

Evidencing Similarity: The Language of Judgement, Spin, and Accountability

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Prof Brian Rappert
University of Exeter

Accusations that some purposefully manipulate information in order to create a favourable impression in others are commonplace in political life. The term ‘spin’ has emerged in recent decades as a versatile but ill-defined normative charge that signifies a lost fidelity. This article examines a prominent attempt to adjudicate on allegations of it in order to ask how such debates are collaboratively produced and sustained. The case study is the ‘Butler Inquiry’, an investigation established to determine whether the British government distorted intelligence about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction capabilities in the build up to the 2003 war. It is argued that the Inquiry and the subsequent debate about it is notable for two features: i) the multiple and shifting orientations adopted to the standing of language; and ii) the lack of regard in this dispute about likeness to how determinations of likeness should be argued – a kind of “a-resemblance resemblancing”. Through the multiple ways in which matters of similitude were resolved and deferred, treated as publicly demonstrated and beyond simple verification, rendered knowable and undecidable, the debate about the Butler Inquiry established the conditions for further charges of spin. The failure to attend to how claims about resemblance were being grounded limited the public debate as well as the modes for conceiving of political accountability.

Key Words: Butler Inquiry, discourse, weapons of mass destruction, spin, Iraq, legitimacy

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“...it was an interesting week before the dossier was put out because there were so many things in there that people were saying well we’re not so sure about that, or in fact they were happy with it being in but not expressed the way that it was, because you know the word-smithing is actually quite important...”¹

David Kelly
30 May 2003

Like many terms of political life, ‘spin’ is subject to multiple conceptions. As an imputation that suggests a lost fidelity, it is also notable for the vagueness of exactly what is being implied by its charge. Deception, distortion, misinformation, manipulation, suppression, exaggeration, lying, evasion, and embellishment are at times treated as synonymous with spin. This situation raises challenges for those who wish to analyse its place and import.

Perhaps the most significant contestations of spin in the UK have centred on government claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the build up to the 2003 war. In light of the failure of Coalition troops to find chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons after the invasion, various claims were made in the media and elsewhere that the government had ‘spun’ or ‘sexed up’ intelligence. On July 14, 2004 a group chaired by Lord Butler launched its report titled *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction* (commonly known as the “Butler Report”) that investigated discrepancies between intelligence assessments and government public statements.

In bald terms, the members of the inquiry eventually identified certain collective government failures, but did not signal out politicians, their advisors, or members of the intelligence community for individual reprimand. No evidence was presented for ‘deliberate distortion’ or ‘culpable negligence’.

British and American government claims about Iraqi WMD have been the subject of attention in the popular press, policy analyses, and academic studies (e.g., Chouliaraki 2005; Billig and MacMillan 2005; Gusterson 2005; Ferrari 2007); particularly in relation to their part in making the case for war. As will be maintained though, this interest has not extended to how contests of the faithfulness of representations were substantiated. In

comparing similar but different texts, a central problem faced by those in the Butler Inquiry was how to assess the similitude between words. Notionally, the Inquiry's report set out to do this in a manner transparent to the general public. Yet, a remarkable feature of the report and the public debate that followed has been the lack of regard given to how such determinations were made.

This article takes this lack – what might be termed as a-resemblance resemblancing – as an occasion for asking how conceptions of language imbue contemporary politics. The Butler Inquiry and the subsequent debate it generated provided a semantic effort at socio-political legitimation of semantic-related disputes (Martin Rojo and Van Dijk 1997) through attempts at 'recontextualization' (Wodak 2000; Chilton 2004). As will be argued, the Butler Report and its interpretation relied on multiple ways of orientating to language and, in particular, the fixity of meaning (Blommaert 2005: 186-7). Allegations of discrepancies (or likeness) between statements were collaboratively constituted through such discursive moves along with a lack of attention to the methods for substantiating resemblance. As will be argued, the failure to attend to how claims about similitude were being supported limited the range of public debate as well as the modes for conceiving of political accountability.

In attending these issues, this article seeks to understand how allegations of spin are accomplished in political debates as well as how the voicing of allegations helps accomplish those debates. The primary goal then is not to set out a definitive definition of 'spin'. For the purposes of this argument, it can be defined as an act involving the purposeful manipulation of information flows and information interpretation that is intended to foster a desired impression in particular audiences. Yet, as will be clear in relation to the matters of resemblance and discrepancy, commentaries on spin are open to charges of themselves being spun. This condition makes it difficult to definitively pin down meaning. It is mapping the formation and negotiation dynamics of meaning making – rather than prescribing it – that this article pursues.

The production of identity, accountability, and expertise on the part of elites is at stake in the contests of meaning examined here. As such, the Butler Inquiry's legitimation functions (see van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999; van Leeuwen 2007) are of some importance. In line with what was written above, this article will argue legitimacy was not sought through attempts to ascribe and objectify the meaning of language. Instead it was sought through the summation of acts that shifted between establishing, undermining, and sidelining claims to authority vis-à-vis disputes about resemblance and meaning. Contests between pragmatic meaning and semantic content, for instance, could and were played out on different orders of argumentation. Because of this and the lack of attention to how similitude should be established, the Butler Report provided an officially certified appraisal of what happened that established conditions under which further allegations (and counter allegations) of spin could run into the future.

