
A CONVERSATION ANALYSIS OF TURN-TAKING STRATEGIES IN THE 2024 U.S PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates turn-taking strategies employed by Donald Trump and Joe Biden in the 2024 U.S. presidential debate. Using Conversation Analysis (CA) as the methodological framework, the research examines how interruptions, overlaps, pauses, and topic shifts are managed to negotiate control, assert dominance, or maintain authority in a high-stakes political context. Data were drawn from the official debate recording and analyzed qualitatively. The findings reveal that both verbal and nonverbal cues function as strategic tools in shaping debate dynamics and influencing audience perceptions of leadership and credibility. By situating turn-taking within the field of political communication, this study contributes to understanding the structural mechanisms underlying political discourse and shows how conversational strategies reflect power relations and persuasion beyond rhetoric and content.

Keywords: Conversation Analysis, turn-taking, presidential debate, political communication, conversational strategies.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menelaah strategi pengambilan giliran berbicara (turn-taking) yang digunakan oleh Donald Trump dan Joe Biden dalam debat pemilihan presiden Amerika Serikat tahun 2024. Dengan menggunakan Conversation Analysis (CA) sebagai kerangka metodologis, penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana interupsi, tumpang tindih, jeda, dan pergeseran topik dikelola untuk bernegosiasi dalam penguasaan wacana, menegaskan dominasi, atau mempertahankan otoritas dalam konteks politik yang kompetitif. Data penelitian bersumber dari rekaman resmi debat dan dianalisis secara kualitatif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa isyarat verbal maupun nonverbal berfungsi sebagai alat strategis dalam membentuk dinamika debat serta memengaruhi persepsi audiens terhadap kepemimpinan dan kredibilitas kandidat. Dengan menempatkan turn-taking dalam ranah komunikasi politik, penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman mekanisme struktural yang mendasari wacana politik dan memperlihatkan bahwa strategi percakapan

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mencerminkan relasi kekuasaan serta proses persuasi yang melampaui retorika maupun isi.

Kata kunci: *Conversation Analysis, turn-taking, debat presiden, komunikasi politik, strategi percakapan.*

A. INTRODUCTION

Political debates constitute a highly strategic form of public communication in which presidential candidates deploy the debate space not only to articulate visions and programs but also to shape public images, assert authority, and influence audience perceptions. Analyses grounded in critical discourse analysis indicate that debate performances are crafted to manage credibility and power, with turn-taking, framing, and selective emphasis functioning as instruments of image construction and persuasion (Hamed, 2025). Building on the 2020 United States presidential debates, the 2024 Trump–Biden encounter provides a historical comparative backdrop for examining continuity and change in political performativity. Both debates feature strategic turn-taking and contestation over agenda control, with interruptions and overlaps employed as tools to signal credibility and shape leadership portrayal, while moderators help regulate flow and fairness. However, the 2024 encounter reveals adaptations to contemporary media ecosystems, including more deliberate use of pauses, a broader reliance on nonverbal signaling, and expedited topic transitions, suggesting that presidential debates function as evolving performances of power rather than static exchanges of policy claims. According to Benoit (2007), political debates are pivotal in shaping how candidates defend their positions and challenge their opponents, thereby offering an advantageous context for examining conversational dynamics.

Turn-taking research has historically been important to the study of interaction. Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson (1974) emphasized that the framework of turn-taking is a crucial mechanism in dialogue. In the context of political communication, this concept is critical when analyzing debates where the candidates not only present policies but also negotiate control of the conversation. As Gumperz (1982) argues, conversational strategies, including turn-taking, are central to understanding how power and authority are negotiated in face-to-face communication. Clayman and Heritage (2002) also further demonstrated how political interviews revealed patterns of turn allocation and control, offering insights into the dynamics of political discourse.

