who based their research on techniques devised by Bull described above (Bull, 1994, 2003; Bull and Mayer, 1993). Bates et al., compared the opening sessions of PMQs for the five PMs from 1979 to 2010 (Thatcher, Major, Blair, Brown and Cameron). Bates et al.,’s aim
was to test a general perception that PMQs have developed into a focal point for shallow political point scoring, rather than serious prime ministerial scrutiny. They found that the conduct of PMQs had become rowdier over the period sampled, with weekly sessions increasingly dominated by the leaders of the two main parties to the gradual exclusion of backbenchers. So, for example, Bates et al., measured rowdiness by counting the number of times that [ Interruption] appears in Hansard transcripts [Hansard is the official record of proceedings of the House of Commons]. This showed that the average number of interruptions per session had increased from less than one during Thatcher’s premiership to about 6.5 during Cameron’s.

According to Harris (2001), discourse in PMQs is composed primarily of intentional and explicitly face-threatening acts (FTAs). In a study entitled “Being politically impolite”, she analysed 12 sessions of PMQs, recorded between March and November 2000. Harris argued that systematic impoliteness is not only sanctioned in PMQs, but rewarded in accordance with expectations of the Members of the House of Commons, through an adversarial and confrontational political process. Hence, even the most serious FTAs rarely, if ever, result in a breakdown in interpersonal relationships, nor is that the intention. MPs clearly perceive that the main role of the political opposition is to oppose, i.e. to criticise, challenge, subvert and ridicule the policies and positions of the government. Arguably, this adversarial and confrontational process was only heightened by the televising of the House of Commons.

Harris (2001) identified two techniques whereby FTAs may be performed in PMQs. One strategy is to ask a question that contains a request for highly specific information, which the PM may not have to hand or may not wish to publicise. If the PM declines or fails to answer the question, the Leader of the Opposition (LO) may then subsequently provide the information in order to embarrass or attack the PM. For example, Jeremy Corbyn (Labour LO since 12 September 2015) asked Theresa May (Conservative PM since 11 July 2016) the following question at PMQs (23 May 2018). “How many more GPs [general practitioners] are there than there were in 2015?” After May failed to provide this information, Corbyn in the preface to his next question provided the answer: “The reality is that there are 1,000 fewer GPs and the number is falling”. Thereby, Corbyn added fuel to his ongoing attack on the government’s mismanagement of the National Health Service.

Also common are questions that build in face-threatening presuppositions. So, for example, the question “Will the PM promise straightforwardness and honesty in future health announcements?” presupposes that past announcements have not always been honest and straightforward. In the latter example, the accusation of lying is only implicit, thereby keeping the questioner within the conventions of acceptable parliamentary language, according to which explicit accusations of lying are prohibited. In addition to disingenuous questions and contentious presuppositions, Bull and Wells (2012) have identified a further four distinctive ways in which FTAs may be performed in questions in PMQs. These are prefacing the question, invitations to perform a face-damaging response, conflictual questions and asides, and are illustrated below.

A lengthy preface may precede a question in PMQs, which can be used to perform FTAs. The following extract (18 April 2007) occurred after the then Labour PM Tony Blair had failed to endorse Gordon Brown (then Chancellor of the Exchequer) as his successor as PM. The Conservative LO David Cameron then commented: “The interesting thing is that the Prime Minister will not endorse the Chancellor”. Cameron’s next question (“What does he [i.e., Blair] think is wrong with him [i.e., Brown]?”) was prefaced with the following extended face-damaging attack on Brown:
Conflict in political discourse

**Extract 13.7**

*We know why we do not want the Chancellor – he has complicated the tax system and virtually bankrupted the pensions system, he is impossible to work with and he never says sorry. That is why we don’t want the Chancellor. What does he think is wrong with him?*

Another questioning technique is to invite the PM to perform some kind of face-damaging act, e.g. by apologising, by criticising a member of his/her own party, by admitting that a particular policy has been a complete failure or by acknowledging that a government department has been incompetent). In the following extract (20 June 2007), Cameron asked Blair a question about the prison population, inviting him to apologise for the early release of prisoners:

**Extract 13.8**

Ten years ago, he told us that he would be tough on crime; now he is releasing 25,000 criminals on to our streets. Shouldn’t he, just this once, apologise for what can only be described as an abject failure to deliver?

