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# **Picking fights with politicians: categories, partitioning and the achievement of antagonism**

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## **Abstract**

In 2016 the UK held a divisive referendum on its membership of the European Union. In the aftermath, difference and division were rife in politics and in everyday life. This article explores how such difference and division play out in and through interaction through examining a citizen ‘picking a fight’ with a politician over how Brexit has been handled. Drawing on membership categorisation analysis we show how antagonism is interactionally accomplished. The analysis focuses on three categorial strategies which interlocutors use to achieve antagonism: establishing omnirelevant devices, categories and their predicates; explicitly challenging category membership; and partitioning a population. Beyond offering insights into moments of social life that are not easily captured, the findings contribute to an empirical conceptualisation of antagonism and illustrate how membership categorisation analysis can shed light on its interactional achievement.

## **Keywords**

antagonism; membership categorisation analysis; conflict; brexit; social interaction; political discourse

## 1. Introduction

Politicians regularly face hostility during their careers, which can range from targeted malice on social media to in-person verbal attacks on their policies or character, or even physical assaults. These attempts to provoke politicians to anger or to possibly saying something detrimental to their career are not an uncommon phenomenon, yet they are generally ephemeral. This paper studies one such instance of a citizen provoking a politician in a public space. The aim of the analysis is to show that antagonism is an interactional achievement that is accomplished through a range of linguistic categorisation practices which manufacture difference both on a turn-by-turn basis and on a larger structural level.

Research has explored encounters between citizens and politicians in the constituency office (Hofstetter and Stokoe 2015; 2018), in a case of sexual harassment of a minor (Tainio 2003), and with regard to how politicians are lambasted through formal channels such as Prime Minister's Questions (Bull and Strawson 2019). However, little interactional research has been conducted on citizens antagonising politicians that would reveal the specific methods of antagonism used to target politicians in face-to-face public settings. This paper seeks to address this gap by offering insight into moments of social life that are not easily captured. We contribute to a fuller, empirical conceptualisation of *antagonism* by bringing together work on membership categorisation analysis (MCA) and antagonism to show how categorisation, omnirelevant devices and partitioning are employed over a series of turns at talk to build and sustain antagonism as an interactional accomplishment. In doing this we argue that the tools of MCA offer a fruitful direction in the study of face-to-face public encounters where politicians are challenged by citizens.

This research is situated in the years following the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union (EU) in 2016. Between the decision to leave the EU and its implementation in 2020, there was much discussion amongst politicians and citizens as to what form this so-called Brexit should take, and it sparked controversies and led to citizens campaigning on College Green, a park outside the UK Houses of Parliament, resulting in encounters between politicians, the media and members of the public.

One such encounter on College Green is our focus, whereby a Member of Parliament (MP) is antagonised by a citizen, a person without an institutional role, because of their (in)actions during the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. We scrutinise the interactional methods used which generally represent political divisions, but beyond that also achieve antagonism.

In what follows, we first discuss the rationale for studying antagonism in the context of Brexit, reviewing MCA studies on political encounters and work on antagonism. Next, we explain our data and method – the tools for revealing how antagonism is achieved. In the analysis, we draw upon a single case of a citizen antagonising a politician. Drawing on membership categorisation analysis, we illustrate how stances towards Brexit are negotiated irrespective of previous political affiliations. Indeed, we argue that being on the same side is of limited relevance to the project of doing antagonism, as we show how ‘being on the same side’ can be interactionally contested. We conclude by emphasising the importance of studying antagonism as an interactional achievement in public encounters between politicians and citizens, and highlight the value of MCA in enabling this.

## **2. Background**

### **2.1 *Contesting Brexit in language***

In 2016 the UK held a referendum on its membership of the European Union. The result favoured leaving (52% leave and 48% remain). This highlighted political division as the UK negotiated its exit from the EU, also known as ‘Brexit’. There is a wealth of political research on Brexit, from tracking causes, such as key political issues (Clarke et al. 2017), distrust of the ‘establishment’ (Abrams and Travaglino 2018), to the production of discourse, for instance the role of social media (Hänksa and Bauchowitz 2017), and political conceptualisations of Brexit (Krzyżanowski 2018). The protracted process of the UK withdrawing from the EU has caused much division across British society, and it has cut across traditional political dividing lines (Meredith and Richardson 2019). However, how people actually discuss Brexit in everyday encounters is difficult to access (but see Demasi 2019; Meredith and Richardson 2019), yet it is crucial for a full understanding of Brexit as a socially divisive phenomenon.

The apparently common division surrounding Brexit (Bowman and West 2020) and the political landscape has been reflected in people’s everyday talk, as reported hate crimes such as racism, homophobia, xenophobia and misogyny have soared (Clarke and Newman 2019). Meredith and Richardson (2019) collected comments on newspaper items and focused on what the political identities of ‘Brexiter’ and ‘Remainer’ mean to those who use them. They mapped those two opposing sides and documented how they sit together within the broader ‘voters in the Brexit referendum’ device, and are mutually exclusive opposites, with one being implicitly defined by using the other (Stokoe 2003; Leudar et al. 2004). Yet

Meredith and Richardson (2019, 49) note that “for both Brexiters and Remainers [...] it can be seen that the precise nature of these categories is contested”. The contestability of Brexit is also taken up in Demasi’s (2019) analysis of EU debates; he demonstrates various ways that ‘facts’ may be challenged, notably how context under which the ‘fact’ is being debated may be altered so that it may be contested. With the nature of categories and ‘facts’ shown to be contestable in talk about Brexit, it is worthwhile investigating how one *alters* their position to control the interaction. This is where the present paper seeks to contribute.

## 2.2 *Membership Categorisation Analysis*

We build upon the toolkit of membership categorisation analysis (MCA) to explore how interactants – or ‘members’ – categorise themselves and others. MCA is an ethnomethodological approach to explore members’ reasoning practices and how members organise themselves and objects through their talk. MCA was first described by Eglin and Hester (1992), who built on Sacks’ (1995) original *membership categorisation device analysis* (see Francis and Hester 2017 for a fuller account of the history of MCA). MCA has subsequently been established as an approach (e.g. Housley and Fitzgerald 2002; D’Hondt 2013) with the analytic power to show how culture is produced in action (Hester and Eglin 1997a), and how people assemble the ‘who-we-are’ and ‘what-we’re-doing’ (Butler et al. 2009) in social interaction.

