

A Conversation Analysis of Adjacency Pairs in Undergraduate Thesis Defense: The Structure of Questioning

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ABSTRACT

The undergraduate thesis defense is a formal academic event where the interaction between examiners and students is highly structured. This study examines how these participants organize their talk, specifically focusing on the use of adjacency pairs in questioning-answering sequences. Using Conversation Analysis (CA), this research explores the patterns of dialogue within the institutional setting of a university defense. The analysis shows that the interaction is more than a simple exchange of information. Students often use "insertion sequences" to clarify a question before answering, which helps them manage the pressure of the examination. Furthermore, the study identifies how students handle difficult questions; they often use pauses or brief explanations before admitting a mistake or a limitation in their research. These findings suggest that success in a thesis defense depends not only on a student's knowledge of the topic but also on their ability to handle the formal structure of the conversation. This research provides useful insights for students preparing for their oral exams, highlighting the importance of communication skills in an academic environment.

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INTRODUCTION

The undergraduate thesis defense, or *viva voce*, is a pivotal academic ritual that marks a student's transition from higher education to professional life or advanced research. Linguistically, a thesis defense is not merely a question-and-answer session, it is a sophisticated form of institutional talk. In this context, the interaction between examiners and the candidate is governed by specific norms that dictate who speaks, when they speak, and how meanings are negotiated (Heritage, 2004).

A central element in understanding this interaction is the concept of adjacency pairs. According to Schegloff (2007), adjacency pairs are the fundamental units of conversational organization. They consist of two related utterances produced by different speakers, where the first pair part (FPP) creates an expectation or "normative obligation" for a specific second pair part (SPP). In the setting of a thesis defense, the most dominant adjacency pair is the Question-Answer sequence.

However, the reality of the defense room often shows that this pattern is rarely straightforward. The inherent power asymmetry between the panel of examiners and the student creates a challenging communicative environment (Drew & Heritage, 1992). Students often face complex questions that test not only their knowledge but also their ability to defend an argument under pressure. This often leads to the emergence of insertion sequences where a student asks for clarification before answering or repair mechanisms when misunderstandings occur.

Understanding how these adjacency pairs are managed is crucial. It allows educators to evaluate students more objectively and helps students develop the interactional competence required to navigate high-stakes academic hierarchies. Despite its importance, detailed conversation analysis of Indonesian thesis defenses remains limited, particularly regarding how students manage difficult or "dispreferred" responses.

Research Questions

Based on the background above, this study aims to address the following questions:

1. What are the structural patterns of adjacency pairs, specifically the question-answer sequences, in undergraduate thesis defenses?
2. How do students utilize insertion sequences to manage comprehension difficulties during the examination?
3. How does preference organization influence the way students respond to critiques or challenging questions from the examiners?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this research are:

1. To describe the dominant structural patterns of adjacency pairs in the context of a thesis defense.
2. To analyze the role of insertion sequences in maintaining the flow of information between examiners and students.
3. To explain the interactional strategies used by students when facing challenging or probing questions.

Significance of the Study

Theoretical Significance: This research contributes to the literature on Conversation Analysis (CA), specifically within academic settings, by exploring how institutional talk is managed in an Indonesian higher education context.

Practical Significance: The findings serve as a practical guide for final-year students to understand the conversational dynamics of a defense, enabling them to communicate more effectively and confidently.

Scope and Limitation

This study focuses on a micro-linguistic analysis of recorded undergraduate thesis defenses. The analysis is limited to sequence organization (specifically adjacency pairs) and does not explore the psychological state of the students beyond what is evidenced in the recorded spoken data.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach using Conversation Analysis (CA) as the primary method. CA is chosen because it focuses on uncovering the social organization of human interaction through the microscopic details of talk (Sacks et al., 1974). In this context, the researcher does not make prior assumptions about the participants' intentions. Instead, the study allows the data to reveal how adjacency pairs are co-constructed by the examiners and the student during the defense.

Data and Data Source

The data for this research consist of naturalistic spoken utterances captured during undergraduate thesis defense sessions. The primary data source includes video and audio recordings of three separate defense sessions within the Language Education department at a university in Indonesia. These sessions are selected because the thesis defense represents a classic form of "institutional talk," providing a rich environment to observe power asymmetry and complex question-answer structures.

