

# On the ritualization of commemorative practices: Paying tribute in British Prime Minister's Questions

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## 1. Introduction<sup>2</sup>

The representation of speech in written genres and its diachronic development has been a long-standing interest in historical pragmatics (e.g., the contributions to [Culpeper and Kytö, 2010](#); [Kytö and Walker, 2018](#)). However, the recent access to historical recordings of spoken interaction has yielded the possibility of analyzing authentic audio and video material from a diachronic perspective, an approach that was not regarded as feasible by linguists in the 2000s and 2010s (e.g., [Barth-Weingarten, 2014](#); [Couper-Kuhlen, 2011](#); [Mair, 2006](#): 21) but has only recently become a much-researched topic within various methodological frameworks (e.g., [Reber, 2021](#); [Couper-Kuhlen, 2021](#); [Jucker and Landert, 2015](#); [Love and Curry, 2021](#); [Reichelt, 2021](#)). This paper addresses the implications – and challenges – of a diachronic interactional sociolinguistic perspective on recent change in a broadcast, institutional spoken genre. Specifically, the study describes the practices of paying tribute at British Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) and examines how these practices have changed in the prime minister's answer turns during a span of more than three decades. To this end, two datasets from the periods between 1978

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and 1988 and from 2003 to 2013 are compared. PMQs is a session in the British House of Commons during which the prime minister is asked questions by the leader of the opposition and other members of parliament. This parliamentary session has undergone substantial change in terms of the type and number of questions asked, the power structure of the participants involved, its scheduling and length, courses of action, and the access granted to the media as well as its media prominence (see Section 3).

Prior research has described PMQs as “an aggressive ritual setting” (Bull et al., 2020: 64) which has shown an “increasingly more rowdy [conduct]” (Bates et al., 2014: 274) since the late 1970s. This work has mainly focused on the (changing) practices of quotation and (im)politeness at PMQs. Quotations have been analyzed as an interactional resource for building hostile actions (Antaki and Leudar, 2001), undergoing change (Bull and Waddle, 2019; Fetzer and Bull, 2019; Fetzer and Weizman, 2018). These changing practices of quoting have contributed to an increasingly confrontational interaction between the prime minister and the leader of the opposition as well as to a general polarization between the two sides of the House (Reber, 2021). The use of visual aids for quotations is reflective of the visualization of PMQs (Reber, 2020).

PMQs has attracted wide interest because of its “ritualistic” impoliteness (Harris, 2001: 467, Bull and Wells, 2012), which Harris (2001: 467) compared to ritual insults among male members of the African American community (Labov, 1972). Few actions have been identified as non-adversarial: These include “requests for information” on ongoing armed conflicts involving British troops by the leader of the opposition which are interpreted as an attempt “to project a statesmanlike image to the electorate” (Murphy, 2014: 94) as well as “helpful questions” (Bates et al., 2014: 262) designed to support the governmental agenda. This paper argues that paying tribute represents a potentially *non-adversarial* practice in the mediated interaction at PMQs which has recently evolved into a ritualized turn component to construct unity across party ranks in and outside the House of Commons. Excerpts 1–3 exemplify the practices of paying tribute in the data.<sup>3</sup>

### (1) PMQs 11 Nov. 1982

PM: Margaret Thatcher (Con); LO: Robin Maxwell-Hyslop (Con); S: George Thomas

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1 PM: -> °h <p>i believe the whOle house will join in paying TRIBute to
    -> him->
2 °h <<dim>and in offering our SYMpathy to his fAmily.>
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### (2) PMQs 08 Dec 2010

