

## Article

# How to Argue with Questions and Answers: Argumentation Strategies in Parliamentary Deliberation

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**Abstract:** While apparently designed to request information, parliamentary questions are the most challenging and face-threatening acts, used argumentatively by opposition members of parliament (MPs) to confront and attack government MPs, and especially the Prime Minister (PM) in the notoriously adversarial Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs). By contextually, discursively and rhetorically articulating varying degrees of relevance and persuasiveness, questioning and answering practices serve as basic debating tools for MPs, whose main parliamentary role and responsibility consist of holding the government and the PM accountable. The aim of this paper is to explore how argumentation/counter-argumentation strategies and persuasive/dissuasive techniques are shaped through the co-performance of MPs' questioning and the PM's answering practices in PMQs. To better capture the effects of the shifting dynamics of polemical question-answer exchanges between political adversaries, the present analysis is based on the cross-fertilization of pragma-rhetoric and argumentation theory. The commonalities and complementarities of these approaches have been used to identify and problematize the higher or lower degrees of argumentation at the question-answer interface in terms of valid or fallacious reasoning patterns in three categories of strategic questions: yes/no questions, wh-questions and disjunctive questions.

**Keywords:** question; answer; argumentation; pragma-rhetoric; parliament; Prime Minister; member of parliament; yes/no question; wh-question; disjunctive question



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## 1. Introduction

Jim Hacker: Opposition's about asking awkward questions.

Sir Humphrey: And government is about not answering them.

—Yes, Minister, "Open Government" (British Sitcom 1980–1988)

As a result of the new and complex challenges of national and super/trans-national politics, including liberal and illiberal policies, as well as extremist political movements, parliaments have acquired a renewed importance as a purposefully designated political forum for the legitimate enactment of dissensus by arguing for the pros and cons of political issues. In general, the role of the political opposition is to constantly criticize the government, while the government will seek to discredit the opposition's views and alternative solutions. This confrontation between adversaries is what constitutes the 'agonistic struggle' that is the very condition of a vibrant democracy (Mouffe 2016). According to Palonen (2016), dissensus is the *raison d'être* of parliaments, and the debate over every issue is the cornerstone of parliamentary procedure. The very essence of parliamentary confrontation lies in its polemical nature, according to which political adversaries have to be proved wrong or at least be neutralized by challenging their standpoints, disputing their solutions and/or attacking their decisions.

In democratic political systems, the scope of confrontational antagonism varies across different parliamentary models. In some systems, political actors strive towards consensus by seeking to bridge conflicts and act on common ground (e.g., the Swedish Riksdag), while actors in other systems (e.g., Westminster-type parliaments) embrace conflicts and display

them openly. Parliamentary debates in the latter category of political systems, especially in Westminster-type parliaments such as the UK Parliament, often display high levels of conflict fueled by issue-based disagreement, difference of opinion, incompatibility of positions and/or diverging goals (Ihalainen et al. 2016; Waddle et al. 2019). The confrontational practices of parliamentary interaction are enacted by means of the MPs' competitive spirit, agonistic behavior and polemical discourse underlying the polarization of political power (Bates et al. 2014; Bevan and John 2016).

Across varying configurations, parliamentary debates shape the ways in which politicians exercise power not only through the antagonistic struggle between political parties, but also through interpersonal contest conducted by means of questioning and answering practices. Many parliaments display parliamentary question-answer sessions as institutionally established practices for overseeing the executive and controlling the government and its administration (Martin and Rozenberg 2012). Parliamentary questions, oral and written, serve as basic interactive tools used by parliamentarians to exert their main parliamentary role and responsibility in holding the government accountable (Franklin and Norton 1993). In performing multiple functions, the prominent role of parliamentary questions goes beyond a simple request or exchange of information. Thus, by asking questions, Members of Parliament (henceforth MPs) are challenging government members, exposing inaction or ineffective policies and ventilating public discontent. Rather than requesting information, MPs use questions to elicit varying kinds of responses, such as answers of confirmation, clarifying explanations or commitment to a line of action. A prototypical category of questions asked by MPs is represented by follow-up questions (Ilie 2015a) which allow both questioning MPs and the responding Prime Minister (henceforth PM) to negotiate and re-negotiate not only issues and policies under debate, but also their status, role and power positions.

## 2. Argumentative Questions and Answers in PMQs

In Westminster-type parliaments such as the UK Parliament, the process of polemical deliberation is normally unfolding as a rhetoric of dissensus driven by pro and con argumentation (Ilie 2021a; Reid 2014). Deliberation consists of examining, discussing and assessing reasons for and against a course of action from several perspectives based on divergent opinions, interests and values. Parliamentary deliberation deals with the inherent value-based dilemmas in controversies on legislative matters or government policies and aims to achieve the critical goal of reasoned judgment through structured discussion and debate. When focusing on parliamentary deliberation processes, a conceptual differentiation needs to be made between internal deliberation that takes place backstage in parliamentary committees on specific legislative matters and government policies, and external deliberation in the frontstage parliamentary deliberation that takes place in the plenary chamber (Ilie 2017, p. 309). A prototypical form of adversarial interaction in parliament is enacted in Prime Minister's Questions (henceforth PMQs), which is a cornerstone of the British parliamentary system. PMQs normally start with a routine question from an MP about the Prime Minister's engagements. This is known as an 'open question' and means that the MP can then ask a supplementary question on any subject. Following the answer, the MP then raises a particular issue, often one of current political significance. The Leader of the opposition (henceforth LO) then follows up on this or another topic, being permitted to ask a total of six questions. PMQs display, in addition to the question-answer confrontation between opposition MPs and the PM, and the question-answer interaction between government MPs and the PM, a ritualistic duel between the main party leaders (the LO and the PM) driven by questions on issues of the LO's choosing. The LO uses the PMQs as a unique platform to make the case against the PM and to set the agenda of the parliamentary debate (Hazarika and Hamilton 2018). When asking questions of the PM, the LO is trying to push the political debate onto the opposition's territory through the goal-oriented choice of issues and arguments.

The default argumentation-oriented debating tools in PMQs are questions and answers. It is incumbent upon MPs to enact the questioning role, and upon the PM to assume the answering role. The confrontation between the LO or opposition MPs and the PM through co-performance of argumentation and counter-argumentation strategies underlying the questions and answers attracts much attention from the media and the public at large (Franklin and Norton 1993; Kelly 2015). While apparently designed to request information, questions asked during the notoriously polarized PMQs are often face-threatening or face-damaging acts, used by the LO and opposition MPs as argumentation strategies to challenge and attack the PM. When asking questions during PMQs, a major goal of opposition MPs is to generate publicity and score points by pursuing particular agendas and raising inconvenient issues to force government members to react (Bates et al. 2014; Franklin and Norton 1993; Ilie 2015b, 2021b). The role of these questions is to scrutinize and evaluate the Prime Minister's and the government's statements and actions, expressing criticism and/or accusations, challenging their opinions and position-taking on matters of public concern, or prompting commitment to a particular line of action. The questioning MPs are not necessarily expecting their questions to receive accurate, relevant or complete answers, but rather to embarrass, challenge and/or push the responding PM to make uncomfortable, damaging or self-revealing declarations (Bevan and John 2016; Ilie 2015b, 2017; Kelly 2015).

