

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 interaction where examiners ask questions and students respond. This study examines how Question-Answer (Q-A) patterns are organized during undergraduate thesis defenses. It uses a qualitative approach with Conversation Analysis (CA) to analyze interactions between examiners and students. The findings show that the Q-A sequence is the main pattern, but the interaction is not always a simple question-and-answer exchange. Sometimes examiners ask follow-up questions, which makes the exchange longer. Sometimes students ask for clarification before answering. The data also show repair mechanisms, in which students correct or clarify information. When responding to challenging questions, particularly about weaknesses in their researches, students use pauses, hesitation, token agreements, and accounts before giving their main responses. These patterns show that students are actively managing the conversation, not just giving answers. The study concludes that thesis defense interaction is a structured but flexible form of academic conversation. To understand how it works, we need to pay attention not only to what is said, but also to how the conversation is organized. The findings may help students better prepare for questions and interactions during their thesis defense.

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INTROUCTION

The undergraduate thesis defense, or *sidang skripsi*, is an important academic event. It marks a student's move from higher education into working life or further education. From a language point of view, a thesis defense is not just a question-and-answer session. It is a special kind of formal talk used in institutions. In this event, the way examiners and the students interact should adopt specific rules. These rules decide who speaks, when they speak, and how meaning is understood between them (Heritage, 2004).

One important concept for understanding this interaction is the adjacency pair. Schegloff (2007) explains that conversation is built from these basic units. An adjacency pair happens when two speakers each produce one related turn of talk. The first speaker's turn, known as the first pair part (FPP), creates an expectation that the second speaker will respond with a matching second pair part (SPP). In a thesis defense, the Question-Answer sequence is the most common type of adjacency pair.

Nonetheless in reality, this pattern during the thesis defense is rarely simple. There is a power gap between the examiners and the student, and this creates a difficult environment for communication (Drew & Heritage, 1992). Students often face difficult questions that test not only their knowledge, but also their ability to defend their argument when they are under pressure. Because of this, two things often appear: insertion sequences, where a student asks for clarification before answering, and repair mechanisms, which happen when there is a misunderstanding or they make mistakes.

Understanding how these adjacency pairs are managed is important. It helps educators judge students more fairly. It also helps students build the interactional skills needed to handle high-pressure academic situations. Despite its importance, detailed conversation analysis during thesis defences in Indonesian is still limited, especially on how students handle difficult or "dispreferred" responses

Research Questions

Based on the background above, this study tries to answer these three questions:

1. What are the patterns of adjacency pairs, especially the question-answer sequences, in undergraduate thesis defenses?
2. How do students use insertion sequences to deal with difficulties in understanding questions during the exam?
3. How does preference organization affect the way students respond to criticism or difficult questions from the examiners?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this research are:

1. To describe the most common patterns of adjacency pairs found in a thesis defense.
2. To analyze the role of insertion sequences in maintaining the clear flow of information between examiners and students clear.
3. To analyze how preference organization shapes students' responses to criticism or challenging questions from examiners

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to a better understanding of interaction between students and examiners in Indonesian higher education through a Conversation Analysis (CA) approach. Practical Significance: The findings can serve as a practical guide for final-year students to understand the conversation dynamics in a thesis defense. This can help them communicate more effectively and confidently

Scope and Limitation

This study focuses on how students and examiners speak to each other during thesis defenses, specifically looking at adjacency pairs. It only analyzes the recorded spoken data and does not cover the students' emotional state

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach and Conversation Analysis (CA) as the main method. CA is used because it focuses on how people interact through talk and how their conversations are organized (Sacks et al., 1974). In this study, the researcher does not make assumptions about what the participants mean. Instead, the analysis focuses on what actually happens in the recorded conversations during the thesis defense. The study mainly looks at how examiners and students produce and respond to adjacency pairs during the defense.

Data and Data Source

The data in this study are spoken words and conversations recorded during undergraduate thesis defenses. The main sources are video and audio recordings from three different defense sessions in STKIP kusuma negara. These sessions were chosen because a thesis defense is a formal academic interaction. It is a useful setting for looking at how examiners and students interact, especially when examiners ask questions and students respond.

Research Instrument

In this study, the researcher is the main instrument. The researcher is supported by recording and transcription tools.

