

Analysis of Interaction and Institutional Power Relations in MH370 Press Conferences

Marlyna Maros^{1*} and Sharifah Nadia Syed Nasharudin²

¹School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM, Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

²Language Studies Academy, Universiti Teknologi Mara, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Malaysian Airlines System (MAS) was stricken by crisis on 8 March, 2014 when flight MH370, which was scheduled to land in Beijing the same day, lost contact with Subang Air Traffic Control in Selangor, Malaysia. What happened to the flight remains a mystery till now. The incident necessitated a lot of press conferences as news of the progress of the Search and Rescue mission needed to be delivered. This study investigated how access to the floor during the MH370 press conferences was decided and regulated and how institutional power was portrayed by participants of the press conferences. Thirteen press conference videos were transcribed and analysed using the Conversation Analysis (CA) approach on institutional interaction and power behind discourse, which is part of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The findings showed that turn-taking was regulated through five mechanisms, namely, pre-allocated turn, turn-allocation techniques, turn-taking cues, overlaps and interruptions. Furthermore, the results also revealed that apart from the role of participants and institutional arrangements, most of the turn-taking mechanisms were used to portray institutional power. The analysis leads to the conclusion that despite the apprehensive situation faced by all involved, turn-taking appeared to have had a central role in shaping institutional interaction and power representation of the MH370 press conferences. Based on the findings, a number of recommendations for authorities involved

and suggestions for future research are provided. This study contributes to the area of discourse analysis, specifically, pertaining to press conferences.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 21 September 2015

Accepted: 15 January 2016

E-mail addresses:

marlyna@ukm.edu.my (Marlyna Maros),

sharifahnadia@salam.uitm.edu.my (Sharifah Nadia Syed Nasharudin)

* Corresponding author

Keywords: Conversational Analysis approach, Critical Discourse Analysis, institutional interaction, institutional power, press conference, turn-taking

INTRODUCTION

Being a very unusual event in aviation history, the case of the missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 caught media attention from all over the world. However, a local media channel reported that the press conferences on MH370 incident were seen as “faulty occasions with sketchy information, sometimes contradictory, and spokespersons not answering questions” (Astro Awani, 2014, March 12). As a result, many people, including next-of-kin of the victims, expressed anger, questioning the truth of the information released.

Press conferences are increasingly gaining more attention as they are broadcast all over the world and made instantly available through the Internet. Previous studies done by Esbaugh-Soha (2003) looked at press conferences from the historical perspective while Tunsall (1970) and Larson (2005) elaborated on the information activity in press conferences. Nevertheless, research into the press conference as a platform for the bridging of interaction and power is limited. As claimed by Clayman et al. (2002), Ekstrom (2006) and Bhatia (2006), there is a scarcity of studies on the press conference as a specific arena of interaction. Hence, the MH370 crisis provides timely ground for an investigation. Using a combination of the CA approach focussing on turn taking and the CDA approach on power perspective, this study intended to fill the gap by analysing the press conferences organised by the Malaysian government in the aftermath of the MH370 disappearance. The aim was to determine

how access to the floor was decided and regulated in MH370 press conferences and how this related to the institutional power of the participants involved. The study was guided by the following questions:

- i. How was turn-taking decided and regulated in MH370 press conferences?
- ii. How was institutional power portrayed in MH370 press conferences?

FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTS

The study focussed on turn-taking and how it related to power representation of the discourse in press conferences held after MH370 vanished from radar screens. It was guided mainly by concepts pertinent to Conversational Analysis (CA) of institutional interaction and Fairclough’s power-behind-discourse interpretation.

Institutionalised Turn-Taking System

Institutional interaction is a formalised arrangement that distinguishes a specific institution such as a press conference from other institutions such as a news interview. Heritage (1997) examined institutional interaction and suggested that it can be investigated in six places: turn-taking, overall structural organisation, sequence organisation, turn design, lexical choice and epistemological and other forms of asymmetry.