PM: David Cameron (Con); LO: Ed Miliband (Lab); S: John Bercow

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1 PM: i'm sUre the whole house (.) will wish to join ME; (.)
2 -> ((click)) <<p>in paying trIBute to private john HOWard;>
3 <<p>from THIRd battalion;>
4 <<p>the PARachute rEGiment;>
5 <<p>who DIED on sunday the fifth of decEmber.>
```

### (3) PMQs 11 July 2007

PM: Gordon Brown (Lab); LO: David Cameron (Con); S: Michael Martin

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1 PM: -> i'd like to pay trIBute to the honourable gentleman's WORK;=
2 =and say that we will supPORT;
3 uh: <<all>the campaign he is taking to combat violence such
    as substance abuse by young PEOPle;>
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Generally, the noun *tribute* means “respectful action”, specifically “something that you say, write, or give that shows your respect and admiration for someone, especially on a formal occasion”. The collocation *pay tribute to sb/sth* is paraphrased as “to praise someone or something”.<sup>4</sup> However, note that in Ex. 1–3 different meaning potentials are evoked.<sup>5</sup> In Ex. 1, the prime minister pays tribute to a deceased clerk in the House of Commons which suggests that the meaning of *pay tribute* can be expanded and paraphrased as to “commemorate a deceased person and praise them for the service they did”. In Ex. 2, where a fallen serviceman is honored, the additional meaning dimension evoked by can be *pay tribute* is “to praise a deceased person for the service they did which caused them to die”.<sup>6</sup> In Ex. 3, the prime minister pays tribute to the questioning member of parliament member of parliament's work, using *pay tribute* in the sense of “compliment on” or “congratulate on”.

<sup>3</sup> Con stands for Conservative Party, and Lab for Labour Party. S is the abbreviation of the Speaker of the House of Commons. The abbreviations PM, MP, and LO represent prime minister, member of parliament and leader of the opposition respectively.

<sup>4</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/tribute?q=pay+tribute+to+sb%2Fsth>.

<sup>5</sup> The present study uses the notion of meaning potentials as proposed by Norén and Linell (2007) to suggest that PAY TRIBUTE is deployed in different situated contexts at PMQs and may evoke different meanings in the process.

<sup>6</sup> This point was raised by an anonymous reviewer.

This study proposes that PAY TRIBUTE represents a parliamentary practice in the British House of Commons by the prime minister, the leader of the opposition and other members of parliament. This practice has undergone processes of ritualization from the premiership of Margaret Thatcher to that of Tony Blair, with the turn slot following the ritual engagements question evolving into a fixed locus for the collective performance of parliamentary commemoration and praise of deceased servicepeople, whose service which caused them to die is constructed as being in the national interest. The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 offers a literature review on public commemoration and political rituals and shows how these two intersect. Section 3 describes the data and methodology used in the study. Section 4 illustrates how the commemorative practices involving PAY TRIBUTE have undergone ritualization over time. In the conclusion (Section 5), the implications of the study with respect to ritualization are discussed.

## 2. Past research

The study of paying tribute seems not to have attracted much attention in the past, and prior research is scarce. Past research shows that the practices of paying tribute are culture-specific and may undergo change. [Abu-Humeid \(2018\)](#) observes that while showing cultural differences, the letters of condolence by Western and Arabian state leaders following the passing of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, Saudi Arabia, serve for political positioning and the construction of collective identity in the international world order. [Knudsen and Stage \(2012\)](#) describe the commemoration of Danish fallen soldiers in “video tributes” on YouTube by private citizens as a “new memory practice” ([Knudsen and Stage, 2012: 424](#)). In contrast to official war monuments, these video tributes open up an interactive virtual space for users’ comments to claim adversarial positions on the war. This is related to a general trend towards “individualization” in commemorative practices since the 20th century ([Knudsen and Stage, 2012: 425](#)). The commemorative naming and referencing of individuals and collective groups on street signs and war monuments have been identified as a locus of the negotiation, construction and transformation of hegemonic power and national identity in urban spaces ([Fabiszak and Buchstaller, 2021](#); [Kaiser, 2008](#)). Commemorative speeches by the head of state serve to construct the identity narrative of a nation shared by the principal political actors and mainstream media ([Wodak and De Cillia, 2007](#)). Practices of address and reference in commemorative political speeches are recipient designed ([Ensink and Sauer, 2003](#)).

The study of commemoration is closely related to the notion of rituals. The work on rituals by the sociologist Erving Goffman has been widely influential within the field of pragmatics. His insights that social “interaction is organized on ritual principles” ([Goffman, 1967: 45](#)) and facework is based on a ritual order ([Goffman, 1967: 19](#)) have informed politeness theory ([Brown and Levinson, 1987](#); [Terkourafi and Kádár, 2017](#)). Recent pragmatic research has revisited the notion of rituals for the interactional analysis of speech acts. “Ritual speech acts” are defined as speech acts produced in the opening and closing of social interaction, such as greetings or well-wishing ([House et al., 2021: 4](#); [Maynard and Zimmerman, 1984](#)). “Ritual frames” ([Kádár and House, 2019: 688](#)) or simply “rituals” ([Kádár and House, 2021: 54](#)) are evoked in “standard situations with varying degree of formality/level of institutionalisation” and “consist of conventional and highly visible ritual practices” ([Kádár and House, 2019: 688](#)). Characterized by pragmatic salience, “recurrent features” and “ratified roles” ([Kádár and House, 2021: 54](#); see also [Kreinath, 2021: 397](#), [Rappaport, 2012: 24](#)), rituals put constraints on the rights and obligations of participants and serve for the (re)production of social structures and the moral order. Rituals are performances inviting affective involvement ([Terkourafi and Kádár, 2017: 172](#)).

In the more specialized setting of political discourse, ritual has been associated with questions of hegemonic power, status and authority (e.g., [Egreteau, 2020](#); [Kustermans et al., 2021: 2](#)). Mediated rituals in the political domain have been analyzed as performances of “social and political reconciliation, reunification, and reintegration” ([Baringhorst, 2004: 293](#)). Only few studies have examined forms of ritual language use in parliamentary debates in more detail, and these have been limited to terms of address ([Bull et al., 2020](#); [Ilie, 2010](#)).

## 3. Data and methodology

The database draws on recordings of PMQs, a parliamentary activity which has evolved over time and is characterized by an evolving media representation. Institutionalized in 1961, PMQs has undergone relevant changes characterized by (1) mediation and mediatization, (2) the merging of parliamentary sessions as well as (3) a more prominent role for the leader of the opposition (see [Table 1](#)), and (4) the procedure of putting questions. With respect to (1), the introduction of radio and later TV and internet broadcasts meant that a non-present public audience gained auditive and visual access to the unfolding debates in parliament in real time, which may also have influenced the conduct of the speakers acting in this political arena. As regards (2), PMQs was initially performed in two weekly 15-min sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays but the two sessions were combined into one single weekly 30-min session on Wednesdays when Tony Blair was elected prime minister in 1997. Related to this, (3) [Bates et al. \(2014\)](#) have noticed an increasingly prominent role for the leader of the opposition with the proportion of questions by members of parliament of declining.

**Table 1**  
Historical outline of Prime Minister's Questions (Reproduced from [Reber, 2021:28](#)).

Year	Event
1869	Formal recognition of Question Time as a parliamentary institution
1881	Questions to the Prime Minister placed last on the day's list
1961	Institutionalization of PMQs: two weekly 15-min sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays
1978	First live broadcast on BBC Radio
1989	First live broadcast on TV
1997	Tony Blair elected into office: one single weekly 30-min session on Wednesdays
2002	Introduction of internet broadcasting

(4) Another evolution in the parliamentary proceedings relevant to this study concerns the institutional procedure for putting questions<sup>7</sup>: Historically, it was mandatory for members of parliament to table the full wording of their questions but they could be allocated a slot for a follow-up question (a so-called supplementary question) on the same topic which was not made available to the prime minister. Supplementary questions thus represent a useful weapon for probing the prime ministers with respect to their factual knowledge and credibility. In an effort to find a way around the existing rules, members of parliament increasingly began to table so-called “open” questions, which allowed them to ask a subsequent non-tabled supplementary question. Since the 1970s, this open question has typically been the “engagements” question, in which the prime minister is asked “to list his engagements for the day” ([Norton, 1996: n.p.](#), quoted in [Coe and Kelly, 2009: 4](#)). With new rules being put in place after Tony Blair entered office in 1997 ([Coe and Kelly, 2009](#)), the engagement question developed into a “ritual question” or ritual “engagements” question (often simply called question number one) to be asked as the very first question at PMQs (cf. [Chilton, 2007: 101](#)).