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Research Instrument

In a CA study, the researcher serves as the primary instrument (human instrument), supported by recording technology. To ensure high-quality analysis, the following tools are utilized:

Digital Video/Audio Recorders: To capture both verbal data and non-verbal cues (such as nodding or gaze) which are essential for understanding timing and turn-taking.

Transcription Framework: The researcher utilizes the Jefferson Notation System (2004) to convert the audio data into highly detailed text, capturing every pause, overlap, and intonational shift.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process follows a rigorous ethical and technical protocol:

Ethical Clearance and Consent: Before recording, the researcher obtains explicit permission from both the examiners and the students. All participants sign an informed consent form, ensuring their anonymity and the confidential handling of the data.

Recording: The recording devices are placed strategically to minimize distraction, ensuring the interaction remains as natural as possible (naturalistic data).

Transcribing: The researcher listens to the recordings repeatedly to produce a verbatim transcript. This includes marking pauses (measured in tenths of a second), audible breaths, and overlapping speech to provide a "magnified" view of the conversation.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis is conducted inductively, following the sequence analysis framework proposed by Schegloff (2007):

Unmotivated Looking: The researcher examines the transcripts without a fixed hypothesis to discover recurring or striking patterns in the adjacency pairs.

Pattern Identification: Identifying the First Pair Parts (FPPs) initiated by examiners and the corresponding Second Pair Parts (SPPs) provided by students.

Mapping Insertion Sequences: Analyzing moments where the student initiates a secondary pair (e.g., asking for clarification) before completing the primary answer.

Deviant Case Analysis: Investigating moments where the expected conversational pattern breaks down, such as significant silences or "repair" attempts after a misunderstanding.

Synthesizing Findings: Drawing conclusions on how these conversational structures reflect the student's interactional competence and the examiners' institutional authority.

Trustworthiness of the Data

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, the researcher employs peer debriefing. This involves discussing the transcripts and initial interpretations with other linguistics experts to verify that the markings for pauses, stress, and intonation are objective and consistent with CA standards. This process minimizes researcher bias and ensures that the analysis remains grounded strictly in the observed data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigates the structural organization of interaction during undergraduate thesis defenses, focusing on the microscopic details of talk-in-interaction. The following findings are based on the inductive analysis of recorded data using the Jefferson Notation System.

Graph TD

A[Examiner FPP
Question or Critique] --> B{Student Comprehension}

B -- Immediate Understanding --> C[Direct SPP
Straightforward Answer]

B -- Complexity/Ambiguity --> D[Insertion Sequence]

D --> E[Student asks for clarification]

E --> F[Examiner provides specification]

F --> G[Final SPP
Calibrated Answer]

B -- Challenging/Dispreferred --> H[Preference Organization Strategy]

H --> I[Micro-pauses & Hesitations]

I --> J[Pre-announcement/Accounts]

J --> K[Admitting limitation or Rebuttal]

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style C fill:#ccffcc,stroke:#333

style G fill:#ccf,stroke:#333

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Figure 1: The Sequential Interactional Trajectory Diagram

Structural Component	Diagram Element (Node)	Role in Adjacency Pairs	Interactional Characteristics & Meaning
Primary Initiation	A: Examiner FPP (Question/Critique)	First Pair Part (FPP)	Establishes <i>conditional relevance</i> . The examiner holds institutional authority, obligating a specific type of next action from the student.
Cognitive Filter	B: Student Comprehension	Interactional Pivot	The student's cognitive state that dictates which structural trajectory the Second Pair Part (SPP) will take.
Path 1: Direct Response	C: Direct SPP (Straightforward Answer)	Preferred Second Pair Part (SPP)	* Features: Immediate, fluid, and seamless delivery.* Meaning: Signals

