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EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERRUPTION AS A COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGY IN THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES IN THE USA

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Abstract

The research hypothesizes that the American 2020 Presidential debate participants used recurrent interruptions as a communicative strategy to gain more power on the debate floor and win the voters' support. The form of political interaction (televised debates) also affected the candidates' speech behavior in a way that it added another participant (the general public) to the discussion; as a result, an institutionally controlled form of political discourse was subjected to a medial turn. This kind of media influence contributed to the speakers' choice of specific interruption types during the debates. The research analyses the turn-taking strategies of D. Trump and J. Biden employed in the First and Second (and Final) Debates and matches them with the pre- and post-debate poll results. The article concludes that although having a certain impact on the perception of the politicians' personalities, the effect of interruptions as a debate strategy on the voters' final choices was marginal.

Key words

Debate; political discourse; turn-taking; communicative strategies and tactics

1. Introduction

In modern linguistics, the term “talker identity” can be considered in a broad and narrow sense. In a narrow mode, talker identification is viewed as the ability of the listener to recognize a speaker by attributing the speaker's specificity effects to the listener's cognitive database (Fontaine et al. 2017). In a broad sense, talker identity can be viewed at the discourse level when the mode of interaction chosen by the speaker invokes in the listener's mind some broad talker-related knowledge including all aspects of language-specific information, namely, the manner, the method, and the means of communication (Hall et al. 2011). Following this broad definition, talker identity is viewed in this paper as a personal style of a speaker, realized through the use of particular communicative strategies in a certain institutional/non-institutional setting.

The way talker identity is realized in televised presidential debates is especially interesting because, in terms of media linguistics, any talker identity in televised discourse potentially becomes the subject of the so-called “medial turn,” which occurs as a result of “the speaker’s recognition of media presence in the act of communication” (Chernyavskaya 2013). The debater responds to the technical side of the issue, that is, being presented to the audience as an image, thus, “efficiently combining impressive rhetoric with an appealing picture” (Sopel 2017).

Additionally, it is important to observe the realization of politicians’ talker identities in an institutional (in our case, pre-election) setting, where the speakers can potentially choose their mode of interaction with the public or political opponents to better fit in with the political situation, the dominant ideology, or the tastes of the electorate. These choices, also known as situational “applications of social identities” (Van Dijk 2010), may involve various language strategies, including changes in style, vocabulary, or manner of interaction. It is still unclear, though, to what extent politicians alter their talker identities depending on certain extra-linguistic factors and the aim of interaction.

This research hypothesizes that several communicative strategies noticeable in the 2020 Presidential debates, like recurrent speaker interruptions, were triggered by the factors such as media presence, institutional setting, and the desire of the participants to influence the debate outcome. We aim to analyze the influence of the medial turn and the changes in the talker identities of American politicians, namely Donald Trump and Joseph Biden, with the following research questions:

- Did the speakers’ interruptions form a regular pattern that can be classified as their communicative strategies?
- Did these strategies manifest changes in their talker identities?
- Were Trump’s and Biden’s interruptions similar in nature?
- Did the televised interaction format influence the debaters’ language behavior?
- Did the chosen communication mode effectively change the viewers’ preferences (and potentially the election results)?

2. Literature Review

It was established in earlier studies that if a discussion or a dialogue is to proceed smoothly, the participants must take regular speaking turns (Sacks et al. 1974). Conversation Analysis studies have shown that speakers, on the one hand, give various signals to the listener that they are willing to hand over the conversational turn at the so-called “transition-relevance places,” or TRPs (Sacks et al. 1974) but, on the other, are often guided by “common pragmatic principles” (Power and Dal Martello 1986) which mean that it is often the communicative intention of the speaker that defines their desire to give or keep a turn.

Similarly, the nature of the speaker’s interruptions is twofold. Interruptions can occur by mistake when the participants do not recognize the subtle signals

of turn transitions (Sacks et al. 1974) and start a new turn earlier than expected by “non-competitive overlaps” (Chowdhury et al. 2019). In contrast, when guided solely by communicative intentions, a speaker may try to dominate the dialogue and use interruptions, or “competitive overlaps” (Chowdhury et al. 2019), as a means to get the speaking role (Beattie et al. 1982).

Although Goldberg (1990) proved that competitive overlaps are not always hostile and can just as often happen in cooperative, friendly talks, studies of parliamentary debates claim that whenever “the debate floor is sought after for both political and professional gain,” interrupting a partner becomes “more formal and adversarial” (Show 2000). It is also believed that the controlled environment of the debate procedure adds a new dimension to the talker identities of the participants, who view violating the procedure rules as the best way to express themselves (Ilie 2015).

