

TURN TAKING STRATEGIES IN POLITICAL DEBATES

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Abstract. This article reports on two separate studies—Natalia (2019) and Subekti (2019)—on communication mechanism in political debates. Specifically these studies focus on turn taking strategies adopted in political debates by political figures during their campaign for presidency or in dealing with specific issues. Both studies adopted Stenstrom’s (1994) classification of turn taking strategies which include three main strategies: taking the turn, holding the turn, and yielding the turn, each of which was further specified into more specific strategies. The data were two Youtube videos: first, Trump and Clinton First Presidential Debate 2016 (36 minutes 22 seconds [Natalia, 2019]) and second, BBC World Debate “Why Poverty” November 30, 2012 (47 minutes 16 seconds, [Subekti, 2019]). Employing descriptive qualitative, with the aim of analyzing turn taking strategies adopted in the debates, both studies found interesting points: *first*, Stenstrom’s three strategies appeared in the debates; *second*, taking the turn strategy was the dominant strategy, followed by holding the turn strategy and the least used one was yielding to turn; and *third*, interruption which was a specific type of taking the turn strategy seems to be most often used in the debater’s attempt to maintain the turn and present their points and thus dominate the debate.

Keywords: *spoken interaction, turn taking strategies, political debate*

INTRODUCTION

Studies on spoken interaction have shed lights on the dynamics of verbal human communication. Such interests arise from the fact that communication is a social activity of whose success will depend on how the persons involved work in cooperation in some ways and through various means. A specific element in conversation is how the participants in the conversation manage the turn for speaking during the conversation. The basic rule of conversation is that, to manage the conversation flow running smoothly, one person speaks at time, after which they may nominate another speaker or another speaker may take up the turn without being nominated (Sack et al, 1974). This mechanism of

nominating and being nominated in turn is known as *turn taking*.

Turn taking comprises how the speakers change and manage their turn in conversation. This mechanism, according to Stenstrom (1994:68), involves at least three strategies: taking the turn, holding the turn and yielding to the turn. Each of these three strategies is further specified into several sub-strategies.

Taking the turn is used to give comment or to answer the current speaker’s question that has been done by the listener. In other words, taking the turn involves the participants’ deliberate taking of a turn in conversation. Taking the turn strategy is further subdivided into four sub-strategies: starting up, taking over, interruption, and overlap.

Starting up involves the speaker's efforts of starting a conversation in order to take over the current speaker's turn. Some lexical items are identified to function as the signals for the strategy such as filled pause (*uhm*; *anda*; *m*) or verbal fillers (*I mean*, *you know*) to give a time for the speaker in order to prepare what the speaker is going to speak next (Stenstrom, 1994:69).

Taking over strategy involves the speaker's effort to take over the current speaker's turn in order to respond to the current speaker. Some common uptakes such as *yeah*, *oh*, *well*, *ah*, *no*, *yes* are usually used to respond to the current speaker's utterance ended with *you know*.

Interruption involves taking over the current speaker's turn by force and at the same time not listening to the current speaker. Stenstrom mentions some reasons for interruption including the interruptor's evaluation that the current speaker has no more message to elaborate, and he/she want to speak up at a particular point in the ongoing talk, before it is too late. Interruption can be in the form of an alert (the interruptor speaking louder to attract attention, with some lexical items such as *look*, *hey*, *listen*), and a meta comment (using more polite devices, usually in formal situation such as *can I just tell..*, *can I say something about this..*, *may I halt you..*, *could I halt you there..*, *let me just*).

An overlap occurs when two speakers talking at the same time and none of them shows any signal of giving up their turn to the other until they finish their points.

The second main strategy of turn taking is holding the turn, which involves the current speaker's effort to carry on talking. It happens when the speaker wants to control or holds the turns all the time. This strategy may be taken to give the speaker some time to plan what to say and speak. The speaker, while planning and preparing for the next points she/he want to proceed, makes brief stop half way of his turn, then continues throughout the turn. Holding the turn occurs when the speaker wants to hold

the current turn to bring conversation the way the current speaker wants it and to avoid a takeover. Holding the turn strategy can be further divided into four substrategies: filled pause or verbal fillers, silent pause, lexical repetition and new start in a conversation Stenstrom (1994:75).

Yielding to the turn involves submitting a turn to the next speaker. The speaker appeals to the listener for a response (Stenstrom, 1994:79). Yielding the turn strategy can be divided into three substrategies: prompting, appealing and giving up.

Prompting is used when the speaker insists the listener to respond the turn, the respond includes greeting, question, apology, invite, object, offer, and request. Appealing is used to give the explicit signal to incite the listener to give feedback: *question tag*, *all right*, *right*, *ok*, *you know*, *you see*. Giving up involves turns that are yielded at completion point, if the speaker cannot say something then there will be pause, and the longer the pause, the stronger the pressure on the listener to say something.