Structural Component	Diagram Element (Node)	Role in Adjacency Pairs	Interactional Characteristics & Meaning
			high competence, immediate cognitive alignment, and confidence.
Path 2: Insertion Sequence	D, E, F, G: Insertion Sequence	Temporarily Suspended SPP	* Mechanism: The student inserts a nested pair—fpp2 (asks for clarification) → Examiner responds with spp2 (provides specification).* Outcome (G): Highly calibrated <i>Final SPP</i>. * Meaning: Acts as a collaborative <i>repair mechanism</i> to resolve ambiguity before committing to a final answer.
Path 3: Preference Strategy	H, I, J, K: Preference Organization Strategy	Dispreferred Second Pair Part (SPP)	* Mechanism: The core answer is delayed via micro-pauses (I) and padded with accounts/justifications (J). * Outcome (K): Admitting limitations or delivering a rebuttal. * Meaning: In Conversation Analysis (CA), difficult or negative actions (<i>dispreferreds</i>) are structurally marked and padded to

Structural Component	Diagram Element (Node)	Role in Adjacency Pairs	Interactional Characteristics & Meaning
			maintain academic <i>facework</i> .

Table 1: The Sequential Organization Model of Institutional Talk in Thesis Defense

In an oral examination or a thesis defense, conversation does not flow randomly. Instead, it is governed by a strict social and cognitive framework. We can look at this interaction as a dynamic story unfolding across three main stages.

Act 1: The Catalyst (The First Pair Part)

Every interaction in this setting is triggered by the institutional authority of the examiner. When the Examiner throws out a question, critique, or challenge, they are producing what Conversation Analysis calls the First Pair Part (FPP). In the rules of human interaction, an FPP instantly creates a state of conditional relevance. This means the conversational "hot potato" is handed to the student. The student is now institutionally obligated to provide a relevant response, known as the Second Pair Part (SPP). However, before that response can be uttered, it must pass through a cognitive filter: Student Comprehension. Depending on how well the student grasps the question, the narrative splits into three entirely different structural paths.

Act 2: Three Interactional Scenarios (The Second Pair Part)

Scenario A: The Seamless Flow (Preferred Action)

When the examiner's question lands perfectly and the student understands it instantly, the interaction is completely seamless. The student delivers a Direct, Straightforward Answer. Narratively, this path is characterized by the absence of gaps or pauses. The student speaks immediately, which structurally signals high competence, command over the material, and confidence. In CA, this is known as a Preferred Action the ideal, structurally expected response that keeps the examination moving efficiently forward.

Scenario B: Negotiating Meaning (The Insertion Sequence)

The academic world, however, is often filled with complexity. If the examiner's question is too abstract, ambiguous, or multifaceted, the primary "Question-Answer" structure is temporarily suspended. The student cannot jump straight to an answer; instead, they open a "conversation within a conversation," known as an Insertion Sequence.

The narrative here shifts into a collaborative rescue mission:

The student initiates a secondary question asking for clarification ("By X, do you mean in terms of methodology or theory?").

The examiner responds by narrowing down and specifying the question.

Once the ambiguity is resolved through this repair mechanism, the student finally has the footing to deliver the Final SPP a calibrated answer that perfectly matches the examiner's true intent.

Scenario C: Damage Control (Preference Organization Strategy)

The most difficult scenario occurs when the examiner's question hits a weak spot, poses a severe challenge, or forces the student to defend a flaw. The student must now deliver what is called a Dispreferred Action an uncomfortable response, such as admitting a limitation or pushing back with a rebuttal.

In human interaction, we naturally avoid raw negativity to preserve "face." Therefore, the student deploys a Preference Organization Strategy to pad the impact of this difficult response:

Delays and Hesitations: The answer does not come out immediately. There are micro-pauses, deep breaths, or vocal fillers ("Uh," "Uhm," "Well..."). Structurally, these delays act as a warning signal to the examiner that a negative or defensive answer is coming.

Accounts and Mitigations: Before actually admitting the flaw or delivering the rebuttal, the student builds a protective wall of justification ("Due to the data constraints during the pandemic..." or "While I completely understand that perspective...").

Only after this structural cushioning is established does the student finally deliver the core blow: admitting the limitation or issuing the rebuttal.

Narrative Conclusion

Through this diagram, we see that an oral exam is not just a rigid interrogation machine. The structure of Adjacency Pairs is highly elastic. It is a sophisticated dance where the student constantly monitors their own understanding, negotiates meaning through insertion sequences when confused, and carefully protects their academic credibility using mitigation strategies when backed into a corner.