The interplay of parliamentary questions and answers highlights the agonistic intersection of competing party-political commitments and ideological beliefs, on the one hand, and the collision between the MPs' divergent positionings and standpoints, on the other (Ilie 2015a, 2021b). This interplay reflects the dynamic between macro-level interaction practices and micro-level debating strategies. On a macro-level, the adversarial interaction practices originate in deep-rooted political opposition regarding divergent or irreconcilable visions and values, and the questioning strategies are institutional discursive tools for scrutinizing government policies, exposing abuses and seeking redress (Franklin and Norton 1993). On a micro-level, the parliamentary questioning strategies are driven by a range of specific disagreements and incompatible positionings, as well as interpersonal dissensus and discrepancy of interests (Norton 1993; Wiberg 1995). Correlating the micro- and macro-levels of analysis to examine the polemical argumentation by means of questioning and answering in PMQs enables a deeper understanding of parliamentary discourse practices, professional roles and relationships.

In terms of argumentation, PMQs, and political debates, in general, display patterns of practical reasoning articulated through an exchange of arguments and counter-arguments. The questioning MPs and responding PM are arguing more about *what to do* rather than about *what is true*. As was pointed out by Kock (2017, p. 3), the arguers' claims in a political dispute are not "about what the world *is* like, but about what they want the world to *be* like". While both sides may provide reasons for their standpoints, they are normally aware that there are also reasons against their positions. However, they differ in one important respect: they assign different weights to these reasons, in the sense that reasons in favor of their respective positions will weigh more than reasons against their respective positions. This constitutes their basic disagreement, the scope of which may and does change during the argument-driven deliberation process as a result of the rhetorical confrontation, personal experience or situation-related factors.

### 3. Data and Research Questions

The present investigation is based on empirical data taken from the House of Commons Hansard archives, which contain official transcripts of the parliamentary debates in the House of Commons of the UK Parliament. For the present analysis of argumentation strategies in parliamentary deliberation, a random selection of PMQs has been made from among the Hansard transcripts covering the January 2020–November 2021 period. The selection process has been guided by considerations of socio-historical timeliness, high levels of parliamentary confrontation and recurrent argumentation and counter-

argumentation patterns. The present investigation is based on the cross-fertilization of pragma-rhetoric and argumentation theory.

Pragma-rhetoric (Ilie 2018) is an integrative analytical approach at the interface of pragmatics and rhetoric. This approach is particularly suitable for the analysis of political discourse in that it provides systematic tools for a multi-dimensional analysis of the discursive mechanisms of political power struggle and of the metadiscursive framing of question-answer political confrontation. The challenges of political discourse genres that display increasing heterogeneity, multiple goal settings and more diverse audiences can be effectively addressed through an integration of a fine-grained, multi-layered pragmatic analysis (e.g., face-threatening/enhancing speech acts, interactive role shifts, context-driven and intertwined discursive/meta-discursive strategies) with the tools of rhetorical analysis (e.g., rhetorical appeals, attacking/counter-attacking techniques, dialogic argumentation patterns). In the present investigation, the pragma-rhetorical analysis relies primarily on the pragmatic criteria for the classification of questions and their usages and on the rhetorical design of argumentative strategies conveyed by questions and answers. The strategies enacted by questioning and answering practices in PMQs will be appropriately accounted for through a combined pragma-rhetorical and argumentative approach. This approach provides the means to understand the interplay between questions and answers in terms of their varying degrees of argumentativeness. It also helps to establish to what extent questioning and answering strategies are correlated argumentatively or counter-argumentatively. The present investigation has been driven by the following major research questions:

- In what ways and to what extent do the institutional and discursive roles of debating MPs (re)shape the co-performance of questioning and answering practices in PMQs, and/or are (re)shaped by them?
- How can the argumentation strategies enacted by questioning and answering practices in PMQs be accounted for through a combined pragma-rhetorical and argumentative approach?
- What types of questioning practices in PMQs are likely to display a higher degree of valid or fallacious argumentativeness and have a stronger impact on the respondents' answering strategies?
- In what ways and to what extent do answering strategies in PMQs function argumentatively or counter-argumentatively?

#### 4. Pragmatic, Rhetorical and Argumentative Functions of Parliamentary Questions

In PMQs, interpersonal relations and the power balance between the LO (or opposition MPs) and the PM are managed to a large extent through the dynamics of question-answer practices. A number of pragmatic factors are linked to answer adequacy: a display of both the questioner's and the answerer's state of knowledge and beliefs, identities and roles, the power relation between the questioner and the answerer, the questioner's explicit or implicit goals, the informative value of the answer and the relevance of the answer to both questioner and answerer.

While parliamentary confrontations—typically enacted through question-asking and question-answering strategies—belong mainly to the deliberative rhetorical genre, they also display features of the epideictic and forensic rhetorical genres. This explains why parliamentary questions and answers perform multiple pragmatic, rhetorical and argumentative functions, which may be overlapping or complementary in varying degrees.

Within the framework of syntactic analysis, the best known is Quirk et al.'s (1985) classification of questions into three main categories: *yes/no questions* (whose appropriate answer is "yes" or "no"), *wh-questions* (marked by an interrogative word, e.g., "what", "why", "when", "where", with a wide spectrum of more than one answer) and *alternative/disjunctive questions* (a restrictive version of yes/no questions, offering a closed choice of two mutually exclusive answers). While the number of syntactic types of questions is relatively limited, the range of questioning (and answering) strategies in actual interactions is practically

endless, as demonstrated by a significant body of multidisciplinary and cross-cultural research (e.g., de Ruiter 2012; Freed and Ehrlich 2010; Goody 1978; Ilie 2021c; Martin and Rozenberg 2012; Walton 1989).

The purpose of the present investigation is to make use of the commonalities and complementarities of approaches pertaining to pragmatics, rhetoric and argumentation theory to reach a better understanding of the varying degrees of adequacy, relevance and persuasiveness displayed by questioning and answering strategies in PMQs.

Within the framework of pragmatics, a basic distinction can be established between *standard questions*, defined as straightforward answer- or information-eliciting questions, and *non-standard questions* (Ilie 1994), which are strategically used by speakers to perform a range of activities, such as conveying a challenge, proposal, reproach, complaint, warning, threat, objection, protest or accusation (Ilie 2015b, 2022b). Typical examples of non-standard questions are *rhetorical questions*, *leading questions*, *hypothetical questions*, *expository questions* and *echo questions*. Depending on the discursive and situational context, non-standard questions are multi-functional since they are contextually able to elicit a great variety of different types of answers and/or responses, such as speech acts of permission-granting, suggestion acceptance, retraction, refutation or disclaiming. Identifying questions as speech acts in a range of contexts and situations enables a multi-level analysis of questioning and answering strategies in terms of goal-oriented, interpersonally performed and interactively shaped practices of verbal confrontation. To get a better understanding of these usages, a very helpful analytical tool is based on Austin's distinction between three different kinds of speech acts: locutionary acts, illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts (Allan 1994; Clark and Carlson 1982).