Various studies have attempted to reveal the aspects and elements of the dynamics of turn taking, including Huda's (2017) and Lestari's (2016) study on turn taking strategies used by Barack Obama and Mitt Romney in the first presidential debates 2012. Another study was conducted by Abdullah (2016) on turn taking strategy in Jane Eyre Movie 2011. A study of turn taking strategies used in TV talk show was conducted by Ismaliyah (2015) on Piers Morgan Tonight talk show. Fathimiyah's (2017) study on turn taking strategies in interview with Donald Trump also provides insights on turn taking mechanisms. Komalasari (2010) studies turn taking strategies used by the characters of "2012" movie also another interest in turn taking mechanism in a different media. All of these studies have identified turn taking strategies in different settings and situations. They show that studies on turn taking are always interesting and reveal various aspects of verbal communication.

This article reports two similar studies on turn taking strategies used in political debates. In particular the studies investigate turn taking strategies used in Trump and Clinton First Presidential Debate 2016 and BBC World Debate “Why Poverty” on November 30th, 2012. The studies aim to answer the questions: (1) What are the turn taking strategies used in the political debates?, and (2) what are the possible reasons for adopting the strategies? The studies may contribute to more insights on the turn taking mechanism in verbal communication and in political debates in particular.

METHOD

Research is a systematic investigation to find answers to a problem. A research design involves plans and the procedures for research to detailed methods of data collection and analysis. Both studies were descriptive qualitative in design that was aimed to obtain information concerning the current status of the phenomena. Blaxter et al. (2006) state that qualitative research is concerned with collecting and analyzing information in as many forms, chiefly non-numeric, as possible. It tends to focus on exploring, in as much detail as possible, smaller numbers of instances or examples which are seen as being interesting or illuminating, and aims to achieve ‘depth’ rather than ‘breadth’ (2006:64).

The data of the studies were two videos downloaded from Youtube. The data source of the first study was the video of the first presidential debate between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton at New York’s Hofstra. Which was retrieved from NBC News in YouTube on September 26, 2016 with duration of 00.36.22. The moderator was Lester Holt of National Broadcasting Company (NBC). The second video was BBC World Debate “Why Poverty” November 30, 2012 between Tony Blair, Arvin, Vandana, Oby and Xena (47 minutes 16 seconds). The videos were transcribed and the analysis was conducted by identifying the types of turn taking strategies

adopted in the debates and the possible reasons for adopting such strategies.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. The result of Natalia’s (2019) and Subekti’s (2019) Studies.

Both studies presented in this article, Natalia (2019) and Subekti (2019), have found interesting points on turn taking strategies in political debates they have investigated. Natalia identified 116 data and Subekti identified 77 data on utterances containing various types of turn taking strategies. The result of strategy choices is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Turn taking strategy results in Natalia (2019) and Subekti (2019)

No	Turn taking strategies	Natalia (2019)	Subekti (2019)	Total
1	taking the turn:			
	A starting up	24	5	29(15%)
	B taking over	9	6	15(8%)
	C interruption	43	25	48(25%)
	D overlap	0	0	0
2	holding the turn:			
	A filled pause or verbal fillers	2	8	10 (5%)
	B silent pause	1	6	7 (3%)
	C lexical repetition	15	16	31 (16%)
	D new start	1	2	3 (2%)
3	yielding to the turn:			
	A prompting	19	6	25 (13%)
	B appealing	2	1	3 (2%)
	C giving up	0	2	2 (1%)
	TOTAL	116	77	193

Despite differences in the number of the data, both Natalia and Subekti reveal similar trends in the distribution of the turn

taking strategies used given political debates. Natalia found 116 data in total, with the distribution as follows: the first strategy—i.e. taking the turn—with 24 data indicating starting up, 9 taking over, and 43 interruptions; the second strategy—holding the turn—there are 2 filled pauses or verbal fillers, 1 silent pause, 15 lexical repetitions, 1 new start. In yielding the turn strategy, there are 19 promptings and 2 appealingings.

Subekti found 77 data in total. The researcher found 77 data in total, with taking the turn strategies comprising of 5 data of starting up, 6 taking over, 25 interruptions; holding the turn strategies comprising of 8 filled pauses or verbal fillers, 6 silent pauses, 16 lexical repetitions, and 2 new starts; yielding the turn strategies comprising of 6 promptings, 1 appealing, 2 giving up.

B. Discussion on the studies

Both studies were conducted separately and individually. Interestingly, both studies show similar findings. First, taking the turn strategy through interruption and starting up substrategies is the most frequently used strategy in the debates.

