Identity Construction in Some Selected Online Debates: A Conversational Analysis

Prof. Dr. Iman Mingher Obied[1], Lecturer Teejan Waheed Al- Khazaali[2*]

[1](Ph.D.) Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research\ Babylon University\College of Education for Human Sciences\ Department of English\ 2024, Iraq.
[2*]Babylon University\College of Education for Human Sciences\ Department of English\ Ministry of Education, General Directorate of Education in AL- Qadisiyah, Iraq.

Email: [1]basic.iman.mingher@uobabylon.edu.iq
Corresponding Email: [2*]qasemqt55@gmail.com

Abstract: This study aims to reveal the building strategies employed in online debates through conversation analysis. Online arguments are more prevalent in the contemporary digital landscape. The study seeks to underscore the need to examine how individuals shape their ideas and engage in discourse. Identify how the online debates reveal the construction and analysis of selected debates according to conversational analysis theory. The research technique encompasses the selection of online debate as the data collection, by Epstein and Wolff about Capitalism vs. Socialism. .
The researcher adopts the conversational analysis theory by Sacks et al. (1970). However, the qualitative study uses theoretical frameworks of production in conversation to uncover patterns and strategies employed by participants. The findings elucidate the approach used in online debates and their potential impact on opinions and shaping discussions. This study provides valuable insights into the unique characteristics of online discourse and the identity construction in the debates. This research improves understanding of constructing arguments in online settings and lays the foundation for future investigations in this evolving field.

Keywords: Construction, Online Debates, Conversational Analysis, Qualitative Study.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rieger et al. (2022) explore that online debates have emerged as significant forums for discussing and exchanging ideas on various subjects in the contemporary digital landscape. Debates provide an online venue for individuals to express their ideas, challenge opposing viewpoints, and engage in thought-provoking exchanges. An in-depth examination of the techniques employed by participants is necessary to understand online debates' dynamic and

fluid nature. Understanding the structure, backing, and delivery of arguments in online debates is essential for grasping their efficacy and impact (Li et al., 2020).

However, this study aims to enhance critical thinking skills in online debates by analyzing strategies used by participants. It provides insights into the mechanics of online discourse and its potential influence on public sentiment. Policymakers and platform developers can use this knowledge to design tools and strategies that promote constructive and polite online interactions. Understanding construction in online debates requires a conversational analysis methodology to understand the intricacies of digital communication (Paulus et al. , 2018). This approach helps researchers understand persuasive techniques, patterns, strategies, and linguistic devices used by participants, providing insights into online discussions and their impact on public opinion and online communities. Non-verbal communication strategies play a significant role in the analysis of online debate. Thus, there is a concern about speaking speed, intonation, order of interaction, indexicality, and other principles that impact the understanding of the constraints in online debates.

This study aims to identify the methods used in online conflicts and improve persuasive communication effectiveness. It will examine participants' argument structure, rhetorical devices, and conversation flow. The data will be analyzed to identify patterns, trends, and influential approaches participants use. Finally, this study explores persuasive communication strategies in online conflicts, focusing on humans' linguistic and rhetorical strategies. It provides insights into the unique characteristics of online discourse, distinguishing it from traditional conversational settings. The study also explores how technology, anonymity, and nonverbal clues affect communication dynamics, providing valuable insights into online discourse.

2. RELATED WORKS

Many studies concerning the identity construction in online debates relate to the current studies. Gunawardena et al.'s study (1997) focuses on identity construction and aims to create a novel interaction analysis model for examining meaning negotiation and knowledge co-construction in collaborative learning environments, including computer conferencing. The model, developed using grounded theory, was applied to real-life interactions in a Global Online Debate and subsequent computer conferences. The findings have implications for designing and facilitating collaborative learning environments, enhancing the effectiveness of cooperative learning experiences, and redefining the concept of interaction in computer-mediated communication.

Zhao et al.'s 2008 study on Facebook reveals that users construct their identities through actions, prioritizing group and consumer identities over personal ones. They rely on visual signals and group associations for identity expression, unlike in anonymous online settings where users engage in role-playing activities. These findings have implications for understanding identity formation in digital environments.

This study differs from the previous studies that it employs a qualitative research methodology to investigate the influence of conversational tactics on the detection of identity formation in online arguments. The subject matter of this study centers on the exertion of

influence and control and the many intricacies of linguistic expression in online discussions. This study thoroughly analyzes the intricate variables that shape individuals' prspectives and beliefs in online environments. It examines how people express their identity through both verbal and non-verbal discourse. Additionally, it presents a distinctive viewpoint on online arguments.