Within the framework of rhetoric, a significant number of non-standard questions have been systematically identified and defined: e.g., *erotema* (strongly affirming or denying a point), *epiplexis* (rebuking or shaming), *anacoenosis* (appealing to common interests), *anthypophora* (asking a question and immediately answering it), *pysma* (asking multiple questions successively). Actually, one of the major distinctions between rhetorical and pragmatic approaches to non-standard questions consists in the fact that, while rhetoric-based approaches are oriented towards mapping categories of questions according to purposefully performed functions, the pragmatic approaches start from the assumption that there is no one-to-one match of form to function, and aim to explore not categories, but usages of questions (Ilie 1994, 2022b). In classical rhetorical scholarship, each type of question is specifically defined through one overarching characteristic or function and primarily from the speaker's intention and goal. Accordingly, these questions are aimed to foster/inhibit particular ways of thinking and reasoning, strengthen/undermine particular beliefs and opinions, and reinforce/contest institutional policies and actions.

The antagonistic exchanges enacted in PMQs are prototypical instantiations of *eristic dialogue* (Walton 1998), where each of the participants aims to defeat the other by any means, by claiming to have the strongest argument. At the same time, the ulterior motive of each of them is to appeal to the public at large so as to sway the opinions of voters. Parliamentary dissent in PMQs is mostly manifested in the form of divergent political visions expressed through pro et contra argumentation articulated by means of questions and answers. Within the framework of argumentation theory, non-standard questions and corresponding answers have been found to perform *argumentation* and *counter-argumentation* functions by supporting or refuting the relevance and/or validity of claims about standpoints under discussion. Both questioning LO or opposition MPs and the responding PM are using (rational and/or emotional) arguments to challenge opposite political standpoints and negotiating divergent versions of events in an attempt to make a significant impact on a multi-layered audience, including fellow MPs and the public at large.

In dialogic argumentation, we frequently encounter arguments with implicit conclusions or premises based on common knowledge rather than fully displayed arguments. Such an argument or chain of argumentation with one or more implicit (non-explicit) premises or conclusions is referred to in traditional logic as *enthymeme* (Govier 1992;



Hitchcock 1985; Walton 2008). A common basis for many enthymemes is found in propositions that are relied on as acceptable assumptions that need not be explicitly stated because they can be taken for granted as holding on the basis of common experience or common understanding of the ways things normally work in familiar situations. These are referred to by Walton (2001) as *plausible inferences*. A classic example is the following inference: ‘All men are mortal’; ‘Therefore, Socrates is mortal’, where the non-explicit premise ‘Socrates is a man’ is expected to be plausibly inferred. Through argumentatively loaded questions and answers, PMQs display various instances of enthymematic reasoning, as will be shown later in this article.

Dialogic enthymemes derive from patterns of reasoning belonging to our common cognitive storage, and theoretically conceptualized as *topoi* (Breitholtz 2020; Ilie 1994; Jackson and Jacobs 1980). According to Ducrot (1988), *topoi* are commonly held notions, in the sense that they are assumed or taken for granted in a community. The validity or acceptability of enthymematic inferences relies on underpinning by a relevant *topos* as a warrant to be retrieved by addressees and audience. Some *topoi* are general to any situation, some in a particular speech event. In PMQs, general and particular *topoi* are often intertwined, and a recurring type of argument is the personal attack, or *ad hominem argument*, involving blaming and shaming. When the use of such an argument is not relevant or justified, it cannot be regarded as a valid argument, but as a *fallacy*. More often than not, *ad hominem* arguments are combined with other context-related arguments, such as *ad baculum* (‘appeal to the stick’, involving intimidation through the threat of harm) and *ad populum* (seeking acceptance for one’s view by arousing relevant emotions in the audience) arguments. Another frequent argument is the *straw man* tactic (creating a distorted or simplified caricature of the opponent’s argument, and then arguing against that) which is used in PMQs to advance evidence and/or arguments meant to make the other side look bad and lose credibility.

## 5. Multi-Layered Approach to Parliamentary Questions and Answers

As mentioned earlier, in PMQs, political adversaries seek to convince not so much one another, but a third party—the wider audience of onlookers, constituency members, TV-viewers—who will serve as ultimate judges of their verbal performance (Walton 1998). Amossy’s (2014) notion of the rhetoric of dissent is “an accurate description of parliamentary polemical deliberation enacted through pro and con argumentation” (Ilie 2021a, p. 240). Enacting a ritualistic confrontation of political rivals, the parliamentary debate can be seen as a crossbreed between eristic or polemical dialogue (Ilie 2016) and deliberative dialogue. A prototypical example is instantiated in PMQs, where questions and answers are essential debating and argumentation tools. The LO’s and opposition MPs’ questioning strategies have an agenda-setting function in that they put forward standpoints based on specifically relevant or strategic *topoi* that are regarded as commonly shared in order to advance their goal-oriented argumentation.

Each of the following three sections will illustrate with typical examples how a multi-layered analysis at the interface of pragma-rhetoric and argumentation theory can identify and explicate the ways in which the shifting dynamics of argumentation and counter-argumentation strategies used by the LO (or opposition MPs) and the PM is conveyed by the interplay of particular usages of questions and answers. In Section 5.1, the distinction between the usages of standard and non-standard yes/no questions in PMQs is discussed with a focus on their degree of argumentativeness. The use of higher or lower degrees of argumentation in *wh*-questions and corresponding answers in PMQs is problematized in Section 5.2, with a focus on varying perlocutionary effects of *wh*-questions, and especially *why*-questions. Section 5.3 features a context-based comparative analysis of the degrees of fallacious reasoning in argumentative disjunctive questions serving as false dilemmas.

### 5.1. Distinguishing Argumentative from Non-Argumentative Yes/No Questions in PMQs

When asking questions with a particular syntactic structure (yes/no-questions, wh-questions or disjunctive questions), the intention is to obtain a particular perlocutionary effect. By choosing one or the other form, the questioner seeks to control the type of answer they want to receive. Yes/no questions, as illustrated in this section, are often used with the intention to prompt unequivocal answers (e.g., acknowledging/confirming or refuting/disconfirming something).

Having explained, in Section 4 above, how standard and non-standard questions can be distinguished from each other, it is also imperative to specify that they are not necessarily, or not always, discrete categories, but rather instantiations of questions on a continuum. This specification acquires particular significance in PMQs, where the boundary between standard and non-standard questions may sometimes be sharper, and sometimes blurred, often depending on their degree of argumentativeness (Ilie 2022a). In this respect, it is important to point out that the question-response exchange in PMQs features, apart from the argument-supported confrontation between the LO or opposition MPs and the PM, friendly questions—aka *partisan* or *planted questions*—from MPs belonging to the government party (Ilie 2015b), which are meant to help increase the chance of expounding upon government-gratifying subjects. An example of such a question (marked in bold) is illustrated in excerpt (1) below.