Most special turn-taking systems exploit question-answer exchanges to form the system. Press conferences differ from

ordinary single-party news interviews where participants are fundamentally constrained and a consistent and fixed format is utilised. Bhatia (2006) has suggested a common organisation of press conferences which are (a) the opening phase, during which the host of the conference welcomes the attendants; (b) the individual voice, during which the guests make their statements; (c) the interactional phase, during which the host asks questions and the guests answer; (d) the closing phase, during which the chairperson who has served as host for the conference rounds it off and thanks the attendants. Two-way communication between interviewer (IR) and interviewee (IE) usually occurs in the third phase and in this phase, the order of the talk follows the pattern below:

IR: Question

IE: Response

IR: Question

IE: Response.

This form of turn-taking involves 'turn-type pre-allocation', in which the activities of questioning and answering are pre-allocated to the roles of IR and IE, regardless of the number of IR and IE involved in the conversation. Specialised turn-taking systems strongly structure the framework of the activity, underlying meaning and interpretation that emerge within the conversation. In relation to this study, the researchers looked at how the institutional nature of MH370 press conferences shaped the turn-taking sequence in the interaction.

Fairclough's Power Behind Discourse

The term critical in CDA is often related to studying power relations (Fairclough, 1997). Power is negotiated, manipulated, expressed, rejected and challenged interpersonally through discourse in settings defined by institutional power asymmetry. Institutional power can be understood as power by which an individual is authorised by a public body to take decisions for other individuals involved.

Power behind discourse is the social order that holds the power to force and distribute conventions and enforce action against the actors if it is linguistically invaded. How effectively the discourse is shaped to suit the objectives and outcomes of the power-holders depend on how skilful the power-holders are at managing discourse. There are three aspects of 'power behind discourse': (i) standard language (ii) particular discourse types, which can be considered 'effects of power' (e.g. medical, education, law, religious discourse types) and (iii) access to discourse and the power to execute and impose constraints on access (Fairclough, 1989). The idea of 'power behind discourse' is that the whole social order of discourse is put together and held together as a hidden effect of power.

Language on its own is neutral of power, but CDA believes that people who use language can use it to generate power. MH370 press conferences, similar to other press conferences, demonstrated complicated power competition among the participants. Hidden effects of power

were shown either in the standard language used, the type of discourse governing the interaction or through access to the discourse. This study sought to examine the extent to which power was represented, by whom and for what objectives.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The samples of this study consisted of (13) press conferences held after Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 went missing. The press conferences were broadcast on Malaysian television channels. The duration of each session was between 30 and 45 minutes. The sessions chosen were dated between 8 March 2014 and 28 March 2014 during the Search and Rescue (SAR) phase. All the press conference videos were downloaded from Astroawani.com and Youtube.com. Table 1 below shows the samples used in the analysis:

Table. 1
The Selected Press Conference Sessions

| Data | Source | Date |
|------|----------------|----------------|
| 1 | Astroawani.com | March 8, 2014 |
| 2 | Astroawani.com | March 9, 2014 |
| 3 | Astroawani.com | March 10, 2014 |
| 4 | Youtube.com | March 11, 2014 |
| 5 | Youtube.com | March 12, 2014 |
| 6 | Astroawani.com | March 13, 2014 |
| 7 | Youtube.com | March 14, 2014 |
| 8 | Astroawani.com | March 16, 2014 |
| 9 | Astroawani.com | March 17, 2014 |
| 10 | Youtube.com | March 19, 2014 |
| 11 | Youtube.com | March 20, 2014 |
| 12 | Youtube.com | March 21, 2014 |
| 13 | Youtube.com | March 22, 2014 |

The Transcription Process

The press conference videos downloaded from the Internet were then transcribed according to Jefferson conventions. The transcripts provided information related to turn-taking such as overlapping and interruption; however, they did not provide precise marks of prosodic cues such as loudness, pause length and the change of pitch contour. The data were coded serially by date.

Data Analysis

The framework of the Conversation Analysis of institutional interaction based on the work of Harvey Sacks (1992) was central to this analysis. The focus of this research was to determine how the institutional nature of the press conference affected the organisation of the talk in-interaction. The data were transcribed in close detail, with emphasis on the turn-taking mechanism and the turn-allocation components identified including pre-allocated turns, turn-allocation techniques, turn-taking cues, overlaps and interruptions.