To address gaps in CA literature on turn-taking in political discourse, this study revisits the 2024 Trump–Biden debate to examine how interruptions, overlaps, and topic shifts shape audience perception in a context not yet fully explored. Grounded in Conversation Analysis, prior work shows turn-taking reflects power and legitimacy across institutional settings: Greatbatch (1988), Clayman and Heritage (2002), Ilie (2010), Bilmes (1997), Harris (1991), Jefferson (1984). In electoral contexts, recent studies document Trump’s taking/yielding and Biden’s holding, with frequent interruptions and repairs (Aryanti et al., 2024),

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Tymbay (2022), Yunus & Eliastuti (2019), and related insights from Chilton (2004) and Barron (2019) on negotiation and turn-taking asymmetries. Together, this CA-based literature provides a foundation for testing whether 2024 patterns align with or diverge from established patterns, thereby addressing the stated research gap.

Framed historically and comparatively, this study situates the 2024 Trump–Biden debate within a continuum of presidential debates since 2020, enabling a direct test of continuity and change in interactional dynamics. The data come from the first 2024 U.S. presidential debate (June 27, 2024, in Atlanta, Georgia), organized by CNN and moderated by Jake Tapper and Dana Bash. This encounter is historically significant as the first direct meeting between Biden and Trump since the highly contentious 2020 debates, providing a renewed stage to assess whether patterns of interruptions and overlaps observed in 2020 re-emerge or are modified in 2024 as communication strategies adapt to evolving media ecologies and audience practices. Moreover, the match carries institutional weight and symbolic resonance: Biden, the sitting president, faces a former president, a rivalry that has shaped U.S. political discourse since 2020.

Taken together, this historical–comparative framing justifies analyzing turn-taking strategies in 2024 against the 2020 baseline to illuminate continuity and change in debate interaction. The setting allows us to test whether similar interactional patterns—such as interruptions, overlaps, and varying hold/take strategies—persist across the two election moments or reveal fresh adaptations in response to shifts in media environments and public scrutiny. In this way, the study contributes to the Conversation Analysis literature on political talk by foregrounding cross-year comparison and the evaluative role of media ecologies in shaping interactional dynamics.

By selecting this debate, the researcher aims to analyze turn-taking practices in a context where interactional strategies directly intersect with political performance, credibility construction, and institutional control. This makes the debate a rich site for applying Turn-taking Analysis to uncover how pauses, interruptions, overlaps, and moderator interventions contribute to the dynamics of high-stakes political communication.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Conversation Analysis (CA) provides the theoretical foundation for this research, as Liddicoat (2007) argues. CA is a systematic approach to examining how participants organize their behavior in real time interaction, focusing on the sequential structures of talk that render conversation coherent. Although CA emerged from the analysis of ordinary conversation, it has since been applied to a wide range of contexts, including institutional settings such as courtrooms, classrooms, medical consultations, and political debates (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Clayman & Heritage, 2002). The strength of CA lies in its reliance on recorded, naturally occurring data, which enables researchers to capture subtle features of communication, pauses, overlaps, interruptions, and turn transitions, crucial for

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understanding the power dynamics at play in political debates (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Clayman & Heritage, 2002).

Jefferson transcription symbols (Jefferson, 2004) can be understood as a simplified transcription system that uses specific symbols to represent key conversational features observed in data. This approach includes signals such as (.) to indicate micro-pauses, (2.0) to denote timed pauses, and [] to represent overlapping speech. By applying these conventions, researchers can capture the relevant dynamics that shape the flow of a debate, making it easier to track who speaks when and how pauses and overlaps influence the progression of turn taking.

Verbal self-selection and floor control, integrated with nonverbal coordination, lie at the heart of turn-taking in political talk. Verbal cues for initiating or resisting a turn are coordinated with nonverbal signals such as gaze, posture, and hand gestures to prefigure or constrain the next turn, producing a smooth flow when the interaction aligns with participants' expectations. CA foundations (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) explain how floor allocation structures who speaks and when, while political interviews show that the speaker who controls turn-taking often shapes the frame of the debate (Clayman & Heritage, 2002). Cross-context work by Gumperz (1982) and Sinaga, Pangaribuan, & Saputra (2021) demonstrates that these patterns recur across venues, and Heritage (2018) links turn-taking to strategies of persuasion in political discourse. More recent analyses (Auer, 2021) emphasize that gaze and other multimodal cues co-occur with verbal turns to signal readiness to take or yield the floor, underscoring the integrated role of verbal and nonverbal acts in establishing dominance, credibility, and audience expectations in high-stakes debates.