(1)

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con)

[ . . . ] I know that he [the PM] shares my concern about the loss of biodiversity around the world. I have seen at first hand how it is possible to turn a palm oil plantation back into a fast-recovering rainforest full of wildlife. While we are already doing good work on restoring environment around the world, **will he ensure that we step up our work through the Department for International Development to restore biodiversity, and in doing so, help to tackle climate change?**

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson)

My right hon. Friend raises an exceptionally important point. That is why it is vital that we have a direct link between the Chinese COP summit on biodiversity and our COP26 summit on climate change.

(Hansard, 29 January 2020)

Conservative MP Chris Grayling's yes/no question is a typical planted question, formally functioning as a standard, confirmation-eliciting question and, at the same time, serving as a face-enhancing act intended to reinforce the positive image of PM Boris Johnson and of the Department for International Development. By emphatically associating the PM's presumed policies "to restore biodiversity" with the goals allegedly pursued by the government "to tackle climate change", the aim of this question is obviously to argue in favor of the PM as a leader with a progressive political agenda. Faced with such a face-enhancing question, the PM's positive answer comes as no surprise. The situation is quite different when the same issue, i.e., tackling the climate emergency, is raised in a question asked by an opposition MP, as illustrated in excerpt (2) below.

(2)

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab)

This week, it was revealed that fossil-fuel companies, interest groups and climate denialists had donated £1.3 million to the Conservative party and its MPs since 2019. **So, a simple question, no waffling or dodging the issue: on the eve of COP26, will the Prime Minister demonstrate that he is serious about tackling the climate emergency by paying back that money and pledging that his party**

**will never again take money and donations from the fossil-fuel companies that are burning our planet? Yes or no?**

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson)

All our donations are registered in the normal way. I would just remind the hon. Lady that the Labour party's paymasters, the GMB\*, think that Labour's policies mean that no families would be able to take more than one flight every five years and that they would have their cars confiscated.

(Hansard, 27 October 2021)

\*GMB = shortened form of the General, Municipal, Boilermakers' and Allied Trade Union (GMBATU)

While the Conservative MP framed his question on a positive note in (1), the Labor MP Zarah Sultana starts, not surprisingly, with an incriminating revelation about the PM, followed by accusatory questions that lay the blame on the PM. In both excerpts, the questions asked of the PM are yes/no questions and concern the policies pursued by the government to tackle climate change. However, the two questioners' assessments of the PM's policies could not be more divergent. The PM is credited by the fellow Conservative MP for "good work on restoring environment around the world", whereas the opposition MP Sultana accuses the Conservative party, and primarily the PM, of receiving payments from "fossil-fuel companies, interest groups and climate denialists". Opposition MP Sultana's question is formally designed as a confirmation-eliciting yes/no question, just like the Conservative MP's question. If she had simply asked "will the Prime Minister demonstrate that he is serious about tackling the climate emergency?", the question would probably have served as a standard confirmation-eliciting question. However, she does not stop there, and prompts the PM to take action in two embedded questions whose presuppositions consist in contesting the PM's integrity and credibility, and also in action-eliciting, whereby the PM is urged to "demonstrate" his seriousness in two steps: "pay back that money" and pledge "that his party will never again take money and donations from the fossil-fuel companies".

By providing details on the corruption charges regarding the PM and his party, for which a redress (to pay back) and a promise (to never again take money from fossil-fuel companies) are elicited, Sultana's question is instantiating an *ad hominem* argument. Hence, it is not a standard confirmation-eliciting question, but a strategically designed argumentative non-standard question, whereby the questioner requests more than just a simple confirmation.

Since there are normally neither formal markers nor syntactical features that can distinguish standard from non-standard questions, contextualization cues, institutional roles and interpersonal relations between questioner and respondent can help to do that.

In spite of the precisely targeted question, the opposition MP Sultana is left to whistle for an appropriate answer since the PM's reply does not address the issue raised in the question and provides instead unsolicited information ("All our donations are registered in the normal way") aimed as a face-saving act (underlined in the excerpt). Obviously, the warning launched by the questioning Labor MP did not reach the expected perlocutionary effect in the PM's response. The PM's non-answering tactic reinforces the perception that the question is a non-standard question that challenges and elicits a commitment, rather than a simple answer. Different techniques used by politicians to evade direct answers to challenging or embarrassing questions were discussed by Wilson (1990). These include questioning the question, attacking the questioner, or stating that the question had already been answered. As in other institutional settings, in PMQs, the questioning MP exercises power over the respondent by initiating the questioning strategy and choosing the types of questions to ask. At the same time, however, the responding PM chooses to avoid giving a proper answer. In (2), in spite of the Labor MP's strongly targeted question, the PM chooses to dodge the uncomfortable question in an attempt to downplay the force of the complex questioning speech act.



Pragmatically, the second part of the PM's response is a threatening speech act that serves as a counter-accusation expressed in Boris Johnson's typical hyperbole-ridden rhetorical style, with obvious exaggerations: "no families would be able to take more than one flight every five years and [that] they would have their cars confiscated". By way of argumentation, he uses in his response an *ad baculum* or *fear appeal* argument (Walton 1996), normally meant to arouse emotions of fear by depicting a frightening outcome. However, since it is not supported by evidence or reason, this is not a relevant, but a fallacious argument, or *fallacy* (Walton 2003). Focusing on the context of dialogue, Walton defines a fallacy as a conversational move, or sequence of moves, that is supposed to be an argument that contributes to the purpose of the conversation but in reality, interferes with it.

### 5.2. Degrees of Argumentativeness of Wh-Questions in PMQs

Asking wh-questions requires answers that provide a specified type of information, which in the case of standard questions is information unknown to the questioner. However, when the information allegedly requested is actually known by the questioner, as is often the case with questions asked in PMQs, the speech act of asking has an ulterior motive, such as to get an on-record acknowledgment/confession of the already known information or to prompt a self-revealing or self-incriminating response, rather than to simply test the knowledge of the addressee (which is the case in examination questions). Depending on the degree of argumentativeness of the question, the responding PM feels more or less constrained to answer within a framework of assumptions set by the questioner when framing the question. Consequently, wh-questions can, just like yes/no questions, function on a continuum from standard to non-standard questions, depending on pragmatic and rhetorical factors that are interconnected, institutionally-rooted and context-specific.

According to Harter, "the wh-words are presuppositional because if you are asking *how*, *when* or *why* something happened, you are presupposing that the event did, in fact, happen" (Harter 2014, p. 22). The category of why questions stands out among wh-questions since they usually rely on pre-established and unverified presuppositions that tend to transfer the burden of proof from the questioner to the respondent. Examining the semantics and pragmatics of *why-questions*, Hintikka and Halonen (1995) consider that they stand out as a more complex type of question than other wh-questions and conclude that an answer to a question of the form 'Why X?' is closely related to an explanation of the fact that X. For them, the answer to a why-question is the explanation of the ultimate conclusion rather than the ultimate conclusion itself. On asking a why-question, the addresser is looking for the argumentative bridge between initial assumptions and the given ultimate conclusion, in other words, for an *explanandum* rather than for an answer. In a more recent study, Schlöder et al. (2016) propose an analysis of why-questions in terms of enthymematic reasoning, given its widespread use in natural dialogue.

