Comparing Prefaced Questions Across Activity Types. Journalists and Financial Analysts as Argumentative Questioners

Prefaced questions, i.e., question utterances that are combined with assertive statements that provide background information concerning the questions themselves, are conventionalized discourse patterns that arise in both earnings conference calls (ECCs) and political press conferences (PPCs). As prefaces present "some sort of argumentation that legitimizes the question", prefaced questions need to be analyzed as argumentative structures. ECCs and PPCs share the same *interaction scheme* but pertain to two different *interaction fields*, respectively finance and politics. In this work, we observe how the different characteristics of the two interaction fields affect the argumentative structure of prefaced questions, verifying the hypotheses that (1) financial analysts are more cooperative than journalists; and (2) journalists make more extensive use of reported speech in their arguments. We adopt a mixed-methods approach, combining corpus-based quantitative observations with an in-depth qualitative analysis of the argumentative structure of prefaced questions. To do so, we introduce a novel framework that combines Inference Anchoring Theory to represent the *dialogical discourse structure* with Argumentum Model of Topics to disentangle the *enthymematic inferential structure.*

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1. Introduction [1]

The present study investigates the ways in which the *interaction field*, "that piece of social reality where the communicative interaction takes place" (Rigotti and Rocci, 2006), affects dialogical and argumentative strategies put in place by participants in interactions. In particular, we explore how the field-dependent contextual features of two comparable activity types impact the dialogical-argumentative configuration of a specific discourse-level construction, which we call *prefaced questions*, following Clayman and Heritage (2002a, b). We look comparatively at a corpus of quarterly *earnings conference calls* (ECCs) held by public companies with financial analysts and *political press conferences* (PPCs) held by politicians in government roles with the press to observe how prefaced questions by journalists and financial analysts differ in terms of internal argumentative structure, and to verify whether their differences can be explained in view of the participants' likely incentives and commitments. In particular, we aim to explore the following hypotheses:

(H1) Financial analysts are more cooperative than journalists because of their field-related incentives;
(H2) Journalists make more extensive use of reported speech in their arguments, both in view of their role and status and of their professional incentives.

To develop hypotheses on how different characteristics of the two interaction fields affect the argumentative structure of prefaced questions, however, we do not restrict ourselves to observe the distribution and characteristics of the prefaced questions as captured by basic corpus annotation. Rather, we adopt a mixed-methods approach that combines corpus-based quantitative observations with an in-depth qualitative analysis of the enthymematic argumentative structure underlying prefaced questions, including the reconstruction the implicit premises it presupposes. By doing so, we can identify the argumentative strategies put into play by analysts and journalists in exemplary cases and demonstrate their fit with the differing participants' goals and constraints as they can be reconstructed from circumstantial evidence for the two interaction fields.
To carry out this fine-grained analysis, we introduce a novel framework to represent both the *dialogical discourse structure* and the *enthymematic inferential structure* of prefaced questions. We adopt Inference Anchoring Theory (IAT) to represent the dialogical structure of instances of prefaced questions, integrating their complete inferential structure according to the Argumentum Model of Topics (AMT). Combining these two frameworks, the proposed

analytical model, tentatively called IAMT[2], allows us to observe the enthymematic argumentative structure of a prefaced question in a particular dialogical situation.

This paper is organized as follows. In Sect. 2 we describe the communicative activity types of ECCs and PPCs and discuss the relevant literature on *prefaced questions* to give the theoretical basis on which our analysis draws upon. In Sect. 3 we present the models of IAT and AMT and sketch our IAMT analytical framework. After describing our corpus and annotation method in Sect. 4, in Sect. 5 we discuss the results of the quantitative analysis, trying to formulate a first answer to our research questions. A deep argumentative reconstruction of examples is given in Sect. 6, where we analyse the peculiar configuration and aspects of prefaced questions as argumentative structures. Lastly, Sect. 7 summarizes conclusions and outlines possible lines of future research.

2. Prefaced questions and their contexts

2.1 The contexts: ECCs and PPCs as communicative activity types[3]

Earnings conference calls (ECCs) and political press conferences (PPCs) are structurally similar communicative events that share a common *interaction scheme* (Rigotti & Rocci, 2006; Palmieri, Rocci & Kudrautsava, 2015; Palmieri, Rocci & Hernandez, 2021): a presentation followed by a Q&A part, in which financial analysts and journalists – respectively in ECCs and PPCs – question their counterparts on issues presumably interesting for their publics. Both analysts and journalists take the role of questioners to gather information for the reports they both produce but also to act on behalf of their publics, of investors and voting citizens respectively, to hold the counterparts accountable. Thus, it can be assumed for both that their questions are also aimed at testing their interlocutors' standpoints, who, in turn, have to defend their accountability arguing for the soundness of their evaluations and decisions (cf. Hernández 2021).

Both communicative activity types have been recognized as argumentative in nature. On the one hand, Palmieri et al. (2015: 123) explore the hypothesis that in ECCs argumentation represents a key component of the value of these events for financial markets and, more specifically, plays an *information-relevant role*, in various ways, for instance, "by pointing out that an already disclosed piece of information is relevant or not as a premise to support a standpoint on a price-related issue" Palmieri et al. (2015: 123). They observe that besides eliciting and shaping argumentation from managers "analysts themselves make use of argumentation to construct their questions" (Palmieri et al: 130).

According to Hérnandez (2021), in political press conferences both politicians and journalists are engaged in an argumentative exchange the former having to defend their standpoints – the appropriateness of stances and opinions – and the latter seeking to challenge them. Hernandez (2021) highlights that in this process journalists can as well advance, through the questions they pose, standpoints that challenge the politicians.

We can characterize these two activity types in argumentative terms as *rhetorical triangle* situations, that is to say in both cases we have two interlocutors arguing, one of them (at least) presents their standpoints and the other one challenges it, possibly advancing and defending an alternative standpoint, while a third party, the *audience*, takes the role of *judge,*

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[2] The label IAMT is, in fact, more of a playful portmanteau blend of IAT and AMT than a real acronym. It might be read as *Inference Anchoring Model of Topics*, but the authors do not claim this phrase is particularly insightful or revealing about the nature of the framework.

[3] As regards the comparison of ECCs and PPCs as communicative activity types, the authors are indebted to Palmieri, Rocci and Hernandez's (2021) paper presented at the Argage conference in Neuchâtel, which remains to this day unpublished.

the *kritès* of Aristotelian *Rhetoric* (see Piazza 2008 on *Rhet.* II, 1391b)[4]. This third party, who is silent in the interaction, is called to pass a judgement, as a citizens do by voting in political elections and as stockowners do by "voting with their wallet" (Laskin 2021)[5].

