

Interviewers' departures from the normative turn-taking structure in U.S. political broadcast news interviews

Marissa Caldwell

West Chester University

MC758568@wcupa.edu

Abstract

This study uses conversation analysis to examine interviewers' departures from the normative question-answer turn-taking structure expected in broadcast news interviews. Previous literature regarding broadcast news interviews has identified a rigid turn-taking structure that categorizes the interview; the interviewer solely asks questions, avoiding response tokens or any expression of agreement or opinion, and the interviewee must answer the questions posed to him or her. The data in the current study include six video files of political broadcast news interviews in the American media surrounding the 2016 presidential election and the Trump administration's policies in 2017. The study encompasses political broadcast news interviews from three top American news outlets: American Broadcasting Company (ABC), Cable News Network (CNN), and Fox News. The analysis of these political broadcast news interviews focuses on the interviewers' violations of the typical question-answer turn-taking structure of interviews and examines the categories of violations according to the purpose they serve in the interview. According to the results of the study, all six interviews display violations of the turn-taking structure by the interviewer, which serve three main purposes: contribution, clarification, and acknowledgement. Unlike previous research describing the rigid structure of the news interview, the analysis of data from the current study suggests that political news interview content and structure is co-constructed through the interviewer's violations. This co-construction allows both the interviewer and interviewee flexible roles in the creation of the news interview, rather than limiting them to a strict question-answer format.

Keywords: Conversation analysis, turn taking, broadcast news interview

1. Introduction

Many linguists have studied the broadcast news interview, with particular attention to the structure and norms governing the genre. Specifically, previous literature on the topic of news interviews has discussed that interviewers maintain neutrality and eliminate bias by following a rigid structure of question and answer in which the interviewer does not explicitly acknowledge the interviewee's response (Clayman, 1988, 2002; Clayman & Heritage, 2002). Heritage & Clayman (2010) explain the format simply: "interviewers (henceforth IRs) are obliged to restrict themselves to asking questions, while interviewees (henceforth IEs) should restrict themselves to answering them" (p. 216). In this definition, there is no room for the IR or the IE to deviate from the norm; their expectations are clear in the institutional context of the news interview, and they know that they each have specific roles to follow in the news interview institution. Additionally, interviewers are meant to avoid voicing response tokens, such as *okay*, *mhm*, or *right*, as they can easily be perceived as an expression of the interviewer's agreement with the interviewee (Clayman, 2013; Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Greatbatch, 1988; Heritage, 1985; Heritage & Clayman, 2010). Greatbatch (1988) further claims that IRs withhold responses typical in everyday conversations to avoid the perception that the IR is expressing his or reaction to, or opinion or assessment of, the information provided by the IE. Research also indicates that if IRs make statements in the interview, they must then lead to questions in order to not violate the expectation of the question-answer structure in the news interview (Clayman, 1992, 1998, 2013).

Previous research also shows that there are two conflicting behavior norms of IRs in the news interviews: they must not only remain as impartial and unbiased as possible in their interaction with public figures, but they should also maintain adversarialness. To maintain an adversarial approach, IRs should question and challenge the responses of their sources (Clayman, 2013; Heritage, 2003; Heritage & Clayman, 2010). Heritage (2003) explains, "The particular balance that is achieved between these two norms can be a distinctive, and even defining, characteristic of particular interviewing styles" [emphasis added] (p. 59). Therefore, when these norms of question-answer turn-taking structure are violated, this changes the interviewing style and deviates from the traditional expectations. Heritage & Clayman (2010) claim that departures from the norms of news interviews provide evidence that both participants' recognition of departures from the question-answer structure demonstrates an understanding of the structure as normative to the news interview, and they treat such departures as problematic and negatively impactful on the interview (p. 222).

Additional research regarding broadcast news interviews encompasses studies of answers and evasions (Clayman, 2001; Clayman & Heritage, 2002), adversarial questioning (Rendle-Short, 2007), question design and agenda setting (Clayman, 2013; Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Heritage, 2003) and orientation to the audience (Clayman, 2013; Heritage, 1985), but there is no substantive research regarding turn-taking departures. Clayman (2013) does acknowledge the interviewer's orientation to the audience in what he calls "displaying understanding for the audience", in which the IR may restate the IE's point in order to clarify the information for the audience (p. 636). However, this brief reference to what I have categorized in my study as "clarifications" by the IR is one of few acknowledgements by previous research of deviations from the normative structure and their subsequent effect on the news interview.