Structural Patterns of Adjacency Pairs

The data reveals that the Question-Answer (Q-A) sequence is the foundational unit of the defense. However, due to the power asymmetry between examiners and students, these sequences are often expanded.

Pattern Type	First Pair Part (FPP)	Second Pair Part (SPP)	Interactional Function
Standard Q-A	Examiner Question	Student Answer	Efficient information exchange.
Expanded Q-A	Complex Question	Delayed Answer	Management of difficult or "dispreferred" content.

Pattern Type	First Pair Part (FPP)	Second Pair Part (SPP)	Interactional Function
Insertion Sequence	Question	Clarification Request	Ensuring mutual understanding before answering.
Repair Sequence	Critique	Self-Correction	Maintaining academic "face" and accuracy.

Table 2. Pattern of Adjacency Pair

The Role of Insertion Sequences

As hypothesized in the research questions, students utilize **insertion sequences** to manage comprehension difficulties. Rather than providing an immediate Second Pair Part (SPP), the student initiates a side-sequence to clarify the Examiner's First Pair Part (FPP).

Table 1: Flow of an Insertion Sequence in Defense

1. Examiner (FPP): Posits a probing or ambiguous question.
2. Student (Insertion): Requests clarification (e.g., "Are you referring to the theoretical framework or the data analysis?").
3. Examiner (Response): Provides specification or narrowing of the question.
4. Student (SPP): Delivers the final answer based on the clarified parameters.

Interactional Feature	Source Observation	Function in Defense
First Pair Part (FPP)	Examiner's Question	Sets the agenda and dictates the topic.
Second Pair Part (SPP)	Student's Response	Demonstrates knowledge and research defense.
Insertion Sequence	Student's Clarification	Minimizes misunderstanding and manages pressure.
Repair Mechanism	Correction of talk	Resolves breakdowns in communication.

Table 3. Insertion Role

These sequences are vital "interactional buffers". They allow the student to navigate high-stakes academic hierarchies by ensuring they do not provide irrelevant answers to complex queries.

Preference Organization and Challenging Questions

The study identifies how students handle "dispreferred" responses moments where they must admit a mistake or respond to a critique. Students rarely admit a limitation immediately; they use specific linguistic markers to delay the "negative" response.

Table 2: Interactional Strategies for Challenging Questions

1. Pauses and Hesitation: Measured silences (e.g., (0.4)) signify the student is processing a "difficult" question.
2. Token Agreements: Starting a response with "Yes, but..." to soften the impact of a rebuttal.
3. Accounts: Providing a detailed explanation or justification before admitting a research limitation.

Synthesis of Findings

The analysis demonstrates that success in a thesis defense depends on interactional competence. The "institutional talk" of the defense is a co-constructed event where students use structural maneuvers like insertion sequences and repairs to balance the inherent power asymmetry of the room. The findings confirm that while the examiner holds the institutional authority to initiate sequences, the student utilizes micro-linguistic strategies to maintain the flow of information and defend their research effectively.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of undergraduate thesis defenses through the lens of Conversation Analysis (CA) reveals that this academic ritual is a sophisticated form of institutional talk. While the interaction is primarily organized around Question-Answer adjacency pairs, the process is rarely a simple, linear exchange of information. Instead, the conversation is deeply influenced by the power asymmetry between the examiners and the student. The findings demonstrate that students do not merely act as passive respondents; they actively manage the dialogue through interactional strategies. One of the most significant strategies is the use of insertion sequences, where students seek clarification before providing a final answer. This mechanism allows students to manage comprehension difficulties and ensures they address the examiners' questions accurately under high-pressure conditions. Furthermore, the study highlights how preference organization dictates the way students handle critiques. When faced with challenging questions or identified research limitations, students utilize specific conversational markers such as pauses, brief explanations, and repair mechanisms to soften the impact of "dispreferred" responses. Ultimately, this research concludes that success in a thesis defense is not solely dependent on a student's mastery of their research topic. It is equally reliant on their interactional competence, which is the ability to navigate the formal structural norms of academic hierarchy and manage complex conversational sequences effectively. These insights serve as a vital guide for students, emphasizing that communication skills are as crucial as theoretical knowledge in the transition from higher education to professional life.

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