Despite all these similarities as regards dialogical structure and the constraints imposed on participants, these two activity types differ in a number of ways that relate to their belonging to two different *interaction fields*, namely those of politics in the public sphere and of equity investing within the financial markets, which involve different commitments of the participants and different incentives for participation in an argumentative discussion. Analysts and journalists despite having a similar role as questioners, have different incentives: the former want to reach correct conclusions about firms' valuation in their reports on the backdrop of a field where investors' basic preferences are generally aligned, while disagreement is epistemic in nature[6]; the latter are interested in letting political disagreement and controversies emerge, on the backdrop of a public sphere where basic political preferences diverge.

Journalists have been observed routinely confronting politicians with the reported speech of political opponents and, more generally, disagreeing voices to maintain their ethos of journalistic objectivity, they are therefore expected to be adversarial towards their interlocutors in an effort to pressure politicians and to let disagreement emerge (cf. Clayman and Heritage, 2002b; Heritage, 2003; Clayman and Fox, 2017).

In contrast, research on financial analysts has often underscored "the challenge analysts face when trying to maintain good relationships with firm management while also satisfying the demands of their investing clients" (Brown et al. 2015: 5). Palmieri et al. (2015: 130) observed how "analysts shape the arguments of corporate representatives without explicitly challenging them to defend a standpoint" and associate this behaviour with their "interest in preserving their ongoing relationship with the managers". In a similar vein Koller and Wu (2023) examine strategic use of *politeness* by analysts to strike a fine balance between their need to maintain access to firm-specific information, and their incentive to "foster the impression that they are independent from managers to give unbiased advice to investors" (Koller and Wu 2023: 771). When firm performance is poor and outlook negative, however, Koller and Wu (2023) observe that analysts can be quick to prioritize their identity as independent professionals, dropping politeness strategies and resorting to more adversarial questioning.

A further apparent difference concerns professional identity and expertise, journalists cast their identity as generalist information intermediaries and don't claim any special expertise on the matters being discussed, while financial analysts see themselves as domain experts whose role is to give an evaluation of the company and give recommendation to investors.

2.2 Prefaced questions

Prefaced questions can be recognized as a specific, conventionalized, *discourse pattern* (Östman 2005) routinely arising both in the ECC and PPC activity types in response to recognizable constraints and incentives of the activity. Lucchini et al. (2022), looking at

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[4] Examining in detail how this Aristotelian rhetorical triangle can be dealt within modern dialectical theories of argument exceeds the scope of this article. Let us just observing, in passing, that in Pragma-Dialectical terms (van Eemeren 2018) the triangle needs to be resolved into three separate argumentative confrontations, while in the polylogical perspective advocated by Lewinski and Aakhus (2023) it would be a special case of the more general notion of an argumentative polylogue.

[5] As Laskin (2021: 47) puts it, "a typical investor tends to sell the stock of the company if they do not like what the company is doing or how it is managed. They are said to *vote with their feet* or *vote with their wallets*."

[6] Generally speaking, investors want firms to create value in order to have return on investment, so they generally want firms to succeed. There are however complexities. Short-sellers betting *against* a stock represent an apparent counter-example. In fact, short sellers seek to profit from disagreement and epistemic uncertainty about firm's value. Another source of complexity is investors concerned with the ethical, environmental and social impacts of their investments, for them *how* a firm produces values is important, which leads to potential disagreement with other investors whose concerns are purely financial.

ECCs, defended the idea that they also qualify as *prototypical argumentative patterns*. We borrow the term *prototypical argumentative pattern* from Pragma-Dialectical theory (cf. van Eemeren 2018: 150), using it more broadly[7] to mean a *significant constellation of argumentative moves whose occurrence can be explained in view of the goals and constraints of the activity type*. Here we further develop this hypothesis, taking advantage of the comparative analysis of ECCs and PPCs.

Prefaced questions consist of turns at talk where one or more *question utterances*[8] are combined with a *preface*, that is "an assertive statement that can either precede, follow or be contained in a question sentence within a journalist's or analyst's question turn, conveying information related to the question" (Lucchini et al., 2022).

The notion of preface originates from the work of Clayman and Heritage (2002a: 755) on journalistic questioning, who see them as preliminary statements that "contain contextual background information that renders the question intelligible to the audience and provides for its appropriateness". According to Clayman and Heritage (2002a, 2002b; Heritage, 2003) prefaces contextualise the question, provide a justification for it, but also serve to constrain the answer and are connected with journalistic *adversarialness*, inasmuch they can provide a basis for a presumption or a preference toward an answer (*preface tilt*) or present bad news, relate criticism or accusations (*preface hostility*). Palmieri et al. (2015) examine prefaced questions in ECCs and highlight that prefaces present "some sort of argumentation that legitimizes the question", but, do not connect them to adversarialness.

We understand a preface as a means to convey important information the question draws upon and to show that the question is correct and relevant, realizing simultaneously the contextualisation and justification function. More specifically, Lucchini et al. (2022) observe that prefaces are arguments for the performance of a specific questioning illocutionary act, and that they can do so in three different ways:

(a) By framing an issue that needs to be solved (for example, depicting a controversy or a misalignment between different people or facts);

(b) By signalling that there are (unspecified) grounds to infer p, as a reason to ask for (dis)confirmation of p (this is the case of requests of confirmation of inferences);

(c) By providing an argument to infer a proposition p, where p may be (part of) the propositional content of the question or a precondition of the specific kind of question (e.g., ambiguity as grounds for a request of clarification).

All three subtypes are argumentative in nature as they provide support to the performance of the questioning illocutionary act. As it is normally the case with conversational arguments, they are *enthymematic* as they appear to rely on implicit *endoxical premises*, pertaining either to the interaction field where the activity takes place or to the general pragmatic functioning of question illocutionary acts. In the former case, they correspond to shared values, goals, rules and commitments in the field. In the latter they may consist of the presuppositional preparatory conditions of the questioning illocutionary act.

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[7] According to van Eemeren (2018: 150), an argumentative pattern "consists of a particular constellation of argumentative moves in which, in dealing with a particular *kind of difference of opinion*, in defence of a particular *type of standpoint* a particular argument scheme or combination of *argument schemes* is used in a particular kind of *argumentation structure*". In our definition a pattern does not need to be fully specified at all the four above mentioned levels. In analogy with constructions in Construction Grammar, we admit of patterns at different levels of abstractness and under-specification (cf. Östman 2005). In short, our patterns are a superset of Pragma-Dialectical patterns. On prototypicality, see *infra*.

[8] We use here the shorthand *question utterance* to refer to a range of discursive units, which (a) introduce an open, underspecified, proposition at the propositional content level, and (b) realize a range of directive acts at the illocutionary level, which are aimed at eliciting a reply from the addressee, whose relevance is constrained by the question's semantics and often by the fine-grained specification of the illocutionary force of the response being elicited (e.g. requests of elaboration, of explanation, of opinion, of commitment, etc.). As regards the underspecified propositions mentioned under (a), they can be either disjunctions (in the case of polar and closed-list questions) or what are effectively lambda expressions, that is, predicates with unbound variables (in the case of open questions). Question utterances can be expressed by interrogative sentences as well as by a variety of indirect constructions. On the modeling of questions at the semantic and illocutionary level and the typology of questions in the ECC see Yaskorska-Shah, Rocci and Reed (2022).