- a. Digital Video/Audio Recorders: These are used to record the conversations during the thesis defenses. The recordings also capture non-verbal actions, such as nodding and eye contact, which help the researcher understand the interaction and turn-taking.
- b. Transcription System: The researcher uses Jefferson's (2004) transcription notation to transcribe the recorded conversations. This system helps the researcher to write detailed things such as pauses, overlapping speech, and changes in tone.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection procedures are carried out in several steps:

- a. Permission and Consent: Before the recording, the researcher obtains permission and consent from the students and examiners. The participants' personal information is kept private.

- b. Recording: The recordings are made during the thesis defense. The recording devices are placed in a certain position so they do not disturb the participants during the defense.
- c. Transcription: After the recordings are collected, the researcher transcribes the conversations in detail. The transcription includes pauses, breaths, overlapping talk, and other details that are important for Conversation Analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques

Following Schegloff (2007), the data are analyzed in several steps:

- a. Initial Reading: The researcher reads the transcripts several times to become familiar with the conversations and identify recurring patterns.
- b. Identifying Adjacency Pairs: The researcher looked for moments when examiners asked questions or started a new topic. These are called first pair parts. Then, the researcher looked at how students responded to those questions. These are called second pair parts.
- c. Analyzing Insertion Sequences: Sometimes students do not answer right away. They might ask the examiner to explain the question again, or they might repeat the question to themselves before answering. The researcher paid close attention to these moments.
- d. Analyzing Repairs: The researcher examines moments when speakers correct themselves or clarify something because of a misunderstanding.
- e. Summarizing the Findings: The researcher summarizes the patterns found in the conversations and explains how these patterns show the way examiners and students interact during the thesis defense.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses a framework called Conversation Analysis (CA), specifically focusing on *Adjacency Pairs*, *Insertion Sequences*, and *Preference Organization* (Schegloff, 2007; Levinson, 1983). This framework looks at how people organize their talk in everyday interactions. In particular, this study focuses on three important concepts: how questions and answers are paired together, how students ask for clarification, and how students manage difficult responses.

To help explain how the interaction works in a thesis defense, this study introduces a model called the Interactional Trajectory Model of Thesis Defense. This model shows the different paths a conversation can take. It is presented in figure 1 and table 1 below