As discourse and power are intimately connected, to answer the second research question, the same transcriptions were analysed using Fairclough’s power-behind-discourse interpretation, which guides the speaker’s status and role, discourse and strategies in interaction. Fairclough’s (2003) framework was used to explore the conversation mechanisms of the discourse in order to examine how power was represented in the interaction. Both the elements of CA

and CDA within an institutional setting were brought together in this study as one approach alone could not have provided answers to the research questions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Turn-Taking Mechanisms in MH370 Press Conferences

The data revealed that there were six turn-taking mechanisms employed by participants in the MH370 press conferences. They were:

Pre-Allocated turns. The MH370 press conferences were governed by the ordinary structure of the turn-taking sequence, which is: request-invitation-question-answer. The institutional turn-taking system according to Atkinson and Drew (1979) is pre-allocated to the roles of interviewer (IR) and interviewee (IE). In this case, IR is the journalist and IE is the spokesperson-in-charge. Participants are fundamentally constrained where IR restrict themselves to questioning and IE restrict themselves to answering questions or responding to them. Each step in the sequence may be represented in various ways.

Example: MH370 Press Conference (March 11, 2014)

| | |
|---|-----|
| J: Tan Sri, I want to clarify one thing | 114 |
| S: You are from? | 115 |
| J: I'm from Guang Ming Daily Malaysia punya. Tan Sri, I want | 116 |
| to clarify one thing, just now you were said that no five persons | 117 |
| check-in and boarding. Did they... | 118 |

In the example above, line 114 is the request. Not necessarily having to utter a proper request sentence of speech act, the utterance made by the journalist "*Tan Sri, I want to clarify one thing,*" is understood as a request to take the turn to ask a question. In the next line, the sentence "*You are from?*" is the invitation. Following the sequence is the question and answers by the participants.

Turn-Allocation techniques. Turn-allocation techniques are used to decide how turns are allocated and regulated among participants in a press conference. According to Schegloff (2000), the turn-allocation technique is the basic resource in the organisation of turn-taking. It controls turn change among participants as it comprises a set of rules for the allocation of the next speaker's turn. This is done to ensure smooth transition in interaction. Turn-Allocation techniques in MH370 press conferences were divided into two groups: (a) current speaker selects next speaker and (b) self-selection by next speaker.

Firstly, the current-speaker may select the next-speaker by foregrounding him or her. This can be done in a number of ways, including by looking at that person, or by asking that person a question. In addition, gestures and body language signals such as nodding, eye contact, pointing with the hand were also some common techniques used in selecting the next speaker. An example of current speaker selecting next speaker by using a simple verbal utterance is as shown in the excerpt below:

Example: MH370 Press Conference (March 12, 2014)

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| J: Kadir from RTM | 268 |
| S: Yang daripada RTM tadi↓ | 269 |

In this example, by saying “*Yang daripada RTM tadi,*” the spokesperson was actually selecting the next speaker by giving the turn to the journalist from RTM. The same goes for the example below, where the spokesperson selected the next speaker by saying “*Soalan kedua tadi apa, repeat?*” which clearly gave the journalist who had spoken before the turn to ask the next question.

Turn-Taking cues. These are signals that speakers and hearers send to each other in order to indicate their place with regards to sequence in turn. In this study, the non-verbal cues were widely used in signaling the end of the turn. Several gestures, body motion and eye movements were seen especially from the spokesperson to yield the turn to the journalists. Goodwin and Goodwin (1986, p.72), for instance, pointed out that non-vocal behaviour, such as gazing towards an interlocutor, can give detailed information about the organisation of the current activity. In the material studied, the spokesperson always looked at the person he wished to give the next turn to.

