

Turn-Taking Strategies in a Political Debate between Mehdi Hasan and Eylon Levy

Elisa Sulistiawati¹, Dadan Rusmana², Ice Sariyati³

Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati, Indonesia

¹ elisaalabs@gmail.com, ² dadan.rusmana@uinsgd.ac.id, ³ ice.sariyati@uinsgd.ac.id

Abstract

This study examines turn-taking strategies in a political debate, focusing on how speakers manage and control interaction. Political debates are inherently competitive, making turn-taking not only a tool for organizing discourse but also for expressing dominance. Using a descriptive qualitative method, the data were taken from a YouTube video entitled “You’re a Sociopath’: Mehdi Hasan vs Eylon Levy on Gaza.” The analysis applies Stenström’s (1994) framework, including taking the turn, holding the turn, and yielding the turn. The findings show that all three types are used, with holding the turn being the most dominant, and Mehdi Hasan dominating the interaction.

Keywords: Conversation Analysis; Political Debate; Pragmatics; Turn-Taking Strategy

INTRODUCTION

Language can be understood as a system of signs through which humans interpret and engage with the world, as it encompasses nearly all aspects of human life (Oviogun & Veerdee, 2020). Language is an essential social, structural, and functional system that shapes human interaction and facilitates communication. (Isphording & Otten, 2014). In essence, language consists of organized sound symbols used by members of a speech group to convey thoughts or concepts based on common standards (Tri Widarti et al., 2025). In relation to this, As a subfield of linguistics, pragmatics examines how meaning is created and comprehended in context, particularly in actual language use (Amir et al., 2025). Conversation is one of form of language. Conversation Analysis (CA) is a methodological approach that focuses on the systematic examination of talk-in-interaction in natural settings. It was originally developed by Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson, who emphasized that conversation is not random but highly structured and organized (Sacks et al., 1974). One of the central concepts in CA is the turn-taking system, which governs how speakers manage the distribution of speaking opportunities in interaction. This system ensures that participants can speak in an orderly manner while minimizing overlaps and long silences.

Through conversation people can understanding each other by recognize and identify the character each other, conversation usually consist two or more people, the speaker who gets a turn talk and the listeners, who gets a turn to listen (Wooffitt & Robin, 2005). Conversation analysis (CA) is an approach that studies how conversation are organized in order to comprehend how individuals communicate and work together in actual circumstances. Conversational analysis (CA) can be applied to analyze the types, functions, and reason of turn taking strategies that uttered by any partiess (Goodwin, 1990). Furthermore, CA emphasizes the transcription of data and the identification and description of patterns of talk, including how these patterns emerge and function within interactional contexts (Okata, 2016).

Turn-taking is the part of conversation analysis (CA) that makes the conversation going well (Sacks et al., 1974). Turn-taking is used to keep the conversation flowing. It describes how speakers change and manage their turns in a conversation. Based in Stenstrom theory, turn-taking mainly divided into three; 1) taking the turn, its occurs when a listener decides to take the turn and begins to speak, right after or even before the last speaker's utterance is completely finish, 2) Holding the turn, refers to strategy to maintain their speaking right and prevent others from interrupting the conversation, and 3) yielding the turn, it occurs when the current speaker on purpose gives up the turn and allow another speakers to speak (Stenström, 1994).

According to Stenstrom, turn-taking system reflects how speakers organize talk in a way that minimize both overlapping and prolonged silences, therefore ensuring smooth and continuous conversation. Turn-taking is considered a fundamental mechanism that enables the flow of conversation. According to Sacks et al. (1974), turn-taking operates through a set of rules that determine when a speaker may take the floor and when a transition between speakers may occur. These rules are closely related to the concept of Turn-Construction Units (TCUs), which are the building blocks of speech. TCUs may consist of sentences, clauses, phrases, or even single words, and their completion signals a possible point for speaker change, known as a Transition Relevance Place (TRP). At this point, another participant may take over the turn or the current speaker may continue (Chung, 2020). These conversation may vary across contexts, including how turns are distributed, how transitions are signaled, and the length of pauses between turns (Hameed Ma et al., 2022). For a conversation to continue effectively, participants must continuously exchange the roles of speaker and listener (Hasson & Ahmed, 2022).