While the distinction between the standard and non-standard yes/no questions in Section 5.1 was rather easy to grasp, especially given the party-political adversarialness between the two questioning MPs—government MP vs. opposition MP—understanding the distinction between complementary (standard and non-standard) usages of the why-questions in excerpts (3), (4) and (5) below will need a more fine-grained analysis.

(3)

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD)

Ambulance response times are now the worst ever, people are waiting for ambulances longer than ever [ . . . ] Waiting times are not statistics; they are about people—people often in great pain and in danger—**so why are this Government closing ambulance stations in parts of our country? Why is the West Midlands ambulance service closing up to 10 community stations, including in Rugby, Oswestry and Craven Arms?** With this health crisis for our ambulance services and in our A&Es, injured, sick and elderly people are being hit. **When will the Prime Minister deal with this health crisis?**

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson)

I appreciate that ambulance crews and ambulance services are doing an amazing job, particularly at this time of year, and I thank them for what they are doing. We are supporting them with more cash. Another £450 million was awarded to 120 trusts to upgrade their facilities, and as the right hon. Gentleman knows, we are putting another £36 billion into dealing with the backlog, which is fundamentally affecting the NHS so badly at the moment, through the levy that we have instituted, **which I do not think he supported.**

(Hansard, 17 November 2021)

Why-questions are generally perceived as more challenging than yes/no questions, especially in confrontational dialogue, where they often seek not simply an explanation, but a cessation of a troublesome state of affairs. This dual targeting is noticeable in (3), where the why-questions (in bold) asked by the opposition MP Ed Davey (member of the Liberal Democrats) are meant to be understood as partly explanation-eliciting (standard questions) and partly action-eliciting (non-standard questions). This dual function (whereby the questioner pretends to ask what he/she calls into question) is actually the default function of questions in PMQs. Apparently, these questions are simply eliciting an answer/explanation, as they ask the PM to provide the reason(s) why the government closed “ambulance stations in parts of our country”. However, they convey a further underlying meaning, derived from the statements prefacing the questions which place the responsibility on the government, and implicitly on the PM as head of government, for the distressing emergency situation: ambulance response times are now the worst ever”, people are often “in great pain and in danger”, “with this health crisis for our ambulance services and in our A&Es, injured, sick and elderly people are being hit”. The successively asked questions (in bold) are an instantiation of the rhetorical figure *pysma*, which consists of a sequence of questions meant to forcefully convey complaints, provocations and insults (Peacham 1971/1577, Silva Rhetoricae <http://rhetoric.byu.edu/> last accessed on 20 May 2022). These questions would normally require a complex response (i.e., more than one single response). Jointly, these why-questions articulate an appeal to the PM to take measures so as to put an end to an unacceptable situation.

This set of multiple questions ends with a *rhetorical question*: “When will the Prime Minister deal with this health crisis?”, whose implied short answer is “never”, but whose underlying message calls into question the PM’s capacity to deal with the health crisis, by indirectly pointing to his passivity and inaction. Like many parliamentary questions, this *rhetorical question* is multi-functional, and consequently lends itself to a combined pragmatic, rhetorical and argumentative approach. Pragmatically, questions like this one cannot be regarded as *categories of questions*, but as *uses of questions* that “are neither answerless, nor unanswerable questions, and that display varying degrees of validity as argumentative acts” (Ilie 1994). A rhetorical question does not elicit an answer, but “is skewed toward a certain possible answer” (Rhode 2006, p. 147). Its distinctive feature consists in contextualizing multi-functional and multi-layered speech acts that display a dual illocutionary force (a question-supported statement) through a mismatch between its interrogative form and its assertive function. Rhetorical questions have “the illocutionary force of a question and the perlocutionary effect of a statement” (Ilie 2009). Rhetorically, a rhetorical question pertains to the category of *erotema* (or *erotesis*), a question that “implies an answer but does not give or lead us to expect one” (Lanham 1991, p. 71), as well as to the category of *epiplexis* (Lanham 1991, p. 69), a figuratively designed question that is asked “in order to reproach or upbraid” rather than to elicit information” or answer. Argumentatively, the inferable answer of a rhetorical question (or any question used rhetorically) is expected to be strongly supported by presuppositions assumed to be commonly shared by both addresser and addressees/audience. In the overall intervention culminating with the rhetorical question, the questioning MP Davey is actually showing that he is strongly committed to a set of values and convictions in relation to a state of affairs, and that his primary goal is not

to question, but rather to challenge, accuse and/or attack the addressee by providing or alluding to fact- and/or evidence-based arguments.

The argumentative force of the challenging questions asked by the LO or opposition MPs in PMQs derives from commonly shared topoi underlying recognizable patterns of reasoning aimed at criticizing and/or attacking the PM's statements, policies, actions and/or behavior. For obvious reasons, a default argument is, in such cases, the *ad hominem* argument, whose relevance arises from common sense expectations of citizens about the credibility and trustworthiness of politicians and parliamentarians (Walton 2000). This is why an *ad hominem* argument is most effective when it raises doubts about a politician's personal credibility and reliability. While this argument is often treated as a fallacy, it can nevertheless be valid in certain settings and situations, especially in political and parliamentary debates, where the issue of character is at stake with regard to democratically elected political representatives and leaders. In the case illustrated in (3), the *ad hominem* argument is juxtaposed with the *ad populum* argument. A major difference between the two is that whereas the *ad hominem* is directed toward one individual, the *ad populum* consists of appealing to popular opinion and is directed toward the whole audience and the public at large, on behalf of whom MP Davey is making an argument. Furthermore, "there is a difference of orientation in that the *ad hominem* is negative in its intent to discredit the individual, whereas the *ad populum* is positive in its intent to win the approval of the group" (Walton 1980, p. 266). A major goal of *ad populum* arguments is to synchronize the beliefs and commitments of the questioning MP and the wider audience.

In his question, the LD MP Davey depicts a disheartening picture of the shrinking capacity of the ambulance services in parts of the UK, for which he holds the PM responsible, and, at the same time, he requests a response and an explanation. However, his request is largely ignored by the PM, who, in his response (underlined), circumvents the question, trying to bring about a rhetorical shift of the debate agenda from the crisis caused by the closing of ambulance services toward a positive evaluation of ambulance crews and ambulance services: "I appreciate that ambulance crews and ambulance services are doing an amazing job, particularly at this time of year, and I thank them for what they are doing". Instead, the PM brags, through a face-enhancing strategy, about awarding important sums of money for facility upgrades and for reducing the NHS backlog. Moreover, he does not miss the opportunity to counter-attack (in bold and underlined) Ed Davey for failing to support the levy instituted by the government.