The early release scheme (whereby prisoners were released from prison before completing their sentence in full) was announced on 20 June 2007 by Lord Falconer (the then Secretary of State for Justice) as a means of reducing prison overcrowding. Arguably, this scheme was tantamount to a government admission that it had failed to make adequate provision for the increase in the prison population.

Cameron’s question was based on the presupposition that Blair never apologised, through the use of the phrase “just this once” (“Shouldn’t he, *just this once*, apologise”) Notably, a direct insult to another MP is not acceptable, it is regarded as a form of “unparliamentary language”. However, this convention may be circumvented by embedding insults in the presuppositional content of the question. Thus, if Cameron had directly accused Blair of never apologising, he might have been called to account by the Speaker. By embedding the insult within the presuppositional content of the question, Cameron was able to keep within the bounds of acceptable parliamentary language.

This extract can also be used to illustrate the way in which conflictual questions can pose face-threats in PMQ questions. In this example, whatever response Blair gave was potentially face-damaging. An apology would have been tantamount to an admission that government policy on the prison population had been a failure. A refusal to apologise might have made Blair sound arrogant, given that the early release scheme could be readily understood as a failure by the government to make adequate provision for the increase in the prison population. In fact, just as the STCC (Bavelas et al., 1990; Bull et al., 1996) would predict, Blair avoided this dilemma by not giving an answer, stating “I entirely regret, as I have said, I regret very much having to take the measures on early release”. Arguably, the use of the term “regret” does not have the full pragmatic force of an apology (Kampf, 2009), in that it attenuates any sense of government responsibility for prison overcrowding. Nevertheless, this failure to take responsibility might also be seen as face-damaging – but perhaps not as face-damaging as answering the question in either of the ways specified above.

Finally, in what is termed an aside, speakers may depart from the question–response format, while also performing FTAs. In the following extract (17 October 2007), Cameron used an interruption from a Labour MP to make an aside attacking the Labour government for its lack of discipline. Previously, in attempting to put his question, Cameron had been
interrupted twice by shouting from a Labour MP Ian Austin, who was reprimanded by the Speaker as follows:

**Extract 13.9**

Order order. I hope the Honourable Gentleman Mr. Austin you’re not going to keep shouting again. You’re a difficulty in PM’s questions because you keep shouting. You shouldn’t do it.

Cameron then used this reprimand to quip the following aside: “It comes to something when you have to tick off the PM’s own PPS” (Ian Austin was Parliamentary Private Secretary [PPS[ to Gordon Brown). Cameron’s aside was greeted by laughter, before he continued with the main body of his question concerning the National Health Service.

Overall, Bull and Wells (2012) argued (following Harris, 2001) that face aggravation between the PM and LO is not just an acceptable form of parliamentary discourse, it is both sanctioned and rewarded, a means whereby the LO may enhance his/her own status. In addition, they observed that PMQs should be regarded as another of the situations identified by Culpeper (1996), where impoliteness is not a marginal activity, but central to the interaction that takes place.

In a second study (Bull, 2013), the political significance of adversarial questioning in PMQs was considered in the context of a specific political issue, that of the British phone-hacking scandal. This was an ongoing controversy involving the News of the World and other British tabloid newspapers published by News International, whose employees were accused of engaging in phone hacking, police bribery, and exercising improper influence in the pursuit of publishing stories. In the context of this furore, the leader of the Labour opposition at that time (Ed Miliband) launched a wholesale attack on both the PM and News International in two sessions of PMQs (6 and 13 July 2011). Notably, Miliband achieved substantive political gains with his questions: most notably, a public inquiry into the role of the press and police in the phone-hacking scandal (the Leveson inquiry) and the resignation of the chief executive of News International (Rebekah Brooks).

PMQs has been likened to a form of verbal pugilism, conducted under arcane conventions resembling the so-called Queensbury rules of boxing (Bull and Wells, 2012). However, although adversarial discourse by its very nature is intrinsically face-threatening, it is arguably not merely about face aggravation, nor is face aggravation necessarily just an end in itself (“rudeness for rudeness’ sake”). From the above perspective, the adversarial and confrontational discourse of PMQs should not necessarily be dismissed as just petty political point scoring, but also may be understood as a means to an end, namely, the pursuit of particular political policies and political objectives (Bull, 2013).