While the model proposed by Sacks et al. provides a general framework for understanding turn-taking, Stenström (1994) offers a more detailed classification of turn-taking strategies, particularly in spoken interaction. Stenström categorizes turn-taking into three main types: taking the turn, holding the turn, and yielding the turn. Each type is further divided into sub-strategies that reflect how speakers actively manage interaction. This classification is especially useful in analyzing competitive discourse such as political debates, where speakers not only exchange information but also attempt to control the interaction.

Starting up refers to speakers who begin a new turn by using discourse marker such as well, I mean, you know, actually, obviously) to initiate speech. For example, in the utterance "Well, I guess we can go home now", the speaker used well to respond to the previous statement before, showing the beginning of a new turn. Taking over refers when a speakers claim the turn after the current speaker has finished or is about to finish speaking, this strategy usually using discourse marker such as an uptakes, appealers, and links in occurs to response or answer the prvious speaker statement. Interruption refers to speakers who cuts into another speaker turn before it is fully completed. This strategy usually using discourse marker such as alerts, and metacomment in occurs to attract the other speaker attention, or allow the listener to come up with objections without appearing too straightforward and without offending the current speaker.

Holding the turn is the way a speakers maintain control their speaking time and signaling that they have not finished yet their statement. This occurs when spekaer uses strategies to prevent another speaker from taking th eturn while they are still speaking. Poorly timed responses, such as delayed acknowledgments or early interrupts, and an inability to recognize when a speaker's turn begins are common problems with this strategy (Patamia et al., 2025). These issues may cause overlaps or empty pauses, which might irritate users and cause misunderstandings. This strategy includes several sub-strategies such as silent pause, repeating words, and verbal fillers.

Silent pause refers to a situation in which a speaker briefly stops speaking without yielding the turn, usually to plan the next utterance. For example, in the utterance “I think (0.3) we need more time to decide,” the short pause indicates that the speaker is thinking while still maintaining control of the turn. Repeating words refers to a strategy in which a speaker repeats certain words to fill gaps and prevent others from taking over the turn. For instance, in “Yes, and and I still need to check the final part,” the repetition of and shows that the speaker is continuing their speech. Verbal fillers refer to the use of expressions such as uh, erm which signal hesitation but also indicate that the speaker has not finished speaking. For example, in “Uh, the traffic was really bad,” these fillers help the speaker hold the turn while organizing their thoughts.

Yielding the turn is the way a speaker signals that they have finished speaking and allow others to take over the conversation. This occurs when a speaker deliberately gives up their turn by using verbal, prosodic, or non-verbal cues. In other words, yielding the turn happens when a speaker creates an opportunity for others to respond or continue the interaction. This strategy includes several sub-strategies such as prompting, appealing, and giving up. Prompting refers to a situation in which a speaker encourages a response from the listener through various communicative acts. These prompting acts may include apology, greeting, invite, object, offer, question, and request. For example, in the utterance “I’ve shared my idea about the schedule, what do you think about it?” the speaker uses a question as a prompting act to invite the listener to take the turn as they encourage the listener to respond and take part in the conversation. Appealing refers to a strategy in which a speaker seeks agreement, confirmation, or attention from the listener by using appealers. These may include question tags (Q-tags) and expressions like “all right,” “right,” “okay,” “you know,” and “you see.” For example, in the utterance “The plan should work if everyone agrees, right?” The application of the tag question “right?” indicates that the speaker anticipates a reply or agreement from the audience. Giving up refers to a situation in which a speaker voluntarily releases the turn, often marked by expressions such as okay or that’s it. For example, in “That’s all I wanted to explain, okay,” the speaker clearly indicates that they have finished speaking and allows the next speaker to respond.