The central concepts of MCA are *categories* that can be assembled into collections, or *membership categorisation devices* (Sacks 1995). For instance, ‘family’ is a device comprising categories such as ‘mother’, ‘son’, ‘daughter’; or the device ‘positions toward Brexit’ consists of categories such as ‘remainer’ and ‘brexiteer’. The latter illustrates that devices are culturally sensitive aggregates, assembled *in situ* in a particular context for a particular purpose. Categories are selected by a speaker to be heard as part of whichever device is relevant to their present environment, and they are understood to be associated with certain qualities, or *predicates*. Sacks (1995) illustrates this with an example from a child’s story: ‘The baby cried. The mommy picked it up’. To understand the action that is described here, the ‘baby’ and the ‘mommy’ are taken to be categories in the same device ‘family’, such that the mother is not any mother, but the mother of that particular baby. The action of ‘picking up a baby’ is thus a *category-bound activity* (Sacks 1995), as something that mothers expectedly do, and ‘being caring’ is a quality that mothers accountably have, a *predicate* of the category. Predicates are a broader take on Sacks’ (1995) original concept, as they include

not just activities, but also “rights, entitlements, obligations, knowledge, attributes and competencies” (Hester and Eglin 1997b, 5).

Whilst devices are assembled locally and can shift during an encounter, it is possible that there is a so-called omnirelevant device that is *always* potentially applicable throughout an entire encounter. Sacks (1995) discusses the example of a group therapy session, where at any point the participants can orient to this omnirelevant device and do a category-bound activity as a category member within that device, such as introduce a new group member. Omnirelevant devices were more fully defined by Fitzgerald et al. (2009) as those which operate at the organisational level and sometimes the immediate level of the interaction – for example, in a TV interview the categories of ‘interviewer’ and ‘interviewee’ have omnirelevance. This is an example of an *institutional* interaction where matters of who the participants are to one another are germane to how the business of the encounter is conducted. Relevant to the analysis is how categories and devices become applied, and the consequences of this.

The application of some categories to a population is known as *partitioning* (Sacks 1995). Partitioning refers to how interlocutors establish a categorial basis (who-they-are) for performing certain actions and managing entitlement to speak about certain topics (Nishizaka 2021). It regards how interlocutors may divide themselves into different categories (for instance, interviewer/interviewee to man/woman) to belong to different ‘territories of ownership’ (Raymond and Heritage 2006) and leverage the associated domains of knowledge and responsibilities tied to those identities, such as to make an accusation of ‘mansplaining’ based on one being seen as a *woman* and not as an *interviewee* (Joyce et al. 2021).

In the example below, taken from the final moments of the encounter investigated in our analysis<sup>1</sup>, David Davies (DD) excludes BasedAmy (BA) from the interaction on the basis that she is not a speaker of Welsh, whereas he and the Interviewer (IR) are, and therefore he is able to escape the argument.

*Extract 1 “you guys are a disgrace”*

160 **BA:** =you’re a MEMber of PARliament ^**Fig. 1**  
161 **DD:** yeah well I’m not your eM Pee am I.  
162 **BA:** thank god [thank god you’re not]  
163 **DD:** [Carry on let’s ] do a bit in welsh  
164 **DD:** [gallaf ei anwybyddu ] ^**Fig. 2**  
164a [I can just ignore it ]

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<sup>1</sup> Please see Joyce & Walz (2021) for the full transcription of the encounter and URL to the recording.

165 **BA:** [so this man he claims he] vote Brexit right? he  
 166 claims he voted Brexit but he signed the dea:l he  
 167 voted for the deal that is a total  
 168 [betra:yal of brexit]  
 169 **IR:** [excuse me ]  
 170 could you just [turn it down ]  
 171 **BA:** [( it's a total d- )]  
 172 you know what I've hada ju- listen >no no no<  
 173 listen you guys are a disgrace as well ↑how much  
 174 have you been paid- how much have the Bee Bee Cee  
 175 been paid t- to promote the European union  
 176 **DD:** gwnewch y cyfweliad yn Gymraeg  
 176a *Do the interview in welsh*

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 INSERT FIG 1 HERE

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 INSERT FIG 2 HERE

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At L163, David Davies instructs the BBC Interviewer to continue with the interview that was previously disrupted by BasedAmy and explicitly states “let’s do a bit in welsh”. Here and in the following lines (L164/164a, and later in L176/176a) David Davies orients to his and presumably the BBC Interviewer’s membership as Welsh speakers. This is coupled with a bodily position change to markedly change his physical orientation from BasedAmy and toward the BBC Interviewer (see Figures 1 and 2). So here, partitioning into different categories serves to escape BasedAmy’s turns by deliberately excluding her from being able to understand, which is antagonistic in itself (cf. Cromdal 2004). BasedAmy treats this as partitioning by, in the first instance, speaking to the recording, “so this man he claims” (L165) rather than responding to David Davies. Moreover, the BBC Interviewer asks BasedAmy to lower the volume of her speaker, “turn it down” (L170), to which BasedAmy can and does respond by targeting the BBC, “you guys are a disgrace” (L173).

The local invocation of the category ‘Welsh speaker’ partitions the interlocutors on the basis that they are or are not speakers of Welsh, and further overlays the device ‘legitimate participants’ to the interview. This restricts BasedAmy’s ability to directly respond to the turn beyond commenting on the talk itself (which she does). This example

illustrates how the invocation of a new category and partitioning the population is done for the immediate purpose: to re-establish the omnirelevant ‘interview’ device and return the encounter to an interview by addressing a Welsh speaking audience. This example illustrates how partitioning manages one’s rights to speak. We return to partitioning in the analysis, but now move to a discussion of how membership categories have been explored in political encounters.