Notably, there is nothing comparable to PMQs in the American political system. In the US, the presidential press conference plays a much more prominent role, where journalists have the opportunity to put questions to the president. But the president can “de-select” a journalist by not inviting him/her to future press conferences if s/he poses questions which are too awkward. In contrast, the PM has no right to de-select the LO, who may return to PMQs week after week to persist in posing awkward questions. Thus, despite its many detractors and deficiencies, PMQs offers a unique degree of political accountability, whereby the leader of the UK can be directly questioned, criticised and challenged by the political opposition. Despite much of the admittedly facile point scoring of PMQs, the conflictual discourse of PMQs can play an important role in sustaining political dialogue and political accountability, as illustrated above in the case of the phone-hacking scandal (Bull, 2013).
Notably, questions in PMQs are posed not by professional interviewers but by other politicians. Although the PM needs to defend both positive and negative face, face aggravation is a prime feature of PMQ discourse. Indeed, the positive face of the Leader of the Opposition depends at least in part on an ability to undermine the face of the Prime Minister, the positive face of the Prime Minister in part on an ability to defend him/herself against such attacks.

In broadcast interviews, in contrast, questions are posed by professional journalists, who are constrained by norms of journalistic impartiality. Nevertheless, their questions also typically present threats to a politician’s positive face, although on occasions politicians may need to defend negative face, should a question threaten their future freedom of action. In addition, politicians may also use questions for face aggravation against their political opponent, should the opportunity arise.

Thus, both PMQs and political interviews are characterised by conflictual discourse, which may be understood in terms of face and facework. However, the way in which that manifests itself varies according to the norms of acceptable discourse in each situational context.

13.6 Extremist versus mainstream discourse: some case studies from interviews and debates

All the data presented above is based essentially on analyses of mainstream politicians. Whether such features are also characteristic of the discourse of more marginal parties considered “extremist” by the mainstream is the focus of the next section of this chapter. Two studies have been carried out by the authors of far right-wing politicians (Bull and Simon-Vandenbergen, 2014; Simon-Vandenbergen, 2008). In addition, a new study is reported in this chapter of an interview with a far left-wing South African politician, Julius Malema. This analysis is intended to show whether similarities in discourse can be attributed to similar contextual factors.

13.6.1 Right-wing extremist discourse in Belgium and the UK

One study of far right-wing discourse was conducted in Belgium of two debates with Filip Dewinter and Gerolf Annemans, both MPs from the Flemish Bloc (FB), a nationalist party which calls for independence of Flanders, but which mainly profiles itself as strongly anti-immigrant. In both debates, the MPs’ opponent was Etienne Vermeersch, a distinguished Flemish philosopher (Simon-Vandenbergen, 2008).

The slogan of the Flemish Bloc (“Our own people first”) refers to the view that priority in all matters must be given to Flemish citizens over immigrants. In 2004, the Ghent court of appeal ruled the FB in contempt of the 1981 Belgian law on racism and xenophobia, a view upheld by the Belgian Supreme Court. Following these verdicts, FB dissolved itself and created a new party, Flemish Interest. In the two debates analysed in this study, the philosopher sought to demonstrate that the politicians had not abandoned their racist views. An analysis was conducted of the politicians’ responses to those arguments, focused particularly on their use of implicit discourse to convey their racial stance.

This implicit discourse was conceptualised in terms of an underlying communicative conflict (following Bavelas et al., 1990). Thus, on the one hand, given the legal position, the politicians might be expected to deny any statement that could be construed as racist. The MPs had been obliged by law to delete certain passages from their political programme,
so when confronted with passages which might seem racist, they avoid expressing commitment to those utterances, either refusing to endorse them, or distancing themselves in some way. On the other hand, the MPs would arguably also wish to reassure their hard-core supporters that the party’s ideology remained the same.

In this context, implicit discourse enabled the MPs to put over their message, but with sufficient ambiguity to avoid risks of prosecution or wider condemnation for racism. So, for example, in one debate, the philosopher asked, “Has the principle ‘Our own people first’ been abolished then?” The MP replied, “There is nothing dirty or racist about it. It simply means that I defend what is most precious to me. It is no disgrace to love your own children more”. Although the MP does not answer the question, there is a clear implication that the principle “Our own people first” has not been abandoned. The philosopher then rephrased the question in a slightly different way. “Does ‘Our own people first’ mean priority for Flemish people regarding housing or employment?” The MP responded:

_Extract 13.10_

I’m not allowed to be in favour of that. It is forbidden by law, since the change of the anti-racism law. You are not going to extract statements about that from me, because otherwise I risk prosecution. But in general terms I can tell you that in my opinion nationality gives certain rights and duties and hence also certain privileges.