Indeed, Benoit (2016) states that election debates as a form of interaction have multiple potentials of “reinforcing the existing attitudes to the candidates, or changing these attitudes,” with political agenda and the candidate’s character gaining almost equal significance in the candidate’s assessment. The Functional Theory of debate analysis, although culture-specific, states that a definite aim of any political candidate is to “distinguish themselves from opponents,” which can only be achieved by “attacking [others], and defending [themselves]” (Benoit and Sheaffer 2006). This way, both the actual policies and the communicative behavior of the candidate, including the language they use, receive the close attention of the viewers, as “the comparisons are easier to make when candidates are engaged in dialogue” (Paatelainen et al. 2016: 70).

Following Fairclough’s definition of “language power,” which is viewed in terms of “asymmetries between participants in discourse events” (1995), Shaw proves that “illegal interventions and interruptions” potentially give the speaker “more control over the debate floor” and, therefore, “more power in debates” (2000: 416). Even though several studies show that having more power and, eventually, winning the debate does not considerably affect the voters’ preferences (Winneg and Jamieson 2017), Montez and Brubaker (2019) claim that social and verbal aggression increases over time with each coming debate segment and the primary debates feature less aggression than the general election debates.

As for the impact of the televised form of the debate on the language behavior of the speakers and the overall assessment of the candidates, Druckman (2003) proves that in TV broadcasts, it is the speaker’s character perception rather than their political agenda that comes to the forefront of the viewers’ evaluation. Empirical studies have shown that the mode of the candidates’ TV presentation, such as a split-screen translation where the audience can see both politicians at the same time, has a profound effect on the politicians’ assessment (Cho 2009), since non-verbal means of interaction (like face expression) and immediate verbal reactions (such as backchannels) instantly contribute to the opinion formation. Cho posits that “disentangling” media effects from identity effects in televised debates becomes increasingly difficult (2009).

Analysts and the media agree that interruptions of a partner became a most noticeable feature of the 2020 Presidential debate in the USA (1). Journalists

report that the First Debate between D. Trump and J. Biden was difficult to follow because of the constant interruptions. The unprecedented change of debate rules before the Second Debate (the debaters' microphones were muted unless it was their turn to speak) visibly reduced the candidates' ability to interrupt each other and helped to create a calmer atmosphere with more room for discussion of political matters; however, the new rules did not successfully deal with crosstalk during the debate. Rowland's (2021) analysis of two presidential debates concludes that even after the rules changed, the procedure looked rather like a "political theater than a public argument," which once again puts the candidates' identity performances realized through the changes in the turn-taking patterns into the focus of research attention.

3. Methodology

In order to answer the research questions, a three-stage analysis of the First and the Second Presidential Debates (2020) was designed. The *First stage*, the auditory-acoustic analysis, was conducted with the help of the Conversation Analysis Methodology (Chowdhury et al. 2019). Four experts (non-natives, proficient speakers of English, experienced in political discourse analysis) watched and listened to the debates to identify the types of turns in the debates, namely:

- *smooth transitions* (taking a turn conducted without a long pause or any significant disruptions of the communication process (Sacks et al. 1974)),
- *interruptions* (competitive overlaps) (change of the speaker with an apparent breach of a standard turn-taking procedure or resulting in crosstalk (Schegloff 2000)),
- *backchannels* (signals expressing agreement or disagreement (Oreström 1983), often not qualified as independent turns),
- *crosstalk* (periods of simultaneous speaking by both participants, when it is difficult to identify the dominant speaker).

The experts were allowed to stop the recording to make notes and comments if something in their view disrupted the normal flow of the debate procedure. After normalizing the frequency counts, the scores were compared for reliability purposes. The measurements of the participants' speaking time were conducted with the help of the Praat 6.0 program.

The *Second stage* of the analysis involved qualitative data processing aimed at generalizing the recurring patterns of turn transitions. Qualitative analysis was carried out with the help of content-based descriptive methodology: interruption types were classified into communicative strategies (whenever possible), based on a larger context found in the debate transcripts (2). The recurrent strategies were then distributed by the speaker (D. Trump and J. Biden).