Closeness and Discrepancy

This section provides a background to the Butler Report that indicates some of the main dimensions of controversy. One rendering of this would go as follows:

Prior to the 2003 invasion, British government officials made a number of intelligence-based statements about the threats posed by Iraq nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. The September 2002 document titled *Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction - The Assessment of the British Government* ("September Dossier") provided the public with a statement of the government's appraisal. It was said to have been 'based, in large part, on the work of the Joint Intelligence Committee [JIC]' (Number Ten Downing Street 2002: 3). JIC consists of heads of British intelligence services along with relevant departmental officials. It provides intelligence assessments to the government.

In the summer of 2003, the disparity between the claims made in the build up to war and the lack of WMD found in Iraq was a topic of significant attention. Notably as part of this, at 6.07am on 29 May 2003, BBC Radio 4 journalist Andrew Gilligan reported on the *Today Programme* that a senior official involved in the drafting of the September Dossier had confidentially told him that the Prime Minister's Office 'ordered a week before publication, ordered it to be sexed up, to be made more exciting and ordered more facts to be er, to be discovered' (Hutton 2003: 12).

In response to the continuing controversy about WMD, both the House of Commons Intelligence and Security Committee (2003) and Foreign Affairs Committee (2003) examined the basis for pre-war claims. In these investigations, concerns were raised about certain government statements; notably the prominence given to the suggestion that some Iraqi WMD would be deployable within 45 minutes of an order to use them (see Extract I). Yet, on the basis of the evidence made available to the committees, neither offered trenchant critiques of the September Dossier.

Prior to his appearance before the House of Commons, on 8 July 2003 Dr. David Kelly was identified by the Ministry of Defence as the senior official referred to by Andrew Gilligan. On 18 July 2003 he was found dead near his home. An inquiry conducted by Lord Hutton was established into the circumstances surrounding his death. While the January 2004 report by Lord Hutton refrained from a detailed evaluation of the government's use of intelligence, he did dismiss allegations that it had knowingly embellished intelligence. The lack of scrutiny to evaluating the preparation and use of the September Dossier was one of the reasons given for why the report was branded as a 'whitewash' by many.²

At the beginning of February 2004, President George Bush announced that an official US bipartisan investigation into the intelligence on Iraq's WMD would

take place. Presumably partly in reaction to the criticisms of the Hutton Report and to Bush's announcement, on 3 February 2004 the British Prime Minister announced that a public inquiry would review British WMD intelligence. What became widely known as the 'Butler Inquiry' followed a long line of similar government inquiries into matters of political controversy. Although public inquiries differ in their form and remit, in the UK they are government initiated investigations commenced without the need for underpinning legislation. Typically their stated purpose is to learn lessons and establish facts. While they can take judicial forms, this need not be so, as it was not the case in the Butler Inquiry.

A limitation of any such effort to present the basic background is the extent to which the facts of the matter have been disputed. As just one instance of this, the degree to which the accuracy of the September Dossier mattered was itself a topic of disagreement. News reports such as that by Gilligan and academic analyses such as that by Coole (2005: 465) attached substantial significance to the 45-minute figure in making the case for war. In contrast, commentators such as Humphreys (2005) and the Butler Inquiry itself (Butler et al.: 76), downplayed the role of the dossier and, by implication, diminished the gravity of any wording discrepancy associated with it.

Such disagreements were not the only type of dispute regarding Iraqi WMD claims. A sense of the proper context is often said to be necessary to give meaning to words or phenomenon (see Dilley [1999]; Rappert [2006]; Hodges [2008]). This was so in relation to WMD debates.³ Herein 'the context' functioned as an open-ended resource in arguments about government manipulation of intelligence (as in White 2005). For instance, Humphreys (2005: 167) contended that '[f]or some years it has been standard practice in government communications for significant documents to be rewritten within Downing Street'. Citing such practices as routine was part of downplaying any sense that the pre-publication rewrites proposed by Downing Street officials should be grounds for special concern.

The considerations mentioned in previous paragraphs about facts and contexts speak to the sorts of difficulties in proposing what counts as relevant for assessing allegations of distortion. As an attempt to offer an authoritative account of events, reports such as those issued by the Butler Inquiry had to take a position in such controversies. Just as accusations were made against the government in 2003 that its language or contextualisation of claims amounted to 'spin', so too could they be made against the findings of the Butler Inquiry. This meant that attempts through it to adjudicate on matters of accuracy and distortion were about spin, able to be spun, and open to charges as having been delivered spun (see Section Four).

On the last of these, Coole (2005) argued that in reducing 'sexing up' allegations made against government officials to black and white distinctions of either known embellishment or making the strongest claims permitted, the Hutton Report was able to be portrayed as a whitewash. To this either/or bifurcation Coole critically commented that:

The effect of this strategy, I suggest, was to eliminate by fiat a grey area where words, meanings and representations remain ambiguous and open to a variety of interpretations, such that the distinctions between representation, presentation and misrepresentation defy definitive judgements of truth versus falsity (ibid: 475).

This argument suggests how, at least for some, the Butler Report was evaluated on the basis of whether it broke away from the argumentative modes of Lord Hutton.

