


Turn-Taking Strategies in the 2024 U.S. Presidential Debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris

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ABSTRACT

Turn-taking is fundamental in political debates, as control of the turn reflects a speaker's communicative authority. Limited research has compared how different candidates utilize turn-taking strategies to assert control or dominance in presidential debates. This study aims to identify and analyse the turn-taking strategies employed by Donald Trump and Kamala Harris in the 2024 U.S presidential debate using Stenstrom (2014) framework. A total of 130 data points were collected from the ABC News YouTube Channel and analysed using qualitative descriptive methods. Following the steps proposed by Merriam & Tisdell (2015). The findings show that Trump predominantly used aggressive interruptive and taking the turn strategies, while Harris tended to apply more structured and holding the turn strategies. The study concludes that turn-taking strategies not only shape the structure and flow of the debate but also reflect each candidate's dominance in the interaction.

Keywords: *Turn-Taking, Presidential Debate, Donald Trump, Kamala Harris, Stenstrom.*

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INTRODUCTION

Turn-taking is a crucial aspect of political communication because it reflects the speaker's ability to control discourse, project authority, and build public opinion. Turn-taking in high-stakes environments like presidential debates is not only a conversational strategy but also to maintain visibility, assert dominance, and cope with pressure appropriately. The candidates who succeed in gaining control over the turn often shape the narrative and come out stronger or competent to the audience (Clayman, 2016). Interruptions, pauses, and holding the turn become mechanisms through which candidates compete for ideological control, making turn-taking the central aspect of political performance.

The political debate concerns turn-taking strategies and their impact on the dynamics of the debate in general. Some candidates may frequently interrupt or extend turns to hold the turn, while others may never get the chance to take or hold the turn. This dominance in conversational turn-taking may determine how persuasive or assertive a candidate appears, therefore shaping public opinion and media narratives (Bull & Wells, 2011). The 2024 American presidential debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris offers a compelling case study for exploring how turn-taking strategies contribute to discursive power (ABC Action News, 2024).

In the 2024 American presidential debate, it is very important to analyse how Donald Trump and Kamala Harris made use of turn-taking strategies and how dominance in these strategies impacted the dynamics of the debate. Trump, known for his assertive and often disruptive speaking style, and Harris, recognized for her strategic communication approach, present an intriguing contrast in their use of turn-taking strategies. As Alafifi (2021) observed in his discourse analysis of the 2020 U.S. presidential debate, dominant candidates such as Trump often employ verbal strategies, particularly interruptions and holding the turn mechanisms to assert conversational control and shape audience perception. Using Stenstrom's framework, this is an attempt to discover patterns in their turn-taking behaviors

and how their dominance in conversation influenced the flow of the debate and interactional power dynamics.

Turn-taking is one basic mechanism in spoken interaction, and conversation analysis has done extensive work on it. Sacks (1978) presented the basic principles of turn-taking, governing how speakers negotiate turns so that communication proceeds without a hitch. Building from this basic framework, Stenstrom (2014) classified the turn-taking strategies into three main types: taking the turn, holding the turn, and yielding the turn. Such strategies become all the more important in structured and competitive interactions, as in political debates, where speakers have to struggle to hold the turn to maintain control.

The study of turn-taking dominance in political debates sheds light on many aspects crucial for scholars in pragmatics, political communication, and discourse analysis. As Hasson & Ahmed (2022) point out, turn-taking patterns in institutional discourse often reflect broader power relations and rhetorical strategies used by political actors. This article will contribute to the literature by offering insight into the role of turn-taking strategies in competitive discourse and highlighting the pragmatic mechanisms bearing on political communication. The findings will be useful not only for linguistic researchers but also for political analysts, debate moderators, and communication strategists aiming to understand and improve strategic discourse in political settings.