Classifying communicative strategies at the second stage of the analysis was also aimed at identifying the changes in the talker identities of the debaters triggered by the institutional type of interaction (a televised debate). However, to

realize the full scope of these changes, the present research would also require samples of D. Trump and J. Biden conversing in a non-institutional environment, which for objective reasons, were not available. As a result, most conclusions concerning the situational changes of talker identities made in the Analysis and Discussion section remain partly hypothetical.

The *Third stage* of the analysis (the effectiveness assessment) relies on the polling results from the FiveThirtyEight/Ipsos project, which are available as an open source on the Internet (3). The present study design did not include running our own pre- and post-debate perception tests, which are necessary to answer the research question concerning the effectiveness of the speakers' interruption strategies, because using the existing Ipsos data seems to add extra validity to our conclusions. The Ipsos polls were run in the USA, among a general population sample, creating a highly representative picture of American society in general. For the FiveThirtyEight/Ipsos study, the same group of respondents (3263 people who watched the debates) was interviewed to track whether their perceptions of D. Trump's and J. Biden's personalities and policies changed before and after the debates. The initial polling was conducted before the First Debate, with two follow-up polls carried out after each debate ended.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Quantitative Analysis

The first observation from the results obtained in Stage 1 (quantitative analysis) is the discrepancy in the number of turns taken in the two debates for relatively the same time (93 min. each). The Second Debate saw a nearly 35% decrease in the number of turns, which can undoubtedly be explained by the above-mentioned change in the debate rules.

Table 1. Distribution of turns by the speaker

The Speaker	First Debate		Second Debate	
	No. of turns	Percentage	No. of turns	Percentage
Trump's turns	315	40%	200	38%
Biden's turns	251	32%	137	26%
The host's turns	226	28%	189	36%

The distribution of turns by the speaker (Table 1) also shows that D. Trump initiated at least 1,25 more turns than J. Biden in the First Debate and 1,46 more in the Second. Although the number of Trump's turns debate-to-debate in absolute measurements decreased by nearly 37% (315 turns vs. 200 turns, respectively), the relative share of his turns (40% vs. 38%) remained almost the same. J. Biden, in contrast, reduced the number of initiated turns by 45% in the Second Debate

(251 turns vs. 137 turns, respectively), which resulted in his having even fewer starts than the Second Debate host (Kristen Welker), whose contributions, quite understandably, were only of technical nature.

Table 2. Distribution of turn-taking types by the speaker

Turn Type	First Debate		Second Debate	
	No. of turns	Percentage	No. of turns	Percentage
Smooth transition	486	61%	402	76%
Interruptions	154	19%	69	13%
Backchannels	80	10%	32	6%
Crosstalk	73	9%	25	5%

As for the turn types (Table 2), the revised debate procedure naturally led to a higher number of smooth transitions (a 15% rise in the Second Debate) and, consequently, to a smaller number of interruptions (a 6% fall). However, the new rules did not wholly eliminate the crosstalk instances (decreased by 4%, but still accounting for 5% of turn transitions), which, in our view, reflects the intensity of competition and the span of the communicative fight typical of a debate as a genre. Although strictly regulated, the Second Debate, in essence, proportionally mirrors the speakers’ First Debate tactics and language practices. The comparative analysis of the two shows that despite the changes in raw quantitative measurements and the increase in the average turn length, the turn’ typology did not change significantly. The role of interruptions (19% – First Debate, 13% – Second Debate) as an instrument of rhetoric competition remained significantly high.

Research on the nature of conflict communication, based on non-specific environments, states that if the number of smooth transitions in the dialogue is lower than 60%, such a dialogue should be classified as a conflict, not a cooperative one (Kellett 2006). In practice, with only 61% of smooth turns in the First Debate, this would mean that this debate was held on the borderline between cooperation and conflict. However, if the competitive nature of the political debate as a specific genre (Ilie 2015) is taken into account, it becomes evident that the benchmark mentioned can only be accepted for general communication, but it is unacceptable in parliamentary and election debates, when the speakers use the language practices “to score points by exploiting each other’s weaknesses and vulnerabilities” (Ilie 2015). Moreover, in a competitive language environment like presidential debates, even 76% of smooth transitions (Second Debate) do not guarantee the speakers’ cooperation.

The distribution of the speaking time in both debates (Table 3) demonstrates an almost two-fold decrease in crosstalk time, which led to a proportionate increase in the candidates’ speaking time.