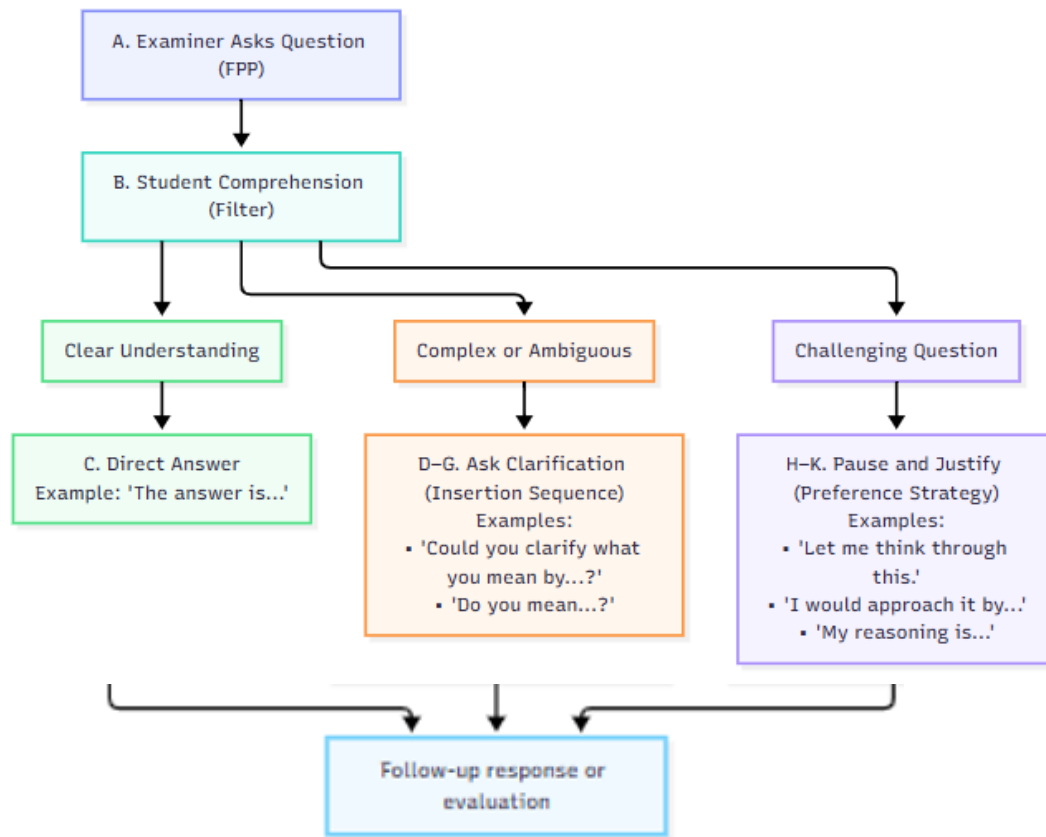


Figure 1. The Interaction Flow Diagram

Table 1. Interaction Process in a Thesis Defense

Structural Component	Diagram Element (Node)	Role in Adjacency Pairs	Characteristics & Meaning
Primary Initiation	A: Examiner Asks Question (FPP)	First Pair Part (FPP)	The examiner asks a question based on their role. This requires the student to give a response.
Cognitive Filter	B: Student Comprehension (Filter)	Interactional Pivot	The student understands the question and decides how to respond. Features: Fast and immediate response. Meaning: Shows that the student understands the question well and is confident in the answer (e.g., "The answer is...").
Path 1: Direct Response	Clear Understanding → C: Direct Answer	Preferred SPP	Process: The student asks for clarification before giving the answer. Meaning: The student tries to understand the question clearly before answering (e.g., "Could you clarify what you mean by...?").
Path 2: Insertion Sequence	Complex or Ambiguous → D-G: Ask Clarification	Temporarily Suspended SPP	

Path 3: Preference Strategy	Challenging Question → H– K: Pause and Justify	Dispreferred SPP	Process: The student uses micro- pauses, hesitations, and justifications before answering. Meaning: These strategies help the student maintain academic credibility when dealing with difficult questions (e.g., “Let me think through this.”).
Closure & Evaluation	Follow-up response or evaluation	Completion Phase	The interaction continues with the examiner's next action, a follow- up question, or an evaluation.

Structural Dynamics of Thesis Defense Interactions

In a thesis defense, the conversation does not happen randomly. It usually follows a certain pattern. The interaction can be understood through two main stages, with three possible ways that students can respond

1. Primary Initiation (First Pair Part)

The interaction usually starts with the examiner. When the examiner asks a question or gives a critique, this creates a First Pair Part (FPP). The student is then expected to give a Second Pair Part (SPP).

Before answering, however, the student needs to understand the question first. This is the Student Comprehension stage. Depending on how the student understands the question, the interaction can go in different ways.

2. Interactional Trajectories (Second Pair Part)

The student's response can take several forms. In this study, three main patterns are considered.

Scenario A: Giving a Direct Answer (Preferred Action)

When the student understands the question clearly, they may give a direct answer. This is a preferred response because it follows the expected Question-Answer pattern and allows the interaction to continue smoothly.

Scenario B: Asking for Clarification (Insertion Sequence)

When the student does not fully understand the question, they may ask for clarification before answering. This creates an insertion sequence within the main Question-Answer sequence. The clarification temporarily interrupts the main sequence.

After the examiner provides clarification, the student returns to the main sequence and gives the final SPP. The pattern can be shown as:

FPP → Clarification Request → Clarification → SPP

Scenario C: Handling Difficult Questions (Preference Organization Strategy)

A more difficult situation happens when the examiner asks about a weakness in the research or a point that the student does not fully agree with. In this case, the student may not give a direct answer right away

According to Preference Organization, a difficult or dispreferred response may be preceded by several interactional features, such as:

- a. Pauses and hesitations: The student may pause before answering or use fillers such as “Well” or “Uhm.”
- b. Token agreements: The student may begin with “Yes, but...” before giving a different or qualified response.
- c. Accounts: The student may provide a reason or explanation before discussing the weakness or disagreement

Interactional Closure

After the student gives an answer, the examiner may ask a follow-up question, give an evaluation, or move to another topic. This continues the interaction and may create another Question-Answer sequence

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Patterns of Adjacency Pairs in a Thesis Defense

The data show that the Question-Answer (Q-A) sequence is the most common type of adjacency pair in a thesis defense. However, the interaction is not always a simple question followed by an answer. Some exchanges become longer when the examiner asks a follow-up question or when the student needs more time to respond.