Butler Report: On (Not) Evidencing Similarity

Against the dimensions for controversy noted in the previous section, this one outlines how matters of interpretation, evidence, facts, and contexts pertinent to concerns about distortion were handled in the Butler Report.

A central aim of the inquiry was to inspect the public use of intelligence in the run-up to the Iraq war. Given the other facets of the Butler Inquiry's remit, however, the 196-page report contained chapters about the nature and uses of intelligence, intelligence in relation other countries of concern besides Iraq, and intelligence in relation to terrorism. The largest of the two chapters about intelligence and Iraq (77 pages) included the sub-section titled 'The Accuracy of the Dossier' that directly dealt with assessing discrepancies.

In general, determining the likeness of a series of texts produced by JIC to the September Dossier could require establishing agreement about the significant elements of the individual JIC assessments, how these should be judged against each other, and how similarities and dissimilarities should be totalled. The types and level of disagreement evident in political debates at the time suggested this would be a daunting task, since the significance and meaning of words were the very issues of dispute. On a more theoretical level, scholars across different disciplines have made a case for the difficulties of determining similarity (e.g., Barnes 1987).

In terms of how the Butler Report practically dealt with determining the faithfulness of representations, the roughly five pages of the sub-section 'The Accuracy of the Dossier' consisted of four tables addressing Iraqi regime intent, chemical and biological agents, delivery systems, and nuclear weapons; with brief pre- and post-table commentary (see Boudeau [2008] for a detailed analysis). Extract I reproduces the part of this sub-section related to Iraqi delivery systems. The conclusion offered in paragraph 339 was that the JIC judgments were 'reflected fairly in the dossier'.

As the central method for substantiating the fairness of government representations, the two column comparison might well be judged as curious: it supports an evaluation of likeness through restating (a limited set of) the very terms debated. Those who conceive of the examination of faithfulness as a trial of representational exactitude might puzzle over how the column listing comparison of statements could form a compelling answer to the question of whether the government appropriately represented the intelligence.

Extract I: Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction (2004)

THE ACCURACY OF THE DOSSIER

333. In general, subject to the points below and others identified in Chapter 6, the statements in the dossier reflected fairly the judgements of past JIC assessments. In the tables in the paragraphs below, quotations from JIC assessments are set out in the left-hand column and from the dossier are set out in the right-hand column.

(...)

338. Delivery systems:

Quotations from JIC Assessments	Quotations from the dossier
<p><i>Iraq told UNSCOM in the 1990s that it filled 25 warheads with anthrax, botulinum toxin and aflatoxin for its Al Hussein ballistic missile (range 650km). Iraq also admitted it had developed 50 chemical warheads for Al Hussein. We judge Iraq retains up to 20 Al Husseins and a limited number of launchers.</i></p> <p>[9 September]</p>	<p><i>Iraq told UNSCOM that it filled 25 warheads with anthrax, botulinum toxin and aflatoxin. Iraq also developed chemical agent warheads for al-Hussein. Iraq admitted to producing 50 chemical warheads for al-Hussein which were intended for the delivery of a mixture of sarin and cyclosarin.</i></p> <p>[Chapter 3, paragraph 14]</p>
<p><i>Iraq is also developing short-range systems Al Samoud/Ababil 100 ballistic missiles (range 150kms plus) – One intelligence report suggests that Iraq has “lost” the capability to develop warheads capable of effectively disseminating chemical and biological agent and that it would take six months to overcome the “technical difficulties”. However, both these missiles systems are currently being deployed with military units and an emergency operational capability with conventional warheads is probably available.</i></p> <p>[9 September]</p>	<p><i>Al-Samoud/Ababil 100 ballistic missiles (range 150kms plus): it is unclear if chemical and biological warheads have been developed for these systems, but given the Iraqi experience on other missile systems, we judge that Iraq has the technical expertise for doing so.</i></p> <p>[Chapter 3, paragraph 14]</p>
<p><i>Iraq has probably dispersed its special weapons, including its CBW weapons. Intelligence also indicates that chemical and biological munitions could be with military units and ready for firing within 20–45 minutes.</i></p> <p>[9 September]</p>	<p><i>[The dossier] discloses that his military planning allows for some of the WMD to be ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them.</i></p> <p>[Prime Minister’s Foreword]</p>
<p></p>	<p><i>Iraq has: ... military plans for the use of chemical and biological weapons, including against its own Shia population. Some of these weapons are deployable within 45 minutes of an order to use them.</i></p> <p>[Executive Summary, paragraph 6]</p>
<p></p>	<p><i>Iraq’s military forces are able to use chemical and biological weapons, with command, control and logistical arrangements in place. The Iraqi military are able to deploy these weapons within 45 minutes of a decision to do so.</i></p> <p>[Chapter 3, paragraph 1]</p>
<p></p>	<p><i>... intelligence indicates that as part of Iraq’s military planning Saddam is willing to use chemical and biological weapons, including against his own Shia population. Intelligence indicates that the Iraqi military are able to deploy chemical or biological weapons within 45 minutes of an order to do so.</i></p> <p>[Chapter 3, paragraph 5]</p>

339. JIC judgements on Iraq's ballistic missile capabilities were reflected fairly in the dossier. The '45 minute' issue was, because of the context of the JIC assessment, run together in the dossier with statements on Iraqi intentions for use of its capabilities. It was also included in the Prime Minister's Foreword.