A recurrent feature of prefaced questions that we find in ECCs and PPCs is the presence in the preface of *reported speech*. Questioners refer to others' words when have to contextualise, or to justify, their question. This is the case both for analysts and journalists, but there are some significant differences in the way this is done.

(1) Vicky Young (journalist): [Prime Minister, one of your top health advisors suggested this morning that we should all minimize our socializing over Christmas.]P [Was she right to say that? Do you agree with her?]Q

(2) Eric Handler (analyst): [OK. And then as a follow-up,]DR [you did talk about Magic: The Gathering Arena that launched on mobile did a little bit better than expected.]P [I wonder if you could maybe talk a little bit about, you know, some of the key performance indicators, if not just for mobile, just in general for the digital business with Arena.]Q

Based on our experience of reading and annotating the two corpora – see section 5, below on corpus annotation and quantitative analysis – and on our understanding of the respective interaction fields of the two activity types – see 2.1 above, we believe that examples (1) and (2) represent *prototypical* prefaced questions respectively of PPCs and ECCs. In the sense that they are clearly instrumental at satisfying the constraints that the respective activity types put on journalists and securities analysts, while pursuing the goals corresponding to their incentives for participation[9]. While (1) and (2) present a similar general structure, their precise strategic purpose is different. Both questioners use reported speech as a source, but they do so in the pursuit of different effects.

In (1) the journalist quotes a relevant authority as a source of knowledge with whom the interlocutor is normally expected to be in agreement, but might well not be in the specific case. The journalist aims at eliciting a clear standpoint from the Prime Minister and exerts pressure through the formulation of the question (polar yes/no) and the reference to the standpoint uttered by a relevant authority (one of Prime Minister's top health advisors). The possibility of a disagreement between the Prime Minister and his top health advisors is clearly evoked as well as the duty of the Prime Minister to defend his standpoint in face of this potential disagreement. The question is overtly adversarial.

In (2) the preface refers to an evaluative claim made by the managers in relation to expectations, which constitutes a potential standpoint in need of elaboration, clarification and ultimately argumentative substantiation. The analyst uses an open question that appears to ask generically for more information about something that the managers are supposed to know – given they talked about it. At face value, this interrogative strategy is less adversarial as the analyst chose a non-confrontational formulation – an open request to *talk more* about something they introduced, instead of directly asking, for a justification or a clarification. Yet, the tentative reference to "key performance indicators" gently invites the managers to clarify the expectations in relation to which the evaluative claim was made and to point to the data that substantiates it.

Referring to someone else's words can be a way to introduce a topic or bring up an issue, and strategically to justify this introduction as *something mentioned or discussed by an authoritative source* and / or represent it *as potentially problematic*. In (1), for instance, the speaker introduces, as we said, something that has been said by a knowledgeable source who happens to be a political ally to the PM and asked the PM his opinion on that, pushing him

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[9] Van Eemeren (2018: 151) characterizes prototypical argumentative patterns as "characteristic of the way in which argumentative discourse is generally conducted in a specific communicative activity type or cluster of such activity types" as opposed to incidental to it. In particular, prototypical patterns "are immediately connected with the institutional preconditions for strategic manoeuvring applying to the communicative activity type concerned". In fact, in this paper we examine structurally similar discourse patterns – i.e. prefaced questions – in two comparable activity types (ECCs and PPCs), differing at the level of the interaction field, in order to substantiate the hypothesis that the structural discourse patterns realize a prototypical argumentative pattern in both, but the nature of such a prototypical argumentative pattern is, consistently with the difference in field-dependent "institutional preconditions", is not the same.

either to align with her position or to reject it – this latter case would require him to justify such rejection. In example (2), the analyst refers to previous statements of the management that presented a result different from what expected, asking for the data on the basis of which the expectation and the result were derived.

In Sect. 6 we will propose a deeper reconstruction of the arguments displayed in these examples, but we can already mention that the justification of the questions act is related to the preparatory conditions of the illocutionary interrogative acts, namely the preface show there is an *issue that needs to be solved*. As we will point out, this issue is different for the two examples. The source of this difference, which reflects in the difference between the argumentation in the prefaced questions in examples 1 and 2, lies in the different characteristics of financial and political discourses, especially on the different incentives of analysts and journalists.

Making the similarities and differences between examples (1) and (2) explicit in a transparent manner requires a proper format for analysis and description. They do not emerge from the mere segment based annotation of structural discourse patterns (see below in section 5), nor by simply by enriching this structural representation into an argumentative (macro-)structure outlining inferential relations among explicit segments. If we want to properly characterize prefaced questions and their varieties as prototypical argumentative patterns relating them with the constraints and incentives of the activity types we need a deeper level of analysis, with two key features:

(a) The first is a principled method for reconstructing and representing the implicit aspects of enthymematic argumentation. Implicit premises and implicit standpoints need to be attributed to the arguers, including both the context-specific endoxical premises and the implicit pragmatic conclusion that ensure the link between the preface and the justified move, i.e., the question.

(b) The second is the possibility of dealing jointly with the propositional and the illocutionary aspects of argumentative discourse. In particular, we need to represent the relationship between the propositional conclusion of the preface and its ultimate pragmatic conclusion which corresponds to the justified performance of the question itself.

We believe that an analytical model that satisfactorily combines these two features does not currently exist "off the shelf". In the next section we outline one, fashioning out tools from two well established models that are nicely complementary as their ability to satisfy (a) and (b), respectively.

3. Analytical frameworks: IAT and AMT

Lucchini et al. (2022) propose a representation of prefaced questions that allows to see how the preface provides an argument that justifies the question speech-act. The proposed analysis that relies on Inference Anchoring Theory (IAT) (Reed and Budzynska, 2011; Budzynska et al., 2014), whose raison d'être is representing the anchoring of inference relations between propositions to sequences of speech acts in dialogue. This approach, however, is loath to hypothesize unexpressed propositional units, not anchored to explicit locutionary acts and is content to complement these explicit propositional contents with a rich set of typed and labelled relational structures. It thus lacks either a theory of enthymemes and of implicit culturally shared – endoxical – premises or a full account of the underlying arguments schemes supporting the inference. The former is necessary to spell out hypotheses on the tacit field-specific assumptions evoked by questioners in the activity types of the ECC

and of the PPC in their use of prefaced questions. The latter is required to characterize argumentative patterns also at the level of the argument schemes involved and, more specifically, to understand the differing inferential role of reported speech in the two genres. At an even more fundamental level, IAT does not include the representation of *implicitly communicated conclusions*, a construct that appears necessary, as we will see, if we want to explain the relationship between preface and question speech-act in inferential terms. These aspects are part of the purview of the Argumentum Model of Topics (AMT).