Previous studies have focused on the importance of turn-taking strategies in political debates. Aryanti et al. (2024) analyzed turn-taking strategies in the 2020 presidential debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden. The study found that Trump frequently employed *taking the turn* and *yielding the turn* strategies, reflecting a more assertive style, while Biden predominantly used *to hold the turn* to maintain his speaking time. This highlights how turn-taking reflects each candidate's communicative control during debates. Natalia et al. (2020) analyzed turn-taking strategies in political debates and found that dominant speakers often used interruptions to assert control, while others relied on cooperative strategies like pauses and yielding the turn. Their study emphasizes how turn-taking reflects power dynamics and rhetorical style in political discourse. Yao et al. (2025) examined *taking the turn* in political interviews and its influence on building government credibility. They demonstrated that discursive choices by interviewees – such as turn-taking strategies – significantly affect public perception of government credibility. This research underscores how effective turn-taking management in political communication is vital for establishing public trust. Collectively, these findings contribute to a strong foundation for understanding how turn-taking strategies are used in political debates and what effects they have on interaction dynamics and public perception.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative descriptive methodology to compare Donald Trump's and Kamala Harris's turn-taking. This research will be suited for qualitative research because it involves an investigation of linguistic trends and styles of discourse in detail (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This research is thus a quest to discover and explain the use of turn-taking strategies, as Stenstrom (2014) classifies them, and focuses on the impact of dominance in them on the development of the debate by descriptive analysis. The data used in this research are video and transcripts of the 2024 United States presidential debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris. The debate video recordings were accessed through the ABC News official YouTube channel.

Data collection for the study employs documentation and non-participant observation. Non-participant observation was done to monitor the turn-taking strategy employed by Donald Trump and Kamala Harris in the debate without the researcher interfering to objectify the data, as suggested by Merriam & Tisdell (2015). The researcher adhered to the following steps for data collection; 1) Downloading and accessing the video of the 2024 American presidential debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris from verified sources, 2)

Watching and recording YouTube-uploaded debate videos to evaluate the utilization of turn-taking strategies in direct observation, 3) Categorizing data into turn-taking strategy categories including taking the turn, holding the turn, yielding the turn, 4) Tentative recording of findings and data categorization based on findings in favour of problem statement development.

After collecting data and observations from the 2024 presidential debate video between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, data analysis in this study will be conducted qualitative descriptive via the following process: 1) Categorizing findings depending on the kind of turn-taking strategy employed during interactions. 2) Breaking down each finding via Stenstrom's theory of turn-taking to identify how the strategy is employed by each candidate in controlling turns. 3) Writing a concise description of findings to detail how turn-taking strategies influence the flow of the debate, 4) Concluding analysis of findings that have been conducted to address the formulation of the research problem.

To systematically classify the turn-taking strategies, this study adopted Stenstrom's (2014) framework, illustrated in the following classification scheme:

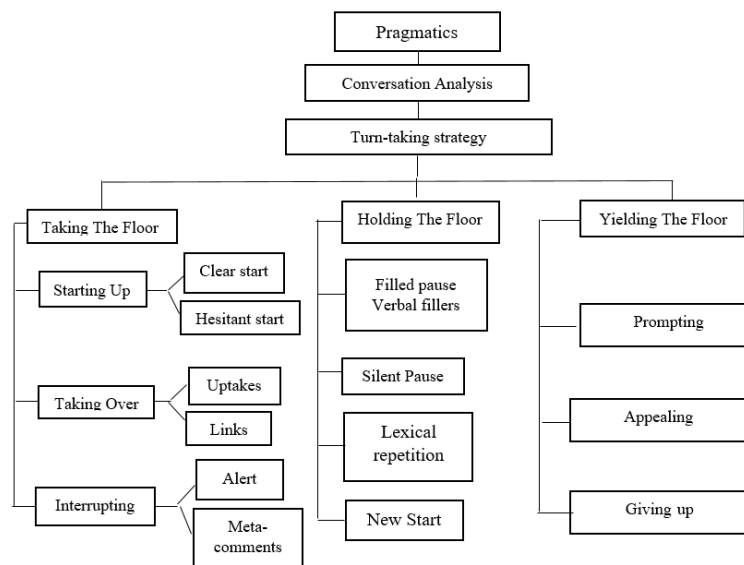


Figure 1. Classification of Turn-Taking Strategies Adapted from Stenstrom

Turn-Taking Strategies Employed by Donald Trump and Kamala Harris in the 2024 American Presidential Debate