The why-question in (4) below differs in important respects from the why-questions in (3) discussed above. In both cases, the questioner is attacking the PM on account of the detrimental consequences for the citizens due to his and his government's decisions. But, while, in excerpt (3), the why-questions are formulated in semantically neutral terms, in excerpt (4) below, the why-question (in bold) contains a semantically biased term, i.e., the verb "to hammer", which is used in an emphatically figurative way.

(4)

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab)

[ ... ] Some 2.5 million working families will face a doubly whammy: a national insurance tax rise and a £1000 a year universal credit cut. They are getting hit from both sides. **Of all the ways to raise public funds, why is the Prime Minister insisting on hammering working people?**

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson)

We are proud of what we have been doing throughout the pandemic to look after working people. We are proud of the extra £9 billion we put in through universal credit. [ ... ]

(Hansard, 27 October 2021)

The argumentative force of the LO Keir Starmer's why-question (in bold) is intuitively perceived as higher than in (3), which is due partly to the precise statistical evidence provided, and partly to the figuratively used verb "to hammer", whose suggestive meaning

here is “to hurt someone or something by causing them a lot of problems” (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online* 2018). Moreover, the mixed descriptive-expressive denotation of this verb is enhanced by the repeatedness implied by its progressive form. Pragmatically, the intention of the LO is to trigger a strong perlocutionary effect by emphasizing the detrimental and distressing effect of the PM’s “insisting on hammering working people”. Rhetorically, his question functions as an *epiplexis*, which is a variety of rhetorical questions asked in order to rebuke or reproach rather than to elicit answers (Lanham 1991). In a broader sense, epiplexis is a form of argument in which a speaker attempts to shame an opponent. In this case, the LO resorts to an *ad hominem* argument that is valid since his claims about the PM’s anti-popular actions are relevant from a rational (providing concrete data) and an emotional (invoking hurt feelings) standpoint. At the same time, through rhetorically emphasized reference to people’s suffering caused by the government’s hurting measures, the LO seeks to enhance the rhetorical force of his argumentation by an *ad misericordiam* appeal targetting the opponent’s feelings of guilt, on the one hand, and the audience’s feelings of sympathy, on the other.

Why-questions, like the ones in (3), are understood as argumentative because they not only question the actions or behaviors of the respondent, but also call into question the respondent’s reasons for having acted or behaved inappropriately, inefficiently or simply wrongly. However, the LO’s why question in (4) displays an even higher argumentative force since, over and above calling into question the PM’s reasons for an ostensibly wrong decision, it also conveys an additionally loaded negative evaluation articulated by resorting to a deeper emotional layer through the implicature of the working people feeling deeply hurt by the PM’s ‘hammering’. Using the verb “to hammer” figuratively as an emotional trigger, the LO puts increasing moral pressure on the PM.

A diversion strategy frequently used by the PM is to shift the attention from the LO’s criticism and accusations by providing a face-saving response whereby he indirectly refutes the presuppositions of the question. While deliberately failing to address the issues raised by the LO, the PM attempts to re-direct the topic at hand by lifting up the allegedly efficient measures taken by his government, and he moreover declares himself proud of the government’s record on the coronavirus (underlined). Thereby he avoids reacting to the LO’s embarrassing and critical question, which condemns the PM’s anti-popular pandemic-related policies.

By way of comparison with the argumentative why-questions in excerpts (3) and (4), which convey partial enthymemes, the why-question in (5) below (in bold) displays a higher degree of argumentativeness, due partly to its more explicitly confrontational formulation, but especially to its use as a whole enthymeme.

(5)

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP)

Brexit is hitting the economy hard, but the Prime Minister cannot even give a coherent speech to business. The Prime Minister’s officials have lost confidence in him, Tory MPs have lost confidence in him—the letters are going in—and the public have lost confidence in him. **Why is he clinging on, when it is clear that he is simply not up to the job?**

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson)

I might ask the right hon. Gentleman what on earth he thinks he is doing, talking about party political issues when all that the people of Scotland want to hear is what on earth the Scottish national Government are doing. They are falling in the polls.

(Hansard, 24 November 2021)

In (5), SNP MP Ian Blackford precedes his question with negative evaluations about the PM’s public speaking skills (which represent a major prerequisite for a political leader) and about the alleged loss of confidence in the PM shown by his officials, Tory MPs and the public. Targeting the PM’s inadequate communication competence and declining credibility, these evaluations carry the premises of an *ad hominem* argument, which is most effective

when it raises doubts about an arguer's credibility so that their argument is discounted. While this argument is typically treated as a fallacy, it is often reasonable, especially in political debates, where the credibility of politicians is at stake. The face-damaging speech act involved in the why-question disqualifies Boris Johnson as a suitable holder of the PM position. Underlying the question is an enthymeme built on a recognizable topos according to which a person should quit if they are not able to carry out a job satisfactorily. For this topos to function argumentatively, it has to be not only recognized, but also acknowledged by both interlocutors, as well as by the onlooking audience. As this is a commonly shared topos, the question acts rhetorically, implying its own answer, which is easily retrievable: "There is no reason why he should be clinging on".

Rhetorical questions are regarded in speech act theory (Searle 1969) as indirect speech acts: by asking a question without expecting an answer, the speaker violates the sincerity condition for questions and gives rise to a conversational implicature that conveys a forceful statement. This was further confirmed by Blankenship and Craig (2006), Ilie (1994) and Kraus (2009), who found that the persuasive force of arguments is strengthened by their formulation as rhetorical questions, which do not elicit information, and whose illocutionary function is to make statements or exhortations. Moreover, the results of Ioussef et al.'s (2021) investigation show that rhetorical questions are used to articulate enthymematic arguments and facilitate linking together parts of arguments over several utterances. In the why-question in (5), the enthymematic argumentation chain of inference is the following: "If you are not up to the job, you should quit and not cling on"; "It is clear that he [the PM] is simply not up to the job"; "Hence he [the PM] should quit and not cling on".

While dodging questions in PMQs is a practice that is often resorted to by PMs, PM Boris Johnson is particularly renowned for dodging uncomfortable questions and for equivocating. In his response, he disregards Ian Blackford's question and counter-attacks (underlined) by calling into question the relevance of the issues he raised and accusing him of ignoring the real needs of the people of Scotland. However, unlike Blackford, who provides actual motivation, the PM is not able to provide any concrete evidence to back his claims. His repeated use of an 'unparliamentary' expression—"what on earth"—can hardly make his accusatory statements more convincing but reveals, instead, a PM under pressure. To divert the attention from Blackford's critical attack and to sidetrack the debate agenda, the PM chooses to discredit his political adversary, resorting to a *tu quoque* argument (Walton 1998). This is a type of ad hominem argument based on an evasive strategy in which an accused person turns an allegation back on their accuser, rather than refuting the truth or validity of the accusation, thus creating a logical fallacy of relevance.