Interruption and overlaps are calibrated moves that can contest dominance or signal alignment, and they hinge on both verbal and nonverbal dynamics. Verbal disruptions can advance a point or challenge an opponent, while nonverbal alignment or contestation such as rising gaze or synchronized gestures can reinforce or undermine the verbal claim. The dynamics are supported by Schegloff (2000) on floor-contest mechanisms and Tymbay (2022) on interruptions as persuasive strategies, with empirical examinations of contemporary debates (Aryanti, Yuliawati, Ekawati, & Darmayanti, 2024; Rohmah, Rohmah, & Suwandi, 2022) illustrating how interruptions shape credibility and audience perception. Heritage (2018) emphasizes that pauses, overlaps, and interruptions in political debates are not incidental but part of strategic management of political authority, and Hutchby & Wooffitt (2008) connect these interactional moves to broader public-perception outcomes. Taken together, this strand treats interruptions and overlaps as context-sensitive resources that combine verbal tactics with nonverbal signaling to influence credibility and reception.

Timing around Transition Relevance Places (TRPs) and pauses, with coordinated nonverbal cues, modulates how authority is constructed in real time. Deliberate pauses and floor-transition cues steer the audience's interpretation of who is in control, while nonverbal cues such as gaze shifts and posture changes often coordinate or prefigure the next verbal turn. The TRP framework introduced

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by Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson (1974) provides the backbone, complemented by Craig (2016), who shows how debates structure turn-taking to permit strategic maneuvering, and Heritage (2018), who links precise timing to persuasive impact. Empirical illustrations from Aryanti et al. (2024) and Rohmah & Suwandi (2022) demonstrate how micro timing around TRPs shapes debate dynamics in practice. This strand treats timing as a strategic resource where verbal and nonverbal timing cues work in tandem to guide audience interpretation of authority, confidence, and deliberation.

Multimodal cues such as gaze, gestures, and body orientation that can precede or accompany verbal turns coordinate participation and signal intent to take or yield the floor. Nonverbal signaling can amplify or moderate verbal moves, and integrating verbal and nonverbal cues is essential for diagnosing turn-taking dynamics and reputational consequences. Foundational CA work (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) remains a touchstone for understanding how nonverbal coordination accompanies verbal turns, while Auer (2021) extends the account to include broader multimodal cues, and Heritage (2018) outlines the persuasive function of nonverbal signals in political discourse. Four representative contemporary debate moments can be inserted to illustrate how gaze, gestures, and body orientation shape who speaks and how they are heard, reinforcing the claim that a holistic view of turn-taking requires attention to both spoken and embodied action.

C. METHOD

The data for this study were obtained from the YouTube video of the first 2024 U.S. presidential debate between Joe Biden and Donald Trump, which was hosted by CNN on June 27, 2024. This debate was selected because it represents a high-stakes political interaction in which turn-taking strategies are highly visible and consequential in shaping the flow of the conversation and the power dynamics between the candidates, and the video provided naturally occurring spoken interaction suitable for analysis using Conversation Analysis (CA). Transcription and coding followed CA conventions, focusing on four core phenomena:

- Turn-taking: how speakers claim the floor and initiate their turn
- Turn-holding: strategies used to maintain the floor amid potential interruptions
- Turn-yielding: signals that transfer the floor to another speaker
- Overlap: instances of simultaneous talk at transition relevance places (TRPs)
- Interruption: cases where one speaker cuts across another before reaching a transition point

Each phenomenon was identified in the data and analyzed in terms of frequency, context, and interactional function, such as asserting power, resisting challenges, or steering the direction of the debate. If you'd like, I can tailor the language to a specific style guide or expand with intercoder reliability details, but this version preserves the original content in a single, continuous paragraph.