We will now illustrate IAT and AMT by applying them separately to the analysis of prefaced questio

3.1 Prefaced questions in Inference Anchoring Theory (IAT)

Inference anchoring theory (IAT) (Reed and Budzynska, 2011; Budzynska et al., 2014) offers a "scaffolding to represent dialogue and argument structures, and the relations between them" (Hautli-Janisz et al., 2022). IAT analysis envisages *locutions* (the 'right-hand side' in IAT reconstruction; see Fig. 1) and *propositions* (the 'left-hand side'), and the different types of relations between these components: *transitions* connect locutions as units of discourse or dialogue; *propositional relations* capture semantic and inferential relations; and *illocutionary relations* connect the right and the left-hand side and represent, in a simplified way, the illocutionary force realized either by a given locution or by a transition between locutions in

Figure 1: representation of example 1 according to the Inference anchoring theory (IAT)

discourse or dialogue. In particular, IAT sees argumentation, the act of arguing, as an illocutionary force anchoring an inference – which is a type of propositional relation – in a discursive or dialogical transition between locutions. More in detail, the inference that connects a premise to its conclusion at the propositional level is anchored to the transition between the locutions to which the propositions are anchored.

Fig. 1 shows the IAT representation of Vicky Young's turn from example (1). In the first move, the preface, Vicky Young's utterance contains a reported speech, and therefore its propositional content (middle node) is the assertion of a proposition by another speaker, the propositional content of the latter being represented in the node further left. The second move is a *request of evaluative opinion*[10]; the journalist is asking for the opinion of Prime Minister – specifically, whether he agrees with what said by the quoted health advisor. The IAT diagram shows that the preface serves as argument for the performance of the question, this

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[10] The taxonomy developed for the classification of requests in ECCs is discussed in Sect. 4.2 and it is presented in detail in the Annotation Manual developed within the project this work pertains to (Lucchini and D'Agostino 2023).

argumentative connection being represented as an *inference* descending from the reported speech, which therefore constitute the *premise*, and supporting the locution of the question, the *conclusion*. The intention of arguing is anchored in the transition between the locutions of the preface and of the question. In short, by offering an integrated representation of inferences between propositional contents and of the performance of speech acts in discourse ad dialogue, IAT allowed us to show that the content of a preface constitute a premise that argues *for the utterance* of a question. Now we can look more closely at how exactly such an inferential step could made plausible, by reconstructing it as an enthymeme via the Argumentum Model of Topics (AMT).

3.2 Prefaced questions in the Argumentum Model of Topics (AMT)

The AMT model (Rigotti and Greco, 2019) "aims at proposing a coherent and founded approach to the study of argument schemes" (Rigotti and Greco Morasso, 2010), providing a theoretically well-founded account of inferential configurations. It allows to reconstruct the internal structure of reasoning "that underlies the connection between a standpoint and its supporting arguments" (Rigotti and Greco Morasso, 2010). Two components are distinguished in the inferential configuration. The first consists of the *procedural-inferential* starting points, including the *locus* (or *topos*) and the *maxim*. *Locus* and *maxim* can be defined respectively as the semantic-ontological relation on which an argument is based and as an abstract inference warrant that holds, necessarily or presumptively, by virtue of the aforementioned semantic-ontological relation relation. The second component comprises the *material-contextual* starting points, namely the *endoxon* and the *datum*, that interact to derive a proposition to which the maxim can be applied.

The interaction of the two components, giving rise to the so-called Y-structure, is showcased in Fig. 2, again through the reconstruction of example (1) according to AMT.
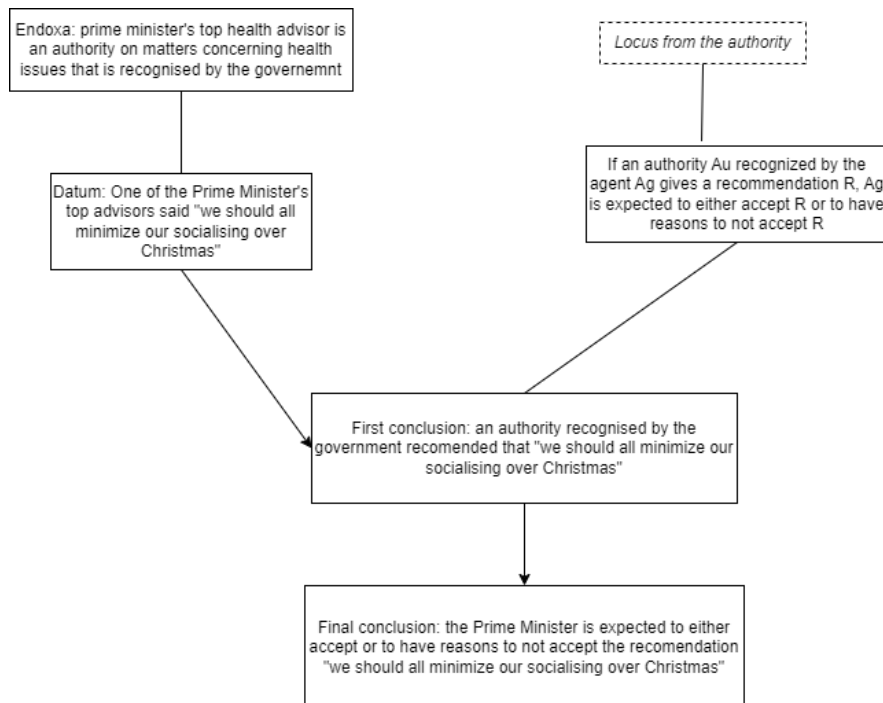

Figure 2: Y structure of example 1 according to the argumentum model of topics (AMT)

We see on the left-hand side the *material-contextual starting points*, the *endoxon* and the *datum*. The former is "a general premise that is accepted by the relevant public in a specific argumentative situation" (Rigotti and Greco, 2019); the endoxon is often left implicit, for it is

a typically a shared premise already part of the common ground of the interlocutors. Here, the activated endoxon is the status of the Prime Minister's top health advisor as an *authority recognized by* the government. We can immediately surmise how contextually established beliefs about who is an authority for whom are needed to interact with the antecedents of the maxims of the locus from authority. This, however, needs to happen through the *datum*, which is a factual premise, often explicit in the discourse; in this case, the fact that the Prime Minister's top advisor said that we should all minimize our socializing over Christmas. The datum corresponds to the propositional content of the "preface" locution we saw above in the IAT reconstruction in Figure 1, that is to say that the datum corresponds to the reported speech event.

From the conjunction of *endoxon* and *datum* a conclusion (*first conclusion*) is derived in a quasi-syllogistic fashion: here, that "an authority recognised by the government recommended that 'we should all minimize our socializing over Christmas'". This first conclusion is then used as *minor premise* in combination with the maxim, again in a quasi-syllogistic fashion.