As restatements of certain terms of the debate, the tables and commentary orientate to assessing resemblance in a rather straightforward manner. Besides the brief post table commentary, the extent of resemblance is taken as established and shown through the table comparison format. Neither in this section nor elsewhere were detailed elaborations provided of why the intelligence was fairly represented. As will be seen in the next section, the overall assessments of 'fairness' given would be questioned by others.

Elsewhere in the report though, resemblance is not simply taken as straightforwardly evident. The prior 'The Intelligence behind the Dossier' section likewise contained a two column comparison; in this case addressing the size and quality of the intelligence basis. As preliminary metadiscursive instructions to that table, it was stated that:

329. In this Section we examine the way in which judgements in JIC assessments prepared during 2002 were translated into the dossier. We are acutely aware of the danger of being unfair through selective quotation. The dossier did not follow the format of JIC assessments exactly, nor should it have done so. It was written for a different purpose and a different audience. Furthermore, to be comprehensive it brought together the key parts of a number of past JIC assessments, together with some intelligence that had not featured in JIC assessments, about Iraq's nuclear, biological, chemical and ballistic missile programmes. It is as a result difficult to make a direct comparison between judgements in any one JIC paper and the language in the dossier. We are therefore publishing, at Annex B, substantial extracts from three key JIC assessments issued in 2002 alongside relevant extracts from the Government's dossier, the Prime Minister's Foreword and his accompanying statement to the House of Commons so that readers can check our judgements and reach their own conclusions. (Butler et al. 2004: 79-80)

Herein, the Butler Report explicitly questions how any comparison can be made between the source-texts of the JIC assessments and September Dossier. Of note is how, as elsewhere (ibid: 79), the said need to 'recontextualise' extracts for their intended pragmatic meaning in use (see Chilton 2004) is presented as indicating that no simple comparison of wording or format would suffice for determining resemblance.

Also of note in relation to paragraph 329 is that while the inquiry members offered their collective conclusions, some space is opened for different ones. In recognition of the said contingency of readings, the final line of paragraph 329 *defers* judgment to the reader. The referred to Annex B contains columns comparing three JIC assessments with aspects of the September Dossier, while stating at the bottom of each page that 'Redactions are not indicated'. It should be noted, however, that the relation between paragraph 329, Annex B, and matters of WMD distortion dealt with elsewhere is not straightforward. While paragraph 329 does not make direct reference to the table comparisons offered in the 'The Accuracy of the Dossier' sub-section that follows, it seem reasonable to assume its qualifications were meant to pertain to it too.⁴

Butler Report as Topic and Resource

The previous argument offered a reading by the author of the Butler Report to the effect that it did and yet did not settle matters of resemblance. This then raises the question of how it was read by others.

This section outlines the interpretations offered within: 1) the proceeding of the UK House of Commons and House of Lords and 2) British newspapers. With regard to the former, it surveys references to the report within the Houses of Parliament debates, written answers, committee hearings and publications, business papers, and other parliamentary activities for the six months following the report's publication.⁵ With regard to the latter, this section surveys newspaper references to it for the same six-month period in *The Guardian* (and *The Observer*), *The Times* (and *The Sunday Times*), *The Daily Telegraph* (and *The Sunday Telegraph*), *The Independent*, and *The Sun*.⁶

At the outset, it can be noted that while the table comparison method was the central spine for structuring analysis of the faithfulness of September Dossier in the Butler Report, it was the subject of extremely limited commentary. In the parliamentary activities examined, only two direct references were made to the tables, with three such references in newspapers.⁷

Perhaps as equally noteworthy, all of these brief references maintained that the columns indicated consequential *dissimilarities*. In an article for *The Times* on 17 July 2004, for instance, David Owen suggested:

Do not start reading the Butler Report at the beginning. Begin instead with the crucial annexe in which the full intelligence assessments from March to September 2002 are published alongside each other. No fair-minded person reading this can have any doubt that the Joint Intelligence Committee document placed before Parliament, and the Prime Minister's foreword, were indeed, as the controversial BBC report alleged, "sexed up". Not, as their reporter at 6.07am on one occasion alleged, with the Government probably knowing that the 45-minute figure was wrong, but rather, as Kipling wrote in his poem *Ghazi*, producing "the truthful well-weighed answer that tells the blacker lie".

So whereas the Butler Inquiry took the tables as indicating relatively bounded set of concerns that did not support conclusions of deliberate distortion, the (few) commentators that noted the tables all drew critical evaluations from them. They also did so without noting how this conflicted with the report's overall conclusions. Herein, the commentators shared the orientation expressed (in certain parts) of the Butler Report that the proper upshot of the table comparisons was obvious; but derived conflicting conclusions about what was so obvious.