Interruption may occur when the listener considers that the current speaker has nothing more to say or that the listener does not agree with the current speaker’s statement. Sometimes this often happens because the next speaker does not seem to end the conversation. Interruption strategy may take the form of an alert or a meta comment. Alerts (such as *listen, look, hey*) is used to attract others people attention and is usually signaled with high intonation. On the other hand, a meta comment is commonly used as a polite interruption (such as *can I just, may I, let me*).The following data shows interruption with a meta comment.

time	speaker	text
00.06.31	Tony Blair	I chaired and we then had the debt relief and the increases in aid and so on

plus the fact that there are there is a has been some real economic growth six out of the ten fastest-growing economies in the world the past few have been in Africa there is progress secondly how =

00.06.45 Xena =**Can I just say** as long as the progress Tony Blair it doesn't matter if you have financial richelite?
 (Subekti, 2019, Data 3)

The above data shows an interruption with a metacomment. The strategy is adopted when Tony Blair made a statement about the debt relief and the increases in aid and the ten fastest growing economies in the world. Then second speaker Xena interrupted and forced Tony to stop talking. Xena’s interruption of the current speaker was signaled with the words **“can I just”** in rising intonation and put stress in those words. Xena asked Tony Blair with her words *“as long as the progress Tony Blair it doesn't matter if you have financial richelite?”* because she disagreed with his statement. Here, the speaker interruptedwith a meta comment strategy to interrupt the current speaker politely.

Taking the turn can be complicated because the speaker who responds the current speaker may not have been well prepared for a take over. If the current speaker does not pay attention, he or she will easily become speechless or does not have any ideas to talk during the conversation and this moment is captured by the interrupting speaker to make his/her turn. However, it is also common in the debate that the current speaker, although being stopped temporarily by the interruption, will fight back with another interruption. This is well illustrated in the following data From Natalia (2019), where one interruption is followed by another.

time	speaker	text
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00.20.33	Clinton	And I have been a secretary
00.20.33	Trump	of state...=
00.20.34	Clinton	= Excuse me. =
		And I have done a lot...=
		(Natalia, 2019, Data 28)

The strategy that is used in the above data is metacomment interruption. The situation of this data was that Trump tried to interrupt Clinton on her presentation about jobs. Trump disagreed with Clinton's statement about her accomplishment. He interrupted her because he wanted he examine some facts. Trump's interruption is indicated with the polite expression "**excuse me**". Trump used this strategy because he wanted to stop Clinton politely and formally and start his turn. At this stage, Trump interrupted politely by saying "excuse me" to Clinton. However, as the above data shows, as Trump prepared to continue his turn, Clinton Clinton used the same interruption strategy to regain her turn. In her case, Clinton did not use any signal for her interruption as Trump did with his polite expression, but she adopted a straightforward statement as if to continue her previous turn. This data shows that interruption does not necessarily stop a current speaker from thir course of speech, even effort for seizing the turn back can be made, and thus interruption is repeated in the debate.

The second most frequently adopted substrategy was starting up, which is also a substrategy of taking the turn strategy. Clean starting up shows that the speaker has prepared well to take the turn. In this case, the speaker will uses starter to begin the turn and signaled by "well" (Stenstrom, 1994:70). Clean start usually occurs in the beginning of the turn in the conversation.

time	speaker	text
00.04.52	Holt	Well , I don't expect us to cover all the issues of this campaign tonight, but I remind everyone, there are two more presidential debates scheduled. We are

going to focus on many of the issues that voters tell us are most important, and we're going to press for specifics. I am honored to have this role, but this evening belongs to the candidates and, just as important, to the American people.

Candidates, we look forward to hearing you articulate your policies and your positions, as well as your visions and your values. So, let's begin. [...]

Natalia (2019)

In starting as the host of the debate, Holt opened the debatewith a starting up strategy. As the moderator, Holt used a start signaled with the utterance "**well**". This opening word indicates that Holt has prepared well about what he wanted to say. Holt was ready to inform the rule of the debate. He also presented the issues to be discussed by the candidates, greeted and started the debate between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton.

A similar signal (*well*) is also used by a speaker when starting a turn being offered by the current speaker.

time	speaker	text
00.16.30	Xena	so is it very much that the Norwegian indeed the Scandinavian model is to have a high level of Taxation whereby you redistribute money from the rich whoever they are to poorer members of society.
00.16.41	Arvin	Well , I think first of all we very fact that there is inequality in a society is a venom for society it roads trust between people and the erosion of trust is also the beginning of the decline of the economy. (Subekti, 2019, Data 20)

The data shows that Arvin applied a starting up strategy to take his turn. It means that he has prepared well about what to say next. Arvin used a clean start “well” to make his statement to respond and support Xena’s statements about the Norwegian being the Scandinavian model. Therefore, the function of this strategy is to signal to the previous speaker of his/her being well prepared and ready to take the turn.