The database was compiled to ensure comparability with the caveat that “the ideal of complete comparability” ([Leech et al., 2009: 28](#)) can never be reached since deviations in size and make-up between corresponding subcorpora are hard to avoid. The corpus includes: (1) Audio recordings of the period between 1978 and 1988 when PMQs was only radio broadcast, comprising 22 sessions, which amount to approx. 5.5 h. To have a balanced sample, the first Tuesday sessions in May and the first Thursday sessions in November of each year were chosen. (2) Video recordings (2003–2013) from the time when cameras were allowed into the House of Commons and parliamentary debates were broadcast on TV and the internet, consisting of 44 sessions (approx. 22 h). The video footage is considerably larger because it was possible to order it with the Parliamentary Recording Unit at reasonable cost as well as to retrieve it from the C-SPAN Video Library online. By contrast, the audio recordings were not readily available but had to be digitized by the British Film Institute in a costly procedure especially conducted for the larger research project on recent change in PMQs from which this study is taken. The proceedings of PMQs are further documented in Hansard, the official written record of the proceedings at the House of Commons since 1802, which is freely available in various forms online.<sup>8</sup>

[Tables A1 and A2](#) in the Appendix provide an overview of the prime minister and leader of the opposition in office from 1978 to 1988 and between 2003 and 2013. The inclusion of some recordings with an acting prime minister and leader of the opposition was intentional to have deviant cases of how these respective roles can be performed.<sup>9</sup> Deviant cases are a powerful methodological tool because they expose a “participant’s own orientations to the normative structures most clearly” ([Sidnell, 2013: 80](#)). The audio and video data are self-transcribed and illustrate prosodic and interactional detail, following the conventions of GAT 2 ([Couper-Kuhlen and Barth-Weingarten, 2011](#)). The software Praat was used for acoustic analysis.<sup>10</sup> In addition, (3) Hansard, the official record of parliamentary proceedings, is consulted as a complementary database to back up the analysis when needed. The shortcomings of Hansard for linguistic analysis have been widely illustrated ([Mollin, 2007; Slembrouck, 1992](#)), acknowledged ([Sealey and Bates, 2016](#)), and corroborated by the present research. Although Hansard is described as “a ‘substantially verbatim’ report of what is said in Parliament” on the Parliament’s website (<https://hansard.parliament.uk/about>), the representation of the parliamentary interaction may differ from the audio and video recordings in terms of syntactic and lexical choices, and interactional structures. Not all participants’ contributions are reproduced, and interactional phenomena such as overlap are neglected.

The methodological procedure included the following steps: Following a first, inductive observation that speakers engage in paying tribute in different ways in the two datasets, the noun TRIBUTE and corresponding collocations were searched in Hansard. The findings were confirmed by listening to the recordings. The collection of TRIBUTE was coded with respect to collocations used, the meanings and functions of these constructions, their prosodic-phonetic contextualization, the institutional role of the speaker, the placement of TRIBUTE constructions in the turn and sequence, and possible responses. The results were compared between the two periods (1978–1988, 2003–2013). Following Diachronic Interactional Sociolinguistics ([Reber, 2021](#)), the study is grounded in naturally occurring social interaction and treats PMQs as an evolving “community of practice” ([Harris, 2001; Lave and Wenger, 1991](#)). It is assumed that language is conceptualized as emergent in and over time and formatted in conventionalized, formulaic constructions. Frequency is taken as concomitant of language change and variation. Linguistic structures, including lexicosemantic, syntactic and prosodic cues, and the formation of commemorative actions are analyzed from a participants’ perspective. This means that the analysis is based on the

<sup>7</sup> Detailed information on the current procedure can be found at [https://guidetopcedure.parliament.uk/collections/nPylcSv3/prime-ministers-questions](https://guidetopprocedure.parliament.uk/collections/nPylcSv3/prime-ministers-questions).

<sup>8</sup> <https://libguides.bham.ac.uk/c.php?g=527535&p=3606960>.

<sup>9</sup> In the event of absence of the prime minister or leader of the opposition at PMQs, the deputy prime minister or leader of the opposition steps in for them at the dispatch box.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.fon.hum.uva.nl/praat/>.

understanding of prior talk made visible by next speakers in the House as well as on the understanding of mediated public participants. This also implies that the analytic categories used, i.e., the linguistic features analyzed as constituting the performance of paying tribute at PMQs, are empirically grounded in the data. Deviant cases are included in the analysis.

## 4. Results

The analysis suggests two major tendencies with respect to PAY TRIBUTE: In Dataset (1), practices of commemoration on the part of the prime minister are prompted by a substantial question and involves collective referents to which tribute is paid. In Dataset (2), the prime minister initiates commemorative PAY TRIBUTE as part of a fixed, ritualized practice in the turn slot following the ritual question at the beginning of the session, making reference to personally named, specific troops. The prosodic-phonetic contextualization of PAY TRIBUTE in both datasets can often be heard as affect-laden, involving displays of sorrow.

### 4.1. Paying tribute as a prompted action component (1978–1988)

The collection of constructions in Dataset (1) is rather small. The prime minister uses the noun TRIBUTE in two types of constructions. First in the collocation PAY TRIBUTE, where the meaning “commemorate/praise” is evoked (three instances), and second, in BE A TRIBUTE (one instance). The following analysis concentrates on the former usage (PAY TRIBUTE).<sup>11</sup>

When the prime minister pays tribute in their answer turns, this tends to be in response to a substantial question. This question prompts the prime minister's public performance of paying tribute. In a subsequent question slot, the leader of the opposition may follow up on the prime minister's commemoration. This is a schematic model which illustrates this interactional sequence.

1 Member of parliament:	Question turn (substantial)
2 Prime minister:	Answer turn
	PAY TRIBUTE
(Leader of the opposition: Question turn [follow-up])	

Ex. 4 exemplifies the prime minister's paying tribute in Dataset (1). In this excerpt, a government member of parliament solicits a commemorative response on Sir Richard Barlas who served as a clerk in the British Parliament. When the leader of the opposition is summoned to ask the next question, he follows up on the prime minister's tribute in his speech.

#### (4) PMQs 11 Nov. 1982

MP: Robin Maxwell-Hyslop (Con); PM: Margaret Thatcher (Con); LO: Michael Foot

(Labour); S: George Thomas

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1 S:      robin maxwell HYSlop;
2          (0.55)
3 MP: -> has {my right honourable friend (0.51) NOTed; (.)
4          -> the VERY sad occasion of the dEath of sir richard bArlas,
5          -> (0.56) [(.) WIDELY re]garded as the greatest clerk of this house
6 MPs:    [<<p>hear> ]
7 MP: -> in living mEmory;
8          (0.59)
9          and held in the GREAtest estEe:m and affEction; (.)
10         by SO many members of this [hOuse-]
11 MPs:    [h h h ][h h h ]
12          [(2.07)] (0.75)
13 PM:     uhm (0.48) YES mister spEaker-
14          (0.53)
15          <<p>as you KNOW <<creaky>sir>;>=
16          =<<p>sir richard barlas served in this house with (.) tOtAl
17          dedication for thirty THREE years,>
18          °h <p>and for THREE,>
19          °h <p>as our MOST distinguished clerk->
20          -> °h <p>i believe the whOle house will join in paying TRIBute to
21          -> him->
22          °h <<dim>and in offering our SYMpathy to his fAmily.>
23          (0.27) [(0.90)]
24 MPs:    [h h h ][h h h ]
25 S:      [mister] michael FOOT;
26 LO:     may i (.) join the right honourable lady in offering (.) <<p,l>our
27          sympathy to (.) lady bArlas> and to (.) express our (.) thanks
28          to the service that sir richard paid to this house over such a
29          (.) long period and with such (.) distINction.
30          but now may i (0.64) take the right honourable lady BACK to the
31          answers that she gave a couple of days ago in the house of cOMmons;
32          ((turn continues))

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<sup>11</sup> It was suggested by an anonymous reviewer to search the data for related lexical items which might serve to perform commemorative actions: My search for the lemma COMMEMORATE in the two datasets revealed only very few instances, which were not deployed to perform commemorative actions.