### **2.3 Categories in political encounters**

Political talk has been a fruitful site of research for MCA studies as spearheaded by Eglin and Hester (1999; 2003) in their analyses of the Montreal massacre. MCA studies have followed significant social and political events to understand the pragmatic characteristics and interlocutors’ sense-making practices as a means of doing culture-in-action (Hester and Eglin 1997a). Examples of such studies are a dissection of political commentary on the then imminent fox hunting ban in the UK (Housley 2002), and an analysis of public addresses made following the September 11th 2001 attacks (Leudar et al. 2004). The latter study reveals the intricate category work that establishes an ‘us’-’them’ category pair united by opposition with individuals belonging to both ‘us’ or ‘them’ depending on how the conflict is framed. More recently, Meredith and Richardson (2019) discussed the precise nature of categories relating to the UK leaving the European Union.

Beyond the mapping of notable events, MCA studies of political talk endeavour to uncover how matters of cultural knowledge are leveraged (Fitzgerald and Thornborrow 2017), how political accountability is accomplished or avoided (Housley 2002; Housley and Fitzgerald 2003), and how interlocutors come to be seen as a victim (Clifton 2009). These studies tackle moral discrepancies between intention and action, namely the distinction between what the authorities promised to do versus what they have or have not done, and how trust and accountability are accomplished.

Political discourse across a variety of contexts is suffused with categories, with categorisation forming the methods for formulating opposition (Robles 2011), for characterising the nature of social and political events and actors, and for holding politicians accountable. These are, of course, interrelated, and as we will exemplify, they can be brought to bear throughout a single encounter. Indeed, Housley’s (2002) analysis introduces the *moral discrepancy device* to see how a radio interviewer secures an account from a politician. Housley and Fitzgerald (2003) reproduce these findings in their analysis of a political TV news interview to show how an interviewer attempts to ascribe moral discrepancy and the



interviewee evades that ascription. The crux of these studies is the discrepancy between category-bound and category-generated predicates of government agents. Jayyusi (1984) distinguishes between these two, understanding *bound* features as conventionally occurring with a category, and *generated* features as connected to some category as an interactional accomplishment. Clifton (2009) clarifies this distinction of conventional occurring as an *in situ* achievement and not an *a priori* association. With these studies investigating the negotiation of categories in institutional environments, our analysis explores whether and how this applies in non-institutional political environments and what its relationship with antagonism looks like, in practice.

#### **2.4 Antagonism**

The central phenomenon explored in this paper is how a citizen ‘picks a fight’ with a politician, this is to say how an interlocutor antagonises a co-interlocutor through linguistic means. Despite much research which describes ‘antagonism’, there is no consensus on what features constitute ‘antagonism’. Generally, antagonism is understood as an interactional achievement that describes how an individual is hostile toward another (Dersley and Wootton 2000). Antagonism is a central aspect within an activity such as disputing, which O’Driscoll and Jeffries (2019, 4-5) define as “any situation or behaviour involving parties (individuals or groups) who are, or consider themselves to be, instrumentally, intellectually and/or emotionally opposed”. Indeed, Housley et al. (2017, 2) describe antagonism as being achieved through speech practices that “elicit oppositional and relational responses”. We may also draw parallels between *antagonism* and the social media phenomenon of *trolling*, the latter defined by Hardaker (2010, 237) as a user “whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement”. Building on these definitions, we understand antagonism as comprised of a range of linguistic practices which on the surface may not appear oppositional, but over the course of an interaction take a position which opposes the interlocutors and entices them to respond in a way that would be damaging to themselves.

Previous studies have explored how interactants exert control over each other in sequences of talk. First, Robles and Castor (2019) explore the consequences of taking a stand in their discourse analysis of a political issue in the US: issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Robles and Castor deconstruct an unyielding dispute to show how accounts for one’s position are withheld, and how accounts are demanded in ways that presuppose no reasonable account exists. These function to accomplish incompatible ideological positions and to

cooperate in the achievement of conflict. In the same vein, Reynolds' (2011; 2015) research on enticing a challengeable demonstrates the power that certain interactional practices hold in conflict. Reynolds presents cases where control over a course of action is won via fabricating a challenge against an opponent.

In certain environments the features of antagonistic speech are sanctioned, yet in others they may be rewarded. Research on adversarial talk in UK politics has explored the format of Prime Minister's Questions, a weekly exchange between MPs and the Prime Minister, where adversarial positions are taken and needless antagonism is sanctioned (Bull and Strawson 2019). In that environment the interlocutors have a symmetrical relationship (politician–politician) with formal opportunities to strike and counterstrike, or as Goffman (1967, 25) describes, to score a 'point' at the other's expense. Traditionally, opportunities to score points against politicians have been restricted to these formal rituals. In recent times, however, the distance between the public and politicians has decreased, for instance through social media, affording opportunities for citizens to entice politicians and antagonise them.

Direct encounters between citizens and politicians have been investigated on social media (Housley et al. 2017), the constituency office (Hofstetter and Stokoe 2018) or in public debates (van Schepen 2019). Except for social media encounters, these interactions tend to be governed by some institutional rules restricting how citizens may challenge politicians. For example, in their analysis of public plenary consultation meetings for urban planning, van Schepen (2019) demonstrates how, when a citizen is invited to ask a question, using a confirmatory interrogative at a politician challenges that politician on the basis that they have so far failed to consider some issue. To illustrate this with an extract from our data, "have you read the [Brexit] deal?" (Extract 7, L76) implies that the politician has failed to read the Brexit withdrawal deal and challenges them for it. Yet the data explored in our analysis is different in that it features a unique encounter between an MP and a citizen in a public setting not governed by institutional rules, and which quickly turns antagonistic, as we show.

### **3. Data and Method**

The data is a real-life single encounter recorded on 21<sup>st</sup> May 2019 between David Davies, who is MP for Monmouth in South Wales, and a citizen and broadcaster, who calls herself BasedAmy and runs a YouTube channel. Also present are a BBC film crew, who were interviewing David Davies before BasedAmy approached them. We refer to David Davies by his full name to reflect his role as a politician, and to BasedAmy by the name she uses online.