The *locus* of this argument, i.e., the ontological relation connecting the premise to the conclusion, is the *locus from authority*. Each locus can give potentially rise to several different maxims (Rigotti and Greco, 2019; Rigotti, 2008), as many as the possible semantic entailments of the relation in question and the epistemic habits associated to it. Here, the applicable maxim associated with the relationship between authority and discourse could be something like that "If an authority Au recognized by the agent Ag gives a recommendation R, Ag is expected to either accept R or to have reasons not to accept R". One can see how the maxim is part and parcel of our naïve understanding of what it means 'for someone to be an epistemic or deontic authority for someone else'. The maxim works as a *major premise* and, in conjunction with the *first conclusion-minor premise* derived from the material syllogism, it derives the *final conclusion*. It is the material component that tells us that we can apply a specific maxim to the case, and this becomes visible when we combine the maxim and the first conclusion.

The final conclusion we obtain from our AMT reconstruction of example (1) concerns an expectation toward the Prime Minister that arise from the declaration of the health advisor reported in the preface.

In Sect. 6 we will discuss the examples more in detail, but we can already say something on the inference we analyzed. We can see through the AMT reconstruction how the inferential connection between the preface and the question-conclusion is underpinned by a contextual premise – the endoxon regarding the role as authority of the source of the reported speech – and an inferential premise – a maxim concerning the relation between some recognized authority's recommendation and the expectation that this recommendation projects over the agent. It can be said that we have two implicit premises that are at work in this inference and that have to be reconstructed in order to understand what inferential configuration is having place. Both these premises build on a shared common knowledge, but while the former is *cultural* and *contextual*, necessitating a knowledge of the case (what does it imply that someone is a "top health advisor" for the UK government), the latter is likely a universally accepted epistemic habit: it does not depend on the specific case, but on our general understanding of what it means 'for someone to be an epistemic or deontic authority for someone else'. That's why we can liken maxims to meaning postulates or axioms for the locus relation[11].

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[11] Cf. Katz and Nagel (1974: 316): "Meaning postulates are the axioms for items in the extralogical vocabulary of an interpreted formal system. They correspond to axioms (like Pierce's law) for the particles in the logical vocabulary. They are customarily presented in the form of universally quantified conditionals […]".

The final conclusion, with its dilemmatic alternative between two possible expected behaviors of the Prime Minister correspond to a reason that makes the question worth asking. Why so? Because the conclusion is an *issue*. The speaker could stop here, having concluded that there are two possible opinions imputable to Boris Johnson; however, the following question builds on this conclusion and takes a step further, asking to *clarify this issue*. The journalist is in fact asking to the Prime Minister whether he's aligned with that declaration – if he accepts it – and, if he's not, to justify such rejection. The question's open propositional content arises from the *dilemma* the preface frames and the question's illocution is justified by it, in the sense that the dilemma constitutes the *precondition* of the request of opinion and the implied request for a justification. This point will be further discussed in Sect. 6.

3.3 Towards an analytic model combining IAT and AMT

As we saw, with IAT we can observe where the arguments come from, identifying the anchoring of inferential links between expressed propositions in sequences of moves in discourse and dialogue, which are characterized at the illocutionary level. Reported speech is explicitly represented. Using AMT we can zoom in our reconstruction and go beyond linguistically expressed propositions, spelling out in full the inferential configuration of an enthymematic argument. The AMT representation, however, forfeits a precise connection with the unfolding of discourse and dialogue as it does not specify which parts of the inference are explicit and which implicit, nor the linear *dispositio* of those parts that are explicit and their attribution to the participants. Finally, no hypotheses about the illocutionary level of the argumentative discourse are embedded in the AMT reconstruction.

For the purposes of the present analysis of the prefaced question pattern across genres, we need to unravel the inferential configuration linking preface and question. It will be important also to represent when the *datum* consists of reported speech and to understand in such cases whether the reported speech act or just its propositional content is assumed as the datum in the inferential configuration. A comparative analysis of the *endoxa* invoked respectively in ECCs and PPCs is also important to differentiate the two structurally analogous patterns.

A representation of arguments combining the features of IAT and AMT, anchoring the full enthymematic structure of the argument in discursive and dialogical sequences of speech acts. This novel format of representation is used in Sect. 6 to fully reconstruct the prefaced questions analysed.

4. Data and methods

4.1 A corpus of ECC and PPC Q&A sessions

For the present work, we collected a corpus of 8 transcribed Q&A sessions, 4 from each activity type. The transcriptions come from two sources.

For the ECC, we drew from the annotated corpus built for the MAP research project (*Mining argumentative patterns in context* SNSF Grant N. 200857), which collects earnings calls of companies from different industries affected by a variety of newsworthy events, both financial and nonfinancial, during the COVID-19 Pandemic period. From this corpus, we selected the ECCs of Hasbro and Credit Suisse for the 2nd and 3rd financial quarters of 2021.

The PPC corpus was collected by José Alfonso Lomelí Hernández for his doctoral research project (cf. Hernández 2021 and 2024) and includes press conferences held by heads of government and other elected officials with executive responsibilities in English speaking countries during the global Pandemic. From this corpus, we selected conferences held by UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson on June, 14, 2021 and November, 30, 2021, and by Justin Trudeau, Canadian PM, of June,14, 2021 and November, 24, 2021.

For both samples, the transcripts of the Q&As were pre-processed, and a subsequent multi-layered pre-annotation has been carried out by trained annotator in INCEpTION platform (Klie et al., 2018) according to a coding scheme *ad hoc*. The pre-annotation process and the annotation layers are briefly described in the section below.

From the pre-annotated corpus, we were able to retrieve and extract preface-question pairs, obtaining a set of 109 preface-question pairs (around 7500 words). For the retrieved pairs, we also identified the type of request performed by the question, and we annotated the presence or absence of a reported speech in the preface. This allows a preliminary quantitative testing of the hypotheses H1 and H2 (cf. 1. Introduction), concerning question adversarialness and the use of reported speech in prefaced questions across genres. The results of the quantitative analysis are presented in Sect. 5.

For the detailed qualitative argumentative analysis, we narrowed the set down to those instances of prefaced questions were a reported speech occurred. The result was a set of 43 examples, that were subsequently annotated in OVA platform (Janier et al., 2014) according to the IAT framework. On the top of that, we implemented the AMT reconstruction to obtain the IAMT analyses.

4.2 Annotation in INCEpTION[12]

The annotation process in INCEpTION comprised four layers of anmalysis.

A first one for *speaker turns*, to distinguish *questioners* (analysts and journalists) and *answerers* (managers and politicians) was automatically annotated.

A layer for *dialogue moves* was subsequently annotated to categorize the basic discourse moves. We distinguish four types of moves: *Preface*, *Discourse regulator*, *Varia*, and *Question*. For Questions we also annotated specific and independent features: the presence of a preface and the *question type*, that can be *open*, *yes-no* (polar questions) or *closed-list* (alternative questions).

