



RESEARCH PAPER

Gendered Interruption Patterns in Political Discourse: A Conversational Analysis of the 2016 Trump–Clinton Debate

¹Saima Jamshaid * and ²Hafiz Qasim Nisar Tarar

1. Lecturer, Department of English, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan
2. M. Phil (Linguistics), University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan

***Corresponding Author** | saima.jamshaid@uog.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

Conversational analysis of everyday language has long been recognized as a key aspect of language studies with interruptions serving as crucial indicator of power dynamics and social norms that govern different use of language by both male and female gender. This study aims to investigate the interruption pattern in mixed gender communication, where men appear to interrupt more than women in order to dominate the conversation. The Conversation Analysis method (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) is applied to analyze the data from Trump VS Clinton presidential debate 26th September, 2016. The data is collected from Washington Post, USA. The data is analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Classification of data into different types of interruptions and qualitative analysis of interruption patterns. As per the quantitative analysis 40 % interruptions were made by Trump to intervene the talk of Clinton. 32% interruptions were made by Holt (the moderator) while Clinton made only 28% of total interruptions, which were less than 71% of total interruptions made by male participant in the debate. In this way, findings of the study evidently show that men interrupt more than women in conversations to dominate and to hold the stage. Future research can be done on analyzing interruptions in a variety of social settings beyond political debates, such as workplace meetings, classrooms, media interviews, or casual conversations. This would help understand how context (formal vs. informal, hierarchical vs. egalitarian) impacts gendered interruption patterns.

KEYWORDS Interruptions, Dominance, Intrusive, Derailment, Conversational Analysis

Introduction

Political campaigns have increasingly emerged as compelling and widely discussed topics in contemporary discourse. A key feature of these campaigns is the political debate, where candidates answer questions from a moderator and engage in argumentation before an audience. Steinberg (2009) defines debate as a formal exchange of ideas involving structured arguments on specific issues. This process can be instrumental in guiding policy decisions and shaping public opinion. Typically, debates involve at least two opposing sides that present differing viewpoints, each supported by logical reasoning. Therefore, critical thinking is vital during debates, and audiences must carefully evaluate the arguments and performances of the candidates.

Language is a social phenomenon, defining it as social particularly implies its use in every aspect of society in day to day talks and conversations people use language not only to meet their need of communication but also actively construct their identities and play their roles as assigned by society. Social, cultural and religious norms define the usage of language by both men and women in a community. Most of past and recent language studies focused on conversational analysis of speech made by both genders, particularly

in mixed gender settings, including both public, professional, formal and informal settings. Interruptions are key aspects of this type of analysis. For instance, Zimmerman and West (1975) proposed in their study that men interrupt more than women in conversations. The reason they sought was dominance psyche of men to exercise control over the course of conversations.

The defining criteria of what interruptions are vary among linguistics. Zimmerman and West (1975) define it as “next speaker’s turn that begins with current speaker’s turn, that is, at least two syllable, before the beginning of or after the end of current speaker’s unit. Interruptions are to be distinguished from interventions that facilitate current speaker”. According to Kendon (1967) “intentional interruptions should be distinguished from misinterpretations, (Orestorm, 1983). Meltzer et al., (1971) define in terms of “just two persons vocalizing at once”. According to Grice (1975), conversational patterns usually incorporate an aspect of Cooperative Principles (Stenstorm, 1984). That means to say people often interrupt to show agreement, support and compliance to the speaker. It can be formulated as a type of Supportive interruptions that are made with a positive purpose in view. The present study focuses on to investigate such type of interruptions made by both male and female candidates in a political debate.