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D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study focuses on four turn-taking phenomena identified in the 2024 U.S. presidential debate: pause, overlap and interruption, defensive interruption, and institutional control. Each phenomenon is illustrated with one excerpt and analyzed within the framework of Conversation Analysis (CA). The findings show that turn-taking in debates not only organizes the flow of talk but also reveals strategies of resistance, dominance, defense, and institutional authority.

1. Pauses

Pauses in conversation are not mere silences; they often indicate hesitation or cognitive load Jefferson (2004). In the 2024 debate, Biden used pauses to emphasize points and manage his turn:

Jake Tapper: “president Trump we will get to immigration uh later in this block, President Biden uh I want to give you an opportunity to respond to this question about the national debt”

Joe Biden: “he had the largest national debt of any president four year period number one number two that \$2 trillion tax cut benefited the very wealthy I what I'm going to do is fix the tax system for example we have a thousand trillionaires in America I mean billionaires in America and what's happening they're in a situation where they in fact pay 88.2% in taxes if they just paid 24% or 25% either one of those numbers they'd raised \$500 million billion dollars I should say in a 10-year period we'd be able to WR wipe out his debt we'd be able to help make sure that all those things we need to do Child Care Elder Care making sure that we continue to Str strengthen our health care System making sure that we're able to make every single solitary person eligible for what I've been able to do with the uh (.) with with the covid—excuse me— (0.4) with um (.) dealing with everything we have to do with uh (0.3) look (0.5) if (0.3) we finally beat Medicare

This excerpt occurs in the healthcare segment, where Biden addressed Medicare and COVID-19. His two noticeable pauses functioned as turn-holding devices, giving him time to organize his thoughts without yielding the floor. At the same time, they worked rhetorically, slowing his delivery and signaling emphasis on key issues. In political debates, such pauses help candidates project control even under pressure. Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson (1974) explain that pauses can signal a transition relevance place (TRP), yet Biden resisted yielding, illustrating how silence can become a strategic resource. Compared to casual conversation, pauses in debates are more intentional, aligning with Schubert (2019) view that candidates adapt conversational practices to maximize persuasive effect.

2. Interruption

Interruptions are often used as persuasive strategies to dominate the floor (Tymbay, 2022). The Trump–Biden debates show interruptions repeatedly seizing

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conversational control and cueing the audience to question credibility, with especially strong impact on emotionally charged topics like abortion where interruptions amplify moral claims and polarize viewers; this pattern aligns with broader findings in political discourse about turn-taking shaping perceptions of competence and honesty. Biden frames Roe as a three-way framework to restore, Trump labels it as enabling radical abortion, Biden (34) clarifies Roe protects unless the woman's life is at risk, Trump calls Roe v. Wade a radical Democrat position, Biden notes the lost long-standing consensus and questions GOP actions.

Donald Trump: so that means he can take the life of the baby in the ninth month and even after birth because some states Democrat run take it after birth again the governor former governor of Virginia put the baby down then we decide what to do with it so he's in he's willing to as we say rip the baby out of the womb in the ninth month and kill the baby nobody wants that to [happen]

Biden: [You're wrong]

Trump: democrat or republican nobody wants it to happen

Biden: You're lying, that is simply not true the roie way does not provide for that that's not the circumstance only if woman's life is in danger she's going to die that's the only circumstance which that can happen but we are not for late term abortion period period period”

In this moment, Biden interrupts Trump to challenge his credibility on abortion policy—a central issue whose salience intensified after the Supreme Court's *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision (2022), which overturned *Roe v. Wade* and shifted abortion authority to the states. The post-*Dobbs* landscape is a patchwork: some states have tightened restrictions, others protected access, while federal funding for abortion remains constrained by the Hyde Amendment (1976). Ongoing federal efforts to codify Roe's protections, such as the Women's Health Protection Act, have stalled. Rohmah & Suwandi (2022) show that interruptions in debates function as deliberate confrontational strategies on emotionally charged topics; Biden's move here is both defensive—shielding his stance on reproductive rights—and offensive—aimed at framing Trump as misrepresenting policy realities to sway undecided voters within a polarized environment.