A third layer specific for questions specify the *request type*. We identify eight main types: request for *clarification*, *commitment*, *confirmation*, *data*, *elaboration*, *explanation*, *justification* and *opinion*[13]. The classification of requests was helpful for the characterization of the *adversarialness* of the exchange: we consider that requests of *clarification, data, elaboration* and *opinion* are generally less adversarial as they point out a topic and give the answerer the space for constructing their own answer in a relatively unconstrained fashion. On the other hand, requests of *commitment*, *confirmation*, *explanation* and *justification* can be considered more adversarial as they corner the answerer trying either to elicit epistemic or deontic commitments from them or to hold them accountable for their past and present commitments.

The last annotated layer concern what is defined as *superquestion*, or Maximal Interrogative Unit (MIU) (D'Agostino et al., 2023). Questioners in these Q&As tend to formulate questions in a very rich manner, typically reformulating and rephrasing the same topic and/or the same broad illocutionary intention more than once, giving rise to agglomerate of questions, with their relevant prefaces and discourse regulators, which is expected to receive *one* answer. For instance, in example (2), journalist Vicky Young produces two utterances with the form and illocutionary potential of *questions* (1. *Was she right to say that?* 2. *Do you agree with her?*), but the interrogative act realized is, in fact, one topically and intentionally coherent macro-unit. The reply associated to a MIU is called a Maximal Answering Unit (MAU). This novel

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[12] The annotation performed in INCEpTION here presented has been carried out according to an annotation scheme developed within the project that is detailed and discussed in the Annotation Manual (Lucchini and D'Agostino 2023), available here: https://n2t.net/ark:/12658/srd1326777

[13] This layer entails, as well, nine sub-types for requests of *confirmation*, *explanation* and *opinion*; as they were not taken into account for the present work, we do not discuss them. The sub-types are presented in the already cited Annotation Manual.

concept and the associated annotation feature allow us to identify "interrogative acts" that are composed of more than one interrogative sentences; in the present work, for instance, it was necessary to identify not only single questions associated to a preface, but entire super-questions comprehending a preface, as they are in fact our unit of analysis.

5. Results of quantitative analysis

To provide a preliminary test of the hypothesis that analysts are more cooperative, and therefore less adversarial, than journalists, we compared the distribution of request types in the two activity types, shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of request types among PPCs and ECCs.

	clarification	commitment	confirmation	data	elaboration	explanation	justification	opinion	*tot*
PPCs	4	7	14	22	10	4	6	33	*100*
ECCs	10	2	18	21	36	21	2	34	*144*
PPCs	*4%*	*7%*	*14%*	*22%*	*10%*	*4%*	*6%*	*33%*	*100%*
ECCs	*7%*	*1%*	*13%*	*15%*	*25%*	*15%*	*1%*	*24%*	*100%*

The distribution of request types is consistent with the hypothesis that analysts are more cooperative than journalists, as we find that journalists request commitments and justifications while analysts request clarifications and elaborations. This assessment of adversarialness is indeed partial as it is based on only one factor – the type of request – and will need to be corroborated by a more thorough analysis based on multidimensional criteria such as those used by Clayman and Heritage (2002a) for measuring journalistic adversarialness in PPCs. What we can say is that the distribution of request types is consistent with our hypothesis, confirming *prima facie* that analysts are more cooperative than journalists, consistently with the observations found in the literature: analysts are found to be interested in maintaining a positive relation with the managers and generally do not have the intent of pressuring them, differently from journalists. This preliminary results encourage us to pursue the idea that prefaced questions in the two genres are best viewed as related but distinct prototypical argumentative patterns, each reflecting the constraints and incentives of its respective field of interaction.

Table 2. Distribution of prefaced spans and reported speech in prefaces in PPCs and ECCs.

	question span	prefaced spans	reported speech prefaced span
PPCs	65	56	24
ECCs	77	53	19
PPCs	*100%*	*86%*	*43%*
ECCs	*100%*	*69%*	*36%*

Table 2 shows the distribution of prefaces in MIUs, and that of reported speech in prefaces. Interestingly, in both activity types, the majority of questions is prefaced, meaning that both analysts and journalists tend to contextualize and justify the questions they pose. While this is not a necessary trait of a prototypical argumentative pattern, van Eemeren (2018: 166) observe that it is expected that certain prototypical argumentative patterns will be also quantitatively prevalent in certain (clusters of) communicative activity types, so as to deserve to be called *stereotypical argumentative patterns*. Prefaced questions appear to be equally stereotypical both in PPCs and ECCs compared to other ways of building a MIU.
As for the use of reported speech, more than one third of prefaces contains it, both in ECCs and PPCs. It was hypothesized that journalists would more systematically use reported speech in their prefaces due to their status as pure information intermediaries – as opposed to domain experts – as well as because of their incentive to confront politicians with disagreeing

voices to maintain their ethos of journalistic objectivity, and their interest in shaping, constituting, even eliciting public controversies (Cramer 2011). The hypothesis is only partially confirmed: while we do see that reported speech is more frequent in PPCs than in ECCs, the difference appears to be small.

Results of quantitative observations helped us to carry out a first test of hypotheses H1 and H2 concerning differences in adversarialness and in the use of reported speech between ECCs and PPCs as motivated by the different incentives of the questioners in the respective activity type. In the next section we move to a qualitative argumentative analysis aimed at refining our hypotheses on how the characteristics of the two activity types may be reflected in the argumentation supporting the performance questions.