Coates (2004) argues that “it seems the men pursue a style of interaction based on power while women pursue style based on solidarity and support”. She further argues that men exhibit more competitive behavior while women have more supportive behavior that is inculcated by the society during childhood. Lakoff (2003) argues that “But there’s much less analysis on the role of gender in politics than in from linguistic perspective”. This shows that, in contrast to general hypothesis built by many studies that women exhibit less aggressive and intrusive behavior, the political interviews, debates or speeches by most influential female politicians manifest such patterns. Coates (2004) further discusses that “if such women pursue soft, supportive and cooperative style, they will be considered as they are powerless and do not deserve that high position, the career women are really in a Catch -22 position in linguistic field”.

Jane and Clark (1993) say that the main function of interruptions often used in conversations is to prevent the current speaker from trailing the interaction and taking the floor by oneself. Kollock et al., (1985) discussed that initiating the interruption is linked with power, the more powerful partner attempts more interruptions, suggesting that significant percentage of interruptions are associated with disruption and dominance. Kalcik (1975) is of the opinion that women interrupt when they enjoy a topic or talk. Few interruptions are related to opposition, most are collaborative in nature. Fishman (1980) is of the view that women do the shit work in conversation, and that is to say they support and enable the interruption to continue.

While these studies have explored various aspects of political discourse – including argument quality, persuasive strategies, power dynamics, and underlying ideologies – none have specifically focused on the role of interruptions in debates. Although Natalia et al. (2019) noted interruptions as part of turn-taking, this aspect only received limited attention in their study. Given that interruptions are a common feature in debates, a more focused investigation is necessary. Because people have different conversational styles, interruptions may not always be intended as intrusions; they could also serve helpful or supportive purposes. Therefore, the current study aims to investigate whether men interrupt more frequently than women in mixed – gender conversations. The study also intends to investigate the different types of interruptions made by both the gender along with the aim to analyze the way power dynamics (e.g., Trump’s tendency to dominate) affect conversational flow.

Literature Review

Men dominance of conversation through strategy of interruptions have been explored in various studies. For instance, Lovin and Charles (1989) viewed gender as a way of ranking social status in a given group. In this context, male interruptions are directly linked to their social dominance, while female interrupting behavior seems almost programmed to deny their socially – established inferiority.

Adawiyah (2017) conducted a study on the use of modality in political debates between Megawati and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) in Indonesia, and between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney in the United States. The findings indicate that politicians often utilize high-value modalities to demonstrate strong commitment to their views. Notably, American politicians were found to be more open to public assessment than their Indonesian counterparts.

In a similar vein, Shabrina (2016) explored Hillary Clinton's use of persuasive strategies in her political campaign speeches. Her findings indicate that Clinton applied all three of Aristotle's rhetorical appeals – Ethos, Pathos, and Logos. Clinton conveyed ethos through motivational language, outlining future plans, and demonstrating empathy. She employed logos by presenting factual information and maintaining consistency in her arguments.

In a related study, Putra (2016) explored power relations in Donald Trump's campaign discourse. The analysis showed that Trump employed discursive strategies to assert dominance over his opponent. These strategies included victimizing, belittling, and discriminating against his rival to elevate his own image and appear more authoritative.

Anggraini (2018) further investigated Trump's ideological stance using Halliday's transitivity framework. The findings reveal that Trump utilized all six transitivity processes – material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential – to articulate his ideology, which reflects a democratic-capitalist perspective.

Additionally, Natalia et al., (2019) analyzed turn-taking strategies in the first 2016 U.S. presidential debate between Clinton and Trump, complemented by data from a BBC World Debate. They identified three main strategies: taking the turn, holding the turn, and yielding the turn, with "taking the turn" being the most frequently employed.

Orcult and Mennella (1995) found in their study that when women interrupted in a conversation they were assumed as controlling the conversation even the man had 64% of participation. The opposite trend they found was, in cases where a women held 64% conversation, were interrupted and surpassed by male participants. This in turn depends upon the context, situation and position of participants. In conversations, where female participants are in majority and male participation is minimal, still their arguments are overshadowed by male judgments with or without interruptions.