The encounter takes place on College Green, a public park close to the Houses of Parliament, which is frequently used as a location for interviews with politicians. The data has been recorded from two perspectives, by the BBC film crew, which was distributed on the BBC News website on the day it was filmed, and contemporaneously by BasedAmy live streaming the encounter for an online audience. BasedAmy's recording was subsequently edited to include the BBC's recording and uploaded to her YouTube channel, making a total of 17 minutes and 35 seconds. The analysis primarily draws on the BBC's version taken from BBC News' website, as it retains the sequential properties of the encounter, captures more of the surrounding environment and is of higher quality. This version is 3 minutes and 26 seconds long – it is cut off when the interviewer and camera operator get involved in the exchange. BasedAmy's recording serves to more fully see the interaction, as it offers context on how the encounter occurs and what follows the recording captured by the BBC. The two different perspectives mirror the different interactional tasks BasedAmy and David Davies are pursuing: for David Davies and the BBC crew the operative membership device is the 'interview' with their coverage relating to BasedAmy's disruption and cutting out at the moment when the interview is abandoned. In contrast, for BasedAmy the interactional task is to change the operative membership device to anything other than 'interview', thereby presenting her as holding a politician to account – and indeed her footage continues long after David Davies and the BBC crew have given up their attempts to resume the interview. The full transcript can be found in Appendix 1 and the BBC recording can be accessed via the URL. The study received ethical approval from Ulster University Research Ethics Committee.

The recording was transcribed using the Jeffersonian system developed for conversation analysis to capture the micro details of speech. The analysis draws on MCA (Hester and Eglin 1997a) as outlined above, and on interactional research that examines disputes (e.g. Reynolds 2015). Specifically, we explore how certain categories, such as some that can be assembled within the device 'positions toward Brexit', are used to partition the interactants into different groups, which in turn results in antagonism. The single case was selected for this paper as it clearly showcases the consequentiality of speech practices that are repeatedly employed in an encounter to achieve antagonism regardless of the interactants' political positions.

#### **4. Analysis**

The accomplishment of antagonism emerges from a variety of interactional strategies. The analysis demonstrates how three strategies sustain this antagonistic encounter. These are (1) establishing omnirelevant devices, categories and their predicates, (2) challenging category membership, i.e. whether an interactant is a valid, ‘authentic’ member of a category (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1990; Walz and Fitzgerald 2020), and (3) creating ingroup and outgroup through partitioning. These three strategies overlap, as they all work towards establishing who-they-are-to-each-other (Butler et al. 2009) in competing omnirelevant devices, as shown below, and thus to deepen the division between the interactants’ ostensibly opposing sides. Their separate discussion serves as an analytic structuring device rather than suggesting a clear qualitative distinction in the data.

The analysis comprises seven extracts from the BBC clip, which feature those three key strategies that achieve antagonism. The cases are organised with respect to those three strategies, but owing to this being a single encounter, the line numbering has been retained to give readers a sense of the sequential position of the extracts.

Immediately prior to these extracts, BasedAmy (BA) approaches a BBC interview with MP David Davies (DD). BasedAmy has been talking to her online audience about the fact that College Green is a public park, and as she approaches the ongoing interview, she wonders out loud who is being interviewed and whether he is ‘a good guy’. Meanwhile, David Davies is being interviewed (by IR, and a camera operator) on the treatment of MPs by citizens, explaining that he now wears a body camera to record what he refers to as ‘acts of minor intimidation’. Coincidentally, this is the moment that BasedAmy arrives within earshot. At this point, she turns on her loudspeaker (for the surrounding public) and continues recording the interaction with her mobile phone (for her online audience). Figure 3 shows the physical configuration of participants in this space.

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INSERT FIG 3 HERE

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#### **4.1 *Establishing omnirelevant devices, categories and their predicates***

In these first examples we see how the interlocutors establish omnirelevant devices, categories and their predicates – this is where BasedAmy positions herself as in opposition so to be antagonistic. BasedAmy takes a pro-Brexit position (known colloquially as being a

Brexit) and challenges David Davies on that basis. However, David Davies is also a Brexiteer, which BasedAmy is ostensibly not aware of initially. The first extract shows the moment that BasedAmy's talk with her online audience and David Davies' interview merge.

*Extract 2 "what's the difference of my phone"*

01 **IR:** How does i:t #ehh >make you feel  
02 **DD:** well obviously what I will do is eh record  
03 it so I'm actually going to turn my camera  
04 on now to record (.) this la:dy and eh I will  
05 put (.) anythin[g abusive on eh onto twitter ]  
06 **BA:** [what did I do I just stood here filming]  
07 **DD:** because [eh I think it's- (.) ]  
08 **IR:** [erm unfortunately ( )]  
09 **DD:** I think it's unacceptable  
10 **BA:** why's he feeling intimidate- well you've got a  
11 bloody great camera there on him for gods sake  
12 what's the difference of my phone.  
13 [hhuh]  
14 **IR:** w[ell ] cause when you're tal:king-  
15 **BA:** °I w[as quiet and yous guys just stopped talking°  
16 **IR:** [there's two: loud speakers basically blaring out  
17 **BA:** when I kept-

This extract represents the initial moments of the encounter, with the BBC interviewer asking David Davies how it feels to be video-recorded and challenged by a citizen. As BasedAmy approaches with her camera and loudspeaker, she is treated as an antagonist, "this la:dy and eh I will put (.) anything abusive on eh on to twitter" (L04-05). Moreover, BasedAmy, in overlap, claims innocence before the characterisation of 'abuse' is made, "what did I do" (L06), contesting David Davies' characterisation by treating it as unwarranted given the ordinary, reasonable interpretation of her activity "just stood here filming" (L06). This is later amplified, "you've got a bloody great camera there" (L10-11), setting up the two competing operative devices: for David Davies, this is addressing the camera and giving an interview. For BasedAmy, in contrast, describing the event through the technological categorisation of the 'great camera' introduces the distinction 'professional/amateur', and thus she can be seen as an ordinary member of the public in public space legitimately overhearing the interview. In this sense, setting up these two competing omnirelevant devices 'interviewer-interviewee' (wherein BasedAmy would feature as a disrupter) and 'politician-citizen' to configure who-they-are and what-they-are-doing facilitates a possible confrontation.