### 5.3. How Disjunctive Questions Are Used Argumentatively in PMQs

Disjunctive questions represent a particular category of questions structured according to a binary paradigm where the disjunction is rooted in contrastive alternatives. A major goal of the questioner is to control the possible answers by ruling out the option of a third alternative. The respondent to such a question is faced with a choice between two overtly mentioned alternatives. When neither alternative is acceptable to the respondent, the disjunction "may embody a tactic in dialogue of trying to force a respondent into an unfairly restrictive choice of required answers" (Macagno and Walton 2010, p. 255). In such cases, the argumentative reasoning underlying the disjunctive question is logically fallacious, with a deliberately deceptive effect. This type of fallacious reasoning is grounded on two premises that are highly controversial or incompatible and is referred to as a *false dilemma* (Copi 1986; Hurley 2014; Macagno and Walton 2010). A false dilemma frames any argument in a misleading way, obscuring rational and consistent debate. When targeting an adversary, the false dilemma fallacy serves to indicate that of the two alternatives, one leads to unwanted consequences. Unlike in a genuine dilemma, the deck is stacked in favor of a preferred option, which is implicitly delineated as the only one worth choosing.



Question-driven argumentation is often used in PMQs to formulate challenging problems as false dilemmas where only one option is presented as acceptable. The following excerpts illustrate the impact of strategic disjunctive questions that use a false dilemma tactic in argumentative questioning directed to the PM by opposition MPs. A pragma-rhetorical and argumentation-based analysis of disjunctive questions in excerpts (6) and (7) below shows how and to what extent contextual, discursive, institutional and interpersonal factors contribute to a higher or lower degree of argumentativeness.

(6)

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP)

[ . . . ] We have had the year of Tory sleaze, but now we have the year of Tory squeeze for family budgets. Economists have warned that UK living standards will worsen in 2022, with the poorest households hit hardest by Tory cuts, tax hikes and soaring inflation driven by his Government's policy. Under this Prime Minister, the UK already has the worst levels of poverty and inequality in north-west Europe. Now the Tories are making millions of families poorer. In Scotland, the SNP Government are mitigating this Tory poverty crisis by doubling the Scottish child payment to £20 per week. **I ask the Prime Minister this: will he match the Scottish Government and introduce a £20 child payment across the UK, or will the Tories push hundreds of thousands of children into poverty as a direct result of his policies?**

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson)

The right hon. Gentleman is talking, I am afraid, total nonsense. This Government are absolutely determined, as I have said throughout this pandemic, to look after particularly the poorest and the neediest. That is what the Chancellor did: all his packages were extremely progressive in their effect. When I came in to office, we ensured that we uprated the local housing allowance, because I understand the importance of that allowance for families on low incomes. We are supporting vulnerable renters. That is why we are putting money into local authorities to help families up and down the country who are facing tough times. The right hon. Gentleman's fundamental point is wrong. He is just wrong about what is happening in this country. If we look at the statistics, we see that economic inequality is down in this country. Income inequality is down and poverty is down, and I will tell you why—because we get people in to work. We get people in to jobs. That is our answer.

(Hansard, 5 January 2022)

In (6), the SNP MP Ian Blackford attacks the PM with forceful accusations for “the worst levels of poverty and inequality” in the UK under his government, arguing that the situation continues to deteriorate. By contrast, he proudly foregrounds the caring and effective measures taken by the SNP Government in Scotland to mitigate “this Tory poverty crisis by doubling the Scottish child payment to £20 per week”. Under the pretext of requesting a piece of information, Blackford reinforces his attack by resorting to a false dilemma, whereby the PM is confronted with an argumentative disjunctive question (in bold) that offers a conflicting set of choices, i.e., two mutually exclusive alternatives that cannot be true at the same time. This false dilemma rivets the target audience's attention on the first alternative of the binary choice as the only valid one, dismissing the second as causing a devastating outcome. By manipulating the pragmatic paradigm of two possible answers that are mutually incompatible, the opposition MP is forcing the PM to choose the first alternative and thereby accept a presupposition that he is not committed to. However, in this particular case, the false dilemma argument underlying the disjunctive question turns out to be a fallacy due to the fact that, in reality, the terms of the two alternatives are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive. Thereby, other possibilities are excluded. In other words, regarding the first alternative, there may be more constructive options than the one suggested by Blackford; regarding the second alternative, it overdramatizes

the situation by ascribing to the government party (the Tories) a deliberate overall policy of pushing “hundreds of thousands of children into poverty”, and thereby inducing a disproportionately negative picture of governmental plans of action.

Blackford’s accusations acquire a stronger illocutionary force as the argumentative value of the false dilemma fallacy gets intertwined with a *slippery slope* fallacy. The most common variant of the slippery slope argument is, according to Jefferson (2014), the empirical slippery slope argument, which predicts that if we do A, at some point, the highly undesirable B will follow. The slippery slope argument suggests that a certain initial action or inaction could lead to a situation with dramatic or extreme results. When the claimed links between actions or events are unlikely or much exaggerated, slippery slope arguments are fallacious, as in (6) above. Here, we find an instance of a precedential slippery slope, which is usually combined with all-or-nothing thinking and often starts by assuming a false dichotomy between two options—in juxtaposition with a false dilemma fallacy.

Avoiding answering the opposition MP’s biased question head-on, the PM refutes the accusation (underlined) by accusing Blackford of talking nonsense and implicitly dismissing the presuppositions of the false dilemma and of the slippery slope fallacies. Moreover, he counter-attacks the critical questioner, “He is just wrong”. He also explicitly contradicts the facts presented in the question (“Income inequality is down and poverty is down”), motivating the overall improvement of the social and economic situation through the effectiveness of government policies.

The examination of the biased argumentativeness and strategic speech act performance displayed in the enactment of the disjunctive question in (6) provides evidence that, in political discourse in general, and in parliamentary debate in particular, the false dilemma fallacy is a manipulative tool designed to polarize the audience, promoting one side and demonizing the other. This false dilemma argument or fallacy is often used in PMQs to produce face damage to the PM and prompt him to commit a face-restoring act when answering tricky and embarrassing questions like the one in excerpt (7).

(7)

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP)

This session shows how much of a distraction the Prime Minister’s behaviour has been. After a recent survey showed that 37% of small businesses felt totally unprepared for the introduction of import controls, rules of origin and the upcoming sanitary and phytosanitary checks, **will he listen to the Federation of Small Businesses and introduce financial and technical support for those small businesses, or is he just too busy drinking in his garden?**

The Prime Minister

What we are doing is offering financial and technical support to businesses, which are responding magnificently. As we come out of the pandemic, as I said to the House earlier, we are seeing record numbers of people in work and youth unemployment at a record low.