Thus, although the MP refused to answer this question, there was again the clear implication that the Flemish people should have priority in housing and employment (“in my opinion nationality gives certain rights and duties and hence also certain privileges”). Thus, from the perspective of the STCC (Bavelas et al., 1990), the implicit responses of the Flemish Bloc MPs could be understood in the context of an underlying communicative conflict.

Equivocation can be understood in terms of four dimensions, namely, “sender”, “content”, “receiver” and “context” (Bavelas et al., 1990). The sender dimension refers to the extent to which the response is the speaker’s own opinion; a statement is considered more equivocal if the speaker fails to acknowledge it as his own opinion, or attributes it to another person. Receiver refers to the extent to which the message is addressed to the other person in the situation – the less so the more equivocal the message. Content refers to comprehensibility, an unclear statement being considered more equivocal, and can be distinguished from context, which refers to the extent to which the response is a direct answer to the question – the less the relevance, the more equivocal the message.

In terms of these four dimensions, the implicit language of these MPs might be regarded as equivocation in terms of content, that is to say, it might seem superficially unclear, vague or ambiguous. Nevertheless, even though not explicitly stated, it carries the clear implication that the underlying “Our own people first” message is still the same. From this perspective, it might also be regarded as a form of “doublespeak” – language that deliberately disguises, distorts or reverses the meaning of words (e.g. Lutz, 1987). It should be noted that linking the concept of doublespeak to the content dimension of equivocation theory is novel. In the theory’s original version, content is defined simply in terms of comprehensibility, an unclear statement being considered more equivocal. In contrast, the concept of doublespeak provides a useful bridge between equivocation and deception. Doublespeak can be seen both as deceptive, given that there is deliberate intent to disguise, distort or reverse the meaning of words, and as equivocal, given that it may seem vague or ambiguous.

Notably, a well-known far right-wing British politician (Nick Griffin) was caught on camera openly advocating this kind of doublespeak. Griffin was a former leader (1999–2014) of...
the far right-wing British National Party (BNP), who was shown on a YouTube video (BNP Nick Griffin + KKK Terrorist) alongside David Duke, a former leader of the Klu Klux Klan (a far right-wing American organisation with a violent history of lynching and murdering blacks). The video was recorded at a private meeting of American white nationalists, but subsequently uploaded onto the internet by Ukfightback (an anti-fascist organisation). In this video, Griffin made the statement rendered in Extract 13.11:

Extract 13.11
But if you put that, i.e. getting rid of all coloured people from Britain, as your sole aim to start with, you’re going to get absolutely nowhere, so instead of talking about racial purity, we talk about identity, we use saleable words, freedom, security, identity, democracy. Nobody can come and attack you on those ideas.

Thus, in this video, Griffin openly advocated doublespeak as a calculated communicative strategy.

A second study of far right-wing discourse (Bull and Simon-Vandenbergen, 2014) was based on Griffin’s appearance on the popular topical current affairs prime-time BBC television program *Question Time* (22 October 2009). This was the first time a far right-wing British politician had appeared on the *Question Time* programme and followed Griffin’s election in 2009 as a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) for the North-West of England. The broadcast provided a unique opportunity to analyse a sample of far-right wing political discourse in the context of a prime-time television debate.

The results of this analysis were compared with the analysis of debates with two Flemish far right-wing politicians reported above (Simon-Vandenbergen, 2008). Just as with the two FB politicians, it was proposed on the basis of the STCC that Griffin was caught in a communicative conflict (Bavelas et al., 1990). On the one hand, the BNP is widely perceived as a racist party, and to support the BNP, let alone vote for them, is totally unacceptable in significant areas of society. At the same time, much of the BNP’s political support comes from its anti-immigrant stance; to be seen to abandon this would be highly face damaging in the eyes of its hard-line supporters. Hence, it was proposed that both the FB and the BNP found themselves in a comparable social and political situation, characterised by communicative conflict. Accordingly, it was hypothesised that the distinctive features of right-wing discourse already identified by Simon-Vandenbergen (2008) in her study of FB politicians would be replicated in Griffin’s performance on *Question Time*.