However, interpretation was not always treated as straightforward in parliamentary and newspaper commentary. Instead, in relation to the Report's *overall* conclusions, a second order level of meaning making was evident. Herein it was varyingly suggested that 'what

the Butler Report states is not what the report really means' (Symons, 2004: Column 548). Arguments about the need to 'decode' its curtailed evaluative language abounded in parliamentary and press remarks. Freedland (2004), for instance, maintained this type of British inquiry would never have used the language of 'screw-ups and false claims' that characterised a comparable US WMD intelligence report. This was so because Butler 'was a former cabinet secretary, an establishment insider who spent a lifetime mastering the art of the coded memo, the veiled policy paper. His report was never going to be the searing, damning indictment some had longed for. That would be far too crude'. Particularly with regard to the 'Mandarin' (senior civil bureaucrat) background of Lord Butler, related suggestions were offered in newspapers regarding the need to think closely about Lord Butler's 'deliberately understated' language (Grice 2004; see as well, e.g., Ashley 2004; The Guardian 2004; Newman 2004).

As a result, contentions were made for the need to translate the report into plainer language. Identifying a second order requirement to give the proper context and background for making meaning out of the semantic content of the report – what Chilton (2004: 36) referred to as 'particularised implicature' – enabled individuals to forward their own assessments of what it said. For instance, it was proposed that the lack of explicit condemnation in the report should not be taken as absolution for the government. As Norman (2004) argued:

Forget the conclusions that on a literal reading absolve everyone of an iota of blame. Or rather, don't forget them, but imagine the mischievous grin on Lord Butler's face as he wrote them, anticipating how easily they would be translated by those with even an A-level^[8] in Euphemism. For so far from being a whitewash, this was a more lacerating assault on Tony Blair than anyone could have anticipated.

Others too argued that the report's 'careful language' made its critical sting 'all the more powerful' (Hennessy, 2004: 73). Numerous proposals for the meta-discursive instructions (Blommaert 2005: 47) that unlocked a 'hidden fixity' were evident – even readings that arguably flatly contradicted those in the report (as in, e.g., Wright, 2004; Marshall-Andrews 2004; Holme 2004: Column 478). The newspaper *The Independent* (2004a) went as far as to produce an article consisting of seven item comparisons between 'What Butler says' and 'What it means'. This translation work was, in turn, presented as more or less doable by readers and, as a result, more or less needed to be done by expert political commentators (contrast Davies 2004; Goodhart 2004; Anderson 2004: Column 256; Beith 2004). In only a limited number of instances did individuals overtly acknowledge scope for multiple interpretations of the report's findings (e.g., Anderson 2004: Column 256; Symons, 2004: Column 556).

The translations of the Butler Report as well as the lack of attention to how it substantiated assessments of faithfulness indicate how the report overwhelmingly served as a resource for those seeking to advance appraisals (as in Ancram 2004; The Independent 2004b; Strathclyde 2004).

In keeping with the lack of attention, few criticisms were offered of the basis for the interpretations about the faithfulness of the Butler Report. So, in theory, the motivations, affiliations and presumptions of the inquiry members could have been portrayed as affecting their determinations of distortion. Yet, it has not been possible find an example along this line.⁹

In contrast to the lack of criticism made about how conclusions of faithfulness were reached, the failure of Butler to identify individuals in government or elsewhere for blame was repeatedly cited as grounds for criticism of the report as well as of what might be glossed as the ‘establishment’ allegiances of Lord Butler (see, e.g., Freedland 2005; Cook 2004b; Reynolds 2004; Meacher 2004: Column 261). In a less condemning tone, some comments contended that in not citing any particular individual for blame Butler had left it to others (parliament, the public – e.g., Norton-Taylor 2004) or that the confined remit of inquiry meant Butler could not appropriate individual blame (Kennedy 2004).

In short, within newspaper and parliamentary commentary the Butler Report was widely used as evidence in blaming games rather than an occasion that would oblige or invite inquiring into the basis for assessments of resemblance (for an academic analysis along these lines see Doig and Phythian [2005: 369]).

‘Inquiry about Inquiries’

As argued in the previous section, critical evaluations of the government’s presentation of intelligence in the press and parliament were justified either by suggesting they were evident in the Butler Report or evident to those capable of decoding its Mandarin-speak. The overwhelming practice by political commentators in settling on appraisals arguably at odds with those in the report raises the question of how the inquiry members would respond to others’ readings.

The House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration provided one occasion for such questioning. As part of the production of a report titled *Government by Inquiry* (The Stationary Office 2005) into the effectiveness of public inquiries, the committee took testimony from a number of witnesses. Lord Butler testified on 21 October 2004.

As elsewhere, this site provided an occasion for individuals to offer interpretations of the Butler Report through providing ‘recontextualisations’ (see Wodak 2000) of its written text into verbal dialogues. The testimony interaction was structured in a manner akin to court room question-answer turn taking conversational format that enabled the interactive interrogation of statements. As elsewhere, the two column method in general and its adequacy for substantiating accuracy were not directly commented upon. However, concern with the similarity or differences between wordings figured as a recurring topic. Charting these contests indicates the “shifting standing” of positions adopted as part of recontextualisations to determine resemblance.