Through daily life, turn-taking can also be observed in digital media interactions, including political debates broadcast. Political communication serves an informative function, as it delivers important issues to the public, who have the right to access political information (Prihastuti & Yusuf, 2019). In the context of political debates, turn-taking plays a crucial role not only in organizing discourse but also in expressing power and dominance. Political debates are inherently competitive, as participants aim to defend their arguments, challenge their opponents, and persuade the audience. As a result, turn-taking strategies are often used strategically rather than cooperatively. Speakers may interrupt, overlap, or hold the floor to assert dominance and control the direction of the discussion. This aligns with the idea that language in political contexts is not merely communicative but also performative and persuasive (Benoit, 2022).

Communication in political debates on digital platforms such as YouTube reflects the role of mass media as a channel for delivering information to the public shows a shift toward more competitive and confrontational interaction (Lamsyah Saputra et al., 2023). The speaker simple do not take turns in an orderly manner but also interrupt and dominate speaking opportunities. This phenomenon indicates that turn-taking is not only a mechanism conversational but also a tool for power and persuasion. Therefore, analyzing turn-taking strategies is important to understand how interaction is organized in conversation.

Based on this issue, this study aims analyzed the turn-taking in the debated at the Zeteo Youtube channel episode entitled “‘You’re a Sociopath’: Mehdi Hasan vs Eylon Levy on Gaza”. The interaction between Mehdi Hasan and Eylon Levy presented a complex case in which, turn-taking strategies are used to involving interruption, floor control, and strategic responses. The analysis used turn taking theory proposed by (Stenström, 1994). This study concluded questions that will be the main focuses on this research. They are (1) What types and sub-strategies of turn-taking are employed in the debate? and (2) Which participant dominates the turn-taking during the interaction?

There have been previous studies that have examined turn-taking strategies in debate using the theory of (Stenström, 1994). The first study was from (Dwi Natalia, 2019) who analyzed Trump and Clinton debate and a BBC World Debate, showing interruption was frequently used as a strategy top gain the floor and challenge the opponents. The second was from (Yunus & Eliastuti, 2020) on the 2019 Indonesian Presidential Debate finding showed that speakers used taking the turn, indicating an active effort to control speaking opportunities. The last from (Farhan Aslam & Ambalegin, 2025) analyzed in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Debate the finding showed that starting up, interrupting, and new start being the most prominent strategies.

Previous studies have mainly examined turn-taking strategies in formal political debates, particularly presidential debates, which tend to follow structured formats. However, limited attention has been given to turn-taking in debates that involve humanitarian issues, in addition, previous research has not specifically explored how turn-taking strategies relate to speaker dominance in such contexts. Therefore, this study offers a contribution by analyzing turn-taking strategies and their relation to speaker dominance in a YouTube-based debate that addresses a humanitarian issue. This study aims to provide insight into how speaking turns are managed and distributed among participants in this context. The findings helped explain how certain participants gained greater control over the interaction through their management of speaking turns.

METHOD

The researcher applied a descriptive qualitative method in this study. Qualitative research is a method that focuses on the study of phenomena in their natural settings, attempting to interpret or make sense of meanings people bring to them (Ho et al., 2007) .According to Creswell, qualitative research seeks to understand social or human issues by developing a complex, holistic description that is shaped through words, reflects participants’ perspectives, and occurs in a natural setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study's data source was obtained from the YouTube video titled “‘You’re a Sociopath’: Mehdi Hasan vs Eylon Levy on Gaza” available on the Zeteo Youtube channel (https://youtu.be/HOQTgfS3PbI?si=JCi6l3oG_S9YUJKRj). The video was published on September 24, 2024, and features a debate between Mehdi Hasan and Eylon Levy, discussing political and humanitarian issues related to Gaza. The data consist of the participants’ utterances, that lasts 1 hour 16 minutes and 44 seconds.