In particular, it was hypothesised that Griffin would utilise various forms of doublespeak to put over the underlying racial message of the BNP, and this was indeed found to be the case. Notably, Griffin’s implicit discourse (like that of the FB politicians) can be regarded as a form of doublespeak. Seemingly, it is vague and ambiguous. Terms such as the “British people” and the “indigenous people” are never clearly defined. However, although never explicitly stated, the terms are readily understood by members of both panel and audience as meaning the white population. At the same time this interpretation, if challenged, had the strategic advantage of deniability, and Griffin does indeed deny that is what he means. Nevertheless, they carried a clear implicit message to reassure the party’s supporters that the underlying anti-immigrant message is still the same.

Interestingly, audience members seemed to be aware of this duality. For example, one audience member remarked, “I think the, erm, the public who are voting for the BNP do need to be educated about what Nick stands for. He’s basically a wolf in sheep’s clothing”. Another audience member quipped, “you’d be surprised how many people will have a whip
According to Bavelas et al.’s (1990) theory, equivocation may be used as an alternative to deception. In this section, it has been argued that equivocation may also be used as a form of deception. In addition, equivocation and deception may be linked together through the concept of doublespeak. Doublespeak can be seen as deceptive, given that there is deliberate intent to disguise, distort or reverse the meaning of words, but also as equivocal, given that it can be vague or ambiguous. Undoubtedly, there are situations in which people equivocate to avoid deception. But as argued above, there are also contexts in which equivocation itself may be seen as a form of deception. In short, people both equivocate to avoid deception, but may also equivocate as a form of deception – and as a calculated communicative strategy.

### 13.6.2 Left-wing extremist discourse

According to the data presented above, far right as well as mainstream politicians equivocate in response to face-threatening questions in conflictual situations. However, some strategies are seemingly more frequent in far-right discourse, in particular denial and attacks. Bull and Simon-Vandenbergen (2014) further found striking parallels between strategies of equivocation and doublespeak in the discourses of Flemish and British extreme right politicians in situations where their face was seriously at risk.

From this perspective, it was decided to conduct a study of a far-left wing politician, to investigate to what extent equivocation may be used in comparable conflictual contexts and may be explicable in terms of threats to face. Should there appear to be parallels with far-right politicians as against mainstream politicians, the types of responses may be accounted for in terms of comparable communicative contexts rather than competing ideologies. The analysis was based on a CNN interview with Julius Malema (dated 12 September 2012). Malema is a South African politician (born 1981) and former leader of the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL). At present, he is “Commander-in-Chief” of the political party Economic Freedom Fighters.

Malema started his political career in the ANC (African National Congress) as a fervent supporter of the ANC leaders, and at one time said that he would “die for Zuma” (speech at Bloemfontein, June 2008). Jacob Zuma was elected President of South Africa in 2009 and has become one of its most controversial presidents since the end of white-majority rule in 1994, facing various allegations of corruption. Malema turned into one of the harshest critics of the President, quickly becoming progressively more controversial himself both within the ANC and in South Africa generally. He publicly distanced himself from ANC decisions and refused to tow the party line. He openly praised Zimbabwe’s President Mugabe’s political regime, especially the redistribution of the land without compensation and the nationalisation of the mines. He is particularly popular with some sectors of the black youth, many of whom are unemployed, as he is viewed as voicing their frustrations and driving radical economic policies which they perceive as their only hope of change.

The following facts form the background to the interview. In early 2010, Malema decided to revive the old struggle song “Dubula iBhunu” (“Shoot the Boer”). Malema was convicted of hate speech in 2011. In that same year, he was found guilty of sowing division in the ANC and expelled from the party. In September 2012, he was charged with fraud and money laundering. In that same year, the miners went on strike for higher wages, but the strikes turned violent and it was clear that the miners had lost all confidence in the ANC. Malema saw his
moment and “paraded straight into the political space that Zuma had unwittingly created for him” (Forde, 2014, p.151). He addressed the strikers as their new leader.