6. Qualitative analysis: deep argumentative reconstruction of prefaced questions

Moving from the analytical tools of IAT and AMT presented in Sect. 3, we present here an integrated IAMT analysis of examples (1) and (2), implementing the elements of the Y structure in the IAT annotation.
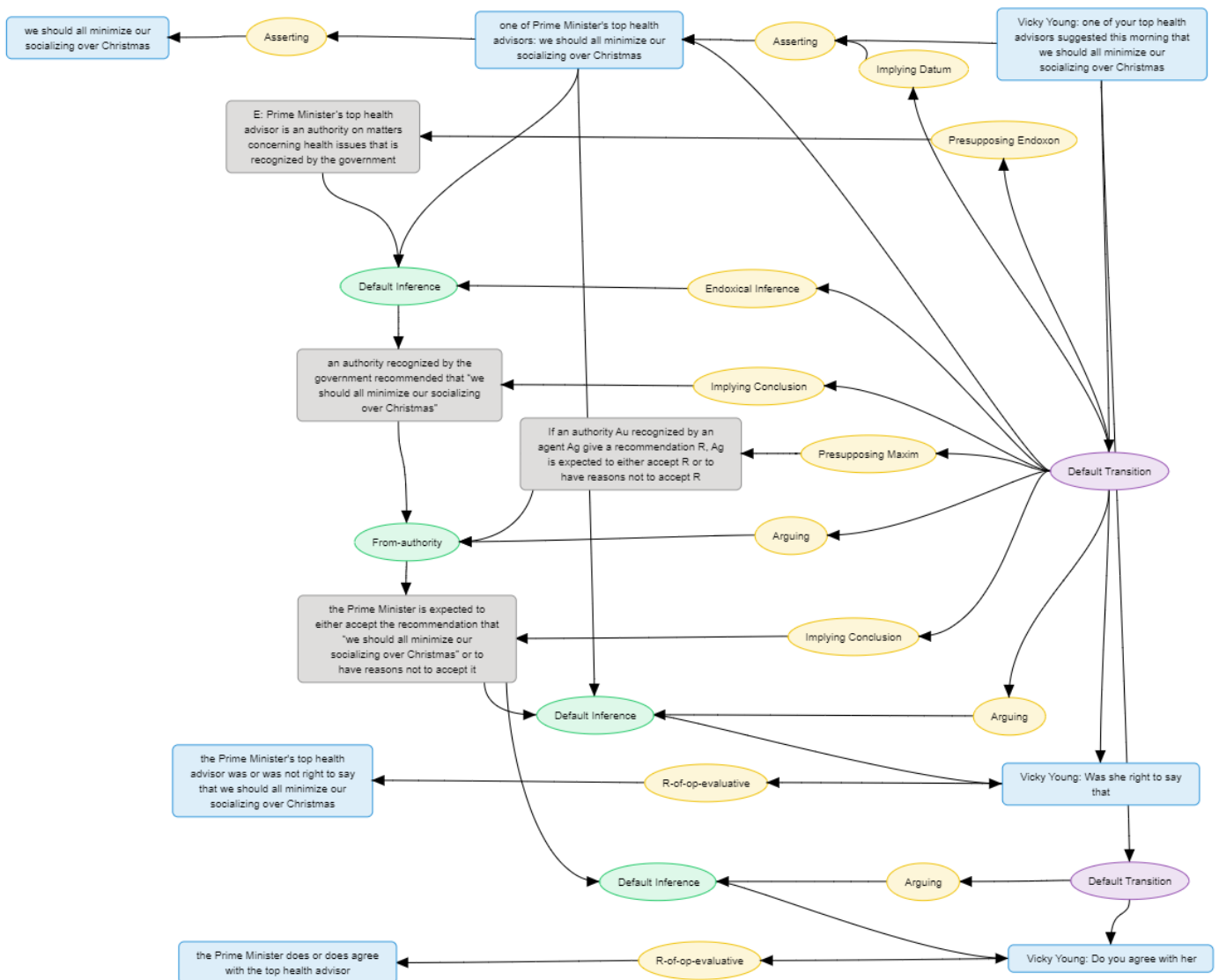

Figure 3. IAMT representation of example (1).

Figure 3 shows the IAMT representation of example (1), that combines the two schemes already shown in Figures 1 and 2. It has to be highlighted, firstly, that all the elements of IAT are maintained; the implementation of AMT elements is in fact realized in such way that it does not requires changes of the previous annotation but rather adds *on top of that* all the implicit components. The latter are recognizable as implicit as they are represented in grey boxes; this means that they are not present in the text, and for this reason there are no corresponding locutions. In IAMT implicit premises and conclusions are. not anchored to locution boxes on the right-hand side but to the relevant *transition*. The implicit premises entail reconstructed in AMT – the endoxon and the maxim – are *presupposed*. By this, however, we do not mean a semantic presupposition of any of the expressed propositions, but rather the pragmatic presuppositions of the speech act of arguing itself. In a Congruity Theory framework, Rigotti (2005: 85-88) treats these presuppositions as imposed by the abstract "connective predicate" of arguing. Correspondingly, in the IAT-based metalanguage of our analysis, we treat them as presuppositions of the transition itself.

To implement the entirety of an AMT Y-structure, a set of ad hoc illocutionary relations anchors the enthymematic components of the AMT Y-structure to the transition: *implying datum* that indicates that a previously asserted proposition is assumed as datum, while *presupposing endoxon* and *presupposing maxim* anchor the implicit content that serve as major premises in each inferential step of the Y-structure. *Implying conclusion* is used to anchor both the first and the final conclusion; the inferential step that supports the first conclusion is annotated as a default inference anchored by the illocutionary relation defined as *endoxical inference*, while the second inferential step, anchored by the main illocutionary relation of *arguing*, specifies the *locus* in the propositional relation (in this case a *locus from authority*).

Finally, we can see that in the diagram the step from the implicit final conclusion amounting to the emergence of the issue to the actual act of asking the question is represented by another inferential node that connects the final conclusion of the Y structure to the locution of the question. The emergence of the issue in the final conclusion represents a felicity condition for the utterance of the question, and therefore acts as a premise for it. One could legitimately ask if this final inferential step should be subjected to a fully-fledged AMT analysis as the previous one. We decided against, considering that the link between felicity conditions of a speech act and its performance is akin to a *final practical judgment* and its analysis in terms AMT would lead to indefinite regress. What the analysis shows is that the journalist justifies performance of the question by making a case for the existence of one of its preconditions. However, we can say that this inference that connects a precondition of the act to the act itself can be considered a standard one, and that it's sufficient to say that the utterance (i.e., the question) is justified if the precondition is justified.