Moreover, the studies by Lakoff (1975) and Zimmerman (1975), focused on men as conversational enemy. Lakoff (1975) introduced three methods through which men control power in conversations; interruptions, topic control and no response. Further, in her work *language and women's place*, she claims that from the early age, girls are conditioned to speak differently and are provided with negative reinforcement when they speak as directly as boys; then, as adults, they are denied full access to discussions on the ground that they don't communicate as effectively.

Edelsky (1982) examined mixed- sex conversations in faculty meeting and found that both genders participated equally during informal discussions in which multiple speakers could take the floor. However, she observed that men spoke more than women in a single -speaker manner.

Fishman (1983) studied the private conversation of both male and female students in graduate schools in order to examine male conversational dominance either imposed by silences, non- responsive pattern or by intrusive, dominating or challenging interruptions.

Many studies explored the phenomenon of interruption in mixed gender settings such as workplaces, formal and informal contexts. However in context of media and politics in which women often hold powerful status, often competing with male counterparts, the extent to which their talks , speeches and arguments are interrupted and disrupted by men is less examined. The present study aims to cover this gap by analyzing such conversational aspects in political debate between presidential candidates such as Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, to find out that men interrupt more than women in political discourse also.

Material and Methods

The data for this study comprises of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton's first presidential debate, held on September 26, 2016, respectively. The data is collected from Washington Post, USA. The analytical framework employed is Conversation Analysis (CA) (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). For the data analysis quantitative and qualitative both methods are used to explore the structural and functional features of spoken interaction. CA has been widely utilized in previous studies, including those by Larasati and Jannah (2014) in the context of film dialogues; in talk show analysis (Faizah & Kurniawan, 2016, Ismaliyah, 2015; Haris and Mirahayuni, 2010); and Cantrell (2014) in casual conversational settings.

In the present research, CA is applied to examine the conversational dynamics between Trump and Clinton, with a particular focus on the use and function of interruptions. Elements typically analyzed in CA include interruptions, dominance, intrusiveness, derailment, and other detailed conversational features. This study specifically concentrates on how interruptions occurred within the turn-taking system and the sequential organization of the debates (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Heritage & Atkinson, 1984; Hutchby, 1998; Levinson, 1983; Sacks, 1984; Schegloff, 1984; Wei, 2002). This categorization enabled a more nuanced understanding of how interruptions function in the political discourse of the candidates.

After getting the transcribed data, the data were carefully examined to find out all interruptions made by Trump and Clinton. Each instance was categorized based on its type, allowing for a systematic classification and quantification of the various forms and purposes of interruptions used by the candidates.

Results and Discussion

Table 1
Interruptions Distribution

	Participants	Interruptions Counted	Types of Interruptions
Total Interruptions Count 306	Donald Trump	124	Challenging Intrusive Dominating
	Hillary Clinton	87	Supportive Fact checking

Moderator	97	Defending
		Steering the debate
		Fact checking
		Time enforcement

The table 1 shows that Total 308 interruptions made in this debate. Donald Trump made 124 were interruptions that is the large number of total number.

Donald Trump (The Leader)

Table 2
Types of Trump's Interruptions

Types	Intrusive	Dominating	Challenging	Supportive	Neutral	Derailment
Count	41	22	28	6	12	15

The interruptions made by Trump are presented below with examples.

Types of Trump's Interruptions

Intrusive

Donald made intrusive interruptions more frequently, particularly to cut of the sentences and speech of Clinton. For example:

Example:

Clinton: "I have put forth a plan to defeat ISIS_"

Trump: No, no, you're telling the enemy everything you want to do.

Dominating

Second type of most frequent interruptions made by Trump were those by which he tried to subside Hillary's arguments and dominate the conversation.

Example:

Clinton: "I think it's important that we grip this issue"...

Trump: "you can't do anything about it"

Challenging

In addition, he posed a challenging and competitive stance to her talk for about 28 times.

Example:

Clinton: I opposed the TPP once the final terms were clear....