3. Overlap

Overlaps can reflect disagreement or attempts to resist another's control of the floor Schegloff (2000). In the debate, Trump overlapped Biden during the segment on age and physical fitness:

Biden: well, you said 64 200—

Trump: [I've never said, I never said that]

Biden: —just take a look at what he says he is...

This overlap shows Trump’s immediate rejection of Biden’s framing, interrupting before Biden could fully develop his point. Although Biden continued, Trump’s interjection underscored his strategy of defending personal credibility at all costs. In high-stakes debates, overlaps often emerge in moments of personal attack, where candidates must quickly deny accusations to avoid reputational damage. Schubert (2019) highlights that such overlaps are not random but calculated efforts to resist adversarial framing. Trump’s move, therefore, functioned less as a conversational accident and more as a strategic rebuttal, reinforcing his combative persona in line with his broader rhetorical style.

4. Moderator Intervention

Moderator interventions are essential in maintaining fairness and structure in debates Clayman & Heritage (2002). A clear example appeared in the immigration segment:

Trump: ...and people are dying all over the place, including the people that are coming up in—

Moderator (Jake Tapper): [Thanks, President Trump.] President Biden—

Here, Tapper intervened to cut off Trump and redirect the floor to Biden. Without such interventions, debates risk being dominated by one speaker, undermining equal participation. Heritage & Clayman (2010) note that institutional figures such as moderators play a key role in balancing control and enforcing procedural rules. In this case, the moderator’s action ensured that Biden had an opportunity to present his stance on immigration, while simultaneously limiting Trump’s tendency to extend his turns. This reflects the institutionalized nature of debates, where moderator power is integral to sustaining order and ensuring both candidates remain accountable to time and topic constraints.

The findings show that turn-taking in the 2024 U.S. presidential debate functioned not only as an organizational device but also as a strategic medium for shaping credibility, authority, and audience perception. Pauses, as observed in Biden’s delivery, hold the floor and emphasize critical points, aligning with Sacks et al. (1974) on transition relevance places and Schubert (2019) on how candidates manipulate norms for rhetorical effect. Interruptions were especially prominent on contentious topics such as abortion; Biden’s direct challenge to Trump disrupted his turn and reframed the argument, consistent with Tymbay (2022) and Rohmah & Suwandi (2022) on interruptions as persuasive tools that can undermine an opponent’s ethos. Overlaps, such as Trump’s denial during Biden’s remark about his condition, illustrate efforts to resist negative framing and act as immediate rebuttals, in line with Schegloff (2000). Moderator interventions underscore the institutional nature of debates; Tapper’s cuts and turn reallocation to Biden reflect Heritage & Clayman (2010) findings on how moderators regulate fairness and prevent domination. Collectively, these findings suggest that turn-taking strategies are shaped by interactional rules and strategic aims; candidates exploit these resources to project leadership, resist attacks, and sway audience judgments, framing debates as performances of power as much as exchanges of policy.

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E. CONCLUSION

This study examined turn-taking strategies in the 2024 U.S. presidential debate between Joe Biden and Donald Trump using Conversation Analysis. The findings revealed four key patterns: pauses, interruptions, overlaps, and moderator interventions. Each served distinct interactional purposes, from managing cognitive load and emphasizing points to asserting dominance, resisting negative framing, and maintaining institutional fairness.

These results confirm that turn-taking in political debates is not simply about regulating the flow of talk but also about negotiating power and credibility in front of a public audience. Pauses functioned as rhetorical tools, interruptions and overlaps reflected competitive strategies, and moderator interventions highlighted the institutional framework that structures debates.

By situating these findings within previous research, this study shows how conversational strategies in debates operate as tools of persuasion and performance. Ultimately, the analysis underscores the importance of turn-taking in shaping both the immediate dynamics of the debate and the broader perception of leadership and authority.

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