The researcher as the main instrument in collecting and analyzing the data. The data were obtained through documentation and observation by watching the video repeatedly, creating timestamps, and transcribing the conversation using a conversation analysis approach, as proposed by (Sacks et al., 1974). The researcher then identified utterances that reflected turn-taking strategies. The procedures of data analysis were conducted in several steps. First, To accurately record the interaction, the researcher viewed and recorded the data. Second, the utterances were selected and classified into categories of turn-taking strategies. Third, the data were analyzed to interpret how these strategies was used in the debate context. Finally, the

researcher drew conclusions regarding the distribution and function of turn-taking strategies, particularly in relation to dominance and interaction in the debate.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results of the turn-taking techniques employed throughout the debate are displayed in Table 1. Three categories of strategies comprise the 188 data found in the debate. They are taking the turn (36), holding the turn (112), and yielding the turn (40). Holding the turn is the most frequently utilized of the three methods, according to the total number; therefore, these strategies will be discussed below.

Table 1. List of Turn-Taking Strategies Classification in Dialogue of Debate

Turn-Taking Strategies		Frequency
Taking the Turn	Starting Up	4
	Taking Over	27
	Interruption	5
Holding the Turn	Silent Pauses	1
	Repeating Words	76
	Verbal Fillers	35
Yielding the Turn	Prompting Strategy	38
	Appealing Strategy	2
	Giving Up Strategy	0
Total Data		188

The results of the turn-taking techniques employed in the debate between Mehdi Hasan and Eylon Levy are displayed in Table 2. The data shows that there are distinct variations in the frequency and dominance of specific tactics used by each debater. Mehdi Hasan and Eylon Levy used eighty data points in their dispute, including giving the turn (11), holding the turn (42), and taking the turn (27). Holding the turn is the most frequently utilized of the three methods, according to the total number; therefore, these strategies will be discussed below.

Table 2. Turn-Taking Strategies Result Between Mehdi Hasan and Eylon Levy

Turn-Taking Strategies		Mehdi Hasan	Eylon Levy
Taking the Turn	Starting Up	3	0
	Taking Over	10	10

	Interruption	3	1
Holding the Turn	Silent Pauses	0	0
	Repeating Words	30	6
	Verbal Fillers	6	0
Yielding the Turn	Prompting Strategy	5	6
	Appealing Strategy	0	0
	Giving Up Strategy	0	0
Total		57	23

Discussion

Turn-taking strategies proposed by Stenström, (1994) There were three primary forms of turn-taking used in the debate, taking the turn, holding the turn, and yielding the turn between Mehdi Hasan and Eylon Levy. Based on tabel 1 there a total 189 data were identified, with holding the turn as the most used stratgy in total 122 data, followed by yielding the turn 40 data, and taking the turn 37 data. This is indicated that the maintaining speaking floor is important to structuring argumentative discourse in political debates. In terms, taking the turn, have three sub stratgies were identified: starting up, taking over and interruption. The following data of type of these strategies is discussed below.

Time	Utterances
00:35:00	- John: Well, the question is when-
00:35:06	Eylon: -The question
	John: You are you are arguing you are answering the question. Yes, Israel's actions are justified.

The data above shows John Donovan as a moderator in this debate, utterance in this turn-taking reflects the use of a starting up strategy as proposed by Stenstrom. He begins his turn with the discourse marker “well” which functions as a signal to initiate speech and respond to the ongoing interaction. The use of “well” indicates that the speaker is preparing to organize his response while simultaneously taking the floor. According to Stenstrom, expressions such as “well” are commonly used to soften the beginning of a turn and avoid abruptness. In this case, John employs this marker to smoothly enter the conversation while maintaining the flow of discussion. This approach is especially crucial in a debate situation because it enables the moderator to guide the conversation without coming across as too dominating. The use of “well” demonstrates how starting up devices function to initiate turns in a controlled.

Time	Utterances
00:39:29 00:39:49	- Eylon: It was legitimate for Israel to remove the Hamas terrorist regime in order to prevent another October 7th. It's a yes or no question, Mr. Hassan. Mehdi: No, it's not. It's a loaded question. I'm going to say it was legitimate for Israel to defend its citizens inside of Israel. It's not legitimate to occupy Palestinian territory for decades decades on end. And let me answer what you came to.