Table 3. Distribution of speaking time by the speaker

The Speaker	First Debate (Total duration: 93 min)		Second Debate (Total duration: 93 min)	
	Speaking Time (min.)	Percentage	Speaking Time (min.)	Percentage
D. Trump	36	39%	39	42%
J. Biden	34	37%	37	40%
The moderator	6	6%	8	8%
Crosstalk	17	18%	9	10%

In both debates, D. Trump spoke about three minutes longer than J. Biden. However, when contrasted with the number of turns started by the participants (Table 1), the difference in just three minutes looks relatively modest. Indeed, D. Trump started at least 64 (First Debate) and 63 (Second Debate) more turns than J. Biden; however, Trump's turns were nearly twice as short as Biden's (roughly 6,8 sec. (mean) vs. 13 sec. in the First Debate and 19 sec. (mean) vs. 27 sec. in the Second Debate), with Biden demonstrating a better skill to keep the turn despite the opponent's interruption attempts.

4.2 Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative analysis of the data (Stage 2) was primarily focused on establishing the difference between the turn-taking modes of the two participants. Special attention was paid to identifying recurring communicative techniques employed by the speakers, which were then identified as their talker identity performances.

The qualitative analysis of interruption sub-types shows that in an institutionally controlled setting, such as a debate, any interruption, irrespective of its type, is primarily used by the speakers as a communicative strategy for grabbing the debate initiative. An essential feature of such an interruption, which, in theory, distinguishes it from a non-competitive smooth transition, is that it usually takes place before the semantic and logical center of an utterance is pronounced (Schegloff 2000). However, the data show that even though some turns were started after the semantic center of an utterance, the speaker can also view them as an attempt to "steal" the debate floor. As a result, the interrupted speaker may react accordingly by trying to keep their turn, which usually results in more cross-talk time, that is, more interruptions.

The content-based analysis of interruptions allowed for distinguishing the following most common sub-types of interruptions that occurred in the 2020 Presidential Debates:

- *Interrupting the speaker aimed at (resulting in) changing the topic of the discussion:* Sometimes it is difficult to say in advance whether interrupting the opponent will lead to a change in the discussion topic. Answering

this question retrospectively, when experts analyze the transcripts, seems relatively easy; however, classifying interruptions into “leading to the subject change” or “resulting in such a change” is still problematic because it would mean knowing the primary intentions of the speakers.

- *Interruptions aimed directly at the TV audience rather than the opponent:* In televised debates, interruptions of a speaker acquire special significance when they are not directed at the opponent but rather at the TV viewers who become the “third” dialogue participant. In contrast to other interruption sub-types, in the “direct address” interruptions, the debaters do not take turns to grab the communicative initiative but to get their message across directly to the audience as if avoiding further discussions with their immediate opponent.
- *Critical backchannels disrupting the course of the discussion:* Critical backchannels, expressing disagreement and various degrees of criticism in the background of the discussion, may or may not be followed by the opponent’s reaction. Although backchannels, in principle, are not typically viewed as competitive overlaps (Chowdhury et al. 2019), in a debate setting, backchannels, just as competitive overlaps, can significantly disrupt the turn-taking procedure.
- *Interruptions promoting Us-Them opposition:* Another interruption sub-type that, in our opinion, underscores the media presence and indicates the medial-turn effects on the debate procedure is the “Us-Them interruptions.” The debaters, in this case, use a special set of pronouns (“we” instead of “I,” “he/they” instead of “you,” and so on) typically combined with various non-verbal signals to contrast themselves and their followers to the opponent’s followers and potential voters as if trying to compel the TV viewers to join their side. Although Us-Them statements are generally quite common in political discourse (Alieva 2008), a high incidence of Us-Them interruptions (3–11%) in the 2020 debates reflects the political polarization that D. Trump and J. Biden underscored in their speeches.

To realize the full potential of interruptions, it would be useful to see some practical examples of their most common types from the context of the debates. It is worth mentioning that the classification mentioned above is not exhaustive, as in a debate multiple interruption strategies occasionally come into interplay, making the exact classification rather complicated.

Debate Extract 1: Changing the Topic of the Discussion

BIDEN: It does not. It’s only for those people who are so poor they qualify for Medicaid; they can get that free. In most states, except for governors who want to deny people who are poor, Medicaid. Anyone who qualifies for Medicare... , excuse me, Medicaid ...would automatically be enrolled in the public option. The vast majority of Americans would still not be in that option. Number one...

TRUMP: So you agree with Bernie Sanders, who’s left on the manifesto we call it, that gives you socialized medicine.

BIDEN: Look. The fact of the matter is, I beat Bernie Sanders...
TRUMP: You got very lucky.
BIDEN: I got very lucky. I'm going to get very lucky tonight as well.