The study found several types of turn-taking in the debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris. Of the three types of turn-taking proposed by Stenstrom 2014, the researcher found only two types, taking the turn and holding the turn, as shown in the following table:

Table 1. Data of Turn-Taking Strategies

Turn-taking Strategies		Donald trump	Kamala harris	Total
Taking the Turn	Starting Up	Clear Start	0	0
		Hesitant start	0	0
	Taking Over	Uptakes	11	20
		Links	5	6
	Interrupting	Alert	6	30
		Meta-comments	1	10
Holding The Turn	Filled Pause/ Verbal Filler		6	26
	Silent Pause		7	8
	Lexical Repetition		11	28

	New Start	1	1	2
	Prompting	0	0	0
Yielding the Turn	Appealing	0	0	0
	Giving Up	0	0	0
Amount of Data		82	48	130

After analysis, the debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump indicates the outcome of applying different turn-taking strategies. Donald Trump has 82 turn-taking strategies. The most frequent strategy employed is interrupt-alert, appearing 24 times, followed by filled pause/verbal filler, which appears 20 times. The third most frequent strategy employed is lexical repetition, which appears 17 times. On the other hand, in Kamala Harris, 48 turn-taking strategies have been identified. The most frequent strategy is uptakes, and there are 11 times of this strategy, followed by lexical repetition with 11 times. The third most frequent strategy is silent pause, which has 7 times. The most frequent overall strategy is interrupting-alert, and appears a total of 30 times and indicating a pattern towards interruptions in the debate. The second most frequent strategy used is filled pause/verbal filler, which is repeated 26 times, followed by lexical repetition, which is also repeated 28 times. This observation brings to light that the two participants continually repeat turn-holding strategies, specifically filled pauses/verbal filler and lexical repetition, in an attempt to stay in command of the discussion. Below is a table classifying the frequency of turn-taking strategies according to each strategy repeated by each participant.

The researcher analyzed the Donald Trump–Kamala Harris debate and illustrated the use of turn-taking strategies based on Stenstrom's (2014) theory. The analysis centers on the different turn-taking strategies used by both participants to control and regulate the flow of conversation during the debate. To support the discussion, the researcher selected examples from the debate that best represent each participant's dominant turn-taking strategies. From the full data set, a sample was chosen to highlight key points that effectively demonstrate the dynamics of turn-taking strategies in a high-stakes political debate. This type of selection aligns with the approach suggested by Mezmir (2020). For each paragraph discussed, a specific excerpt from the debate is presented, followed by an analysis specifying the identified turn-taking strategy and its type. The names of the participants have been abbreviated for clarity and brevity: Donald Trump is referred to as DT, Kamala Harris as KH, David Muir as DM, and Linsey Davis as LD. The turn-taking strategies used in the debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump will be examined step by step in the following sub-sections.

The Dominance of Turn-Taking Strategies Employed by Donald Trump and Kamala Harris Influenced the Debate

Taking the Turn: Uptakes

LD : "...But if I could just get a yes or no. Because your running mate JD Vance has said that you would veto if it did come to your desk...."

DT : "Well, I didn't discuss it with JD In all fairness. JD -- And I don't mind if he has a certain view but I think he was speaking for me...."

Donald Trump's reaction in this turn-taking is a classic case of the uptake strategy falling under the category of taking over, as discussed by Stenstrom (2014). Uptakes like "well" are discourse markers indicating the speaker's intention to take over the turn and react to what the other speaker has said. Here, Trump starts his answer with "well," which enables him to smoothly transition into his explanation while showing respect for the previous statement by Linsey Davis. This is an excellent way of keeping the conversation flowing and being in command, especially in a setting of high stakes such as a presidential debate (Sa'adah, 2022). According to Stenstrom (2014), uptakes are commonly used to signal hesitation, agreement or in introducing a counterpoint without abrupt interruption. Trump's use of "well" in this case is faithful to this function in the sense that it creates time for processing before giving his argument, thereby controlling the conversation in a desired way in an indirect way.