In the political news interview during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, and under the Trump administration in 2017, IRs commonly depart from the turn-taking structure to make interjections or continuer response tokens in their interaction with IEs. The focus of this study is to examine the ways in which IRs depart from the normative turn-taking structure of broadcast news interviews and what purpose these departures serve. Findings from this study indicate there are three ways in which the interviewer and interviewee co-construct the interview content through departures by the interviewer: contributions, clarifications, and acknowledgements.

2. Methodology

The data for this study includes over two hours of recorded and televised video interviews focusing on political discourse, primarily with interviewees involved in politics. I transcribed and analyzed the interview video files using conversation analysis (see Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson, 1974; Clayman, 2013). My study includes two interviewers from American Broadcasting Company (ABC), two from Cable News Network (CNN), and two from Fox News, in an effort to compile a representative sample of political broadcast news interviews from top American television news sources. The selected interviews were chosen to include the interviewers who were identified by their broadcast network as top political correspondents, and careful consideration was taken to ensure that the interviewees did not overlap between separate interviews. The interview participants are as follows: Fox News' Tucker Carlson interviewing Ivanka Trump, CNN's Anderson Cooper interviewing then presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, Fox News' Sean Hannity interviewing Rush Limbaugh, ABC's David Muir interviewing recently inaugurated President Donald Trump, ABC's George Stephanopoulos interviewing then Vice President-elect Mike Pence, and CNN's Jake Tapper interviewing Carter Page. The interviews are of varied length, and all interviews take place between December 2016 and November 2017.

Table 1. Interview Data

Interviewer	Interviewee	Broadcast Network	Date	Length
Tucker Carlson	Ivanka Trump	Fox News	Nov. 6, 2017	4:34
Anderson Cooper	Hillary Clinton	CNN	Sept. 14, 2017	37:47
Sean Hannity	Rush Limbaugh	Fox News	Sept. 29, 2017	35:53
David Muir	President Donald Trump	ABC	Jan. 25, 2017	23:15
George Stephanopoulos	Vice President-elect Mike Pence	ABC	Dec. 4, 2016	23:09
Jake Tapper	Carter Page	CNN	Nov. 3, 2017	12:52

These interviews were analyzed using Conversation Analysis with special attention to any instances where the IR deviates from the standard question-answer structure of the news

interview. First, I watched the full interviews, then I rewatched the interviews and recorded all departures by the IR. Specifically, I noted any statements or questions by the IR that served to disrupt the IE's response turn and to which the IE then oriented his or her speech, and also any continuers, such as *mhm*, *okay*, *right*, and others. After noting all departures, I then counted all instances and analyzed examples, which allowed me to categorize the departures based on the context in which they occurred. The three types of departure usage have been categorized and defined due to their function in the interview: contribution, clarification, and acknowledgement.

Table 2. Categorization of Departures

Category	Definition	Example
Contribution	<i>Rapport Builder</i> - Contributions by the IR that do not provide relevant information to the interview content; their function is to evoke laughter, foster rapport between the IR and IE, offer a personal anecdote, express opinion, or demonstrate agreement with IR	"Five days, Rush, they'll play it five days" (Hannity & Limbaugh)
	<i>Adding Relevant Information</i> - Contributions by the IR that provide relevant information; this could be the IR sharing additional information that is relevant to the IE's response in either disagreement or neutral contribution	"not just the media...It's with the Chinese government" (Cooper & Clinton)
Clarification	Clears up confusion regarding a previous, vague statement or re-words information from the IE to ensure that the audience and/or IR understands the content	"With Papadopoulos?" (Tapper & Page)
Acknowledgement	Continuers/response tokens that acknowledge the IR is listening and encourage the IE to finish his/her response; they do not necessarily express agreement.	Mhm, right, yeah