The following excerpts show some of the patterns found in the data.

Excerpt 1 – Standard Q-A

Examiner : *Why did you choose this method?*

Student : *I chose this method because it is suitable for my research.*

Analysis: The examiner's question functions as the First Pair Part (FPP), followed by the student's answer as the Second Pair Part (SPP). This forms a basic Question-Answer adjacency pair.

Excerpt 2 – Standard Q-A

Examiner: *What is the main problem in your research?*

Student : *The main problem is the lack of previous studies on this topic.*

Analysis: Again, the examiner produces the FPP, and the student produces the expected SPP. The exchange follows the basic Question-Answer pattern.

Excerpt 3 – Expanded Q-A

Examiner: *Why did you choose this theory?*

Student : *I chose it because I chose this theory because it is relevant to my research topic*

Examiner: *Can you explain more about that?*

Student : *Yes. The theory helps explain how the participants use language in the interaction.*

Analysis: This example shows that a Q-A sequence does not always end after the first answer. The examiner produces a follow-up question, which expands the initial sequence. The student then provides a further explanation. This can be described as an Expanded Q-A sequence.

These excerpts show that the Question-Answer sequence is a common form of adjacency pair in the data. Although the basic structure remains the same, the sequence can be extended when the examiner requires further explanation.

Table 2. Patterns Of Question-Answer Adjacency Pairs In A Thesis Defense

Pattern Type	First Pair Part (FPP)	Second Pair Part (SPP)	Function in Interaction
Standard Q-A	Examiner Question	Student Answer	Provides a quick and direct exchange of information.
Expanded Q-A	Examiner Question	Student Answer + Follow-up Question/Response	Allows the examiner to ask for further explanation.

The Role of Insertion Sequences

As stated in the research questions, students may use an insertion sequence when they do not understand an examiner's question clearly. Instead of giving the Second Pair Part (SPP) immediately, the student temporarily pauses the main conversation to ask for clarification or ask the examiner to explain more.

Excerpt 4 – Insertion Sequence

Examiner : *Why did you choose this method?*

Student : *Do you mean the research method?*

Examiner : *Yes, the research method.*

Student : *I chose this method because it is suitable for my research.*

Analysis: The examiner's question is the initial First Pair Part (FPP). Instead of giving the expected Second Pair Part (SPP) immediately, the student asks for clarification. This clarification request creates an insertion sequence. The examiner then provides the clarification, and the student finally gives the expected answer. The sequence can be represented as: FPP → Clarification Request → Clarification → SPP

This shows that the student uses the insertion sequence to make sure the question is understood before giving the main answer.

Excerpt 5 – Insertion Sequence

Examiner: *What is the main reason for using this theory?*

Student : *Could you please repeat the question?*

Examiner: *What is the main reason you chose this theory?*

Student : *The main reason is that the theory is related to the research problem.*

Analysis: In this example, the student does not immediately give the SPP. Instead, the student asks the examiner to repeat the question. The examiner repeats the question, and the student then gives the answer. The sequence can be represented as: FPP → Clarification Request → Repeated Question → SPP

Both excerpts show that insertion sequences can help students deal with questions that are unclear or difficult to understand. Instead of answering right away, they pause the conversation and ask for clarification. When the examiner gives more explanation, the student then continues with their main answer

Table 3. Analysis Of Insertion Sequences In Thesis Defense Interactions

Excerpt	Initial FPP	Insertion	Examiner's Response	Final SPP	Pattern
4	Why did you choose this method?	Do you mean the research method?	Yes, the research method.	I chose this method because...	Insertion Sequence
5	What is the main reason...?	Could you please repeat...?	Repeats the question	The main reason is...	Insertion Sequence

The findings suggest that insertion sequences is important because it shows that students do not always answer an examiner's question immediately. It acts like safety nets for students and gives the student an opportunity to understand the question better and prevent them from giving wrong or unrelated answers.