(Hansard, 12 January 2022)

By juxtaposing two entirely disparate and incompatible options—“will he listen to the Federation of Small Businesses and introduce financial and technical support for those small businesses, or is he just too busy drinking in his garden?” (in bold)—opposition MP Philippa Whitford seeks to achieve a double perlocutionary effect. On the one hand, she performs a face-damaging act to seriously embarrass the PM by revealing a negative record of his government regarding small businesses, and, on the other, she seeks to undermine his authority and diminish his credibility in a sarcastic tone in front of a multi-layered audience of MPs, Hansard reporters and the public at large. When a questioning opposition MP wants to ensnare the PM into making a commitment to take action, the PM is expected to answer questions that rely on presuppositions that may be detrimental to him personally. Such loaded questions may involve presuppositions that the PM may have to reject. In this particular case, a false dilemma is generated by the disjunctive question,

which falsely dichotomizes the issue at hand by treating two unrelated events as equivalent alternatives. The first alternative of the disjunction addresses directly the issue at hand, but the second—“or is he just too busy drinking in his garden?”—does not and may need further explanation: Boris Johnson was accused of participating in a wine-and-cheese garden party at 10 Downing Street in May 2020 during the time of COVID-19 restrictions when British people were ordered not to go out and stay home, thereby violating the very lockdown imposed by his own government. While Boris Johnson’s transgression was found by legal investigators to be a very serious breach of legal regulations (still under legal investigation), it nevertheless cannot be treated on par with the first alternative that concerns a concrete political course of action, namely the PM’s commitment to provide, or not, financial and technical support for those small businesses.

The false dilemma generated by the disjunctive question in (7) is meant to constrain the PM to assume responsibility for both past and future actions by taking the necessary measures to redress a troublesome situation. False dilemma arguments, whether incorporated in a statement or a question, can be evaluated based on the strength of the claimed links between the two juxtaposed events. If those links are weak, then the argument is likely to also include further fallacies. As was shown in the discussion of excerpt (6) above, false dilemmas often occur in combination with other arguments or fallacies, which magnify their rhetorical effect. In (7), the false dilemma is juxtaposed with an *ad hominem* argument, whose force derives from the ironical rhetorical question used by the opposition MP to attack the moral character of the PM. A moral character is a central prerequisite for a politician in general and for the holder of the prime-ministerial office in particular. In political and parliamentary debate, more than in other types of debate, the *ad hominem* argument has often proved to be valid and legitimate since it calls into question a politician’s credibility by throwing doubt on his character and raising concerns about the justifiability of public trust in that person. This excerpt displays an instance of circumstantial *ad hominem* argument which “essentially involves an allegation that the party being attacked has committed a practical inconsistency, of a kind that can be characterized by the expression “You do not practice what you preach”. (Walton 2000, p. 106). These arguments activate the Grice (1975) implicature according to which the PM says one thing but does another (“actions speak louder than words”), which is meant to have a strong emotional effect on the audience.

The PM avoids answering MP Whitford’s embarrassing question (underlined), which raises serious doubts about his credibility and the consistency of his behavior. Hence, he performs a face-saving act as he tries to show commitment and give assurance about “offering financial and technical support to businesses”. The persuasiveness of his response is certainly impacted by the emotional uptake of the *ad hominem* argument invoked in the question.

As already mentioned, argumentative questions display different degrees of argumentativeness, some being more argumentative than others. The argumentative questions asked of the PM by opposition MPs in (6) and (7) share a number of common features, such as the form of a disjunctive question, the use of a combination of valid and invalid (fallacious) arguments and the adversarial relation between questioner and respondent. At the same time, they differ in several respects: they feature combinations of different types of arguments, e.g., false dilemma and slippery slope fallacy in (6), and false dilemma and *ad hominem* argument in (7); the scope and target of the disjunctively articulated arguments concern primarily the main issues under debate in (6), whereas in (7) they are primarily directed at the credibility and trustworthiness of the PM as basic prerequisites for successfully performing the prime ministerial duties. Moreover, the ironical tone underlying the second option of the disjunction in (7) is meant to produce an emotional response in the audience, which is likely to increase the degree of argumentativeness.

## 6. Conclusions

In parliamentary deliberation, more than in other types of institutional deliberation, the interplay between questions and answers acquires varying degrees of argumenta-

tiveness since MPs negotiate not only the pros and cons of the issues under discussion, but also their party-political roles and power positions (Ilie 2021b). While the questions asked in PMQs can be very challenging, accusatory and compelling, they are often responded to with evasive replies, irrelevant answers, justifications or counter-questions. The questions asked during the notoriously polarized PMQs are rarely information-eliciting, but often face-threatening or face-damaging acts used by the LO and opposition MPs as argumentation strategies to challenge and attack the PM.

The aim of this paper was to explore how argumentation strategies and persuasive techniques shape and are shaped through the co-performance of questioning and answering practices during parliamentary interaction in PMQs. A multi-layered analysis at the interface of pragma-rhetoric and argumentation theory has focused on three categories of questions: yes/no questions, wh-question and disjunctive questions. The impact of these particular types of questions in PMQs results primarily from the context-specific interplay of questions and their corresponding answers. Significant distinctions have been discussed regarding the usages of standard and non-standard yes/no questions with a focus on their degree of argumentativeness. The use of higher or lower degrees of argumentation in wh-questions and their corresponding answers has been problematized, with a focus on varying perlocutionary effects of wh-questions, in general, and why-questions, in particular. A context-based comparative analysis has been carried out regarding the degrees of fallacious reasoning in argumentative disjunctive questions acting as false dilemmas.

To better capture the effects of the shifting dynamics of the polemical question-answer exchanges between political adversaries, the present analysis is based on a cross-fertilization of pragma-rhetoric and argumentation theory. The commonalities and complementarities of these approaches have been used to identify and explore the varying degrees of adequacy, relevance and persuasiveness displayed by a range of questioning and answering strategies in PMQs.

From the perspective of a pragmatic approach, the present investigation has shown that the parliamentary question-based confrontational interaction is not just a mere chain of independent speech acts, but rather speech acts interrelated with each other argumentatively in a wider institutional discourse context. The pragmatic analysis has revealed that the parliamentary question-answer interplay is impacted by multiple factors: the questioner's and the answerer's commitments, beliefs, identities and institutional roles, the power balance between questioner and respondent, the questioner's explicit and implicit goals, the informative value and the relevance of the answer to both questioner and respondent.

In an argumentation-based approach, questions endowed with argumentative force and responses displaying counter-argumentative force seek to challenge the agenda-setting, shift the direction of the polemical deliberation, reinforce a viewpoint, introduce a new focus on the debated issue(s), refute a standpoint, divert the attention from the issue at hand and/or establish/reinforce the connection with multiple audiences.

A combination of pragma-rhetorical and argumentation approaches has provided the analytical tools needed to examine and understand the interplay of parliamentary questions and answers in terms of their varying degrees of argumentative validity or fallaciousness. The findings show that parliamentary questions and answers perform multiple pragmatic, rhetorical and argumentative functions, which may be overlapping or complementary in varying degrees.

The results show that in default questions asked in PMQs, the questioning LO or opposition MPs pretend to ask what they actually call into question. Questions with a higher degree of persuasiveness have been found to convey a strongly assertive illocutionary force and to trigger strategic answers in an attempt to shift mindsets. The pragma-rhetorical analysis of parliamentary questions illustrated with excerpts from the Hansard transcripts of the UK Parliament reveals that there is no one-to-one match of form to function and that questions are multi-functional, with varying degrees of context-specific relevance and persuasiveness. Argumentatively the interactive force of questions derives partly from

underlying patterns of reasoning aimed to challenge the PM's statements, policies, actions and/or behavior, and partly from audience-targeted emotional triggers.

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