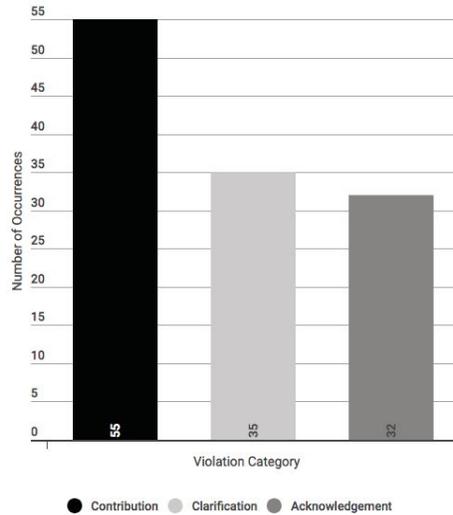
Most importantly, IR responses that are coded as departures from the news interview must meet one or both of the following criteria: a) a statement that is not tied to a question by the IR, which is in disagreement with the expectation that the IR will only ask questions, or b) a question or statement that *interrupts* the IE's response while the IE intends to continue his or her response (this could occur during a brief pause mid-response).

3. Analysis

Analysis of the six selected political broadcast news interviews shows consistent departures from the turn-taking structure of the news interview. The selected extracts demonstrate examples of

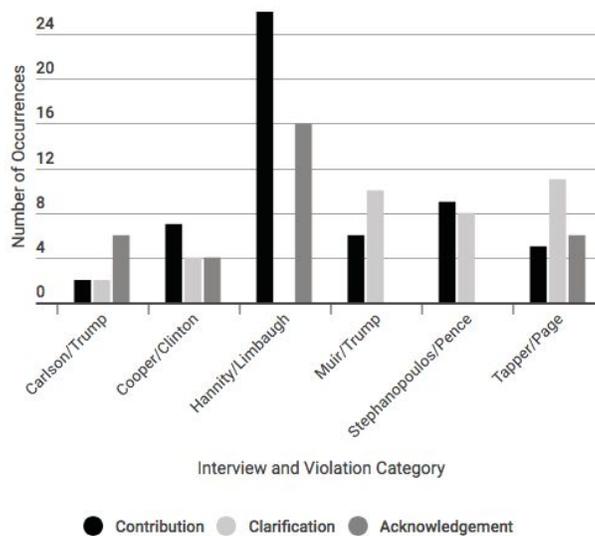
patterned use of IR interjections and third turn responses in departure from the normative question-answer turn-taking structure of the news interview. A catalog of the occurrence of each category of departure was compiled, both in the complete data set, and by individual analysis of each interview. Overall, 122 departures occurred in the data set: 55 contributions, 35 clarifications, and 32 acknowledgements.

Table 3. Occurrence of Each Departure Category in Data Set



The interviews were also counted individually in order to determine any patterns of occurrence within the interviews. Notably, while departures occurred in each of the six interviews, not all six interviews exhibited an example from all three categories. For example, the Muir and Trump interview showed no occurrences of acknowledgement, while the Hannity and Limbaugh interview did not demonstrate any clarifications.

Table 4. Occurrence of Each Departure Category by Individual Interview



*Interviews are of different lengths, as specified in Table 1

3.1 Contributions

This category of departures from the turn-taking structure includes both rapport builders and contributions that add relevant information.

3.1.1 Rapport builders

An example of the use of rapport builders is demonstrated in the September 29, 2017 interview of Rush Limbaugh (IE) by Fox News reporter Sean Hannity (IR). In this extract, Limbaugh discusses the lack of Republican politicians' support for President Trump's political agenda:

Extract 1 (Hannity & Limbaugh)

01 IE: I'm not, I'm not exaggerating here (.) and I'm not trying to say
02 things that'll (appear) in a sound byte that Fox replays for the
03 rest of the day (.) .hhh They [don't] want
04 IR: [hhhh]
05 → Five days, Rush, They'll pla[y it five days] hh
06 IE: [hhh hh hhhhh]
07 They don't want- they can't afford for him to succeed. With his
08 agenda They can't afford it .hhh the lid's blown, the gig is
09 IR: [Mhm
10 IE: over, the joke is revealed, if an outsider (.) with no prior
11 political experience can come in and fix messes that people have
12 been promised will be fixed for 30 years, .hhh how does that make
13 them look, they can't allow that to happen

In line 5, the IE interjects during the IE's response with a departure that does not contribute relevant content to the interview, but rather functions to develop rapport between the IR and IE. The IE responds with laughter in line 6 and the IR laughs along with him. This departure is inconsistent with the typical, rigid turn-taking structure of a news interview that ensure IRs maintain neutrality and polite distance from their IEs.