This highlights one way of achieving antagonism: explicit establishment of categories and their predicates. ‘Innocence’ is evoked as a quality that BasedAmy has, as the ‘innocent’ party engaged in a lawful activity. In contrast to herself, BasedAmy frames David Davies as guilty of being needlessly confrontational towards a citizen, which would be inappropriate for his role as MP. David Davies refutes BasedAmy’s claim of innocence, “I think it’s unacceptable” (L09), but BasedAmy reformulates this refutation as a feeling “why’s he feeling intimidate-” (L10), drawing on David Davies’ own formulation of ‘acts of minor intimidation’ prior to this extract. Consequently, BasedAmy ironises that feeling ascription, “what’s the difference of my phone” (L12), portraying her filming of David Davies, who is already being filmed by the BBC crew, as not materially different, despite the institutional purpose of the BBC recording.

The interviewer answers BasedAmy, identifying the trouble with her assertion “cause when you’re tal:king” (L14) to pass blame for the disruption onto BasedAmy. However, BasedAmy directly rejects that turn, “I was quiet” (L15), so that the contestation of what caused the confrontation is actually progressing the confrontation – who the ‘guilty party’ is and how their behaviour provides evidence for this is a matter for categorial negotiation.

The following extract continues with BasedAmy repeating her assertion as a correction to the version of events which is transpiring, and accounting for her intentions, “>I was just gonna< listen to what he was saying” (L19) notably refusing responsibility for causing any disruption to the interview that was being conducted. She then pivots to antagonising David Davies based on his position toward Brexit.

*Extract 3 “he’s a remoaner”*

18 **BA:** I was quiet (.) right when I came here I was quiet  
 19 >I was just gonna< listen to what he was saying.  
 20 but now I can tell he’s a remoaner (.) he must be  
 21 a rem- did you vote remain:n  
 22 **DD:** act[ually I’m on-]  
 23 **IR:** [do you fancy ]  
 24 [not do- do you ]  
 25 **BA:** [are you an eMPee]  
 26 **DD:** I [am an eMPee ]  
 27 **IR:** [fancy not doing that]  
 28 **BA:** are you an eMPee did you vote to remain  
 29 **DD:** no I voted to leave actually.

Extract 3 begins with BasedAmy trying something different to antagonise David Davies, “now I can tell he’s a remoaner” (L20). BasedAmy here is seeking to establish category membership of them both, thus who-they-are and what-they’re-doing (Butler et al. 2009): whether he is an MP and what political position he holds. The use of ‘remoaner’ is antagonistic, as it is not simply about voting remain, but it introduces particular predicates for people who actively complain about the referendum result and are positioned as unable to accept the democratic process. BasedAmy treats David Davies’ membership of ‘remoaner’ as obvious (“he must be”, L20), but the contestable nature of ‘remoaner’ leads to BasedAmy seeking confirmation of a predicate which would definitively allocate David Davies as a ‘remoaner’: “did you vote remain” (L21). David Davies indicates some contrast to BasedAmy’s assertion “actually I’m-“ (L22), but both the BBC interviewer and BasedAmy interject. BasedAmy takes up David Davies’ possible turn for an answer with a new line of questioning, “are you an eMPee” (L28), pushing forward her antagonistic trajectory with these polar questions which prefer short responses that David Davies cannot reasonably refuse.

In these first two extracts which constitute the initial part of the encounter, BasedAmy has disrupted an ongoing interview. This disruption occurs as she antagonises David Davies and the BBC crew in two ways that both draw on categorial resources: firstly, she negotiates what is (un)acceptable behaviour for an encounter between an MP and citizen, implying that an MP should not be intimidated by a citizen who is ostensibly not disrupting, but just listening. BasedAmy thereby claims innocence and lays the blame for the disruption onto David Davies and the crew. Secondly, she antagonises David Davies based on his presumed category membership as a remain supporter. Her use of the term ‘remoaner’ (L20) at the same time positions her as a leave supporter who disapproves of people who she sees as ‘bemoaning’ the outcome of the referendum. Ascribing – and criticising – opposing category membership in the invoked ‘Brexit’ device here serves BasedAmy as a means of pursuing her antagonistic project.

Yet this fails at the end of Extract 3, when it transpires that they are both leave voters and as such co-members within this device: “no I voted to leave actually” (L29). David Davies’ turn-final ‘actually’ acts as counter-positional to BasedAmy’s dividing of the ‘Brexit’ device. This failure to produce herself and David Davies as members of opposing categories could possibly close this antagonistic sequence, with them both agreeing. Instead, BasedAmy engineers further antagonism by challenging David Davies on the basis of their category membership.

*Extract 4 “acting like a snowflake”*

30 **BA:** well I don't know. >why are you acting like a  
31 snowflake then< (.) do[you know what a snowflake? ]  
32 **DD:** [I'm not acting like a snowflake]  
33 but I-  
34 **BA:** weh you are cause you got a >little bit  
35 intimidated< by me I'm jus-  
36 **DD:** I'm not intimidated by you=  
37 **BA:** =we[ll you said it]  
38 **DD:** [but you might ] make a: false eh:  
39 allegati[on agains]t me  
40 **BA:** [of ↑whhat]  
41 **DD:** well I don't know so um [I'm recording]  
42 **BA:** [have you done]  
43 something to be accused o↑f?  
44 (0.4)