The data above shows the use of taking the turn with the sub-strategy of taking over. This occurs when Mehdi, representing the pro-Palestinian side, claims the floor immediately after Eylon's utterance, which attempts to frame the discussion in a restrictive yes-or-no format. Mehdi directly rejects this framing by responding with "No," indicating resistance to the prior speaker's control. According to Stenström (1994), taking over is used when a speaker actively seizes the turn to assert their own perspective. In this case, Mehdi not only rejects the premise but also reformulates the argument, demonstrating how this strategy functions to challenge dominance and establish an alternative viewpoint within the debate.

Time	Utterances
00:56:12 00:56:16	- Eylon: It's a difficult question. John: Let me just ask you, you do are you pointing that to anybody in particular? Both can answer it, but okay.

The data above shows the use of taking the turn with the sub-strategy of interruption. This occurs when John, acting as the moderator, interrupts Eylon before he is able to fully elaborate his statement. The phrase "Let me just ask you..." signals an immediate intervention, cutting into Eylon's turn. According to Stenström (1994), interruption is a common strategy in competitive interactions where speakers intervene to redirect or control the flow of conversation. In this context, John uses interruption as a regulatory device to clarify the direction of the discussion and maintain balance among participants.

Time	Utterances
01:13:19- 01:13:25	John: ə(m), (0.6) I am ə(m) I I am I am curious.

The data above shows the use of holding the turn through filled pauses, repetition, and silent pauses, as proposed in Stenström's (1994) model. The filled pauses "ə(m)" and the repetition "I I am I am" function as hesitation markers, while the (0.6) indicates a brief silent pause. These elements allow John to organize his thoughts and keep charge of the floor. Rather than yielding the turn, these strategies help the speaker signal that the turn is still ongoing, preventing interruption and ensuring continuity in speech production.

Time	Utterances
00:18:47- 00:18:50	Mehdi: I don't mind. It's fine. It's fine. It's fine. I can do that.

The data above shows the use of holding the turn with the sub-strategy of repeating words. Mehdi repeats the phrase "it's fine" multiple times, which functions as a mechanism to maintain his speaking turn. According to Stenström (1994), repetition can be used to fill potential gaps in speech and prevent other participants from taking over the floor. In this case, the repetition reinforces his stance while simultaneously securing his control of the interaction.

Time	Utterances
00:18:53- 00:19:07	John: You You don't You don't need to do that to make your case, please. Medie Hassan, you are answering ə(m) no answer in c answer to the question is is were Israel's actions in the Gaza war justified?.

The data above shows the use of holding the turn with the sub-strategy of verbal fillers. John employs fillers such as “ə(m)” along with repetitions like “You You don’t” to maintain control of the turn while formulating his statement. These features indicate hesitation but also function strategically to prevent interruptions. According to Stenström (1994), verbal fillers allow speakers to keep the floor during moments of planning and speech production, ensuring that the turn is not taken by others.

Time	Utterances
00:09:25	John: Welcome to Open to Debate. I'm John Don Van

The data above shows a yielding the turn with sub strategies prompting strategy. This strategy appears when John begins the debate with the opening statement that welcomeing to the debate. According to Stenström, (1994) prompting strategy typically include discourse acts such as greetings, questions, and request, which naturally invite a response from other participants. In this case, John used this opening includes a greeting, which serves a act that signals to start the interaction and implicitly invites the participants to engage the discussion.

Time	Utterances
01:07:18- 01:07:21	John: You can talk. You can talk afterwards. All right. Mehdi: I mean, the dude works for the New York Post. I prefer not to talk to him, but It's not my debate

The data above shows the use of yielding the turn with the sub-strategy of appealing. John uses the expression “all right” at the end of his utterance, which serves as an appeal for acknowledgment or agreement from the participants. According to Stenström (1994), appealers function as signals that invite feedback or response from others. In this context, John uses this strategy to manage the interaction and subtly encourage participation, indicating that the floor is open for response. The usage of turn-taking techniques in the argument between Mehdi Hasan and Eylon Levy can be summed up as follows based on the speakers' point of view.