DM : *"We are going to get to immigration and border security during this debate. But I would like to let Vice President Harris respond on the economy here..."*

KH : *"Well, I would love to. Let's talk about what Donald Trump left us..."*

With "well," Harris uses a discourse marker to indicate her readiness to discuss the issue as she transitions into her argument without interruption (Shuqi, 2022). Stenstrom (2014) calls uptakes an expression of appreciation for the previous speaker's turn as well as preparation to provide an alternative view. Here, Harris's use of "well" is a rhetorical strategy in which she takes control of the discussion and shifts the attention to her criticism of Trump's economic performance (Medeiros, 2022). This is a conversational coherence-maintaining strategy while backing her argument in the debate.

Donald Trump used uptakes 9 times, whereas Kamala Harris used this strategy 11 times during the debate. The trivial numerical disparity, Trump's 9 and Harris's 11, indicates that both nominees drew on this strategy to construct their positions to the same extent, although more often on the part of Harris. Uptakes, argues McDonald (2021), are utilized to connect turns and allow smooth transitions in discourse, particularly for high-stakes, competitive discourses such as political debates. Use by both debaters, however, indicates an attempt to establish control over talk while cooperative-looking.

Taking the Turn: Link

LD : *"Vice President Harris, thank you. President Trump?"*

DT : *"So, she just started by saying she's going to do this, she's going to do that, she's going to do all these wonderful things..."*

Donald Trump starts his turn using the linking device "So" in the chosen excerpt, thus demonstrating the link strategy under the taking-over category identified by Stenstrom (2014). The strategy assists the speaker in referring to the previous speaker's turn and his turn at the same time, thereby marking his position in the discourse. By beginning with "So," Trump indicates that his utterance is a continuation or response to Harris's argument, and as such, he can shift attention to his criticism. Trump's "So" serves as a bridge, a smooth but assertive transition that preserves conversational utility without leaving room for disagreement. Such employment of links demonstrates his intentional effort at turn-taking management with cohesion and control, especially within the high-stakes situation of a political debate (Darchuk, 2020).

DM : *"Vice President Harris, I'll let you respond."*

KH : *"So, Donald Trump has no plan for you. And when you look at his economic plan, it's all about tax breaks for the richest people."*

Kamala Harris starts her turn with the word "So," Using this strategy, Harris can link her answer to the question from the moderator and, at the same time build a logical connection from the preceding subject to her attack on Trump's economic policy. It is, as Stenstrom (2014) points out, through the use of such cohesive devices that serves to both link the speaker's turn to the local discourse and function to indicate the progression of an extended connected argument or point. Harris's "So" functions as a rhetorical device to exert control and exercise authority, as well as to keep the conversation under her control. It cushions entry into criticism, being less intrusive, yet still asserting her point. This is consistent with the way links function to enable both coherence and argument structure in discourse (Fadhli & Rosita, 2023).

Trump utilized the link strategy once, while Kamala Harris utilized it five times. This means that Harris employed more cohesive devices to organize her answers and create argumentative coherence during the debate. Her use implies a communicative preference for the use of smooth transitions and logical coherence, whereas Trump's use, though effective, was less frequent and more confrontational or direct in tone (Novikova & Suima, 2023).

Taking the Turn: Alert

KH : *".....Donald Trump actually has no plan for you, because he is more interested in defending himself than he is in looking out for you//"*

DT : *"//That's just a sound bite. They gave her that to say. Look,..."*

Donald Trump employed the alert strategy under Stenstrom's (2014) interrupting turn-taking strategies category in the extract. This is where a speaker has the desire to interrupt the present speaker's turn to take control of the turn, often to express urgency, disagreement, or the need to disprove or correct something being said. The interruption comes in the statement by Kamala Harris, "because he is more interested in defending himself than he is in looking out for you," and Trump's sudden interruption, "That's just a sound bite." The interruption is a warning, a sudden and biting interruption to discredit her point. It is evidence of Trump's refusal on the spot to her claim and his trying to divert the attention of the listener away from her locating him (Kaldybekova & Duisekova, 2023). Stenstrom describes alerts as typically being constituted by brief, usually affect-loaded speech turns and being verbal alert signals that the speaker wishes to interrupt. Trump's phrase "That's just a sound bite" is an excellent instance of the technique of an alert.