Following a summons of the Speaker (line 1), the member of parliament asks if the prime minister has noted the passing of the clerk of the House of Commons (*has ↑my right honourable friend Noted the VERy sad occasion of the dEath of sir richard bArlas*, lines 3–10). This occasions the prime minister's commemorative action: In her answer turn, she praises the service of the late clerk in highly positive terms (*sir richard barlas served in this house with (.) tOtal dedication for thirty THREE years, and for THREE, as our MOST distinguished clerk*, lines 16–18). By using the “metapragmatic” (Caffi, 2006) construction *i believe the whOle house will join (...)* (lines 19–20), she next indexes a change in “footing” (Goffman, 1979), speaking on behalf of the whole House of Commons to pay tribute and offer sympathy to his family. Prosodically, the entire answer turn (lines 13–20) is characterized by a largely narrow-range contour with only little noticeable pitch movement in a medium to low register as well as a soft volume, which decreases even more towards the end of the turn (line 19; see Fig. 1 for an acoustic analysis). The address form *sir* (line 15) is produced with creaky voice quality. This cluster of prosodic and phonetic features is similar to sound patterns associated with displays of “sadness” (Couper-Kuhlen, 1986: 181) and “regret” (Freese and Maynard, 1998: 198) in British English everyday conversation (cf. also Couper-Kuhlen, 2009; Reber, 2012 on disappointment). The coupling of a negatively valenced prosody and a positively valenced lexis represents a “duality” typical of (mundane) death announcements (Holt, 1993: 205).

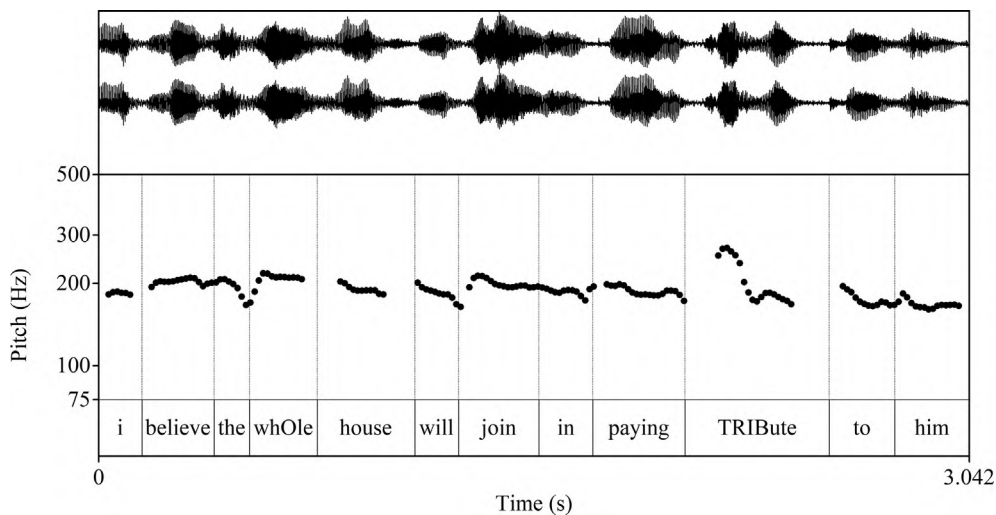


Fig. 1. Acoustic analysis of excerpt 4 (PMQs 11 Nov. 1982), line 19.

Next the leader of the opposition sides with and supports the prime minister's commemorative action, producing a follow-up in his question slot (*may i join the right honourable lady in offering our sympathy to sir lady bArlas and to express our thanks to the service that sir richard paid to this house over such a long period and with such distinction*, line 24) before he turns to other business.

What is noticeable about the PAY TRIBUTE constructions in Dataset (1) is that the recordings do not contain any cases of commemorative actions relating to war or terror. During the period comprised by Dataset (1), the UK was engaged in one war, the Falklands War against Argentina from 2 April to 14 June 1982. 650 Argentinians and 255 British people were killed.<sup>12</sup> Public surveys from that time demonstrate that the British majority considered this loss of life worth the cause and backed the Falklands War.<sup>13</sup> The analysis of Hansard files from this period reveals three sequences in which PAY TRIBUTE is used in commemorative moves with respect to the Falklands War. Ex. 5 demonstrates such a case. Following the opening ritual question-reply sequence, Harvey Proctor, a Conservative member of parliament, asks the prime minister from same party to pay tribute (lines 8–10).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/event/Falkland-Islands-War/The-course-of-the-conflict>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/falklands-war-panel-survey>.

<sup>14</sup> <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/sittings/1982/may>.



1 § Q1. *Mr. Proctor*

2 asked the Prime Minister if she will list her official engagements for Tuesday 25 May.

3 § *The Prime Minister (Mrs. Margaret Thatcher)*

4 This morning I presided at a meeting of the Cabinet and had meetings with ministerial  
5 colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further  
6 meetings later today, including one with the Australian Foreign Minister.

7 § *Mr. Proctor*

8 During the course of a busy and exacting day, will my right hon. Friend take time to pay  
9 tribute, with the support of the whole House, to the bravery and sacrifice of our Armed  
10 Forces and merchant seamen in defence of British interests in the Falkland  
11 Islands? In the light of this, will my right hon. Friend give an assurance that there will  
12 be no negotiations on sovereignty with the Argentine or anyone else, because this  
13 would be unforgivable and unforgettable?

14 § *The Prime Minister*

15 I respond gladly to my hon. Friend's invitation to pay tribute to the courage and skill of  
16 our Armed Forces and of the merchant marine in the splendid work that they are doing.  
17 Our object is to retake the Falkland Islands. ((continues to respond to the second question))

18 § *Mr. Foot*

19 I certainly join the right hon. Lady in paying tribute to the courage and skill of the British  
20 troops. May I turn to the second part of the matter to which she has referred? ((turn  
continues))

Having asked the engagements question and received a ritual answer (lines 1–6), the member of parliament requests the prime minister to pay tribute to the bravery and sacrifice of the British troops in the Falkland War (*will my right hon. Friend take time to pay tribute, with the support of the whole House, to the bravery and sacrifice of our Armed Forces*, lines 8–11). Note that according to the wording provided by Hansard, the member of parliament does not request an immediate commemorative action. Also, the request treats the British troops as a collective rather than making specific reference to individual soldiers killed in action. In her answer turn, the prime minister embraces the member of parliament's request, paying tribute to the achievements of the British troops (*I respond gladly to my hon. Friend's invitation to pay tribute to the courage and skill of our Armed Forces and of the merchant marine in the splendid work that they are doing*, lines 15–16). Note that she performs the commemorative action on an individual rather than collective footing. She next accounts for the Falklands War (line 17). When the leader of the opposition follows up on the prime minister's commemoration, he frames his paying tribute as a joint, collective action (*I certainly join the right hon. Lady in paying tribute to the courage and skill of the British troops*, lines 19–20). The commemorative uses of PAY TRIBUTE on the part of the prime minister in Dataset (1) show these recurrent features.

- The commemorative uses of PAY TRIBUTE are not initiated by the then prime minister Margaret Thatcher herself but prompted by a question turn which tends to be produced by a Conservative, i.e., government, member of parliament.
- These commemorative actions are *not* bound to a fixed position, i.e., they can be situated following the opening sequence (Ex. 5) as well as in other turn slots (Ex. 4).
- The prime minister does not pay tribute to specific troops who are personally named but only references the qualities and abilities of the troops as a collective group.

Finally, these commemorative performances might be contextualized by a sound cluster indexing sadness. This affective display concords with the speaker's verbal claims of sympathy but disconcords with their praise of the servicepeople's service during their lifetime.

#### 4.2. Paying tribute as a parliamentary ritual of commemoration (2003–2013)

In Dataset (2), the noun TRIBUTE is exclusively used in the collocation PAY TRIBUTE. The analysis revealed 20 cases where PAY TRIBUTE was used in the sense of commemorate/praise, 30 instances with the meaning of compliment/congratulate, and 2 cases with ambiguous pragmatics. For reasons of space, the discussion centers on cases of pay tribute with the meaning commemorate/praise, showing (1) how paying tribute has emerged as a fixed, ritualized locus of national commemoration in parliament performed by the prime minister.<sup>15</sup> This commemorative ritual is placed in the turn slot of the ritual answer and may be followed up on by the leader of the opposition and other members of parliament in a demonstration of national unity. Crucially, paying tribute has evolved into a turn component independent of the question–answer sequences formally required by the institution. (2) The value and merits of the collective service personnel are referenced, a practice which changes in 1997 when soldiers are named individually, i.e., they are “personified” (Palander-Collin and Nevala, 2020: 9).

As in Dataset (1), the performance of the commemorative actions can be contextualized by vocal displays of sadness. This includes a softer volume, a narrow pitch contour, a medium to lower pitch register as well as a slower speech rate than usual, and breathy quality. On a metapragmatic level, these commemorative performances are projected and framed as collective actions through formulae of the forms I’M SURE THE WHOLE HOUSE WILL WISH/WOULD WANT TO by the prime minister and (CAN) I JOIN THE PRIME MINISTER IN PAYING TRIBUTE by the leader of the opposition and other members of parliament. In subsequent speech the first-person plural pronoun WE may be deployed.

Ad (1): The construction of PAY TRIBUTE is used in commemorative moves by the prime minister which treat the death of the deceased person as relevant to the parliament and – by extension – to the (security) interests of the UK as a nation. The interactional environment in which PAY TRIBUTE is deployed in this function is modelled in what follows.

1 Member of parliament:	Ritual question (Question no. 1)
2 Prime minister:	Ritual “engagements” reply PAY TRIBUTE to killed service personnel, police constables, recently deceased members of parliament (commemorate/praise) <sup>a</sup>
Leader of the opposition (members of parliament/leader of the second-largest opposition party):	Question turn [follow-up] <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> The ritual engagements reply and the commemorative practices can be produced in alternative order.

<sup>b</sup> Note that the mere expression of condolences by the prime minister in the ritual answer turn slot may prompt expressions of tribute in follow-up speeches. For instance, PMQs on 27 June 2007 is a case in point.

What characterizes such ritualized practices of paying tribute is that they are performed on a collective footing and that the deaths, while being mourned, are treated and defined by the government as being in the national interest. The parliamentary commemoration in the ritual answer slot thus serves to claim interpretive authority and hegemonic power over commemorative actions. When the leader of the opposition is summoned to speak in the subsequent interaction, they (and potentially other members of parliament) follow up on the prime minister’s paying tribute. Ex. 6 exemplifies a typical case where the prime minister pays tribute to a British soldier who died in Afghanistan in the opening sequence of PMQs in Dataset (2).

#### (6) PMQs 08 Dec 2010

MP: Mark Menzies (Con); PM: David Cameron (Con); S: John Bercow