Preference Organization and Challenging Questions

This study also looks at how students respond when they face difficult questions, especially questions that ask them to admit a mistake, weakness, or problem in their research. In these situations, students often do not answer right away. Instead, they use certain strategies to make their response feel more comfortable. These responses may contain features of dispreferred responses, such as pauses, hesitation, token agreements, and accounts

Excerpt 6 – Pause Before a Difficult Response

Examiner: *Do you think your research has any limitations?*

Student : *(0.5 second) Well, I think there is one limitation.*

Examiner: *What is it?*

Student : *The number of participants was quite limited.*

Analysis: In this example, the examiner asks the student to mention a weakness in their research. The student does not answer right away. First, there is a short pause of about 0.5 seconds followed by “Well before giving an answer. The student does not directly state the weakness, but gives a more careful or indirect answer

The pause and hesitation show that the student is delaying the response. The response can therefore be considered as a dispreferred response. This kind of delay often happens when someone has to give a difficult or uncomfortable answer. The student finally mentions the weakness, but only after the examiner asks a follow-up question.

Excerpt 7 – Token Agreement

Examiner : *Do you agree that your sample was too small?*

Student : *Yes, but I think it was enough for this type of study.*

Examiner : *Why do you think it was enough?*

Student : *Because the study focused on a small group of students.*

Analysis: In this example, the student starts the answer with "Yes, but...". The word "Yes" shows that the student agrees with the examiner at first. The word "but" then introduces a different idea or explanation. The student does not directly disagree with the examiner. Instead, the student first shows agreement, then gives a reason for having a different view.

This response can be seen in terms of preference organization because the student does not simply say "I disagree." By using "Yes" first, the student makes the disagreement sound softer and less direct. This helps the student express a different opinion in a more polite way

Excerpt 8 – Account Before Admitting a Limitation

Examiner: *Why didn't you include more participants in your study?*

Student : *Actually, I wanted to include more participants, but I had limited time to collect the data. So, I decided to use the participants who were available.*

Analysis: In this example, the examiner asks the student to explain a weakness in the research. Instead of directly saying "The number of participants was too small," the student gives a longer explanation. In terms of interaction, it allows the student to respond to the examiner's challenging question with an explanation rather than only giving a short negative answer.

Three examples from the data show that students do not always answer difficult questions directly. In Excerpt 6, the student paused and said "Well..." before answering. In Excerpt 7, the student said "Yes, but..." before giving a different opinion. In Excerpt 8, the student gave a long explanation before admitting a weakness in the research.

Table 4. Interactional Features In Responses To Challenging Questions

Interactional Feature	Example	Possible Function
Pause and Hesitation	"(0.5) Well..."	Delays the response before a difficult answer
Token Agreement	"Yes, but..."	Acknowledges the examiner before qualifying the response
Account	"Actually, I wanted to..., but..."	Provides a reason or explanation

CONCLUSION

This study examined Question-Answer patterns in undergraduate thesis defenses using Conversation Analysis (CA). The findings show that thesis defense interaction is more than a simple exchange of questions and answers. It includes Standard Q-A, Expanded Q-A, Insertion Sequences, Repair, and responses to challenging questions.

The Question-Answer sequence is the most common pattern. In a Standard Q-A, the examiner produces the First Pair Part (FPP) by asking a question, followed by the student's Second Pair Part (SPP) as an answer. In some cases, the sequence is expanded when examiners ask follow-up questions or request further explanation.

Insertion Sequences occur when students do not answer immediately because they need clarification. They may ask the examiner to explain or repeat a question. After receiving clarification, the student returns to the main sequence and gives the answer.

Repair also happens when students correct or clarify something during their responses. These sequences help maintain understanding between the examiner and the student.

The analysis of Preference Organization shows how students respond to challenging questions, especially questions about weaknesses in their research.

Students may use pauses, hesitation, token agreements, and accounts before giving their main responses. These features show that responses to challenging questions can be more complex than ordinary answers.

Overall, thesis defense interaction is a structured but flexible form of institutional talk. Students are not passive respondents. They also take an active role by asking for clarification, correcting themselves, and organizing their answers.. Therefore, CA helps explain not only what participants say, but also how the conversation are organized during the thesis defense.

The findings may help students prepare for thesis defenses by developing their ability to understand questions, ask for clarification, correct responses, and handle challenging questions. These communication skills can help students manage the question-and-answer process during a thesis defense.

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