Debate extract 1 exemplifies Trump's interrupting Biden twice. The first interruption happened out of TRP before the semantic center of the new utterance was pronounced (*Number one...*). In the second case, Trump did not let Biden finish his idea (*I beat Bernie Sanders...*) by introducing a critical comment. This extract illustrates Trump's attempt to divert the opponent's attention from discussing some particular political issue by substituting it for another topic. In the example above, Biden started answering Trump's critical comments; however, in most other cases, he preferred to leave these comments unanswered, favoring the projection of his other ideas and choosing to address the audience directly.

Debate Extract 2: Direct Address to the Audience

TRUMP: He said it's a possibility that we'll have the answer before November 1. It could also be after that. We're gonna deliver it right away. We have the military all set up – logistically, they're all set up. We have our military that delivers soldiers, and they could do 200,000 a day. They're going to be...

BIDEN: This is the same man who told you...

TRUMP: It's all set up.

BIDEN: He said this would be gone away. Whether it'd be gone – miraculously, like a miracle. By the way, maybe you could inject some bleach in your arm and that would take care of it.

Debate extract 2 illustrates Biden's most common strategy of directly addressing the viewers. His interruption comes before Trump finishes his utterance (*They're going to be...*), but it is not meant to respond to Trump's words. Biden finds fault with Trump's arguments, and his primary aim is to draw the viewers' attention to Trump's faulty conclusions (*This is the same man who told you...*). Biden ignores Trump's next turn (*It's all set up.*) and finishes his address by demonstratively calling Trump "he."

It should also be mentioned that passages like these are typically accompanied by Biden's non-verbal signals, such as pointing at the camera, framing the screen, and other gestures specifically targeting the TV audience. Throughout the debates, Biden repeatedly and explicitly hints that he is aware of the media presence and that this debate is his virtual dialogue with a larger audience.

Debate Extract 3: Critical Backchannels

TRUMP: Ohio had the best year it ever had last year. Michigan had the best year they've ever had...

BIDEN: That is not true.

TRUMP: Many car companies came in from Germany, from China. They went to Michigan, went to Ohio.

Debate extract 3 is a typical case of a critical backchannel, a turn that does not lead to the speaker transition. Biden comments (*That is not true.*) in the middle of Trump's utterance, but formally he does not take a turn. Trump finishes his idea; however, the audience is now aware of Biden's attitude to the matter. Thus, without openly confronting the opponent, the debate participant communicates their idea to the audience.

As mentioned above, in non-institutional environments, backchannels usually express support and understanding of the speaker, serving as a trust-building mechanism in cooperative conversations. However, in a televised event like a debate, backchannels become another strategy of immediate contact with the audience that demonstrates the media effects on the speaker's identity performance.

Debate Extract 4: Keeping the Floor

TRUMP: He's talking about the Green New Deal. And it's not 2 billion or 20 billion, as you said. It's \$100 trillion...

BIDEN: I'm talking about ...

TRUMP: and rebuild the buildings. Where airplanes are out of business. Where there are two-car systems or where they want to take out the cows.

Debate Extract 4 is an example of a failed interruption. Biden's interruption attempt (*I'm talking about...*) was ignored by Trump, who wished to keep the floor. In this case, the exact mechanism of interaction is difficult to define. It is unclear if it was Biden, who misinterpreted the TRP and started his turn in the wrong place, or if it was Trump who interrupted his opponent (*You wanna rip down buildings [...]*) by intentionally raising his voice to keep the turn, as he was not ready to hand over the communicative role. Such episodes of the communicative fight were quite common in the 2020 debates.

Debate Extract 5: Repetition

TRUMP: You mean, the laptop is now another Russia, Russia, Russia hoax? You gotta be...

BIDEN: That's exactly what... That's exactly what...

TRUMP: Is this where you're going? This is where he's going. The laptop is Russia, Russia, Russia?

Debate extract 5 presents the candidates' repetition strategy. Repetition, which is often combined with an interruption, comes to the forefront as another means to be more convincing in an argument. Earlier studies of Trump's public speaking style (Tymbay 2018) noted it as his typical feature, often combined with short, "clip-like" utterances.

Biden's repetitions (*That's exactly what... That's exactly what...*) are different. He uses repetitive "false starts" as a tactic to start a new turn.