In addition, similar to what he mentioned in relation to gestures and their connection to turn-taking, Schegloff (1996) stated that hand gestures can be used, for example, when a current non-speaker wants to indicate that s/he is willing take the next turn. As shown in the excerpt below, hand

gestures were used together with verbal expression in taking the turn:

Example: MH370 Press Conference (March 11, 2014)

| | |
|---|-----|
| J: Channel News. Melissa ((raising hand)) | 277 |
|---|-----|

Overlaps. The next mechanism that was found used to regulate turn-taking in the MH370 press conferences was overlapping. Threatening the basic principle of one-talk-at-a-time, overlaps occur when participants simultaneously try to take the turn to speak. Overlap is considered to be of two types: either competitive or non-competitive with respect to turn-taking. Competitive overlaps are produced in overlap when the current speaker has not finished his turn but the floor is prematurely taken by another speaker. Non-competitive overlaps, in turn, refer to overlapping talk whose purpose is not to compete for speakership with the current speaker.

Interruptions. Interruptions are situations in the sequence of interaction in which the current speaker has started his or her turn as a second person speaking, through an audible overlap or a pause, thus interrupting the previous speaker. Only two interruptions thus defined were apparent in the present data; these are shown (in boldface) in the following examples.

In the excerpt from March 12, 2014 and March 20, 2014, J interrupted S by posing another question without waiting for S to complete his statement: S responded to J’s question but J interrupted and attempted to pose another question.

Example: MH370 Press Conference (March 12, 2014)

| | |
|---|-----|
| J: Excuse me, this is NBC News. You are getting increasing criticism now, | 100 |
| you searching east you searching west, you don't seem to know | 101 |
| what you saying on radar as you taking told now why they placed that. | 102 |
| This is confusion now. | 103 |
| S: I think that's not true. I don't think so. I think it's far from it. | 104 |
| It only confusion if you wanted it to be seen to be confusion. | 105 |
| We make it very clear, that we be very [consistent in our] | 106 |
| J: [Where you need to search?] | 107 |
| S: Yes, in this two areas and we have searching this area. | 108 |

Institutional Power Portrayed in MH370 Press Conferences

Institutional power is precisely the power by which an individual is mandated by a public body or institution to take decisions for other participants. In relation to the turn-taking mechanisms discussed earlier, power relation may be arranged according to five analytical themes:

The role of actors and participants. In press conferences, many actors with different relationships are allowed to participate, thus raising the competition among them. As Bhatia (2006) has mentioned, when many participants take part in an interaction, they usually intend to present a unified image and this is when the more powerful actors control the situation.

There were three main actors in the MH370 press conferences: the host, the spokesperson and the journalists, all portraying different levels of power. From the data, the host or the chairperson had the exclusive role of holding access to turn-taking; hence, the chairperson regulated the access of others to the floor. The chairperson had the power to close the press conference despite the fact that journalists were still trying to take turns for additional questions. For the journalists, when competition for turns occurred, the one with the greater power had the chance to grab the turn. Greater power in this type of press conference means that the journalist either (a) had a good relationship with the spokesperson or (b) was in a position further forward than the others in seating arrangement.

Holding a bigger role in regulating turns is the spokesperson's advantage. In this case, the spokesperson was the minister or the authority involved. Whenever competition for turn arose, the spokesperson was in control and could decide who to allow to speak, when he/she could speak and for how long. For instance, the spokesperson had the power to accept another question even though the host had closed the session.

Institutional arrangements and pre-allocated turns. The institutional arrangement of the MH370 conferences was closely related to the power it portrayed in the interaction. The organisation of press conferences (opening, individual session, question and answer, closing) as well as pre-allocated turns in each sequence portrayed

distinctive power between the participants. Two aspects affecting the power represented in the interaction were (a) scheduled time frame, (b) pre-determined cycle of turns and access to question turns.

Institutional power depicted through the pre-determined cycle of turns in the MH370 press conferences clearly indicated that the journalists had less power during the interaction. The question-answer system and the pre-allocated turns limited the journalists' power to talk more than once. The host (seated at the corner of the hall) regulated turn-taking between the journalists who were allowed to ask questions but seldom given the chance to follow up with another question. The transcript below represents such turns:

Example: MH370 Press Conference (March 12, 2014)

| | |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| J: What do you think how low... | 218 |
| S: One. | 219 |
| J: : And also (.) sorry ↓ | 220 |
| S: Yep ↑ (DIRECTS GAZE TO ANOTHER J) | 221 |

Turn-Taking techniques. The material studied indicated that verbal utterance in giving turns seemed to give stronger control and power than only gestures and body movements such as in the form of a nod or pointing with the hand. Using a combination of both techniques allowed for stronger control, as demonstrated in one MH370 press conference, where the spokesperson said, *“Okay, Siva”* (while nodding and pointing his finger at the

person). A possible explanation for this is that the verbal gesture functions better in commanding the attention of all participants (Thornborrow, 2000).