In the CNN interview, the following topics were covered: corruption charges and allegations of fraud; Malema’s aims as leader in the crisis of the national miners’ strike; Malema’s right to claim leadership in the miners’ strike; his expulsion from the ANCYL; and finally, the charge of stoking (anti-white) racial tension, notably by singing the song “Shoot the Boer”.

The choice of this politician’s discourse for comparison with the earlier data was based on the following considerations:

1 although the language in which the interview is conducted is the same as in the Nick Griffin interview (English), the cultural context is different (South Africa vs. Europe). On the other hand, the interview is conducted by an American journalist and broadcast by CNN. CNN International reaches more than 350 million households worldwide and thus addresses a global audience. In addition, Julius Malema is a critical, experienced interviewee with a great deal of global exposure, who reads the context. This raises the question whether similar discursive strategies are used to the ones we found in the European data

2 although Malema’s ideology and political programme are at the opposite extreme of the political spectrum to speakers from the far right, he shares with them an antagonistic attitude to mainstream politics and charges of racist rhetoric. These common positions raise the question whether similar types of facework are performed in similar situational contexts, irrespective of differences in cultural contexts.

The total interview lasts 8:49 minutes. Yet only five questions get asked. This is because both the first and the last question give rise to denials, interruptions and overlaps, so that the interviewer, CNN journalist Christiane Amanpour (Ier) has to repeat the same questions several times. Malema is put into a position of communicative conflict on several occasions in this interview. For example, in the opening of the interview (rendered in Extract 13.12), the interviewer suggests – through the use of presupposition – that the leadership role that Malema assumes in the miners’ strike conflict is dubious both because he has been ousted from the ANC and because he is facing corruption charges. In other words, while seemingly asking for Malema’s agenda, she is attacking his credibility as a leader. On the surface her double question (“Why have you done this? What do you think you can achieve?” is a double wh-question, giving Malema the opportunity to respond freely. But underlying the question is the accusation of inappropriate behaviour. Malema sees this and before responding to the “why” and “what” he attacks the presupposition. If he had given a direct reply this would have signalled that he accepted the accusation of unrightful leadership. He therefore had no choice but to equivocate. This is the opening of the interview:

**Extract 13.12**

*Ier:* Julius Malema, a harsh critic of the Zuma government, has become the face of this crisis, stepping into the leadership void that’s been left by the President and his men calling for a national strike in all of South Africa’s mines. Malema was leader of the ANC’s Youth Wing before being expelled for fermenting division within the party. He’s now facing corruption charges relating to the misuse of party funds while he was in office. And he joins me right now.
Julius Malema, you are a very controversial figure and yet you’ve gone and inserted yourself into [Malema laughs] a really violent and difficult situation right now. *Why have you done that? What do you think you can achieve?*

*JM:* No let’s correct one thing here. I’m not facing any corruption charges eh from any institution in South Africa.

*Ier:* There’s are there’s an investigation.

*JM:* for any wrongdoing.

*Ier:* There’s an investigation into some fraud and allegations of misappropriation.

*JM:* Yeah yeah.

*Ier:* So my question is

*JM:* Yeah so if you use I’m facing charges as if I’m charged already that’s not correct.

*Ier:* No I said that you that there’s an investigation.

*JM:* Yeah.

*Ier:* And they’re looking into it. *Could you please tell me what you’re doing* inserting your very controversial self into what’s going on in South Africa at the mines right now? *What do you think you will achieve?*

Malema does not reply to the question but criticises the question for being based on incorrect information. His denial “I’m not facing any charges” attacks a statement in the introduction by the journalist by denying its truth. By doing this his response “No let’s correct one thing here” falls under what Bull and Mayer (1993) call “the question is based on a false premise”.

The facts are that on 12 September 2012, the day of the interview, he had appeared in court for these charges, but the trial was to take place 18–29 November 2013. In any case Malema plays on the words “facing charges”, and finally accepts the wording “there’s an investigation”. Note that in one turn he attacks the interviewer directly “if you use”, implying she is either misinformed or deliberately manipulating the truth.

The interview ends with another wh-question which puts Malema in a position of communicative conflict. It is a question about his singing of the controversial song “Kill the Boer”. This question again leads to a long exchange between interviewer and Malema, rendered in Extract 13.13.