Moreover, Trump and Biden often use repetition as backchannels during the debates. Phrases like "*wrong*" or "*not true*" are quite common. Similarly to other interruptions, repetitions are addressed to the TV viewers rather than the oppo-

nents. The speakers increasingly use them to interact with the audience but not as a strategy to take a turn.

Debate Extract 6 Us-Them Interruptions

TRUMP: I want to open the schools. The transmittal rate to the teachers is very small, but I want to open the schools. We have to open our country. We're not going to have a country. You can't do this, we can't keep this country closed. It is a massive country with a massive economy. [...] We have to open our country. You know I've said it often – the cure cannot be worse than the problem itself, and that's what's happening, and he wants to close down. He'll close down the country if one person in our, in our massive bureaucracy says we should close it down.

WELKER: Vice President Biden, your ...

BIDEN: Simply not true [...] We ought to be able to safely open, but we need resources to open.

Debate extract 6 illustrates Biden's interruption (*Simply not true.*) paired with his response to Trump's projection of the "Us-Them strategy." At the beginning of the passage, Trump embraces the collective "we" pronoun epitomizing himself and his supporters. Trump opposes his team's supposedly righteous policy to the one that can be implemented by J. Biden, whose disagreement is so strong that he decides to violate the debate procedure, interrupts the host, and suggests his vision of the situation also using the "we" pronoun.

At the final stage of the qualitative content-based analysis, all interruptions sub-types were grouped by the speaker with a frequency chart (Table 4) summarizing their occurrence in the First and Second Presidential Debates.

Table 4. The distribution of interruption types by the speaker (4)

The Interruption Type	First Debate		Second Debate	
	D. Trump	J. Biden	D. Trump	J. Biden
Changing the topic	17%	10%	15%	8%
Addressing the audience	4%	15%	6%	22%
Critical comment	21%	17%	24%	16%
Us-Them opposition	3%	9%	7%	11%
Other interruptions types	55%	49%	48%	43%

The sum-up (Table 4) analysis shows that despite a potentially broad variety of interruption types the same four sub-types – changing the topic, addressing the audience, critical comments, and "Us-Them opposition" strategy – make up roughly 50 percent of all non-smooth transitions. Such frequency allows for categorizing them into Trump's and Biden's main communicative strategies that, in our opinion, became dominant partly due to the televised form of debate.

Taking into account the data received at Stage 1 of the experiment (Tables 1–3), it seems meaningful that despite the decrease in the absolute number of turns in the Second Debate, the total share of the four dominant interruption strategies in the Second Debate increased by 6% for Trump and 5% for Biden. It looks as if both debaters embraced these types as their talker identity performances in the First Debate, realized the interruptions' full potential, and proceeded with the same communicative tactics in the Second Debate.

For both politicians in the past debates, the “critical comment” became the most common interruption sub-type (21–24% for Trump and 17–16% for Biden), rivaled only by the “direct address” to the audience (15–22% for Biden). In essence, both these types are competitive backchannels or short comments produced by the opponent when there is a pause or a short break between the tone groups with the only difference that “critical comments” are aimed at the opponent, while “direct addresses” are more aimed at the general audience.

As for the “direct address strategy,” Biden resorted to this kind of interruption three times more often than Trump (15% vs. 4% in the First Debate) and even increased the number of Direct addresses in the Second Debate by 7%. With “direct addresses” making up 22% of all interruptions, they became Biden's trademark strategy of a sort. Whereas Trump's most typical feature remained his short “critical comments” (24% in the Second Round), well-corresponding to his above-mentioned “clip-like” speech technics.

Another thing worth noticing in the 2020 debates is Biden's loyalty to the “Us-Them opposition” strategy, which manifests itself both in interruptions and the broad content of the debates (9–11%). Trump, in his turn, seems to have adopted the same tactic only in the Second Debate (3–7%), with the number of such interruptions going up from debate to debate.

The reduction in the number of interruptions leading to the change of the topic by 7% for both speakers in the Second Debate can be best explained by the changes in debate rules. The debaters had to stick to the suggested topic of the discussion and follow a strictly controlled environment. As a result, the occurrence of all other interruption types grew, probably, as a compensation means.

By way of concluding the quantitative analysis, it is worth mentioning that despite the discrepancy of certain discrete parameters in the First and Second Debates, including the absolute number of turns, the average duration of the turn, and the raw number of interruptions, the proportional measurements of the speakers' strategies, in particular their preferred interruption types, remained the same, if not more evident in the Second Debate.