Here, BasedAmy initiates a new way of antagonising David Davies, “>why are you acting like a snowflake<sup>2</sup> then< (.) do you know what a snowflake” (L30-31). This turn is designed in two parts: firstly as an insult to David Davies that he is ‘making a fuss’ and is easily offended, and secondly as an interrogative as to whether he knows what the term means. Note also the shift to a ‘why’ question and its preference for a more extended response. David Davies responds in overlap with the second part “I’m not acting like a snowflake” (L32) to contest his membership of ‘snowflake’. Moreover, his rejection marks this as a dispute about what it means to be a ‘snowflake’. Indeed, BasedAmy’s assertion “you got a >little bit intimidated< by me” (L34-35) describes what predicate of David Davies’ ostensible ‘snowflake’ membership he is furnishing: that being easily intimidated is a predicate of the category. BasedAmy’s turn is neatly produced before David Davies can claim further speakership and is confirmatory with “weh you are” (L34), and upgrades her claim that David Davies is intimidated with “by me” (L35). In this sense, it is not only that David Davies is intimidated, but that he is specifically intimidated by BasedAmy, who through her physical actions and talk is claiming membership as an ordinary citizen, as suggested by the following minimisation, “I’m jus-” (L35). This antagonises on the basis that he might reject the stigmatised label, but not the basis for the accusation (Joyce et al. 2021), namely that he is intimidated.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Snowflake’ is a derogatory term that describes a person who is easily offended or overly sensitive.



David Davies responds in kind, “you might make a: false eh: allegation against me” (L38-39). Yet BasedAmy handles David Davies’ response by neither accepting nor rejecting this characterisation of her as someone who would make false allegations, but instead she reverses the inference of his turn. The reversal “have you done something to be accused of?” (L42-43) puts David Davies in a position of justifying himself. Indeed, his next turn does not follow immediately (see L44), and when it is produced, it does not respond to BasedAmy’s question, but seeks to conclude the altercation and move back to the interview, as seen in Extract 5.

These first extracts illustrate one way that contributes to the achievement of antagonism: establishing categories and their predicates, and in the process introducing competing omnirelevant devices. BasedAmy positions herself as an ordinary citizen who is lawfully filming, thereby characterising David Davies’ apparent offence as him being intimidated. The aim of establishing predicates in these terms is to position oneself and one’s interlocutor in opposing categories and to control which omnirelevant device is operative. Here, establishing what features they possess contributes to the encounter being antagonistic as, for example, it lays the blame for the current confrontation onto David Davies for unreasonably claiming offence. In the latter two extracts we can also observe the repeated questioning – not as queries needing answers, but as a vehicle to keep the interaction moving. The following section explores another strategy BasedAmy employs to sustain her antagonism: she challenges David Davies’ position as a Brexiteer and thus his category membership.

#### 4.2 *Challenging category membership*

##### *Extract 5 “not acting like a brexiteer”*

45 **DD:** so anyway that’s [the-  
 46 **BA:** [huhhuh  
 47 **DD:** that’s the kind of- funnily enough I think this  
 48 this lady is actually on the brexit si:de which  
 49 is my si[de of the arg]ument.  
 50 **IR:** [think she is yeah]  
 51 **DD:** but basically it’s the same-  
 52 **BA:** well you’re not acting like a brexiteer  
 53 °you’re being very-°  
 54 **DD:** [how do brexiteers act]  
 55 **BA:** [no you see actually ]  
 56 >no honestly< if you are a brexiteer then this is

Extract 5 begins with David Davies pivoting away from BasedAmy's question (Extract 4 L42-43 "have you done something to be accused of?") with "so anyway that's the- that's the kind of- funnily enough I think this this lady" (L45-47). His turn responds to BasedAmy's line of argument but not directly to BasedAmy by moving to a meta level to talk about her ("this lady") to a different audience. Indeed, such 'going meta' is a method through which speakers are able to avoid the content of the prior turn and speak as an ordinary person by pointing at some non-ordinary conduct (Clift and Pino 2020).

Not only does David Davies' meta turn handle the antagonistic question, it also underlines the struggle between the two operative membership devices by addressing the overhearing audience while still talking about BasedAmy. The turn seeks to bring the interaction to a close by drawing on their shared membership "on the brexit si:de which is my side of the argument" (L48-49). BasedAmy's pursuit of antagonism occurs in L52, blocking the closing attempt by challenging the legitimacy with which David Davies can claim to be a member of the category 'brexiteer'. This is built as an accusation of him as not displaying the right predicates, "you're not acting like a brexiteer" (L52). David Davies' retort "how do brexiteers act" (L54) exposes BasedAmy's challenge as empty because it invites BasedAmy to identify specific actions and behaviour which, once listed, would make her argument vulnerable because any of these would be contestable and deniable by David Davies.

At this point, the tables are turned, and it is David Davies who produces the next antagonising move, as evident in Extract 6.

*Extract 6 "I actually was campaigning for Brexit"*

58 **DD**: [can I just say ( )]  
 59 cause >I actually-< [hang on a minute- ]  
 60 **BA**: [( ) I'm still talking]  
 61 **DD**: I campaigned for Brexit where were you?  
 62 >where were you people< when I was out campaign-  
 63 for brexit. You were nowhere\_ you behind your  
 64 keyboards and now you've come out right- you are not a  
 65 brexiteer=  
 66 **BA**: =you obviously haven't watched [my f]ootage then  
 67 **DD**: [no- ]  
 68 **BA**: [before you say anymore- ]

69 DD: [I- I actually was campaign]ing for Brexit  
70 and have been for years so I don't need to  
71 be- given lectures by people like you.

Here David Davies challenges BasedAmy's membership of 'Brexiteer' (and her rights to challenge). His category membership is emphasised based on his past behaviour, "I campaigned for Brexit" (L61). His claim of being an authentic member of 'Brexiteer' rests on historicity (Coupland 2003), on displaying category predicates over a period of time (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1990; Walz and Fitzgerald 2020). Furthermore, he categorises BasedAmy as 'you people' (L62), which is subsumed with the category 'keyboard warrior' (L64), and challenges BasedAmy's membership as an authentic leave voter based on her inaction, "you were nowhere" (L63), during the Brexit campaign. BasedAmy defends herself by rejecting his assertion with "haven't watched my footage then" (L66), but this does not prevent David Davies from reusing that category, "people like you" (L71), to dismiss the legitimacy with which BasedAmy can claim to be a proper Brexiteer. At this moment, by David Davies orienting to BasedAmy's omnirelevant device (as politician-citizen) rather than maintaining his own (interviewer-interviewee), he loses – the operative device has shifted, fulfilling BasedAmy's interactional task.