Mehdi Hasan appears to dominate the interaction, producing 57 instances of turn taking strategies, Eylon Levy accounts for only 23 instances. Regarding taking the turn, both speaker demonstrate a relatively equal use of the taking over sub strategy (10 instances each). Mehdi additionally employs starting up (3 instances) and interruption (3 instances), while Eylon shows a lower frequency of interruption (1 instance).

Holding the turn emerges as the most frequently used strategy overall, with a total of 42 occurrences. This strategy is largely dominated by Mehdi Hasan (36 instances), particularly through the use of repeating words (30 instances) and verbal fillers (6 instances). In contrast, Eylon employs this strategy less frequently (6 instances), mainly through repetition. Meanwhile, yielding the turn is the least utilized strategy, with only 11 occurrences in total. Within this category, Eylon shows a slightly higher frequency (6 instances) compared to Mehdi (5 instances), primarily through the use of prompting strategy. Notably, no instances of appealing or giving up strategies are identified in the data.

The findings clearly show that Mehdi hasan is the dominant participant in the debate. As shows in the tabel 2, Mehdi more produce 57 of turn taking strategies, compared to Eylon 23 instances. The dominance of Mehdi Hasan in this debate can be further understood through his extensive use of holding the turn strategies. Unlike taking the turn, which involves gaining access to the floor, holding the turn reflects the ability to sustain control once the floor has been obtained. This suggests that dominance in interaction is not only determined by how frequently a speaker takes the turn but also by how effectively they maintain it.

Mehdi Hasan's frequent use of repetition and verbal fillers indicates a strategic effort to prevent interruptions and prolong his speaking time. This aligns with Stenström's (1994) view that holding the turn functions as a mechanism to secure the floor during speech production. In a highly competitive setting such as a political debate, this strategy becomes particularly important, as it allows speakers to fully develop their arguments without being disrupted by their opponents.

The findings of this study differ from previous research that highlights interruption as the primary strategy of dominance. While interruption is present in the data, it is not the most dominant strategy. Instead, holding the turn emerges as the key mechanism through which dominance is constructed. This indicates that speakers may rely more on maintaining the floor rather than aggressively taking it, especially in moderated debates where interruptions may be controlled. This finding also reflects the role of the moderator in shaping interaction. The presence of a moderator limits excessive interruptions, thereby encouraging speakers to use alternative strategies such as holding the turn. As a result, dominance is achieved not through overt competition but through subtle control of speaking time. This highlights the importance of considering contextual factors when analyzing turn-taking strategies in political discourse.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated turn-taking strategies in a political debate and aimed to identify the types and sub-strategies of turn-taking employed, as well as to determine which participant dominates the interaction. The findings demonstrated that all three types of turn-taking were used, with holding the turn emerging as the most dominant strategy, particularly through repeating words and verbal fillers. Mehdi Hasan was found to dominate the turn-taking, as he more frequently claimed, maintained, and controlled the conversational floor compared to Eylon Levy. These results underscore the importance of turn-taking as a tool for managing interaction and expressing dominance in political debates, suggesting that speakers can strategically use these mechanisms not only to participate but also to control the direction of discourse. While this study provides valuable insights into turn-taking strategies in debate discourse, certain limitations should be noted, such as concentrating on a specific argument and using qualitative data interpretation. Therefore, future research should analyze a broader range of debates and incorporate both qualitative and quantitative approaches to enhance understanding of interactional dominance and inform discourse analysis in media and political communication contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to the supervisors, Mr. Dadan Rusmana and Ms. Ice Sariyati for guidance, support, and feedback throughout the completion of this research. The author also thanks to the lecturers of the English Literature Department for their knowledge and encouragement during the academic process. Last, appreciation is also extended to family,

friends, and all parties who have contributed, directly or indirectly, to completion of this research.

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