4.3 Effectiveness Assessment

One of the main research questions of the present paper concerns the effectiveness of the interruption strategies that D. Trump and J. Biden employed in the 2020 Presidential Debates. However, answering this question solely within the framework of the present experiment design was impossible as it would demand attracting enormous resources unavailable in the present study.

Televised Presidential Debates target vast masses of the US general public;

therefore, assessing the effectiveness of the speech strategies would mean surveying many Americans, who were the focus audience of the debates. To deal with this issue, we suggest relying on the available political analyses and existing polling data from the FiveThirtyEight and Ipsos cooperation project (described in detail in the Methodology section). Although using Ipsos data is, to some extent, a limitation of the present study, the broad scope of opinions they provide may add extra validity to the conclusions made.

Another research limitation worth mentioning here is that pre-election poll results inevitably reflect general favorability ratings, which include both the attitudes to the speakers' policies and their personalities. Although it was stated above that the viewers of the debates often merge the two concepts (Druckman 2003), certain reservations should be made if we want to assess the effects of the speakers' speech strategies on the voters in isolation.

Table 5. The candidates' performance assessment (Abridged from FiveThirtyEight/Ipsos poll results (5))

Candidate's performance	First Debate		Second Debate	
	D. Trump	J. Biden	D. Trump	J. Biden
"good"	32.9 %	59.7 %	51.8 %	68.1 %
"poor"	66.2 %	39.1 %	46.1 %	29.6 %

The Ipsos results (Table 5) show that more than 66.2 % of people who watched the First Presidential debate assessed Trump's performance as "poor," with only 32.9 % satisfied with the way the then President conducted the debate. In contrast, 59.7 % of viewers called Biden's performance "very good," with only 39.1 % considering it "poor."

The polls conducted after the Second Debate demonstrate that the number of voters satisfied with Trump's performance went up ("good" – 51.8 %; "poor" – 46.1 %), with Biden's performance also getting a better appraisal ("good" – 68.7; "poor" – 29.6). Such improvements in ratings can probably be explained by the decrease in crosstalk time, which made the politicians more intelligible to the audience. The increase in smooth transitions, a falling number of interruptions, and longer turns have certainly contributed to better contact with the audience and, in our opinion, may have shifted the focus of the viewers' attention from the speakers' performance to the speakers' political agenda.

As for the political analysts' subjective assessments of the debates, Collinson and Hearn (2020) report that in the First Debate, Trump is seen as someone who puts a premium on "appearing strong" and supposedly never showing weakness or vulnerability. According to the experts, Trump is always in control, with them emphasizing his visible "masculine authoritarianism, [...] dominance, aggression, and winning at all costs, regardless of the rules" (Collinson and Hearn 2020). Such a vision is probably based on the effects of numerous interruptions on the audience. The speaker who starts a competitive overlap tends to believe that they

can more effectively express their point of view because interruptions “command the attention of the viewers and often win their respect” (Ivanova 2003). Breaches of a standard turn-taking procedure are more memorable and contribute to the “sensationalism” traditionally expected from the media (Uzuegbunam 2013).

On the other hand, Biden is believed to have presented an unmistakable contrast to his opponent (Collinson and Hearn 2020). His speaking style is understated, “old school,” possessing “caution, thoughtfulness, and benevolent leadership.” Additionally, Stewart (2020) mentions laughter as another para-verbal feature of Biden’s speaking style, helping him to “take control of the conversation.” In comparison, Trump’s signature facial display (protruding funneled lips), as the expert suggests, should be “associated with anger and threats while engaging in dominance-seeking behavior” (Stewart 2020).

From these expert assessments, it is pretty clear why most viewers initially considered the interaction of the politicians to be ridden with anger and “largely unwatchable” (6). Nevertheless, as we have proved earlier, in the Second Debate, both Biden and Trump remained loyal to the speech strategies they used in the First Debate. Choosing the overtly aggressive stance in both debates, in our opinion, reflects the general tensions in American society at election time and matches the ambition of the speakers who wish to turn an institutionally controlled debate communication into a loosely controlled verbal competition for power.

If we look at the Ipsos set of data showing how the voter preferences changed before and after the debates (Table 6), we will see that despite the evident approval/disapproval of candidates’ performance (Table 5), the shifts in the resulting voter preferences (“How likely are you to vote for the candidate?”) are only marginal. Biden was estimated to slightly improve his credibility (by 0.2 points, from 5.0 to 5.2) after the First Debate but lost 0.1 points after the Second Debate (5.2 and 5.1 before and after the debate, respectively). At the same time, the audience’s loyalty to Trump went slightly down (from 3.8 to 3.7) after the First Debate and remained at the same level (3.8) after the Second Debate.