Trump: You called it gold standard of trade deals

Supportive

There are few instances where Trump supported Hillary's argument only to make his point just making Supportive interruptions. For example:

Example:

Clinton: we both want to help worker's families

Trump: That's true, but your plan is weak

Neutral

He made 12 neutral interruptions by which he either showed compliance, asked for clarification or repetition to the moderator.

Example:

Holt: let's move to the next topic....

Trump: Okay

Derailments

Another type of interruptions used by Donald Trump are derailments. These are used to intentionally or unintentionally change the topic or focus of ongoing conversation. Trump used these as give or scoff to disrupt the focus of talk made by Clinton.

Example:

Clinton: You haven't paid federal income tax...

Trump: That makes me smart

The so far analysis of the data shows that Trump employed confrontational strategy through aggressively using intrusive, dominating or derailment interruptions. So move next to Clinton for the analysis.

Hillary Clinton (The Leader)

Table 3
Types of Clinton's Interruptions

Type	Intrusive	Supportive	Disagreement	Compliance
Count	51	9	12	5

The table 3 shows that although, Clinton's interruptions are far less than those made by Trump in the debate but she made considerably more competitive interruptions than any other type to counter Trump's arguments as presented in the examples given below.

Types of Trump's Interruptions**Intrusive**

Clinton as a proactive politician and nominee of Democratic Party in presidential election she made over 61 attempts in which she actively used intrusive.

Example:

Trump: We need law and order in the cities....

Clinton: But not in a way that racially profiles

Supportive

She made more supportive arguments than Trump, 11 in numbers. Often using it as cooperative and acquiescence mechanism against his less heated conservations.

Example:

Trump: We should invest in infrastructure

Clinton: Yes, but we need real funding behind it.

Disagreement

Example:

Trump: Who called it the gold standard of trade? He said it's the finest deal you've ever seen.

Hillary: No

The example above illustrates Hillary Clinton's use of interruption to express disagreement, a clear example of the intrusive function of interruptions. While Donald Trump is still articulating his point regarding trade policy, Clinton interjects with a brief but firm "No." This interruption serves as a direct rejection of Trump's claim – specifically his reference to the trade deal as the "gold standard." By cutting in mid-sentence, Clinton effectively disrupts Trump's narrative to immediately challenge the accuracy or framing of his statement. Her response signals strong opposition, emphasizing her intent to discredit the argument before it is fully developed. This kind of interruption aligns with the disagreement function, where the speaker uses minimal yet assertive language to contest the ongoing discourse.

Compliance

She also interrupted the moderator 5 times in a neutral way to show compliance with his arguments. However in proportion to turn taking in the form of interruptions, she is less aggressive.

Example:

Trump: Our jobs are fleeing the country....., and there's nobody in our government to fight them.

Clinton: Donald's very forceful about this, and I understand that...., we actually did push China on a number of issues, including currency manipulation.

Holt (The moderator)

Table 4
Interruptions made by Holt (The moderator)

Type	Steering the debate	Fact – checking	Time enforcement
Count	42	25	30

As his role to mediate the debate was the moderator Holt frequently interrupted as shown in the table 4 given above. The interruptions are discussed with examples below.

Types of Holt's Interruptions

The moderator tries to change the topic to lessen the intensity of the arguments made.

Steering the debate

Example:

Holt: Moving on to the next segment....

Fact Checking

Although two minutes the given time to Clinton was ended but for reaching to the fact the mediator gives her some more time.

Example:

Holt: Your two – your two minutes expired, but I do want to follow up. Stop-and-frisk was ruled unconstitutional in New York, because it largely singled out black and Hispanic young men.

Time Enforcement

The mediator earns Clinton that her two minutes have expired to show his authority and power.

Example:

Holt: Your two minutes have expired.