**Extract 13.13**

*Ier:* Julius Malema, *do you believe* that stoking racial tensions is a way of getting what you believe the workers are entitled to? *Why did you go there and sing that song* again today and yesterday that got you into trouble in the first place ‘Kill the Boers’?

*JM:* *That is not the song that got me into trouble that*

*Ier:* But anyway *why* did you do it?

*JM:* I think people know know the difference. *No I didn’t sing the song “Let’s kill the Boer” today I*

*Ier:* What did you say?

*JM:* I was saying in Zulu you can listen to the tape and *get a proper interpreter because those who are interpreting for you are actually misleading you and you must fire them.*

*Ier:* So what were you saying?

*JM:* I sang two songs today. One is the toitoi the other one was the one that says we are going forward irrespective of us being shot or arrested or being killed while soldiering on with the struggle for economic freedom.
Ier: Let me just play this.
JM: In the past.
Ier: Let me play the tape.
JM: Yeah.

[Plays video with JM chanting “Kiss the Boer, the farmer” and the crowd responding with the refrain “kiss kiss”].

Ier: What is that then because we had reports so you were again using those words and that song.
JM: The song says “Kiss the Boer kiss the farmer” – listen to them to the words in that song “Kiss the Boer kiss the farmer”. That’s what I’m saying in the song so I don’t know where you’re getting what you’re saying.
Ier: Might you have changed those words?
JM: Come again.
Ier: The original song that you were told basically told off for using was “Kill the Boer”.
JM: No this was not the song before the court – this song was sung by the firebrand the president of the Youth League Peter Mugaba. It used to have the words “Kill the Boer kill the farmer” and we changed those words into reconciliatory words promoting reconciliation through kissing. That’s why we talk about the kiss in the song and the one before the court was
Ier: All right.
JM: a different song and was never sung anywhere since the proceedings of the court and since the finding by the judge and the appeal we are awaiting on the other song.
Ier: Julius Malema, thank you very much for joining us.

The interviewer starts with a why-question in which the truth of the proposition that JM sang the song “Kill the Boers” is presupposed. Malema attacks the question by protesting that it is factually incorrect, i.e. he attacks the presupposition. Note that he needs to do this because the court had found him guilty of stoking racial hatred by singing the song in public. The remainder of the exchange turns around this presupposition which is thus turned into the proposition which is argued about. The facts are that JM indeed changed the word “kill” into “kiss”. However, that the song is meant to be reconciliatory is not credible in view of his stance on white ownership of land.

Thereby Malema’s version of the song might be seen as a clever and effective strategy for remaining within the law and at the same time telling the supporters that he has not changed his mind – a form of doublespeak in response to the communicative conflict created by the court ruling. Malema is clearly in exactly the same situation as the far-right politicians analysed in the previous section: he is forced to choose between breaking the law or losing the support of his core voters who expect him to be radical and unwavering. His solution in this case is a cynical use of doublespeak: using the same chant in which he “leads” and the crowd responds he changes the refrain “Kill the Boer, the farmer” into “Kiss the Boer, the farmer”, well knowing that everyone grasps the underlying message. In fact, the message was so clear that it prevented the journalist (and others) from noticing the change from “kill” to “kiss”. Notably, Malema uses this for another personal attack on the interviewer, claiming that she is being misled.

In the middle of the interview, between the opening and closing questions, Malema sets out his programme of economic reform and uses the opportunity for personal image
building, with such phrases as “we have now taken over the leadership of that struggle to ensure that the mineral resources of this country benefit the people of this country”, “we remain leaders […] to ensure that the working class in South Africa does not become leaderless” (a clear attack on Zuma).

In conclusion, Julius Malema in this interview uses equivocation strategies comparable with other politicians. Like mainstream politicians, he attacks the presupposition of the question (cf. Bull and Mayer, 1993). Like both mainstream and far-right wing politicians, he makes personal attacks on the interviewer (cf. Bull and Mayer, 1993; Simon-Vandenbergen, 2008; Bull and Simon-Vandenbergen, 2014). Furthermore, his reformulation of the song “Kill the Boers” to “Kiss the Boers” is comparable with the forms of doublespeak used by far-right wing politicians to get their message across while staying within the law (Simon-Vandenbergen, 2008; Bull and Simon-Vandenbergen, 2014).