```

1 S:      questions to the PRIME minister;=
2      mark MEN[zies;]
3 MPs:    [h h h][h h h ]
4          [(0.88)]
5 MPs:    [h h h h h h h h h h]
6 MP:     [question number ONE] mister speaker;
7 ( ):    ((cough))
8 S:      PRIME minister;
9          (0.65)
10 PM:    THANK you mister speaker;
11 -> %h i'm sUre the whole house (.) will wish to join ME; (.)
12 -> ((click)) <<p>in paying trIbute to private john HOWard;>
13 -> <<p>from THIRD battalion;>
14 -> <<p>the PARachute rEgiment;>
15 -> <<p>who DIED on Sunday the fifth of decEmber.>
16 <<p>he was an incrEdibly gIfTed and POPular pAratrooper;>
17 <<p>we should send our condolences to his FAMily->
18 <<p>his frIends and the love' his lOved ones at this VERy sAd
    tIme.>
19      ((turn continues))

```

<sup>15</sup> PAY TRIBUTE in Dataset (2) may also be used by members of parliament in questioning turns to invite commemorative actions on controversial topics. These may be rebutted and treated as attacks on the authority of the government (e.g., PMQs 09 January 2008).



The Speaker of the House of Commons opens the session, announcing *questions to the PRIME minister* (line 1) and summons the first member of parliament to speak (line 2). The member of parliament next produces the ritual question for the prime minister (*question number ONE mister speaker*; line 6). In his response, tribute is paid to private John Howard (lines 12–15), his achievements in his military role are appreciated (line 16) and the condolences of the House of Commons are sent to his family, friends and loved ones (lines 17–18). Note that this is framed as a collective action performed on behalf of all members of the House of Commons (*i'm sUre the whole house will wish to join ME*, line 11; *we*, line 17). The micro pause after *the whole house*, which addresses the co-present audience, lends more emphasis to the address (see also Ex. 9). The entire commemorative speech is produced with soft volume (lines 11–18), and locally with a relatively narrow contour (line 12). Ex. 7 illustrates how the leader of the opposition follows up on this move.

#### (7) PMQs 08 Dec 2010

LO: Edward Miliband (Lab); PM: David Cameron (Con); S: John Bercow