We can now examine in detail how the preface justifies the question. The datum is an instance of reported speech, specifically, here the journalist quotes a third party that is a relevant epistemic authority – a top health advisor is supposedly an expert in health issues, and specifically about health policies to be implemented – but that is also a political relevant figure the Prime Minister is supposed to agree with. What justifies the question is the relevance of the topic and especially the fact that a relevance source said something with which the interviewee is expected to agree but it has not been declared it yet. In other words, the Prime Minister's opinion on the declaration by the top health advisor is crucial, but he has not taken position yet. It is then clear how there is actually an issue, that needs to be solved. Moreover, there is a latent possibility of conflict between the Prime Minister and the quoted source, which is nevertheless an authority, and this makes the question more cornering. In this sense, the preface serves to demonstrate the relevance of the question and to prevent the interviewee from avoiding it.
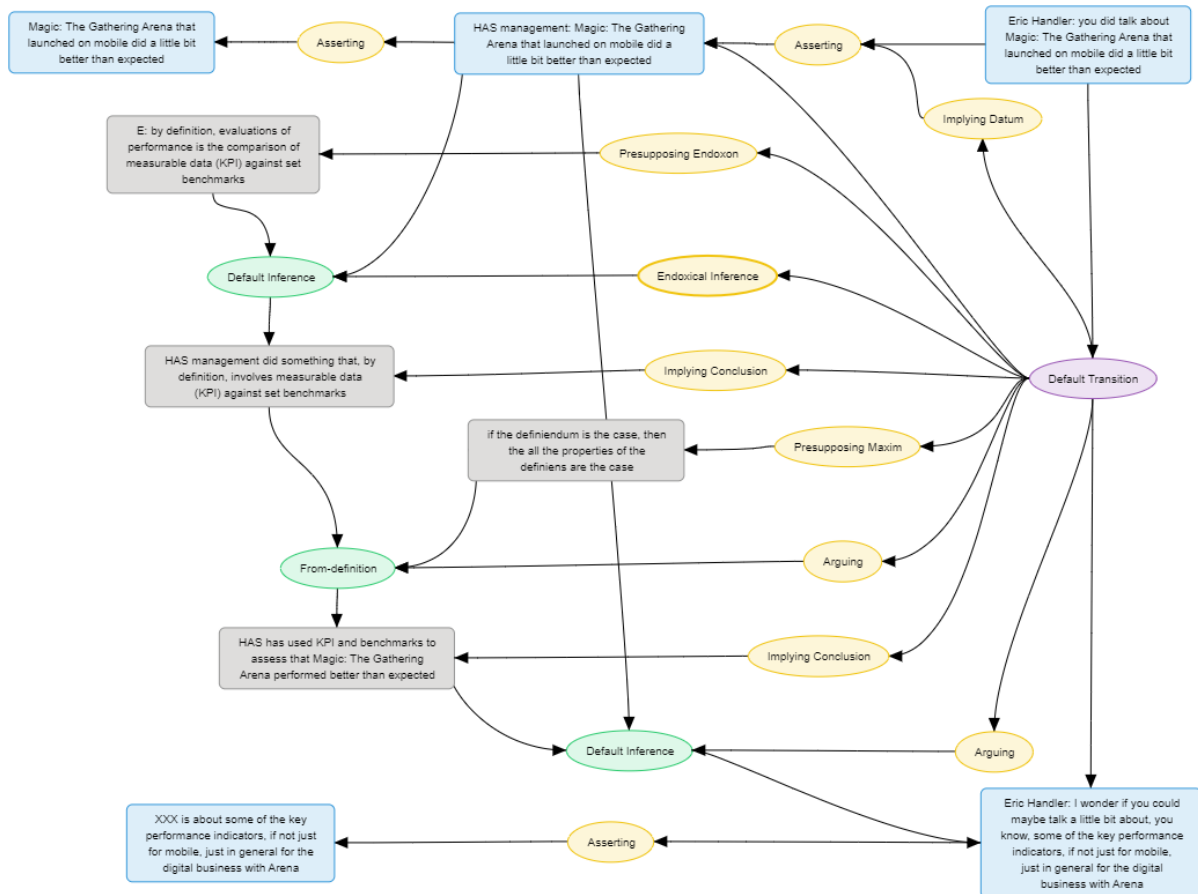
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Figure 4: IAMT representation of example (2)

Figure 4 shows the IAMT reconstruction of example (2). As for the previous one, we implemented the AMT components within the IAT representation. We can see that the structure is similar to (1), with the reported speech serving as a datum. What is different in this case is the type of premises that justify the question. Here the quoted source is the management themselves – and not a third party as in the previous example. The analyst is asking for a specific information – the key performance indicators used – justifying this request by pointing out that the management had to use them to elaborate the valuations. The addressee is charitably presupposed to have strong objective reasons backing their evaluations and, at the same time, is invited to share them. In this case, the request of a precise KPI, is justified by pointing out that managers must have used one to build their expectations and then to evaluate the result as better than expected. As it has been often observed, quarterly financial reporting is often a race to beat expectations: companies engage extensively in expectations management and are keen to under-promise in order to be perceived as over-delivering, but "at some point in time the market raises the bar" of expectations (Damodaran 2017: 330). Questions about the way companies measure their performance and build expectations are precisely meant to adjust the bar of expectations and leave less room for under-promise to the management.

We can observe here that the performance of the question act this time is justified by pointing to the satisfaction of a different felicity condition, instead of the existence of an issue, what is being highlighted is that there is reason to believe that the addressee knows the answer.

7. Conclusions

In the present work, we examined the construction of *prefaced questions* in two corpora observing their dialogical and argumentative features. Aim of the study was to determine whether and how the characteristics of the interaction field affect the way questioners pose their questions and argue for them. To do so, we collected and compared questions from earnings conference calls and political press conferences, that share a common interaction scheme and similar dialogical constraints but pertain to different social fields, namely finance and politics. To verify the hypothesis that journalists are more adversarial than analysts, we observed the distribution of request types, which showed that in ECCs we find the less adversarial types of requests (clarification, elaboration, explanation) while in PPCs we have more adversarial types of requests, such as request of justification and of commitment. We also verified that, although the difference is small, PPCs present a slightly higher number of prefaces and a higher percentage of prefaces containing a reported speech. These results are broadly consistent with our hypotheses and reflect the respective incentives of analysts and journalists: analysts need more detailed information, while journalists look for quotable statements and try to uncover potential controversies.

After having detailed in paragraph 2.2 our account of prefaced questions as argumentative structures, showing that prefaces can be considered enthymematic arguments supporting the illocution of the question act, we proposed a novel framework of analysis. Inference Anchoring Theory model allows to represent the dialogical development and anchoring of inferences, and to show where in the text argumentative structures lie. On the other hand, Argumentum Model of Topics enables the representation of inferential configurations and to unveil enthymematic structures and relevant implicit premises. The combination of the two gives rise to a framework, IAMT, that accounts for both the dialogical and the deep inferential structure.

The IAMT analytical framework was used for an in-depth case study of two select examples from ECC and PPCs respectively, showing at once how prefaced questions are structured and which are the implicit premises warranting the questions' utterance.

Thanks to this, we have been able to identify the different justifications put in place by the analyst and the journalist. While both used a reported speech as wedge to highlight the relevance of the question, a deeper analysis suggested a significant difference. While the journalist quotes an epistemic authority sensing the potential of uncovering a latent conflict with the interviewed politician, the analyst quotes the management themselves as a source of information to show the need of more data, i.e., the KPI indicator, to adjust a correct evaluation of the company.

The examples illustrate how both analysts and managers use argumentation to support the acceptability of their questioning speech acts and to commit the respondent to provide a satisfying answer – but suggest that it may happen in strikingly in different ways, connected to the incentives of the participants in the two activity types. The PPC argument's conclusion satisfies one precondition of the questioning speech act, namely that there's an issue to be solved. So, the question is not otiose, the advisor's statement makes the question worth asking and less easy for the Prime Minister to avoid answering. On the other hand, the ECC argument satisfies another precondition of asking a question, namely that the addressee is expected to know the answer. Once this presupposition is activated, asking a question is not only legitimate but also a way to test that the presupposed knowledge is actually there.

We plan to develop further the combination of IAT and AMT analysis sketched in this paper, and to apply to a broader collection of corpus examples to explore the variety of enthymematic arguments aimed at supporting questioning speech acts in the two genres. An expansion of the corpus can further corroborate the *adversarialness* hypothesis and can allow a more thorough comprehension of how the interaction field shapes such structures.

Also, this work paves the way for a subsequent investigation of argumentation for illocutions, and we plan to provide a fully-fledged reconstruction of the ultimate pragmatic step of the argument, analyzing in depth how the inferential conclusion of the preface can support the illocution of the question.

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