DT : *"Would you do that? Why don't you ask her that question?"*

KH : *"//Why don't you answer the question would you veto?"*

DT : *"//That's the problem. Because under Roe v. Wade?"*

KH : *"//Answer the question, would you veto?"*

DT : *"//You could do abortions in the seventh month, the eighth month, the ninth month?"*

KH : *"//That's not true?"*

DT : *"//And probably after birth. Just look at the governor, former governor of Virginia..."*

During the controversial interaction above, Kamala Harris demonstrates an evident application of the alert strategy categorized by Stenstrom (2014) as interrupting by continuously interrupting Donald Trump's turn. Trump attempts to take control of the conversation by using rhetorical questions and evading factual answers, Harris interrupts with, "Why don't you answer the question, would you veto?" and subsequently continues to insist, "Answer the question, would you veto?" Her serial interruptions are classic cases of alerting interruptions deployed not merely to talk but to pressure the interlocutor and change the subject. This is following Tymbay (2022) assessment that alerts are characteristically deployed to ask for clarification, disagree with what is said, or redirect the discussion to a dodged topic. Harris implements this tactic with the interruption "That's not true" in close reaction to Trump's hyperbolic abortion claims.

Donald Trump employed this strategy with high frequency – 24 occurrences – making it his strongest turn-taking behavior. His alerts were typically a power play, cutting off his opponent's turn and seizing the conversational ground to reinterpret or negate what was said (Rohmah & Suwandi, 2021). Kamala Harris, on the other hand, employed alerts only six times, suggesting a more strategic and reactive use. Though less frequent, Harris's alerts were assertive and served a deliberate purpose: to call out Trump and fact-check him in the moment. The gap in frequency reflects the diverging rhetorical approaches of the two candidates. Trump used alerts more relentlessly and forcefully, reflecting his adversarial debating style, while Harris employed them more selectively – only when necessary to strike back or regain control.

Taking the Turn: Meta-comments

DM : *"President Trump, as you know, the FBI says overall violent crime is coming down in this country, but Vice President the?"*

DT : *"//excuse me, the FBI -- they were defrauding statements. They didn't include the worst cities. "*

In the extract, Donald Trump adopts the strategy of meta-comments under the mode of interrupting turn-taking strategies as outlined by Stenstrom (2014). Meta-comments tend to be utilized as a resource to interrupt and deflect the story, usually by attacking or discrediting the basis of what is said (Dilaimy et al., 2022). Trump's interjection, beginning with "Excuse me, the FBI - they were defrauding statements...", functions as a metacommentary that interrupts the moderator's point by directly contesting the credibility of the cited source.

Instead of addressing the substance of the question, Trump redirected the discussion by making a broader judgment about the FBI's report. His repetition of such words as "fraud" indicates his intention to discredit the message itself and the legitimacy of the information given. Trump's reply is faithful to this intention since he employs the interruption to delegitimize not the subject of violent crime but the statistical ground of the question itself. This tactic is highly common in political discourse, where setting the subject of discussion might be as powerful as the words in it (Fairclough, 1992)

DM : "Mr. President, thank you, your time is up. Linsey//"

KH : "//I want to respond to that, though. I want to just respond briefly. Clearly, I am not Joe Biden, and I am certainly not Donald Trump."

Kamala Harris's "I want to respond to that, though. I want to just respond briefly" is a straightforward instance of the meta-comment strategy. Harris breaks the continuity of the moderator with an outright statement of intention to reply: "I want to respond to that, though." This is not a comment on the actual content of Trump's previous turn; rather, it concerns the form of the interaction—her feeling of the right or entitlement to reply. Stenstrom (2014) states that all these strategies are used in institutional communication to negotiate power and establish presence within adversarial dialogue situations.