```

1  S:      ed MILiband;
2  MPs:    [h h h]
3          (3.68)]
4  MPs:    [h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h]
5  LO:      [mis' (.) mister SPEAKER; (0.55)]
6  MPs:    [h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h]
7  LO: -> [mis' (.) mister speaker can i: (.) can I JOIN the prIme
          MPs:  h h h h h h]
          LO: -> minister;] (0.35)
8          -> in paying trIbute to private JOHN hOward;=
9          -> =from THIRd battalion;
10         -> °h <<dim>the PARachute rEgiment;>
11         °h he showed eNORmous courage,
12         °h we pay TRIBute to his sACrifice;
13         °h and our THOUGHTS and deepest condOlcences are with his fAmily.
14  MPs:    ((soft cheering))>

```

Following self-repair, the leader of the opposition performs a commemorative action displaying deference to the troops and national unity. Framed as a joint, collective move by a metapragmatic formula (*can I JOIN the prIme minister*, line 7), the leader of the opposition pays tribute referencing the fallen soldier (*in paying trIbute to private JOHN hOward*, lines 8), his sacrifice (*we pay TRIBute to his sACrifice*, line 12), and appreciates his achievements in service (*he showed eNORmous courage*, line 11). He closes with condolences which are taken up with a display of affiliation by the members of parliament (lines 13–14). When produced in line 12, the situated referent of the first-person pronoun *we* is underspecified. The soft cheering by the member of parliament suggests that the commemorative action is treated as a collective, consensual achievement of the House of Commons.

Dataset (2) suggests a tendency from references to the value and merits of fallen troops to references to named individuals. 2007, the fifth year of the Iraq War, during which the number of British fatalities peaked and Prime Minister Tony Blair was eventually forced to step down, seems to mark a turning point in this development, which continues after David Cameron was elected into office.<sup>16</sup> To illustrate this evolution, Ex. (8) and (9) exemplify this changed practice of person reference in Tony Blair's speech from before and since 2007.

<sup>16</sup> See the official OP Telic Casualty and Fatality Tables by the British Ministry of Defense: [https://web.archive.org/web/20091204165507/http://mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/7E86BD05-D4FF-4677-97AA-CCFBDCE4E34/0/optelic\\_31jul09.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20091204165507/http://mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/7E86BD05-D4FF-4677-97AA-CCFBDCE4E34/0/optelic_31jul09.pdf).

## (8) PMQs 02 April 2003

PM: Tony Blair (Lab); LO: Iain Duncan Smith (Con); S: Michael Martin

```
1 PM:      ((10 seconds omitted))
2          °h <<breathy>i Also (0.46) am sure the HOUSE;>
3          (.) <<breathy>the WHOLE house;>
4          °h <<breathy, l>would want to pass on its SYMpathies->
5          °h <<breathy, l>to the fAmilies (0.46) of british SERvicemen;>
6          (.) <<breathy, l>who have tragically been killed in their
           SERVICE;>
7          °h <<breathy, l>of their COUNtry;>
8          °h <<breathy, l>over the past WEEK;>
9          °h <<breathy, l>aGAIN;>
10         -> (.) <<breathy, l>we want pay TRIBute,>
11         -> <<breathy, l>to their COUrage;>
12         -> <<breathy, l>and their DIGnity->
13         °h <<breathy, l>and pass on> <<l>(.) our conDolences and our
           sympathy to their fAmilies and their frIends.>
14 MPs:    h h h h h
```

The prime minister uses a metapragmatic construction to shift the footing of his talk, framing his subsequent commemoration as a collective action on behalf of *the WHOLE house* (lines 2–4). He expresses their sympathies, making collective reference to the families of the fallen troops (*pass on its SYMpathies-to the fAmilies (0.46) of british SERvicemen (...)*, lines 4–8). When paying tribute, he references the merits and value of the troops for the nation (*we want pay TRIBute, to their COUrage; and their DIGnity*, lines 9–12). Prosodically and phonetically, his speech is marked by a medium to low-pitched, narrow contour (lines 4–13) and noticeably breathy voice quality (lines 2–13). The many filled and unfilled pauses contribute to an overall slower speech rate. This sound cluster contextualizes his speech as an affect-laden display of sadness, which is in alignment with his negatively valenced lexical resources referring to the event of the death of the servicemen (*its SYMpathies/our sympathy, conDolences, who have tragically been killed*) and contrasts with the positively valenced expressions associated with the prior life of the soldiers (*their COUrage, their DIGnity*; see also Ex. 9). In his follow-up, the leader of the opposition deploys the same form of reference, paying tribute to the courage of the armed forces (not shown here). Ex. 9 illustrates how the practice of paying tribute is reframed in a personalized, individualized fashion in the data since 2007 (cf. also Ex. 6 for another tribute to a named serviceman produced by Prime Minister David Cameron).

## (9) PMQs 23 May 2007

PM: Tony Blair (Lab); LO: David Cameron (Con); S: Michael Martin