Percentage of interruptions

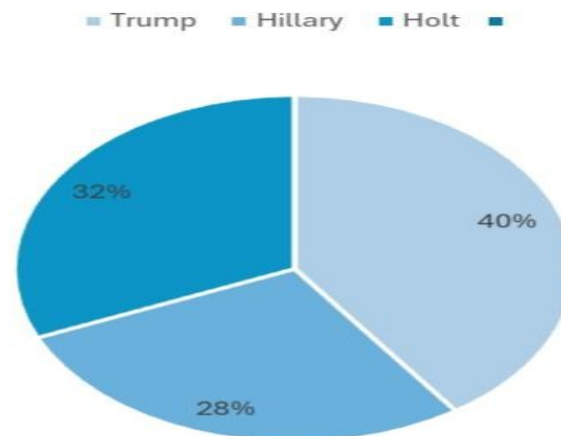


Figure 1. Over all Percentages of Interruptions made by both the Leaders and the Moderator

As per the above figure 1 Trump was responsible for the majority of competitive interruptions, which made up 40% of the total – more than either Clinton or the moderator. In comparison, Clinton contributed only 28% of the total interruptions, and hers were generally less dominating. These patterns illustrate how gendered communication styles manifest even in formal, high-profile interactions, and how gender continues to play a significant role in shaping linguistic behavior. On the other hand the moderator's were 32% either to be neutral, for fact checking or just to enforce time management.

Discussion

The data for this study was derived from political context of debate between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton held on 26th September, 2016. The findings show that although Clinton made 87 interruptions, out of which 61 were competitive against the arguments of Donald Trump, these seem to be more demanding of her position as presidential candidates who had to make political antagonism to Trump's talks in front of public. But Trump's 106 competitive interruptions suggest more a masculine urge to dominate the conversation than to make political counteracts. In this way, the present study aligns with the claim that men interrupt more than women in conversations.

The findings reinforce a well-established pattern in linguistic and gender studies: men tend to interrupt more frequently than women, whether in informal conversations or high-stakes political discourse. Donald Trump interrupted 124 times, significantly surpassing Hillary Clinton's 87 interruptions. This disparity supports the notion that men often use interruptions as a means of asserting conversational dominance and authority. In contrast, Clinton's interruptions were largely corrective or defensive in nature, consistent with existing research suggesting that women tend to use interruptions less aggressively, often for clarification or fact-checking purposes rather than to control the conversation.

The formal debate context – where assertiveness is often equated with strength and leadership – further amplifies this gender imbalance. Additionally, the moderator, Lester Holt, made 97 interruptions, primarily to enforce debate rules and maintain structure. This highlights that the function of interruptions varies depending on both context and the speaker's role. In a nutshell in contrast Hillary's interruptions to either Trump or moderator were mostly defensive and corrective in a fact checking way rather than controlling the conversation.

Conclusion

This study affirms the long-documented observation that men interrupt more often than women, even in formal political contexts. The analysis of the 2016 U.S. presidential debate between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton revealed that Trump made a substantially higher number of interruptions, reflecting a tendency toward conversational dominance often associated with male speech patterns. Clinton's interruptions, by contrast, were primarily corrective and less confrontational, reinforcing the idea that women typically employ interruptions for clarification and accuracy rather than dominance – even when they occupy powerful positions.

Furthermore, the findings underscore the impact of gender dynamics on speech in public and political settings, where assertiveness is frequently interpreted as a marker of leadership. The frequent interventions by moderator Lester Holt emphasize the regulatory role of interruptions within structured discourse and highlight the various functions interruptions can serve.

Overall, the research demonstrates how cultural and social norms embedded in male-dominated societies shape discursive practices and language use. It also brings to light the enduring influence of gender on communicative behavior. Additionally, the study suggests that when women occupy positions of authority, they may engage in more assertive speech strategies – including interruptions – within mixed-gender interactions. This observation presents a valuable avenue for future research into how power and gender intersect to influence language use in formal and informal settings.