Table 6. TV viewers’ voting preferences (Abridged from FiveThirtyEight/Ipsos poll results (5))

“How likely are you to vote for the candidate?” on a scale from 0 (“no chance”) to 10 (“absolutely certain”)	First Debate		Second Debate	
	D. Trump	J. Biden	D. Trump	J. Biden
before the debate	3.8 %	5.0 %	3.8 %	5.2 %
after the debate	3.7 %	5.2 %	3.8 %	5.1 %

By way of concluding the effectiveness assessment, it can be assumed that although both experts and the cited Ipsos data show that the candidates’ chosen speech strategies have a certain impact on the likes or dislikes of the viewers, judging by the voters’ final choices, the potential effect of the politicians’ identity

performances on election results remains rather limited. The viewers may be satisfied or dissatisfied with their favorite candidate's debate performance, but, as described in earlier studies (Winneg and Jamieson 2017), they are still reluctant to change their voting preferences.

5. Conclusions

The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the 2020 Presidential debates in the USA shows that both presidential candidates, namely D. Trump and J. Biden, repeatedly resorted to recurrent interruptions of various nature, which can be classified as their chosen speech strategies. Since the presence and the ratio of these techniques were maintained more or less constant throughout the debates, we consider the chosen strategies the representations of the politicians' identity performances realized in the setting of an institutionally controlled debate environment.

Although following a similar language pattern, Trump's and Biden's interruptions were principally different. Critical comments were chosen by D. Trump as his top communication strategy, allowing for making relatively short "clip-like" comments aimed at the opponent to control the floor and change the discussion topic. Biden's interruptions, in contrast, were more directed at the audience, as if building direct communication with the voters. The increased number of these "direct addresses" in the Second Debate, coupled with the candidates' building on the number of "Us-Them" interruptions, reflects, in our view, their perceived media presence and can be classified as the medial turn effects.

Though it is still difficult to say whether the identity performances of the senior US politicians observed during the debates were merely situational and to which extent they characterize the debaters' usual speaking manner in non-institutional and less rigidly controlled discourse, the candidates' behavior restates that a political debate as a genre encourages a fierce verbal competition and taking the floor during the debate is sometimes associated with the manifestation of power and authority.

With the number of interruptions relatively high, the traditional communication division into cooperative and conflicting types is inappropriate for political debates. Enhanced by the power of the visual media, a televised debate creates for its participants a certain incentive to be more competitive and, thus, interrupt more frequently. When an overly interrupted communication loses its comprehensibility and, consequently, communicative value for the TV audience, strictly regulated rules are needed to restore the procedure. Strict debate rules effectively reduce the interruption number and bring order to the discourse.

Post-debate poll results demonstrate that although numerous speech strategies and tactics increase the impact of the speaker's personality on the audience, their effect on the voters' election choices remains rather limited.

Notes

- ¹ CNN Politics: https://edition.cnn.com/politics/live-news/presidential-debate-coverage-fact-check-09-29-20/h_9157f17840971e050e3d006f5b60f6f2 (Accessed on 20.10.2022) USA Today: <https://eu.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/2020/10/23/last-night-trump-biden-debate-recap-interruptions-speaking-time/3733474001/> (Accessed on 20. 10. 2022)
- ² The transcript of the First Debate: <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/09/30/presidential-debate-read-full-transcript-first-debate/3587462001/> (Accessed on 20. 10. 2022)
The transcript of the Second Debate: <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/10/23/debate-transcript-trump-biden-final-presidential-debate-nashville/3740152001/> (Accessed on 20. 10. 2022)
- ³ <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/538-first-presidential-debate-2020> (Accessed on 20. 10. 2022) <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/538-final-presidential-debate-2020> (Accessed on 20. 10. 2022)
- ⁴ Since the same interruption can belong to different categories (e.g. a critical comment leading to the change of the topic), the auditors were allowed to include a turn into more than one category. When it was difficult to put an interruption into a particular category, it was left uncategorized (Other interruption types).
- ⁵ <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/trump-biden-debate-poll/> (Accessed on 20. 10. 2022)
<https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/trump-biden-final-debate-poll/> (Accessed on 20. 10. 2022)
- ⁶ The Washington Post: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/09/30/trump-was-interrupter-in-chief-tuesdays-debate-it-wasnt-close/> (Accessed on 20. 10. 2022)

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