```
1 PM:      mr SPEAKER sir;=
2          =before listing my enGAGEments;
3          <<breathy, p>i'm sure that the whole house (.) will once again
           wish to JOIN with me;>
4          °h <<breathy>in sending our profound> (.) <<breathy, p>SYMpathy
           and condolences;>
5          <<breathy> to the FAMily and friends;>
6          °h <<breathy>of cOrporal jeremy BROOKES,>
7          (0.33) <<breathy, p>of FOURTH<<breathy>battalion the rifles> (.)
           <<breathy, p, l>who was killed in iraq this week by a terrorist
           bOMB.>
8          °h <<l>he and others beFORE him;>
9          <<l>died working towards a SAfer->
10         °h <<p, l>and more secure WOLRD->=
11         -> =<<p, l>and we pay TRIBute (.) to him.>
```

Indexing collective footing (*i'm sure that the whole house will once again wish to JOIN with me*, line 3), the prime minister sends their sympathy and condolences to the family and friends of the killed serviceman (*in sending our profound SYMpathy and condolences to the FAMily and friends*, lines 3–5). In what is different to the pre-2007 data, he references the individual soldier and identifies him by his military rank and full name, specifies the infantry regiment and provides the circumstances of his death (*of cOrporal jeremy BROOKES of FOURTH battalion the rifles who was killed in iraq this week by a terrorist bOMB*, lines 6–7). This practice of personalization can be interpreted as “distinction” (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: 600), i.e., the identity of this soldier is constructed in terms of his difference from the group of serviceman and thus elevated in the situated context of parliamentary commemoration. The prime minister continues with an ideological account for his and other servicemen's death which presents their actions prior to his death in positive terms (*he and others beFORE him died working towards a SAfer and more secure WOLRD*, lines 8–9) and a final tribute to the corporal (*and we pay tribute TO him*, line 11). Similar to Ex. (8), the commemorative action is accompanied by a vocal display of sadness marked by medium to low pitch, a narrow contour, soft volume, and breathy voice quality. The multiple pauses make the speech heard as being produced in slow tempo (see Fig. 2 for an acoustic analysis).

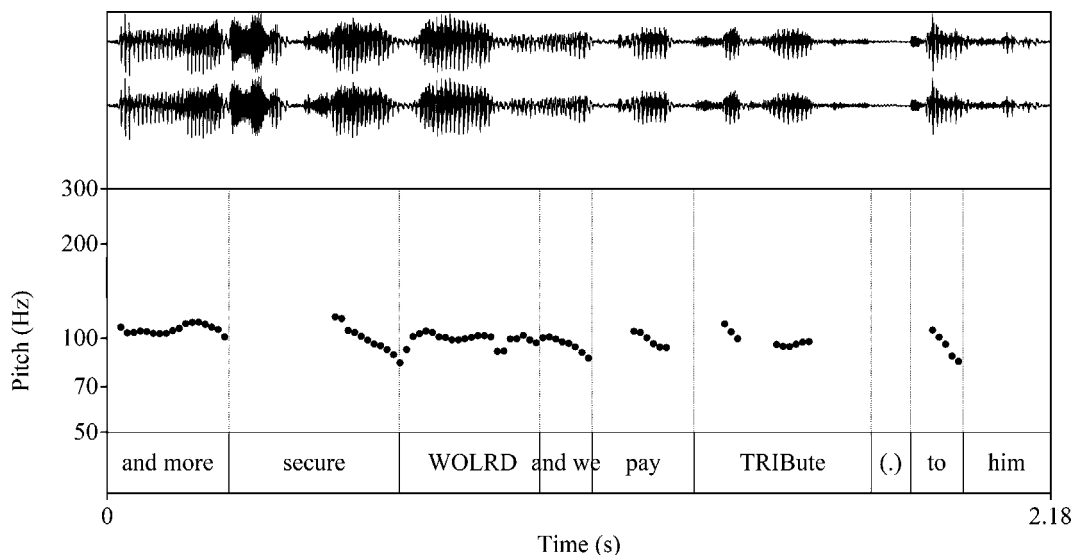


Fig. 2. Acoustic analysis of excerpt 9 (PMQs 23 May 2003), lines 10–11.

The follow-up by the leader of the opposition represents a deviant case with him also paying individual tribute to another serviceman (Ex. 10).

#### (10) PMQs 23 May 2007

PM: Tony Blair (Lab); LO: David Cameron (Con); S: Michael Martin