References

- Adawiyah, R. (2017). *Modality in political debates: A comparative analysis of Mega vs. SBY and Obama vs. Romney*. Unpublished master's thesis, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya.
- Anggraini, N., Sahnaz, A., Fathonah, E. L., Al Farisi, M. R., & Fidiyanti, M. (2018). *Transitivity process and ideological construction of Donald Trump's speeches*. *NOBEL: Journal of Literature and Language Teaching*, 9(1), 26–44.
- Atkinson, J. M., & Heritage, J. (Eds.). (1984). *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis*. Cambridge University Press
- Blake, A. (2016, September 26). The first Trump-Clinton presidential debate transcript, annotated. *The Washington Post*.
- Coates, J. (2004). *Women, men, and language: A sociolinguistic account of gender differences in language* (3rd ed.). Pearson Longman. ISBN: 9780582771864
- Edelsky, C. (1982). *Who's got the floor?* *Language in Society*, 10(3), 383–421.
- Fishman, P. M. (1980). *Conversational insecurity*. In H. Giles et al. (Eds.), *Language: Social psychological perspectives* (pp. 127–132). Academic Press.
- Freeley, A. J., & Steinberg, D. L. (2008). *Argumentation and debate: Critical thinking for reasoned decision making* (12th ed.). Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Grice, H. P. (1975). *Logic and conversation*. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics*, Vol. 3: *Speech acts* (pp. 41–58). Academic Press.
- Jane, E. A., & Clark, M. (1993). *Gender and discourse in the workplace*. *Discourse & Society*, 4(1), 133–159
- Jannah, S. (2014). *Modality in political discourse: A study of the 2014 Indonesian presidential debates*. Unpublished master's thesis, Universitas Negeri Malang.
- Kalcik, S. (1975). *Language and gender: A sociolinguistic analysis*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.
- Kendon, A. (1967). *Some functions of gaze-direction in social interaction*. *Acta Psychologica*, 26, 22–63
- Kollock, P., Blumstein, P., & Schwartz, P. (1985). *Sexuality and social control: A sociological perspective*. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 11, 1–20.
- Lakoff, R. (1975). *Language and woman's place*. Harper & Row.
- Lakoff, R. (2004). *Language and Woman's Place: Text and Commentaries* (Revised edition). Oxford University Press.
- Larasati, D. (2014). *Conversation analysis in Indonesian talk shows: A study of turn-taking and repair strategies*. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 66, 1–13.
- Levinson, S. C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge University Press.

- Lovin, L. A., & Charles, M. (1989). *Gender differences in conversational style: A study of interruptions*. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 8(2), 125–138.
- Meltzer, B. N., Morris, J., & Hayes, R. (1971). *Social psychology: A sociological approach*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.
- Mennella, J. A., & Orcutt, J. D. (1995). *Gender differences in conversational style: A study of interruptions*. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 14(3), 241–258.
- Natalia, R., Subekti, F., & Mirahayuni, N. K. (2019). *Turn-taking strategies in the 2016 U.S. presidential debates*. *Anaphora: Journal of Language, Literary, and Cultural Studies*, 2(2), 56–63
- Orestrom, J. (1983). *Interruptions in conversation: A study of their occurrence and function*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Putra, I. M. (2016). *Power relations in political discourse: A study of the 2016 U.S. presidential debates*. Unpublished master's thesis, Universitas Negeri Malang.
- Roman, L. (1975). *Language and gender: A sociolinguistic analysis*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.
- Sacks, H., Schegloff, E. A., & Jefferson, G. (1974). A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language*, 50(4), 696–735.
- Schegloff, E. A. (1984). *On some questions and ambiguities in conversation analysis*. In J. M. Atkinson & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis* (pp. 28–52). Cambridge University Press.
- Stenström, A.-B. (1984). *Questions and responses in English conversation*. Lund Studies in English, 68. CWK Gleerup.
- Wei, L. (2002). 'What do you want me to say?' On the Conversation Analysis approach to bilingual interaction. *Language in Society*, 31(2), 159–180