WELL, LOOK, OH, NO: Dealing with hostile questions in political news interviews

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The data set

- BBC Radio 4 Today Programme
- May – December 2017
- 30 broadcasts; 50 interview samples, 66 Q/A sequences
- 'feature' interviews
  - we'll be speaking to X later in the programme
- and others, with politicians, experts, public figures
- topical issues: Brexit, June 17 election, budget cuts, taxation, social policy, foreign policy

Focus: question/response sequences

- Containing 'argumentative challenge' to interviewee, contentious or objectionable proposition about a state of affairs (Heritage 2002)

- Found in negative interrogative (polar) questions (6):

  - aren't you ignoring the fact that in many cases these trusts play an important role

  - is this not uh all simply designed to uh (.) em<u>ba</u>rrass Mr Trump

- But also in declarative tag formats (9) :

  - It's your fault isn't it

  - You're willing to borrow aren't you

… hostile propositions

- In negative declaratives (5):
  - You're not going to get everything done are you
  - They've not always been successful though have they
- And in 3rd party source attributions (47):

  JW: Fraser Nelson uh commentator writing in the

  the (.) Telegraph (.) today suggesting it could

  become .h Theresa May's <u>pol</u>l tax what does

  the government need to do

Attributional practices and orientation to neutralism

- Clayman (2002) notes 4 types of IR footing shifts into 3rd party source attribution :
- specific named individuals: 'Fraser Nelson'
- groups or categories
  - People like Ken Clarke say
  - Most business people would tell you
  - What they're saying though the Irish
- generic
  - Some people sometimes say
  - ?? Reason tells you that they won't
- evoked
  - Again and again we're told on this programme

5th category: Hypothetical attribution (named source)

Extract 60 Kier Starmer

MH   >   =if <u>you</u> were sitting there as David Davies
                          has been across from Michel Barnier and
                          Michel Barnier is saying (.) to you are you
                          <u>in</u>? or <u>out</u>. of the customs union what's your
                          answer to [that

KS   [well we say leave that option on
                          the table we certainly wouldn't rule it out,
                          we'd want to have a conversation

Hypothetical attribution (generic)

- Some people might say…
- People may wonder…

Extract 20 Leanne Wood

JW   >   I suppose some people might say to that
                well >hang on a second< (.) the people of Wales
                <u>vot</u>ed for Brexit they should live with its
                consequences

         >   (3.0)

LW   but what kind (.) of Brexit hasn't yet
                been determined

Hypothetical attribution (evoked)

Extract 4 John McDonnell

NR >   it wouldn't be sneering would it to say ? (.)
       >Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonell< can't
       even control their own shadow cabinet, you've
       had disputes, you've had resig<u>nat</u>ions, your party's
       tried to get rid of your leader (.) what on ↑earth
       makes you believe that you are capable (.) of
       running the British e<u>con</u>omy. (.) in that way.

JM >   .h because (1.0) you will see that the way
       we've constructed our manifesto (.) and the
       costings and <u>fu</u>nding sources (.) is based
       upon <u>sound</u> advice

IE responses: turn initial 'Oh'

- 2 examples of IE response turns with 'oh' in turn initial position after 3rd party named source attributive

- both indicate strong alignment with proposition:

- Extract 22 Peter Mandelson

  - oh I think obviously the prospects for the Labour party are now looking uh very strong

- Extract 49 Owen Patterson

  - oh absolutely Jeremy's quite right we want to get right behind the prime minister

IE responses: turn initial 'well'

- Oppositional well: response contains clear unmitigated disagreement with prior proposition (3):
  - well they would be <u>wrong</u> (Caroline Lucas)
  - well they work perfectly <u>fine.</u> (John Redwood)
  - well he's <u>left</u> the communist party (John McDonnell)
- Mitigating well: moves away from proposition (35):
  - well (.) I don't want to just (.) uh target the queen in this these papers have revealed <u>massive</u> <u>wides</u>pread tax avoidance

Turn-initial 'look' – (1)

- Often projects negative/hostile response; disalignment, with prior proposition

Extract 62 Bernard Jenkin

MH   >house of Lords EU committee< I'm sure
             you've heard about their report which
             has said it's difficult if not impossible
             to envisage a <u>worse</u> outcome for the UK
             than a no deal.

BJ   >   >look why< look. (1.0) uh I I don't I don't
             I think there's a good prospect we're going
             to get a deal

- Repair here : hostile response avoidance?

Turn initial 'x look'

Extract 10 David Lamy

DL   >   .hhh look I I'm not comfortable (.) w-

                with the position on Europe but

                the position on Europe (1.0) has travelled

Extract 63 Chris Grayling

CG   >   >but look< uh what you've got is people who

                believe we're doing the wrong <u>thin</u>g, and I

                I respect their views though I disagree

                with them

Turn initial mitigated 'well look'

Extract 7 Jeremy Hunt

MH   >   but you're willing to <u>bo</u>rrow (.) aren't you

to to get public services to the point

that they need to be:

so why not make a bold di[(plo)-

JH   >   [>well<

look I mean i- i- i-traditionally NHS funding

Turn initial 'no'

- 4 instances of IE turn initial 'no' following third party attributive + polar question:
  - Is he right / no I don't think he's right
  - might you not be <u>fall</u>ing for their version of events / no I don't think that's the case
  - are they wise ? / no I don't think they're wise
  - is that ten per cent (.) <u>all</u> in the hands of Dublin / n- no I don't believe that
- 1 turn initial 'no' following declarative tag question:
  - We're a long way away from that aren't we / no we're not

Turn initial 'no'

- Occurs in 0 risk scenarios: either IE is non-British politician (irish and Norwegian EU ministers) or 'expert' not politician:

Extract 9 David King

(former government chief scientific advisor)

JH   we can't have any power generated by carbon

         emitting power stations and so on and so on

         and so on because if that's the case

>   we're an awful long way from that aren't we ?

         (1.0)

DK   no we're not

0 political risk scenario

Extract 38 Iain Duncan Smith

(former leader convservative party, brexiteer)

NR   do you think the EU leader

            who's spoken to the Times this

            morning and said (.) .hh they have

            to pre<u>pare</u> now for the possibility

            of Theresa May falling by christmas,

    >   (.) are they wise ?

IDS   >   no I don't think they're wise

            on a number of things and least

            of all on British politics

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Summary: Hostile questions as a challenge to neutralism?

- In this data set, IR turns often display a range of incrementally embedded hostile questioning practices, including hypothetical attributive practices

- IE response turns are designed with an orientation to neutralism (i.e. avoid attributing opinions or viewpoint to IR) but also with an orientation to hostility avoidance (i.e. producing non-hostile re-alignments to hostile questions)

- High frequency of mitigating turn-initial markers, well, look, or other indicators of trouble (inter-turn long gaps)

- Overt explicit alignment 'oh' or disalignment 'no' with hostile stance in IE proposition only occurs in 0 risk scenarios