3.1.2 Adding relevant information

In the next extract, the IR (David Muir) provides a contribution to the conversation in which he reminds the IE (President Donald Trump) of contradictory information to what the IE is providing in his response. In this January 25, 2017 interview, the first interview after President Trump's inauguration, the IE discusses his claims that millions of illegally cast votes caused him to lose the popular vote while still winning the Electoral College:

Extract 2 (Muir & Trump)

01 IE: So let me tell you first of all it was so misrepresented that was
02 supposed to be a confidential meeting and you weren't supposed to
03 go out and talk to the press as soon as (you were) but the
04 democrats (.) uh viewed it not as a confidential [(meeting)
05 → IR: [but you have

In an interview between Jake Tapper (IR) and Carter Page (IE) on November 3, 2017, the IR asks the IE for information regarding his possible involvement with Russian officials while working for the Trump campaign and allegations that Papadopoulos also made contact with Russian officials:

Extract 4 (Tapper & Page)

01 IR: And the question is .hh did Papadopoulos tell anybody else in the
02 campaign (.) Did he?
03 IE: I never heard anything .hh I- I had a couple of brief
04 conversations with him early on (.) .hh [I-
05 → IR: [With Papadopoulos?
06 IE: Yeah, °yeah° I mean again there was- it was a large- a group as-
07 as uh (.) then candidate Trump mentioned when he had the
08 Washington Post Editorial Board [(.) mentioning a few people who
09 IR: [Right
10 IE: had volunteered for the campaign and was putting together this uh
11 .hh committee it's a growing group so there are a lot of people
12 that kind of kept joining over time and .hh again he- he's someone
13 I met uh and had a few brief conversations with

In this extract, the IR departs from the turn-taking structure in line 5 in order to ask for clarification after the IE's vague reference to "brief conversations with him" (lines 3-4), asking "With Papadopoulos?" The IE responds in confirmation of the clarification with "Yeah, °yeah°" (line 6) before then completing his previously interrupted response. This line clearly shows a departure from the turn-taking structure with the IR's purpose to clarify vague information for himself and/or his television audience.

In her interview with Anderson Cooper (IR), Hillary Clinton (IE) discusses her positive portrayal of the presidential debate moderated by Anderson Cooper, as written in her recently published book, despite her overall negative attitude toward media coverage of the 2016 presidential campaign:

Extract 5 (Cooper & Clinton)

01 IE: A couple uh people come in for (.) °you know° good descriptions
02 an- and praise and I thought the way you started that debate- what
03 you said in the beginning needed to be said and I- I really
04 appreciated th[at
05 → IR: [Well what you're referencing i:s is my first
06 → question to President Trump which wa:s you know (.) (describing)
07 → what he had talked about- he described as locker room banter and
08 → I s[aid that is sexual a[ssault (or- or) d'you- d'you understand
09 IE: [Mhm [Mhm
10 → IR: that uhm .hh we wrestled as- as a co-moderator we wrestled
11 with how to handle the Access Hollywood tape I'm wondering (.)
12 when the Access Hollywood tape came out two days before this
13 debate did you wrestle with what to say about it?

This example of clarification, in lines 5-8 and 10, is different than the previous example, as the IR is not asking a question of the IE to prompt her confirmation. Instead, the IR, having

knowledge that the audience may not have, clarifies the comment to which the IE is referring, providing the audience with the context necessary to understand the IE's comment. Because the IE has this knowledge and does not need confirmation of a vague statement by the IE, he is able to clarify the information in the form of a statement. While this example may at first appear to be a contribution on the part of the IR, it is evident that the statement functions as a clarification, or as Clayman (2013) characterizes, a deviation that is "displaying understanding for the audience" (p. 636).

3.3 Acknowledgement

In this November 6, 2017 interview with Tucker Carlson (IR) and Ivanka Trump (IE), the IE discusses ways in which the proposed tax bill will help families, specifically those with working mothers and young children:

Extract 6 (Carlson & Trump)

01 IE: But- but n-n-no but as- as a government in terms of [you know (.)
02 → IR: [(oh)
03 IE: schooling starts at the age of f[ive there's not a lot of support
04 → IR: [right
05 IE: for families .hh in those early years. Indeniably it's very
06 expensive to raise children [that's if you're a stay at home
07 → IR: [yeah
08 IE: parent .hh who's investing in potentially .hh um after school
09 activities [.hh mommy and me classes .hh um food (.) and whatever
10 → IR: [right
11 IE: it is that they think is the best investment

In lines 2, 4, 7, and 10, the IR utilizes continuers in order to demonstrate engagement and encourage the IE to continue her response. Here, the IR's responses are not meant to assess the information or agree with the information, but rather to demonstrate engagement in the response.