```

1  MPs:  [h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h]
2  LO:    [THANK you mister speaker;=]
3  -> =i JOIN the prime minister;
4  -> (.) in paying tribute <<p>to corporal jeremy BROOKES;>
5  -> (0.57) and i also pay tribute to lance <<p>corporal george
    DAVEY;>
6  -> <<p>who died after a tragic °h ACCident <<l>at a british base in
    afghAnistan.>(0.32)
7  ((click)) °h †with over FORTy maternity units under thrEat in the
    en aitch es.
8  (.) including FI:VE in greater mAnchester.
9  °h h †WOULD the prime minister;=
10 =advi:se the NEXT prime minister,
11 to STOP this closure programme and think again.
12 MPs:  h h [h]
13 PM:    [i?] i? certainly would NOT advise;
14 stopping a chAnged programme that is ABSolutely necessary, ((turn
    continues))

```

Using a metapragmatic formula, the leader of the opposition first constructs his tribute as a collective action (*I JOIN the prime minister in paying tribute to corporal jeremy brOokes*, lines 3–4). Indexed by the first-person subject *i*, he next adds an individual tribute to another soldier in a disaffiliative move (*and i also pay tribute to lance corporal george DAVEY*, lines 5–6). Given the fact that on 10 May 2007 Tony Blair announced to stand down as prime minister and was subsequently considered as a lame duck, the lack of loyalty displayed by the additional tribute may be interpreted as an attack on the authority and credibility of a battered head of government.<sup>17</sup> This commemorative action is produced locally with soft volume and a medium to low pitch register (lines 4–6) as well as a narrow contour (lines 4 and 6), when the killed soldiers are referenced. This speech does not sound as affect-laden as the prime minister's in Ex. 9 nor does not it acknowledge the soldiers' achievements prior to their death.

The subsequent talk shows that the prime minister does not respond to the potential attack by the leader of the opposition. Following a pause, the leader of the opposition quotes figures, which serves as a “question preface” (Clayman and Heritage, 2002: 201; Reber, 2021) designed to make the action format more adversarial (*with over FORTy maternity units under threat in*

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2007/may/10/tonyblair.labour>.

the en aitch es including *Fl:VE* in greater *mAnchester*, lines 7–8) and asks a yes/no interrogative based on these figures (*WOULD the prime minister; advi:se the NEXT prime minister, to STOP this closure programme and think again*, lines 9–11). In his answer turn, the prime minister ignores the additional tribute by the leader of the opposition and potential attack it implements but focusses on his institutional task of answering questions, rejecting the question by the leader of the opposition (lines 13–14).

## 5. Conclusion

During a period when the Labour government was under great pressure due to the controversial military involvement of British troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and a rising number of losses, the ritual commemoration of the killed servicepeople represented a practice to (re)construct the authority and interpretative power of the government (cf. [Kustermans et al., 2021: 2](#)) in the mediated arena of PMQs, which was continued when Prime Minister David Cameron was elected into office. Although limited by a small collection of cases, the study has provided a first insight into how the consensual commemoration of servicemen at British PMQs has emerged as a ritualized turn component over three decades.

*Pragmatic change in the ritual opening sequence of PMQs.* The commemoration is staged at the very beginning of the session following the ritual question. This means that this sequential position (the answer turn slot following the ritual question) has evolved into a formalized slot for the prime minister's performance of commemoration. The commemorative ritual has no thematic or functional association with the prior engagements question which makes a response interactionally and sequentially relevant. In this sense, the ritual question has undergone pragmatic change, prompting the routine ritual answer as well as opening up interactional space for the prime minister to perform a separate commemorative turn component.

*Collective footing and formulaic structures.* The ritualized commemorative actions are performed on a collective footing and tend to be constituted by recurrent wording, which contributes to the “obliteration” ([Du Bois, 1986: 330](#)) of the individual, personal speaker. The collective footing is indexed by metapragmatic formulaic constructions both on the part of the prime minister and other members of the House.

*Construction of affective involvement.* The commemorative speech may be enacted with prosodic-phonetic displays of sadness and contain expressions having negative and positive valence which are concordant and discordant with the negative affect shown. By doing so, the parliamentary speakers use vocal and verbal practices known from mundane interaction.

The pragmatic change in the ritual opening sequence observed in the more recent data appears to be the defining feature of ritualization in the study, while traces of collective footing and formulaic structures as well as the performance of affective involvement can also be identified in the older dataset. By initiating the commemorative moves in the opening sequence, the “sacredness” of the head of state is indexed and substantiated ([Goffman, 1967: 47](#), [Maynard and Zimmerman, 1984](#)).

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## Declaration of competing interest

None.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

## Appendix

**Table A1**  
Speakers at the dispatch box in the 1978–1988 dataset.

Date	Prime Minister	Leader of the opposition
02 May 1978	James Callaghan (Lab)	Margaret Thatcher (Con)
09 Nov. 1978	James Callaghan (Lab)	Margaret Thatcher (Con)
22 May 1979	Margaret Thatcher (Con)	James Callaghan (Lab)
01 Nov. 1979	Margaret Thatcher (Con)	James Callaghan (Lab)
06 May 1980	Margaret Thatcher (Con)	James Callaghan (Lab)
06 Nov. 1980	Margaret Thatcher (Con)	Michael Foot (Lab)
05 May 1981	Margaret Thatcher (Con)	Michael Foot (Lab)
12 Nov. 1981	Margaret Thatcher (Con)	Michael Foot (Lab)
04 May 1982	Margaret Thatcher (Con)	Michael Foot (Lab)
11 Nov. 1982	Margaret Thatcher (Con)	Michael Foot (Lab)

(continued on next page)

**Table A1** (continued)

Date	Prime Minister	Leader of the opposition
03 May 1983	Margaret Thatcher (Con)	Michael Foot (Lab)
03 Nov. 1983	Margaret Thatcher (Con)	Neil Kinnock (Lab)
01 May 1984	Margaret Thatcher (Con)	Neil Kinnock (Lab)
15 Nov. 1984	Margaret Thatcher (Con)	Neil Kinnock (Lab)
07 May 1985	Margaret Thatcher (Con)	Neil Kinnock (Lab)
14 Nov. 1985	Margaret Thatcher (Con)	Neil Kinnock (Lab)
06 May 1986	The Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. John Biffen, Con) acting for Margaret Thatcher	Neil Kinnock (Lab)
06 Nov. 1986	Margaret Thatcher (Con)	Neil Kinnock (Lab)
05 May 1987	Margaret Thatcher (Con)	Neil Kinnock (Lab)
05 Nov. 1987	Margaret Thatcher (Con)	Neil Kinnock (Lab)
03 May 1988	Margaret Thatcher	Roy Hattersley (Lab, deputy leader of opposition, acting for Neil Kinnock)
10 Nov. 1988 <sup>a</sup>	Margaret Thatcher (Con)	Neil Kinnock (Lab)

<sup>a</sup> The session on 10th November 1988 was selected instead the first Thursday session in November 1988 which was taken by Mrs Thatcher but by the leader of the House of Commons.

**Table A2**

Speakers at the dispatch box in the 2003–2013 dataset.

Date	Prime Minister	Leader of the opposition
15 Jan. 2003	Tony Blair (Lab)	Ian Duncan Smith (Con)
02 April 2003	Tony Blair	Ian Duncan Smith (Con)
16 July 2003	Tony Blair (Lab)	Ian Duncan Smith (Con)
03 Dec. 2003	Tony Blair (Lab)	Michael Howard (Con)
14 Jan. 2004	Tony Blair (Lab)	Michael Howard (Con)
21 April 2004	Tony Blair (Lab)	Michael Howard (Con)
14 July 2004	Tony Blair (Lab)	Michael Howard (Con)
13 Oct. 2004	Tony Blair (Lab)	Michael Howard (Con)
08 June 2005	Tony Blair (Lab)	Michael Howard (Con)
22 June 2005	Tony Blair (Lab)	Michael Howard (Con)
16 Nov. 2005	Tony Blair (Lab)	Michael Howard (Con)
07 Dec. 2005	Tony Blair (Lab)	David Cameron (Con)
01 Feb. 2006	Tony Blair (Lab)	David Cameron (Con)
24 May, 2006	Tony Blair (Lab)	David Cameron (Con)
11 Oct. 2006	Tony Blair (Lab)	David Cameron (Con)
01 Nov. 2006	Tony Blair (Lab)	David Cameron (Con)
23 May 2007	Tony Blair (Lab)	David Cameron (Con)
27 June 2007	Tony Blair (Lab)	David Cameron (Con)
11 July 2007	Gordon Brown (Lab)	David Cameron (Con)
17 Oct. 2007	Gordon Brown (Lab)	David Cameron (Con)
09 Jan. 2008	Gordon Brown (Lab)	David Cameron (Con)
06 Feb. 2008	Gordon Brown (Lab)	David Cameron (Con)
27 Feb. 2008	Gordon Brown (Lab)	David Cameron (Con)
02 July 2008	Gordon Brown (Lab)	David Cameron (Con)
14 Jan. 2009	Gordon Brown (Lab)	David Cameron (Con)
11 March 2009	Gordon Brown (Lab)	David Cameron (Con)
10 June 2009	Gordon Brown (Lab)	David Cameron (Con)
16 Dec. 2009	Harriet Harman (Lab, acting)	William Hague (Con, acting)
14 July 2010	David Cameron (Con)	Harriet Harman (Lab, acting)
03 Nov. 2010	David Cameron (Con)	Ed Miliband (Lab)
01 Dec. 2010	David Cameron (Con)	Ed Miliband (Lab)
08 Dec. 2010	David Cameron (Con)	Ed Miliband (Lab)
19 Jan. 2011	David Cameron (Con)	Ed Miliband (Lab)
30 March 2011	David Cameron (Con)	Ed Miliband (Lab)
27 April 2011	David Cameron (Con)	Ed Miliband (Lab)
11 May 2011	David Cameron (Con)	Ed Miliband (Lab)
11 Jan. 2012	David Cameron (Con)	Ed Miliband (Lab)
18 April 2012	David Cameron (Con)	Ed Miliband (Lab)
11 July 2012	David Cameron (Con)	Ed Miliband (Lab)
17 Oct. 2012	David Cameron (Con)	Ed Miliband (Lab)
09 Jan. 2013	David Cameron (Con)	Ed Miliband (Lab)
24 April 2013	David Cameron (Con)	Ed Miliband (Lab)
17 July 2013	David Cameron (Con)	Ed Miliband (Lab)
16 Oct. 2013	David Cameron (Con)	Ed Miliband (Lab)

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