Furthermore, time is also a significant factor in this interaction situation, as it is in many others. A short pause between a politician's answer and the next speaker can be used by non-selected participants to try to take a turn and get in control of the situation. The absence of pauses can be used by the politician who wants to control the action without competition.

Overlapping turns. Overlapping occurs when two participants talk simultaneously. From a power perspective, simultaneous talk can be regarded as power portrayal by the participants. When participants overlap, they are trying to take the turn as much as demonstrating their power over the other.

From the data studied, it can be concluded that when two participants overlapped each other's utterance in the MH370 press conferences, the person either received or lost his turn. This showed a struggle over the desirable territory. The fact that one participant stopped while the other participant continued suggests that the participant who continued had the priority to control the situation. In the MH370 press conferences, when overlap occurred between the spokesperson and the journalist, the spokesperson had complete control and power over the journalist.

Interruptions. Interruptions in press conferences were also used to demonstrate power. By interrupting, the participant did not only stop the current speaker from

continuing but also showed his/her power to take the floor.

Example: MH370 Press Conference (March 12, 2014)

| | |
|---|-----|
| J: On this perspective plane, did you look on this perspective plane | 150 |
| Sir [.....] | 151 |
| S: [From this perspective plane I will have to check on the record but as a | 152 |
| policy....as a policy, Malaysia Airline ensure that all its fleet | 153 |
| complied with the SP and SD issued by the contractor.] | 154 |

The example above shows that the interruption made by the spokesperson was an expression of power representation. The spokesperson, having greater power, was eager to demonstrate his power and hence, interrupted the journalist even before he finished his question.

Conditions and Configurations of Press Conferences

Press conferences involve more than two participants at a time. To ensure smooth flow of conversation, the MH370 press conferences used consistent conditions, as revealed in our study. The sessions were based on four conditions. Firstly, the journalists who took part in the press conferences were allowed to ask questions and (sometimes) were given the chance to follow up on them. Secondly, the talk in press conferences was organised according to the general principles of turn-taking, where only one participant talked at a time (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974, p. 699).

Thirdly, there was a time limit for journalists to ask their questions. Upon reaching the limit, journalist was not allowed to pose any more questions. Finally, the MH370 press conferences were an opportunity for the spokesperson to report on progress of the SAR whereas, for the journalists, it was the occasion to ask critical questions. This is in keeping with the general nature of press conferences as being an arena where two institutions meet: politics and journalism, both having missions that conflict with one another, competing, as they claim to do, for representation of the general public.

Besides looking at the conditions, it is also crucial to look at the configuration of the press conferences. As Schegloff (2000) stated, conversations that involve more than two participants create opportunities for many types of simultaneous talk (and interruption) configurations. In the MH370 press conferences, the following configurations were noted:

- a. J1 and S1 talked simultaneously to each other while the others did not interfere. This occurred, for instance, when a politician interrupted the person asking a question with an answer.
- b. J1 and J2 talked simultaneously to S1. This usually occurred when two journalists began to compete to ask questions at the same time and during this time, overlaps and interruptions were obvious.

- c. S1 and S2 talked to J1. This happened sometimes in the MH370 press conferences when two spokespersons had to answer questions that required explanations from different expertise.
- d. J1 talked to S1, who simultaneously talked to S2. This was seen when journalists directed a question to the chairperson, who then turned the floor over to one of his colleagues on the panel who could better answer the question.
- e. J1 talked with S1, who simultaneously talked to J2. This occurred when a journalist directed a question to the spokesperson, while he was already turning the floor over to another journalist.