In the previously mentioned interview between Hannity and Limbaugh, the IR demonstrates use of the continue during the response to a question posed to the IE about whether he would consider having his own television show:

Extract 7 (Hannity & Limbaugh)

01 IR: I think people would like to see you on T.V. .hh uh m-maybe an
02 hour a week.
03 IE: I u[h
04 IR: [Would you eve[r- see I told you you would hate i[t
05 IE: [I- uh [There's
06 something goin' on everybody is telling m- I (had) a couple
07 callers this wee[k did they call you and you tell them to
08 → IR: [Yeah
09 IE: call m[e? They said
10 IR: [No other people

11 IE: They- they s[aid
12 IR: [I'm here as an em- (.) emissary from Fox

In line 8 of this extract, the IR responds to the IE with the continuer “Yeah”, which is meant to acknowledge the IE’s response without making comment on the validity of the statement. The IE has previously stated, “I (had) a couple of callers this week” (lines 6-7) and the IR responds to encourage the IE to continue the response, much as a participant in a mundane conversation might do.

4. Discussion

As the results of the study show, departures from the normative turn-taking structure by the interviewer are present in all six of the selected interviews, with contributions occurring the most frequently in the data at 55 times in two hours, and acknowledgements occurring least frequently, with only 32 examples in the data set. However, no clear pattern of usage exists between the six interviews, and some interviews demonstrate use of only two of the three departure types, with others exhibiting examples from all three categories. The implications of this study indicate that the interview has become more of a co-constructed genre of talk. This allows the IRs and IEs both contribute to the narrative, rather than the IE only responding, and the IR having control over the direction of the interview via questioning techniques. Although previous research has shown deviations from the turn-taking structure, it suggests that IR and IE both recognize these departures as violative and typically demonstrate adherence to the question-answer structure (Heritage & Clayman, 2010). However, the results of my study suggest that the participants in the interview do not see these deviations as violative, but rather that the IE will orient himself or herself to the deviation, responding to the IR’s violation during the IE’s response turn. Furthermore, the categories of violations demonstrate patterns in their function, and serve a purpose within the interview context. The IR’s contributions, while varied in whether they express agreement or disagreement with the IE, serve to either provide additional relevant information to the audience or refute previous information spoken by the IE. Clarifications by the IR provide relevant information to the audience about the topic the IE is discussing. Acknowledgements serve, as they do in mundane conversation, to show active listening by the IR and to encourage the IE to complete his or her turn. Overall, these violations by the IR are accepted by the IE as a valid part of the interview and elicits a response from the IE that demonstrates this acceptance.

In considering the implications of this study, however, the limitations must also be taken into account in making claims about the broader significance of the results. The small data set of six interviews may not be representative of larger patterns in U.S. political broadcast news interviews. Due to the large number of broadcast news interviews, this collection of six specific broadcast news interviews is not representative of the larger genre. Therefore, larger scale analysis of political broadcast news interviews would need to be conducted to determine if there is further evidence of these violations in additional data. In addition, the possible political bias of the news sources and the interviewers must be taken into consideration in determining how violations affect the construction of the news interview. With a small data set only including six

interviews, it is difficult to ensure that the news interviews encompass a variety of hostile and friendly interviews in terms of whether the IR's and IE's political opinions agree or clash. For this smaller scale analysis, I selected interviews from three top news sources in the U.S., but less attention was paid to whether the IR and IE agree or disagree on politics. Additionally, the selected interviews are not controlled for length, and this has an effect on the overall count of violations and violation categories in the data. In considering the previous literature that identifies departures from the normative question-answer structures as recognizably violative in the interview, it is important to consider that much of the previous research about news interviews has focused on interviews from the 1990s and earlier. As the societal demands are ever-changing, it is possible that changes in audience expectation could cause the IRs to orient to these new demands, thus affecting their role in the news interview to satisfy their audience. Diachronic studies of political broadcast news interviews would allow for a comparison of current-day news interviews and those from the 1990s and earlier in order to see if changes have been made to the expectations of the political news interview.

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