Donald Trump used Meta-comments 9 times during the debate, consistent with a recurring pattern of questioning the validity or structure of either the opponent's or the moderator's remarks. Stenstrom (2014) describes how such Meta-comments enable speakers to take control of the discourse, claim authority, and redirect the discussion in a more favorable or defensible direction. Kamala Harris, in contrast, used only one meta-comment throughout the debate. Her restrained use of Meta-comments represents a more formal and collaborative turn-taking style than Trump's frequent and sometimes confrontational use of Meta-comments. The quantitative imbalance, Trump's 9 to Harris's one, is highlighted by a deep difference between the two candidates in how each exercises power through speech. Trump employs Meta-comments as a strategic intervention to interrupt and redirect discourse, whereas Harris employs Meta-comments hesitantly and as an apologetic justification for speaking. One is characterized by disturbance and control of the discourse, the other by defensive engagement and measured use of voice (Poggi et al., 2022).

Holding the Turn: Filled Pauses/Verbal Fillers

DM : "Please I'll give you a minute here"

DT : "He would have been sitting in Moscow much happier than he is right now. But eventually, you know, he's got a thing that other people don't have. He's got nuclear weapons. They don't ever talk about that. He's got nuclear weapons. Nobody ever thinks about that. And eventually uh maybe he'll use them."

Here, Donald Trump demonstrates the deployment of filled pauses/verbal filler as a holding the turn strategy in turn-taking, utilizing Stenstrom's (2014) framework. The strategy is used by speakers so they can keep their hold on the speaking turn when they are preparing to or are suspending their production. Verbal fillers such as "you know" and "uh" enable speakers to pause for an instant without releasing the turn (Muchsan, 2023). Trump utilizes "you know" and "uh" in the course of a sentence while making a complex assertion regarding nuclear weapons, especially when switching from argument to argument. For instance, "and eventually, you know, he's got a thing that other people don't have..." illustrates that Trump is employing the filler not only to create space in thinking but also to sustain the continuity of conversation. The filler "uh" that appears before the words "maybe he'll use them" serves the same function as purchasing a temporary pause without loss of attention on the listener's part and, in so doing, his turn control (Jiang et al., 2023).

DM : "Vice President Harris, I'll let you respond to the rest of what you heard."

KH : "Talk about extreme. Um, you know, this is I think one of the reasons why in this election I actually have the endorsement of 200 Republicans..."

Kamala Harris's speech in the excerpt describes the filled pause/verbal filler, i.e., "um" and "you know," Harris starts to deliver a speech using the words "Um, you know..." which provide her some short pause for preparing thoughts in the mind and then proceeds towards the more explanatory comment on big Republican endorsements (Beňuš, 2009). According to Stenstrom (2014), these fillers perform a mental function of bridging between utterances and are useful mostly in spontaneous or high-stakes speech contexts, such as live political debates. The "um" softens the switch and suggests hesitation or thinking, while "you know" serves as a discourse marker to mark the addressee and gain flow. Harris employs them tactically to keep her turn without being abrupt or overly forceful. It also helps to keep her flowing when presenting a series of political endorsements, a moment requiring accuracy and clarity.

Donald Trump utilized filled pauses and verbal fillers 20 times, which is much greater than Kamala Harris, who utilized them 6 times. Kamala Harris utilized fillers more wisely. The comparatively limited frequency of Harris's filled pauses is an indicator of higher levels of verbal control and accuracy, as one might expect of her controlled and disciplined debating style. The frequency difference, Trump 20, Harris 6, is notable for how it reveals the candidates' differing styles of gaining control. Trump's increased use indicates a less formal, more spontaneous kind of style in which speech fillers are used to ensure presence and pace, whereas Harris's use is more regulated, used to ensure coherence and audience attraction (Muchsani, 2023).

Holding the Turn: Silent Pause

KH : "Don't lie."

DT : "...You ever see a solar plant? By the way, I'm a big fan of solar. But they take (0.3) 400, 500 acres of desert soil..."

Donald Trump, in this passage, illustrates the employment of a silent pause, which falls under the category of holding the turn in Stenstrom's (2014) turn-taking model. Trump's pause is silent during the middle of a sentence: "But they take (0.3) 400, 500 acres of desert soil..." The pause serves as a rhetorical and cognitive tool so that he has a very short moment in which to search or mark the next building block in his argument. Rather than expressing uncertainty or lack of control, the pause appears to be deliberate and is used to stress the quantitative exaggeration that follows "400, 500 acres," which is characteristic of his way of speaking. Lundholm Fors (2015) argues that short, controlled pauses like this are employed to maintain turn-holding power and allow speakers to structure spontaneous speech without risking it being interrupted. In political oratory, these pauses could also be employed to add dramatic effect or to provide time for the speaker to shift his rhythm and tone. Trump's pause, though short, is part of his statement's rhythm and allows him to keep his hold on the turn, particularly in a high-stress, high-speed situation in a debate.