Movement: Minding the Exact Wording

Exact wording mattered, at least at times. On several occasions Lord Butler queried the differences between the statements in the report and the formulations given of it by committee members.¹⁰ In one instance, towards the end of a line of questioning focusing on the institutional workings of civil service-cabinet relations, the Chairman offered a gloss indicating the report was ‘pretty devastating’ for the way the country was being governed. To this the response came:

Lord Butler of Brockwell: You may say that the report is expressed in Mandarin but these are, if I may say so, pretty dramatic terms which we did not use. We did not use phrases like "bolts of lightning" or "devastating" or anything like that. What we did say—and I think I would rather like to stick to the words—is "We do not suggest that there is or should be an ideal or unchangeable system of collective government. Still less, that procedures are in aggregate any less effective now than in earlier times." Then we expressed a concern that the fact that papers were not circulated and ministers did not have the chance to be briefed on them beforehand could reduce the scope for informed, collective, political judgment. That is what we said. People can draw their own conclusions from it and you are but we did not express ourselves in quite the dramatic terms which are being represented here.

Here as during other parts of the testimony, Butler resisted attempts by committee members to gain his agreement to their summarizing gists or to have him extend points made in the report along the critical lines they proposed. In this case, the refutation of similarity was done through focussing on differences between the report’s written words and those offered in the Chairman’s value-word laden questioning. Herein, the report is treated by Butler as a docile document having a fairly transparent and fixed meaning that could be gained from attending to its specific wording (even if it was written in Mandarin). The practice of pointing out the dissimilarities in exact wording between statements and later formulations of them differed from the aforementioned orientation adopted by Butler Inquiry members within the report’s two column comparisons relating to the accuracy of WMD claims.

Movement: Being Told, not Shown

Elsewhere, the meaning of the report is orientated to by Butler as fairly straightforward and transparent from what was written in it – though this is combined with a different assessment about the ability of readers to comprehend the basis for appraisals. As part of a series of questions regarding how the veracity of intelligence assessments could be validated, this exchange took place:

Q506 Mr Liddell-Grainger: How do we get at that evidence? You were the Cabinet Secretary over three Prime Ministers. If we are looking to dig up the evidence, somebody somewhere dropped a clanger. We went to war and the British presumption is that it was on information that was false. Either it was the Prime Minister or the Cabinet Secretary—

Lord Butler of Brockwell: No. You know what happened. Our report tells you what happened. What it tells you is that there were intelligence reports, some of which since the war have turned out to be unreliable. You have been told that.

Q507 Mr Liddell-Grainger: Absolutely.

Lord Butler of Brockwell: That intelligence was wrong. You have also been told that the Joint Intelligence Committee reached conclusions on the basis of the intelligence they had which were truthfully reported in public, but that in our view, you should also have been told that the intelligence underlying them was thin. You have been told all that. There is nothing more to tell you. As Privy Councillors, we were able to look into the details of intelligence which, for perfectly good and important reasons, cannot be made public. We have to be trusted on that. If you do not trust us on that, that machinery has failed, but I think you can trust us on it.

Against speculative questioning by Liddell-Grainger MP regarding the intelligence-related mistakes were made in the build up to war, Butler countered that that what happened had been made known through his inquiry. In relation to concerns about possible government distortion, his second intervention contended that the JIC assessments were truthfully reported in the September Dossier. In contrast to paragraph 329 examined in Section Three of this article, no room is suggested during this exchange for the possibility that differences in the wording between the two documents might be open for alternative judgements regarding their resemblance.

While Butler notes that the conclusions of the report relied on access to intelligence reports that were not made public, this is said to raise questions of trust rather than doubts about interpretation. The manner in which he made a case for the significance of intelligence not disclosed to the committee and the wider public is worthy of note in relation to how it stands in contrast to the two column approach in the 'The Accuracy of the Dossier' section of the report. There was no suggestion in this section that making authoritative determinations of faithfulness relied on access to esoteric knowledge.¹¹ Instead, the table extracts are treated as sufficient. As set out in section three of this article, notionally readers are *shown* the similarity of claims between the September Dossier and the JIC assessments in publicly accessible manner, not simply *told* the appraisal of an expert inquiry making use of secret intelligence.¹²

Movement: Deferring Judgement

Besides these 'showing' or 'telling' orientations to matters of evidence and argument, another one was also evident in the Public Administration Select Committee testimony. That orientation was that the determinations of issues were matters of judgement in which individuals could take different positions.¹³ For instance, in relation to concerns raised about the said inadequacy of the circulation of written materials to Cabinet Ministers, Butler responded that the Committee questioner should 'reach your own

conclusions about that'.¹⁴ When questioned by the Chairman why Butler Report did not include JIC's February 2003 assessment (also referred to in the House of Commons Intelligence and Security Committee [ISC] report) that contended:

any collapse of the Iraqi regime would increase the risk of chemical and biological warfare, technology or agents finding their way into the hands of terrorists, not necessarily al-Qaeda.

Butler (2005: Q457) responded that while the Chairman might have found it worth referring to, 'The ISC report had already been published. We did not feel it necessary to go over everything that the ISC had disclosed. You may say we should have criticised the Government on that ground, but we did not, we saw the document.'

At dispute in this case was not the interpretation of what was in the Butler Report, but what was *absent* from it. As elsewhere within the Committee testimony interactions,¹⁵ 'judgment' here was interactionally 'flat' – meaning that reference to it brought a lack of follow on questions about the logics informing the judgements. In the instances where potential differences in judgments were noted, these were left at the level of individual preference akin to subjective personal tastes.