The second most frequently used strategy in turn taking found in these studies is called *yielding to the turn strategy* particularly the prompting substrategy. In yielding the turn, the current speaker can make prompting in order to incite the participant to respond so that it turns them automatically into turn yielders. Moreover, the current speaker can make a prompting in order to invite, greeting, offer, request, object, and apologize as illustrated in the following two data.

time	speaker	text
00.07.33	Clinton	[...] Finally, we tonight are on the stage together, Donald Trump and I. (2b)Donald, it’s good to be with you=. We’re going to have a debate where we are talking about the important issues facing our country. ...
	Trump	=yeah. (Natalia, 2019, 2b)

As shown in the data, after Clinton as the current speaker tried to answer the host’s questions, she greeted the next speaker, Donald Trump, and call him by his first name, indicating some degree of informality and closeness between them, “*Donald, it’s good to be with you.*”By addressing and greeting him, Clinton wanted to indicate that she would yield the turn, although only for a brief amount of time, to give Trump an opportunity to respond to her greeting, which then Trump responded by saying “*yeah*”. However, she soon take over

the turn by continuing to present the purpose of the debate, that is, important issues facing the country, which was also the topics of their presidential debate.

Another signal for yielding the turn that is found in the data is making questions. The following data shows that the current speaker deliberately yielding the turn by asking questions to the next speaker.

time	speaker	text
00.36.01	Mbeki	Mali is in livestock you find today that the Malians don't milk their goats they don't know they're cattle they are importing powdered milk from Europe now. <i>who is to blame for that?</i>
00.36.07	Xena	Africa imports 150 million dollar’s worth of food imports every year and yet other than half of the world it really never the land it really does go hungry... (Subekti, 2019, Data 47)

In the debate, the current speaker Mbeki made a statement about the situation in Mali about live stocks and the economy of the country, that despite the national resources, the Malians still imported powdered milk from overseas. The current speaker then continued with a question: “*who is to blame for that?*” This question indicates a prompting strategy used by the current speaker yield or submit the turn to the next speaker, Xena. The success of the strategy was indicated by Xena’s taking the turn in response to Mbeki’s question.

The last strategy to be discussed from the result of the study is lexical repetition which forms 13 % of the strategy. Lexical repetition is used by the debaters to hold and carry on talking. The reason why the debaters used these utterances wasbecause the speaker wanted to maintain the turn.This strategy is

characterized by repetition of some words during the speech.

time	speaker	text
00.15.36	Clinton	Nine million people — nine million people lost their jobs. Five million people lost their homes. And \$13 trillion in family wealth was wiped out. (Natalia, 2019, Data 15)

Clinton uses lexical repetition at the beginning of her statement in response to previous speaker's statement. She made repetitions with complete noun phrase, "**Nine million people — nine million people**" to hold her speaking turn in order to prevent any interruption by the other speaker. This repetition can also be viewed as making an emphasis on the issue. Here, Clinton wanted to keep her statement on the fact about the crisis in the country. She examined the quantity of people who lost their jobs, their homes and about family wealth that was wiped out. She holds her turn using lexical repetition by repeating the utterance twice.

Lexical repetitions can involve single words or incomplete phrases as shown in the data below.

time	speaker	text
00.37.40	Oby	^(52a) no no ^(52b) back that there I'm going to disagree okay the the ^(52b) EU subsidy policy these thoughts they it distorts the opportunity wages et cetera yourself the problem if you get rid of it wouldn't solve the problem (Subekti, 2019, Data 52)

The speakers in the data above were Oby and Tony Blair. In the data being excerpted above, Oby (the current speaker) expressed disagreement against Tony Blair's statement about EU subsidy policy in the Common Agricultural Policy. Early in the turn, she even

take the turn from Mr. Blair (data 52a) through interruption and the lexical repetition (*no, no, no*) further signals the taking over of the turn. In the middle of her speech, she made another repetition, this time she repeated an article (*the, the*, data 52b) to indicate that she intended to maintain her turn yet may need some moments to arrange for and continue her arguments.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion shows that debates are dynamic in nature where each participant has in their mind their own points and positions that they want to propose and argue. Maintaining turns, thus having more time to speak, will secure opportunities for the debaters to present and argue for their points and each participant in the debate is required of full concentration to take any opportunity to hold their turns. Various strategies have been employed, and the studies being reported here show there are at least three most frequently selected strategies (or substrategies), with taking (over) the turn dominating the turn taking phenomena in debates. Interestingly, taking over the turn needs extra efforts from the participants since none of the debaters are willingly submit or yield the turn. The yielding the turn strategy is normally done by host or moderator in their role to distribute equal opportunities to participants in the debate to present their arguments. This article is limited in the scope and data. More research may be conducted in analyzing some socio-pragmatic elements of the data, power relation among the debaters and contextual issues behind the topics being debated in the forum.

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