DM : "...I do want to ask the vice president, do you believe you bear any responsibility in the way that withdrawal played out?"

KH : "...and this (0.3) former president as president invited them to Camp David because he does not again appreciate the role and responsibility...."

In this sentence, Kamala Harris uses a silent pause labeled as (0.3). A silent pause is an intentional device that enables the speaker to maintain control of the conversation turn while temporarily organizing thoughts or creating rhetorical emphasis (Karami, 2015). The pause occurs at a strategically effective point: "And this (0.3) former president, as president, invited them to Camp David..." The pause serves two primary functions. First, it allows Harris a moment to collect her thoughts in preparation for a powerful emotional argument. Second, it emphasizes rhetorical stress on the words "former president," helping to shift the tone and direction of her statement. Stenstrom (2014) observes that such pauses assist speakers in managing their pacing, preventing overlap with other speakers, and maintaining control over the discourse.

Donald Trump used a silent pause once, whereas Kamala Harris used it 7 times. Kamala Harris's consistent use of silent pauses over and over again, 7 times in total, implies a more studied and controlled manner of handling speech. The differential pacing, Trump's 1 to Harris's 7, also implies that Harris uses more constructed pacing and rhetorical control,

whereas Trump speaks more rapidly and forcefully and takes up less silent space. The difference emphasizes the ways the two candidates employ different turn-holding strategies to create presence: Harris through silence and thoughtfulness, Trump through pace, repetition, and volume (Henderson et al., 1965).

Holding the Turn: Lexical repetition

DM : *"President Trump, as you know, the FBI says overall violent crime is coming down in this country, but Vice President the..."*

DT : *"...they were defrauding statements. They didn't include the worst cities. They didn't include the cities with the worst crime. It was a fraud..."*

Donald Trump applies lexical repetition in this paragraph. According to Stenstrom (2014), repetition refers to the subconscious or conscious, spontaneous repetition of one word or more to preserve the speaker's turn and avoid being cut off while talking. It often occurs in spontaneous or high-pressure speech, providing the speaker with time to think while signaling that they are not finished speaking. Trump repeats the words "they" and "a" while making a critical statement about the FBI's crime data: "They didn't include the worst cities. It was a fraud." These repetitions serve two purposes. First, they act as thought fillers, giving him a moment to gather his thoughts without surrendering the turn (Silaen & Afriana, 2024). Second, they set a rhythm that reinforces the accusatory tone of his statement, amplifying the emotional effect of exasperation or disbelief (Maru et al., 2023).

LD : *"...Two years later you proposed a plan that included a private insurance option. What is your plan today?"*

KH : *"...But what we need to do is maintain and grow the Affordable Care Act. But I—I'll get to that, Linsey. I just need to respond to a previous point that the former president has made."*

Kamala Harris shows lexical repetition in phrases like "I I I" and "that that." Lexical repetition refers to the immediate repetition of a word or phrase within a speaker's turn, used with smooth maintenance of speech. It serves to relieve cognitive overload and helps mark the speaker's continued hold on the conversational turn (Annisa et al., 2022). Here, Harris states: "But I I I'll get to that, Linsey. I just need to respond to a previous point that that the former president has made." The repetition of "that" likewise assists her in maintaining rhythm and continuity as she shifts into refutation. These repetitions, as Stenstrom (2014) proposes, are not merely disfluencies but function to prevent interruption and assert control over the conversation—especially in high-stakes contexts such as political debates.

During the debate, Donald Trump employed lexical repetition 17 times, and Kamala Harris employed lexical repetition 11 times. Trump's lexical repetition tended to occur in those moments of extremely intense critique or argument. Kamala Harris employed lexical repetition more restrained and formalized. Kamala Harris's repetition, though comparable to Trump's with a tendency toward spontaneity and rhetorical weight, leans instead toward cautious structuring and control of discourse. The difference in frequency, Trump's 17 and Harris's 11, illustrates that Trump utilized this pattern more to maintain speech and highlight things when under tension, and Harris used it minimally to regulate speech pace and avoid digression (Jiménez-Preciado et al., 2024).