(J=Journalist, S=Spokesperson)

Based on these configurations, it can be said that the common handling of the MH370 press conferences was complex as it included many competing participants. However, even though the MH370 press conferences were a struggle between the spokesperson and journalists, it was dominated by the spokesperson as he represented the authorities, who had exclusive access to the institution. The spokesperson's power over the institution restricted the journalists from controlling and creating controversy out of the issue.

CONCLUSION

The present study was carried out, firstly, to shed light on what kind of turn-taking mechanism occurred in the MH370 press conferences and, secondly, to look at how institutional power was depicted in this kind of interaction. The results gained from analysing the interaction suggests that various conversational elements were used in deciding and regulating turn-taking. Furthermore, the results showed that most of the turn-taking mechanisms were used to portray institutional power. It also showed that turn-taking appeared to have a central role in shaping institutional interaction. Therefore, it can be concluded that press conferences are used by politicians as a tool to communicate with the public. Through press conferences, politicians exercise what they want people to believe; this was translated into distrust among the people in relation to the disappearance of MH370. The findings would be of help to a particular authority and organisation on holding an effective press conference with a better understanding of specified discourse structures and turn-taking regulation and thus, both parties (authorities and journalists) can obtain maximum benefit from the press conference. This can minimise misunderstanding of the authorities as well as the issue.

The study can be further explored by expanding the data from only the Search and Rescue phase to include data from the Search and Recovery phase after April 28, 2014 in the analysis. Having more data

may add richness to the existing study. With additional data, new turn-taking mechanisms and power representation methods may be found. Other than that, future researchers can also compare data between the two phases to look at the differences they may reveal.

In conclusion, the findings contributed to understanding the nature of institutional interaction and how power is represented in press conferences. The study also provided some insights into turn-taking mechanisms of a specialised context, which is still a fresh field for future research.

REFERENCES

- Bhatia, A. (2006). Critical discourse analysis of political press conferences. *Discourse and Society*, 17(2), 173-203.
- Clayman, S., & Heritage, J. (2002). Questioning presidents: Journalistic deference and adversarialness in the press conferences of Eisenhower and Reagan. *Journal of Communication*, 52(4), 749-775.
- Ekström, M. (2006). Interviewing, quoting, and the development of modern news journalism: A study of the Swedish press 1915-1995. In M. Ekström, A. Kroon, & M. Nylund (Eds), *News from the Interview Society* (pp. 21-48). Göteborg: Nordicom.
- Eshbaugh-Soha, M. (2003). Presidential press conferences over time. *American Journal of Political Science*, 47(2), 348-353.
- Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. Routledge: London.
- Goodwin, M., & Goodwin, C. (1986). Gesture and co-participation in the activity of searching for a word. *Semiotica*, 62(1-2), 51-76.
- Heritage, J. (1997). Conversation analysis and institutional talk: Analyzing data. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice*, (pp. 161-182). London: Sage Publication Inc.
- Jefferson, G. (1984). Transcription notation. In J. Atkinson, & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Structures of Social Interaction*, (pp. 191-221). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Maxwell, J. A., & Drew, P. (1979). *Order in court: The organization of verbal interaction in judicial settings*. United States: Humanities Press, Inc.
- Maxwell, J. A., & Heritage, J. (Eds.). (1984). Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis. *Sociology*, 19(4), 624-626.
- Sacks, H. (1984). Notes on methodology. In J. M. Atkinson, & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis* (pp. 21-27). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Sacks, H., & Jefferson, G. (1992). *Lectures on conversation*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sacks, H., Schegloff, E. A., & Jefferson, G. (1974). A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language*, 50, 696-735.
- Schegloff, E. A. (1996). On some gestures' relation to talk. In J. M. Atkinson, & J. Heritage, (Eds.), *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis* (pp. 266-296). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Schegloff, E. A. (2000). Overlapping talk and the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language in Society*, 29(1), 1-63.

- Thurnborrow, J. (2002). *Power talk: Language and interaction in institutional discourse*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Tunsall, J. (1970). *The Westminster lobby correspondents: A sociological study of national political journalism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.