13.7 Discussion and conclusions

In this chapter, we have considered conflictual discourse in three genres of communication: broadcast political interviews, debates and parliamentary questions. Since we focused in the debates on how speakers responded to the moderator-journalist’s questions, we discussed interviews and debates together. Most of the data analysed has come from recordings of British politicians, but we have also included analyses of Belgian and South African politicians.

In broadcast interviews, questions typically present a threat to a politician’s positive face, although on occasions politicians may need to defend negative face, should a question threaten their freedom of action. In addition, they may use a question as an opportunity for face aggravation against their political opponents. Politicians typically equivocate to conflictual questions, where all the principal forms of response present a threat to face, but typically answer non-conflictual questions. From this perspective, facework is integral to both replies and equivocation, which both may be seen as distinctive forms of communicative skill. In broadcast interviews with extremist politicians, both of the far right and the far left, face management and facework have also been shown to be important. In particular, so-called doublespeak may be used as a way of putting their message across while staying within the law. In the immediate context, it also serves ambivalently to put one message across to core followers and another to presumably more mainstream listeners.

In PMQs, questions are posed not by professional interviewers but by other politicians. Although the PM needs to defend both positive and negative face, face aggravation is a prime feature of PMQ discourse. Indeed, the positive face of the LO depends at least in part on an ability to undermine the face of the PM, the positive face of the PM in part on an ability to defend him/herself against such attacks. In PMQs, all participants must orient to the expectation both that the dialogue should follow a question-answer pattern and that they should refrain from unacceptable unparliamentary language. Given these constraints, the adversarial discourse of PMQ can be seen as a highly demanding form of social interaction, in which the participants need to acquire high level skills in the formulation of both questions and responses.

Our overarching theoretical framework is based on the concepts of face and face management, and the view that the salience of different form of facework varies according to genre of communication. Three distinct types of facework (positive face, negative face and face aggravation) have been discussed in the context of three distinct genres of political communication (broadcast interviews, debates and parliamentary questions). Face and face
management are central to both the handling of conflict, and to the most favourable representation of political arguments to persuade others of their validity – hence, the importance of these concepts in understanding the language of conflict.

The question of the opposition between “mainstream parties” versus “marginal parties” or between “moderate parties” versus “extremist parties” needs further investigation. In this article, we have used them more or less as synonyms, i.e. mainstream parties tend to be moderate, while marginal parties (at least those we studied here) hold what moderates see as extremist views. On the other hand, we are aware that politicians may have “extremist” views while belonging to “mainstream parties”: Donald Trump comes to mind as an example. The type of doublespeak we have discussed was clearly due to the situation the interviewees found themselves in. But there is more: what the far right- and far left-wing speakers in our data – as well as the president of the US – share is that they use populist discourse. We are using the term “populism” in the meaning as defined by Buruma (2018, p.77), i.e. “which includes hostility to political, cultural and social elites”. Buruma writes: “Since the make-up and the history of elites vary in different countries, populism comes in various forms as well”. Causes of its success, according to Buruma, include the erosion of ideological principles, the shifting of responsibilities, and corruption: “People felt increasingly alienated from and disgusted with the political class, those ‘elites’ who represented nobody but themselves” (Buruma, 2018, p.83).

When it comes to the question of conflict transformation, these findings lead us to the need for politicians with ideologies and principles they stand for and can be seen by the electorate to stand for. These are issues that go beyond what we as discourse analysts can do. What we can do is raise awareness, both of “mainstream” and of “marginal”, of “populist” language meant to deceive rather than to elucidate. More than ever, close reading and understanding of political discourse is essential to the maintenance of the democratic process.

Notes
1 Extracts 13.1 to 13.3 are taken from Bull (2003).
2 It should be noted that interviewers are often expected to play a devil’s advocate for opposing views. In those cases, they tend to signpost this role (e.g. with “Some might say that”), thus making it clear that, in Goffman’s (1981) terms, while they are animating (and sometimes authoring) these views, they are not their principal. This is how they preserve neutrality. We thank the anonymous reviewer who added this comment.
3 We are aware that the use of face with regard to persons not present is objected to by some (e.g. O’Driscoll 2011, 2017).
4 Extracts 13.4 and 13.5 are taken from Simon-Vandenbergen (1996).
5 The original language in Extract 13.7 was Dutch. The translation is ours.
6 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=drP336QXp9s.

References


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