In Extracts 5 and 6, we can observe challenges to category membership, namely, whether an interlocutor is an authentic member of the category to which they purportedly belong. After discovering that they share membership of both being Brexiteers, BasedAmy challenges David Davies' membership for not acting how a Brexiteer ought to act. Similarly, David Davies challenges BasedAmy's membership as inauthentic. Their respective challenges to membership seek to discredit one another's position and thus their rights to argue about Brexit, despite their apparently shared membership. The direct challenges to their membership do not allow the encounter to be anything other than antagonistic – they cannot reconcile if they disagree about who they are.

### **4.3 *Creating ingroup and outgroup through partitioning***

The following extracts show partitioning, which functions as a third way of achieving antagonism. After discovering that they both share membership as leave voters, and the challenges to discredit one another's membership, BasedAmy and David Davies move to a different strategy: separating one another such that, despite being leave voters, they appear as members of different types of leave voters.

*Extract 7 “you’re a liar”*

72 **BA:** did you- did you vote for the dea:l.  
73 **DD:** I did vote for the deal but.  
74 **BA:** Y'↑O VOTED FOR THE DE↑AL  
75 **DD:** ye[a↓h]  
76 **BA:** [OH ] MY GOD and tha- have you read the deal?  
77 **DD:** yeah I read the deal=  
78 **BA:** =and it means not to leave=  
79 **DD:** =and how many of eM Pees how many- [yeah ]  
80 **BA:** [grea↑t]  
81 does it- it means we do↓n't leave=  
82 **DD:** =how many eM Pees=  
83 **BA:** =so you're a liar you did not vote to leave.  
84 **DD:** °there we are then° (.) [I tell you what ]  
85 **BA:** [>>you didn't vote to leave<<]  
86 **DD:** people like you- peo[ple like you al ]most make me  
87 **BA:** [have you read it]  
88 **DD:** want to join the [eEyU again to be honest] with you  
89 **BA:** [see I've read? ] (.)  
90 the eh withdrawal agreement unlike this man  
91 **DD:** [yeah ]  
92 **BA:** [who's] an eM Pee and shame-  
93 what is your name then if you're an eM Pee  
94 **DD:** never mind what my name is I'm not talking to you

Instead of engaging with David Davies' history of campaigning for Brexit, BasedAmy separates them into opposing categories, “did you vote for the dea:l” (L72). Her turn partitions them within the ‘Brexit’ device: Brexiteers who voted for the government’s deal (then Prime Minister Theresa May’s withdrawal agreement, which would keep the UK, to a certain extent, tied to the EU) and those Brexiteers who prefer a ‘no deal Brexit’ and thus a severing of all ties between the UK and EU. Later, voting for the deal is treated as a predicate of people who are remainers (“it means not to leave”, L78). Dividing Brexiteers into these two populations turns the category of ‘Brexit voter’, to which they both belong, into a device, now with the opposing categories ‘people who voted for the deal’ and ‘people who did not’. This affords BasedAmy the opportunity to challenge David Davies as an inauthentic member due to his behaviour being incompatible with the predicates of Brexiteers, namely that ‘authentic’ Brexiteers would not have voted for the deal.

This reconfiguration of their relationship as (in)authentic Brexiteers respectively enables BasedAmy to categorise David Davies in terms of his character, “you’re a liar” (L83), and to challenge his membership as a Brexiteer outright, “you did not vote to leave” (L83). In fact, BasedAmy is conflating two different stages in the political process here: the

initial referendum to leave or remain in which citizens could participate, and the vote for or against Prime Minister Theresa May's 'leaving deal' in parliament, in which only members of parliament and not citizens such as BasedAmy could participate.

Moreover, BasedAmy works to further separate herself from David Davies into people with opinions on the deal who have either read it, or have not read it, "have you read the deal?" (L76). This suspends the presupposition that David Davies has read the deal to vote on it – preferring a 'no', otherwise it needn't be asked. This division between who BasedAmy and David Davies are to each other affords the subsequent challenge done by BasedAmy, "see I've read? (.) the eh withdrawal agreement unlike this man" (L89-90), completely ignoring his previous response, "yeah I read the deal" (L77). Partitioning Brexiteers in this manner antagonises David Davies: reading the deal is built as a predicate of a good MP, and insinuating that he has not, "and shame-" (L92), undermines the validity of David Davies' opinion (cf. Joyce et al. 2021). As soon as blame is allotted, even if untrue, it is available for everyone – so the moment that BasedAmy says that David Davies has not read the deal, the damage to his reputation is done. Interestingly, this trajectory is paused as BasedAmy attempts to discover David Davies' name (L93), presumably to allow her to further antagonise him as she would be able to target him as an individual rather than just as an MP. This is met with David Davies' refusal to talk to BasedAmy any further (L94).

Dividing herself and David Davies within the 'Brexit' device enables BasedAmy to ignore their alliance as leave voters and instead emphasise their differences, ultimately positioning David Davies as not true to his political commitments. The achievement of antagonism in this case is done by BasedAmy producing David Davies as a fraudulent leave voter. This is neatly built over several turns that by way of partitioning create the dichotomy of *proper* leave voters (herself included) and *improper* leave voters, thereby targeting ostensible qualities of MPs, namely that they have integrity and represent people's will.