While the repeated reliance of judgment provided Butler an interactional mechanism for deadening the interrogative logic of questioning, it opened him up to the problem of the contingency of his judgments. So the point was put to him:

Q546 Mr Hopkins: You talk about fairness and balance but we have also had a conversation about membership of committees, and membership of select committees even. Had we had three other Privy Councillors on your inquiry—I suggest Kenneth Clarke, Menzies Campbell and Robin Cook—might we have had a different report?

Lord Butler of Brockwell: A report will always be influenced by the people who are the members of the committee but I had good advice when we were starting to prepare the report and indeed I would put this on the record for people who do these things subsequently. The advice I got was: tell the story. Stick to the facts. If you tell the story, you may or may not get agreement about the conclusions to be drawn from it but as long as you have set out the facts then the committee may agree on reaching some conclusions, as it certainly did about technical intelligence matters, as it reached agreement about some things which it suggested the intelligence agencies should pursue and the JIC and the assessment staff should pursue. On more contentious issues, we set out the facts in a way that people from both sides of the political spectrum on the committee could endorse and agree with and then we handed it over to Parliament and the public.

Here, Hopkins MP questioned whether the composition of the Butler Inquiry affected the outcomes of the Butler Report. In keeping with certain practices of acknowledging the scope for judgment noted above, Butler noted the influence of who undertakes inquiries,

but then introduced a distinction between facts and conclusions. Thus, when pressed in this interactional exchange, the previous greyness of interpretation is lost in favour of a fact-value distinction. Setting out the facts enabled inquiry committees to draw shared conclusions on certain matters. In the last three lines of his response to Q546, Butler then draws a distinction with contentious issues wherein the facts were again assembled. With respect to these facts, though, it is implied that the proper conclusions are matters for Parliament and the public. It is not clear from this exchange or a reading of the wider report whether faithfulness about WMD claims was one of the referred to ‘contentious issues’ for Butler. Certainly though, it was a topic of considerable public controversy.

Spin, Politics, and Language

The fractured disputes about the status of British government claims examined here displayed noteworthy dynamics in relation to language. First, the attempts to hold the British government, Lord Butler, and others to account for their claims were characterised by varying orientations to meaning. By following out the production and reception of the Butler Report, it has been possible to examine how words were sometimes seen as possessing an unambiguous, fixed, face value meaning, whereas at other times they were treated as raw data whose proper sense had to be spoken for. And yet, as a second noteworthy point, while opposing claims about distortion were the stuff of public debate, the bases for substantiating appraisals of resemblance were given little attention.

As in many policy and academic analyses (e.g., White 2005; Jones 2004b; Heffernan 2006), in this case ‘spin’ acted as a versatile but ill-defined normative charge. The lack of clarity about exactly what was being alleged provided a strategic ambiguity (Leitch and Davenport 2007) for commentators to take part in a (notionally) joint dialogue, without necessarily agreeing on what was being contended. In this sense, the ambiguity of spin acted as a lubricant to allegation-making in a similar manner to imputations of ‘sleaze’ elsewhere (Lynch and Bogen 1996).

In following out the reception of the Butler Report though, it has been possible to develop a further appreciation of how contests of spin transpire. As argued, disputes about government distortion spilled out into ‘second order’ disputes about the distortion of evaluations about distortion, which then resulted in further interactional attempts to settle the similarity and dissimilarity between sets of (meta-) statements. It is in the totality of such movements that efforts to establish the status of government claims as social facts took place.

Yet in these trials, little explicit attention was given to how determinations of resemblance were being substantiated. As well, no explicit recognition was given to the parallels and asymmetries in attempts at “resemblancing” between the order levels of disputes. Individuals proffered evaluations of government representations and refuted others’ glosses of their evaluations through (numerous and contrasting) appeals to the importance of wording and the scope for judgement. The lack of recognition of the inter-relations in different order disputes over resemblance enabled fairly free flowing

argumentative moves. Taken together, the movement between orders of dispute and the lack of attention to substantiation produced shifting registers for handling meaning.

As a consequence, it cannot only be said that allegations of ‘spin’ often lacked precision (Humphreys 2005: 169), but also direction about what should be taken as being spun – this because of the ways in which particular arguments about resemblance spilt over into other order disputes about resemblance.

The movements associated with contests produced a complex mix in which matters of resemblance were resolved and deferred, treated as publicly demonstrated and beyond simple verification, rendered knowable and undecidable, presented as unmistakable and choices of personal preference, overtly ‘entextualised’ and left to stand alone, as well as portrayed as the product of reflexive and unreflexive agents. So, it was not simply the case that individuals contended their claims were facts while opposing claims were opinion (as in Mulkay 1985) or people tried to advance their particular reading as authoritative (Blommaert 2005: Chapter 7). Rather it was messier activity in which the need for interpretation was contrastingly positioned. This situational positioning dynamic combined with the previously mentioned lack of attention to the inter-relation between resemblance debates provided the conditions for allegations and counter allegations to turn and turn (and turn and turn).

The result is arguably problematic. The contentions about British government WMD representation read at times as an assorted jumble of accusations with individuals talking past one another. It is not clear to what extent the (presumably different) underlying presumptions and inferences were being shared and examined. It seems reasonable to suggest that under such conditions, debates about intelligence distortion could carry on for some time with little by the way of further mutual understanding being nurtured. Commentators seemed too preoccupied with critiquing others’ appraisals and defending their own to inquiry about how appraisals or distortion were and could be made.