Holding the Turn: New start

DM : *"President Trump, as you know, the FBI says overall violent crime is coming down in this country, but Vice President the..."*

DT : *"excuse me, the FBI -- they were defrauding statements. They didn't include the worst cities. They didn't include the cities with the worst crime. It was a fraud. Just like their number of 818,000 jobs that they said they created turned out to be a fraud."*

In this data, Donald Trump employs the new start strategy. According to Stenstrom (2014) new start is a speaker restarting or reformulating some aspect of their utterance, usually by making a minimal change or expansion of an earlier idea to hold the turn while projecting to add weight or extend a point. Trump states: "They didn't include the worst cities." They

never discussed the worst crime cities. The speaker rephrases the same general point in different terms. Instead of moving to a new subject. Trump employs this device to support his argument, gain rhetorical momentum, and maintain his turn. By choosing to repeat and rephrase his criticism of the FBI report, Trump enhances the credibility of his argument and maintains verbal momentum. His use of a fresh beginning not only takes command of the conversation space but also sets up his message for the greatest rhetorical impact, allowing him to position himself as steadfast and persistent. In political discourse, where appearance and persistence matter, such a strategy lends weight to a speaker's presence and functions to strengthen their narrative (Barkho, 2022).

DM : *"Vice President Harris, your thoughts on this?"*

KH : *"I think it's – I mean honestly, I think it's a tragedy that we have someone who wants to be president who has consistently over the course of his career attempted to use race to divide the American people..."*

Kamala Harris's utterance in this sentence is an example of the new start strategy, a new start is when a speaker begins an utterance, pauses, and then restarts or re-formulates the original idea, usually as a means of clarifying, strengthening, or altering the tone, but still holding the turn (Stenstrom, 2014). In the utterance: "I think it's – I mean honestly, I think it's a tragedy...", Harris begins with an evaluative "I think it's," pauses and reformulates with "I mean honestly" before recycling what she had stated initially. Such a restart serves both cognitive and rhetorical purposes. Cognitively, it provides her with an opportunity to find a better articulation. Rhetorically, it adds the emotive weight to the statement by inserting the adverb "honestly," which is serious and urgent in connotation.

During the debate, both Kamala Harris and Donald Trump employed new start strategy once, exercising this device during instances of rhetorical stress. Contrary to Trump's confrontational, repetitive speech, Harris's restart is more indicative of thoughtful, emotionally expressive speech. Both speakers utilize the same strategy for management of ideas within the moment as well as control over the space of conversation. The use frequency, symmetrical at 1 use per, shows that while the two candidates employed this strategy conservatively, both did so successfully in various modes of rhetoric. Trump employed it to maximize repetition and assertion, whereas Harris employed it to reboot tone and create emotional resonance (Jesudas & Mohammed, 2025).

CONCLUSIONS

The 2024 U.S. presidential debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump was analyzed and revealed that both candidates utilized a variety of turn-taking strategies. Trump most frequently used interruptive forms of turn-taking, such as alerts and meta-comments, along with uptakes and verbal fillers, to take over the turn and continue dominating the interaction. Conversely, Harris employed a more structured and controlled approach to turn-taking, frequently using lexical repetition, silent pauses, and formally prepared interruptions to seize the turn. These contrasting strategies illustrate the different styles each candidate used to shape the direction of the debate and control their public image. Furthermore, findings indicate that the dominance of the use of a specific turn-taking strategy relates to the direction of the debate. Aggressive strategies used by Trump often disrupted the conversational flow and dominated the opponent. Conversely, the use of turn-holding strategies by Harris represented an effort to make conversations coherent and establish credibility. These findings contribute to the broader field of pragmatics and political communication through demonstration of how turn-taking can be a linguistic tool, not only to facilitate interaction, but also to assert authority, engage audiences, and create persuasive language in political settings.

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