*Extract 8 "pretending like he's a leaver"*

99 **BA:** =so he voted for the deal and this f-guy's  
100 pretending like he's a l- leaver (.) what a li↑:ar£  
101 you're a liar °shame on you° you're a traitor (.)  
102 you signed that (.) document- that is nothing-  
103 [it's not even- you can't even say it's leav-]  
104 **DD:** [you see that's- that's what eh ]  
105 that's what you put up with when you're out here  
106 all the time  
107 **BA:** oh d[ear ahh (.) have you h-]

108 **DD:** [( . ) th]ere's another one  
109 over here now  
110 **BA:** ohh look- I mean this guy- I think he picked  
111 the wrong job if you can't cope with >somebody  
112 walking along with a-<  
113 **DD:** I can cope with it I can sit here a:ll  
114 da::y to be honest with you= **^Fig. 4**

-----  
INSERT FIG 4 HERE  
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Here the partitioning is successful: by making a distinction between people in favour or against the Brexit deal, BasedAmy can now say that David Davies is not a leave voter – nicely returning this to being a challenge of membership. This occurs through “this £guy’s pretending like he’s a l- leaver” (L99-100). Now that BasedAmy has established that David Davies is not a *true* Brexiteer (based on her earlier partitioning), she addresses the audience to which she is live streaming, “this guy- I think he picked the wrong job” (L110-111). This antagonises David Davies in two ways: firstly, by chastising him for not being an adequate MP. That is, as an MP he ought to be able to cope with, “somebody walking along” (L111-112) – a low responsibility for what is required of being an MP. This follows a similar line to the earlier challenge of him not having read the deal and thus not acting responsibly as an MP. Secondly, and returning to our first strategy of antagonism, BasedAmy has successfully enticed David Davies into her omnirelevant device by positioning herself as ordinary (i.e. not blame-worthy), and David Davies as being unreasonably confrontational – reversing what is actually happening.

This sequence preserves the ongoing attempts to achieve antagonism and provoke David Davies into a confrontation. BasedAmy challenges David Davies’ category membership as both an authentic Brexiteer and as an MP. At this point David Davies begins to disengage from the conversation. He sits down (Fig. 4) and reorients to the omnirelevance of the interview by partitioning himself and the BBC crew from BasedAmy, on the basis that they speak different languages, as shown in Extract 1.

## 5. Conclusion

The analysis explored a non-institutional encounter in a public space where a politician is challenged by a citizen. Our argument is situated within previous MCA research on political encounters (e.g. Housley and Fitzgerald 2003) and studies of confrontations (e.g. Reynolds 2011), including the contestable nature of Brexit (Demasi 2019; Meredith and Richardson 2019). We offer an empirical conceptualisation of antagonism by showing that it is an interactional accomplishment built recurrently both on a turn-by-turn basis and with respect to omnirelevant devices operative throughout the encounter. Achieving antagonism then rests on a variety of linguistic practices that problematise and challenge who an interactant is to another. Using the tools of MCA, we can see interlocutors leveraging who-they-are for adversarial ends and how political positions are built and contested *in situ*.

We focus on how members establish category predicates where an interlocutor works towards ‘doing being ordinary’ (Sacks 1984) in direct contrast to their co-interlocutor, who comes to be characterised as the party at fault. As we discuss in Extracts 2, 3 and 4, BasedAmy claims innocence whilst blaming David Davies for the ongoing confrontation – notably, that David Davies’ behaviour is a consequence of him being unreasonably intimidated. This compares to our second pattern: challenging category membership, which in our data is a direct way of undermining a co-interlocutor’s position. Here, BasedAmy strikes at whether David Davies is truly a Brexiteer or whether he is posturing. These extracts demonstrate the outright questioning of an interlocutor’s legitimacy to claim category membership. The third observed pattern is the separation of who the interlocutors are to one another through partitioning. These final extracts (although the phenomenon extends across the entire encounter) show how the application of a new category (e.g. MP, snowflake, deal-voter, Welsh-speaker, etc.) alters the configuration of members and divorces their positions. These three patterns are intertwined with the struggle of determining which omnirelevant device is operative throughout the encounter.

Exploiting these strategies – establishing omnirelevant devices, categories and their predicates, challenging membership, and partitioning – achieves antagonism. They problematise the relationship between the interlocutors and override any effort to mediate the incipient confrontation. Although we scrutinise how these strategies may provoke and exclude speakers, those same strategies might achieve the opposite – establishing shared membership for supportive ends, such as the application of the category ‘Welsh speakers’ to escape the antagonistic encounter and progress the interview.

BasedAmy’s initially unsuccessful attempts at provoking David Davies illustrate how antagonism is interactionally achieved. We can observe antagonism in these moments as

BasedAmy stresses her and David Davies' differences, and even where they have commonalities, such as both being Brexiteers, she partitions them on different grounds. When a strategy fails to entice a response in kind from David Davies, BasedAmy seeks a new angle to pursue her provocation. As such, antagonism is recurrent in its design.

Consequently, antagonism is not achieved in a single turn. Whilst we show that turn-design contributes to BasedAmy's antagonistic project as she moves from a series of polar interrogatives to questions that prefer a more elaborate response, there is more to achieving antagonism. This can be uncovered through careful analysis of speakers' work to partition themselves into categories which have opposing stances, or incongruent rights and responsibilities with their present behaviour. From a larger structural viewpoint, we see that the flow of the interaction results from both parties' efforts to pursue their own omnirelevant device and resist that of the other – a process from which emerges antagonism. Despite his initial resistance, David Davies' attempts at maintaining the 'interviewer-interviewee' device finally succumb to the 'politician-citizen' device that BasedAmy controls.

Indeed, these repeated attempts throughout the encounter to create opposition and determine the operative device are what exposes BasedAmy's agenda – the absence of (preferred) uptake informs us of what antagonism is for members. BasedAmy's overarching agenda is antagonistic for possibly entertaining ends (enticing a response to achieve footage for her YouTube channel), but her individual actions are seemingly innocent: recording David Davies, finding out who he is, asking about the withdrawal agreement. This aligns with Hardaker's (2010) description of a *troll* as someone whose goal it is to cause disruption without being obvious. Future work could explore whether the asynchronous practices of social media trolling have commonalities with face-to-face antagonism.

By shining a light on Brexit divisions in-the-wild and not solely as part of institutional discourse we may fully see how divisions emerge in everyday life as they are built *in situ*. To this end, the methodological power of MCA is to show just how these categories and actions are highly consequential and for the purpose of 'picking a fight' may be manipulated via *partitioning* such that, despite any efforts to remediate, they allow interlocutors to never be on the same side.

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