These points advise rethinking certain assessments of the Butler Report. Coole (2005), in line with many media portrayals, positively contrasted this report with the Hutton Report that preceded it. She did so ‘not because [the former] reversed Hutton’s conclusions but because of its willingness to enter that crucial zone of ambiguity that I am accusing Hutton of vacating. Although aspects of this second report, which reviewed the intelligence on WMD, were criticized, it courted nothing like the controversy of its predecessor’ (ibid.: 476).

Through examining the content of the Butler Report along with subsequent representations of it, this analysis indicated reasons why it should not be treated as an innocent or even as a commendable effort at legitimation. Lord Butler both entered and existed zones of ambiguity and fixity. As a result, to the extent a grey indeterminate zone was created, this was the product of the summation of the (unacknowledged) multiple orientations adopted to language and truth. The complex mix of opening and closing worked itself out in different ways. Any single characterization of what the Butler Inquiry did – such as it laid out the facts in the report and then the matter was ‘handed

[...] over to Parliament and the public'¹⁶ – would fail to acknowledge the multiple positionings adopted.

Certain critical points can be said to follow on. First, it seems reasonable to conclude that one of the reasons the Butler Report did not court much controversy was because the indeterminacy of its claims readily enabled individuals to use it for their own ends. Second, the manner in which its conclusions were forwarded in the absence of attention to the bases for substantiating resemblance set a precedent for later commentators. A third set of concerns pertains to how claims about distortion were orientated to as facts. Notionally the scope made for judgement within the Butler Report opened questions of resemblance up for wider political debate; but this was also accompanied with the advancing of said definite official exonerating appraisals too. Lord Butler adopted contrasting appraisals about whether his Inquiry's conclusions were supposed to be taken as noteworthy. This included denying any special claim to authority on matters of distortion; even with the central place of the Butler Inquiry within political disputes and even with Lord Butler elsewhere putting forward the report as authoritative. Thus, in relation to wider questions about how language works to legitimate practices (see van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999; van Leeuwen 2007), these functions are not only achieved through attempts to ascribe and objectify meaning. Rather, in this case they were produced from the summation of acts that shifted between Butler establishing, undermining, and sidelining his claims to personal and expert authority.

Against continuing controversy about the Iraq war, on 26 March 2009 the British government announced a future inquiry would take place into its justifications. That 'Iraq Inquiry' is underway at the time of writing. Its final arguments and modes of argument are unclear at present. This article has suggested reasons why it is difficult to envision how a further round of gladiatorial contests about distortion along the lines elaborated above could go beyond expanding the current set of accusations and counter-accusations. Rather than more allegation-trading, what is needed is greater imagination in handling disputes about language. While it is beyond the limited scope of this article to detail how this would happen, those strategies could take as their starting rationale the need to make the implicit orientations to the meaning of language explicit in order to foster more concerted scrutiny – scrutiny of both of the appraisals of resemblance and the claims to credibility underlying them. So as the previous sections repeatedly noted, the debate about the Butler Report traded on unexamined inferences and assumptions in relation to language and resemblance. Underscoring the choices to be made in how claims about spinning are treated by political commentators, academics, and politicians and others could open up alternative possibilities for handling language within public disputes.

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Notes

¹ From Appendix 3 of Hutton (2004: 341).

² See Phythian 2005: 136; Coole 2005: 467 for a discussion of these claims

³ See as well Coole: 465.

⁴ This is so because both the sections in question use the two column comparison approach. Furthermore, Annex B contains claims related to the intelligence behind the dossier as well as the accuracy of claims about WMD and delivery systems.

⁵ More specifically, a Hansard word search for ‘butler’ between 14 July 2004 and 14 January 2005 at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/cgi-bin/semaphoreserver?DB=semukparl&FILE=search>. The search domain included all ‘document types’. The 400 entries found were then screen for their relevance and significance.

⁶ A word search was undertaken through the internet archives for each newspaper using the terms ‘butler’ and ‘report’ for the time period between 14 July 2004 and 14 January 2005.

⁷ These included House of Commons statements by Ken Clarke MP (14 July 2004) and Michael Meacher MP (20 July 2004) as well as newspaper articles by Jonathan Freedland *The Guardian* (15 July 2004) and Crispin Black *The Guardian* (15 July 2004).

⁸ A school level certificate.

⁹ For instance, former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook (2004a), said he was ‘frankly astonished by the September Dossier, which bore no relation in tone to any of the intelligence assessments that I saw. It was one-sided, dogmatic and unqualified.’ Yet this said incongruence did not lead to criticisms related to why the inquiry members largely exonerated those who produced the September Dossier in relation to the fairness of its representation of British intelligence (see as well Wolfson 2004). See Kilfoyle (2004), Jones (2004a) and Davies (2004) for wider criticism of the personal dispositions of Butler.

¹⁰ Contrast the following exchange with that undertaken in Q520.

¹¹ For a wider analysis of how claims to the possession of esoteric knowledge can authorise interpretations see Murphy (1981).

¹² For a discussion of how these showing and telling played out in relation to US justifications, see Gusterson (2006).

¹³ See Q460 and Q467.

¹⁴ Q483

¹⁵ Q460, 467, 483

¹⁶ As in Q546 above.