2.1 Online Debates

Venancio (2014) describes the term "debate" as commonly employed to describe a discourse between two or more participants. Whenever a group of two or more individuals convene, they commonly initiate an argument. Nevertheless, in many nations, like the United States of America, deliberation can be regarded as a competitive activity, and, as with other sports, it adheres to its own set of regulations. The Debate can vary depending on these rules. Freeley and Steinberg (2013) define Debate as inquiry and advocacy which refers to the process of seeking a well-reasoned judgment on a proposition. However, a debate can be categorized into many types, such as a judicial or parliamentary debate, governed by the court of law and parliamentary procedure. Additionally, there is Academic Debate, which typically follows specific rules determined by the institution or contest in which it occurs.

Traditionally, the ancient Greeks recognized the importance of discussion for individuals and society. Plato defined rhetoric as a universal art of persuading the mind through arguments applicable in legal proceedings, public councils, and private meetings. Aristotle outlined four roles of rhetoric:

- **Deterring deceit and unfairness.**
- **Positing that truth and justice have inherent superiority.**
- **Putting responsibility for wrong decisions on those with righteousness.**

He believed that knowledge of the correct decision is not enough; it also requires the ability to articulate and defend it in front of others (Freeley &Steiberg, 2013).

Additionally, online debates have become a prevalent form of communication in the modern day, allowing individuals from diverse backgrounds and geographical locations to discuss various topics. These debates occur on several platforms, including social media, forums, and dedicated debate websites. Online fights are increasing, driven mainly by widespread internet access, seamless information sharing, and individuals' inclination to express their opinions publicly (Alqaiwna & Quba, 2023).

Researchers and intellectuals are currently devoting their attention to analyzing online debates to understand these digital exchanges' intricacies. Research has examined several aspects of online debates, such as argumentation strategies, persuasive techniques, language features, and the influence of online communities on conversations.

2.1.1   Types of Online Debates

Santagiustina and Warglien (2021) express that online debates have become a crucial part of modern democratic society, involving many individuals in expressing their views on various subjects. Debates involve speech acts, reasoning, mental frameworks, and emotions and can be concluded through public assemblies or broader discussions on contentious issues. Large

communities use Online Social Media sites like Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit to collect information and express opinions on national or global events. Both partisan and non-partisan participants openly express their thoughts on these events, including their probability and anticipated consequences. These debates are characterized by vigorous disputes and the ability to influence perspectives on contentious issues.

Generally speaking, there are two main types of online debates: political and political. Since social media has spread rapidly, many participants in these debates use online ways to present their issues (Wright et al., 2016). Branham defines debate as advocating, endorsing, challenging, and safeguarding opinions. However, Gill (2006) differentiates between five types of debates: Support, Participative Discussion, Task collaboration, Workflow Management, and Administration.

Furthermore, Davis et al. (2016) refer to another division of debates. According to them, debates can be divided into the Lincoln- Douglas debate, Student congress\ congressional debate, Public forum debate, Model U.N, Mock Trial, and policy debate. They illustrate that all these types of debates share the same ideas but differ in the topics, time limits, expectations for participants, and sets of roles. Whatever the type of debate, there is a need to follow specific strategies. Thus, the following tackles the strategies of debates.

2.1.2 Strategies of Online Debates

Debating relies heavily on strategic thinking, meticulous preparation, and intellectual effort. The use of clever arguments and strategic maneuvers wins debates. Nichols and Person (1914) outline the tactics of argumentation in the following manner:

a. The practice of confronting or opposing adversaries by presenting specific arguments.
b. The practice of citing extensively or relying on authoritative sources.
c. The policy of demonstrating affection for others.
d. The practice of deliberately providing false information.
e. The policy of summarizing consolidates all the essential contentions and provides them to the audience.
f. The policy of employing comparison and contrast is an effective technique for juxtaposing different plains.
g. The policy of reinforcing a solid argument by restating it and making speakers endorse each other's claims.
h. The policy of evading questions and avoiding concerns (also known as begging the question), particularly when these issues and questions pose significant risks to one's position.
i. The policy of admission and the superb device is fair-minded when not excessively burdened.
j. The practice of posing provocative or attention-grabbing questions must be supported by evidence for a response.
k. The assumption policy involves believing that opponents will concede specific points, which can lead to the drawing of unintended inferences that might harm the opponents' position.

2. 2 Identity Construction in the Online Debates

Identity construction can be intentional or automatic. Furthermore, due to the nature of identity being organically connected to relationships, it will always be incomplete and developed through the contextually placed and ideologically influenced arrangements of oneself and others (Li, 2021). In this context, identity is a result of linguistic practices such as positioning and indexing during contact. It is a relational and emergent product that can be seen as the speakers' way of managing rapport (Locher, 2008). However, identity formation in online discussions pertains to how individuals shape and exhibit their identities through their interactions and arguments in digital spaces (Subrahmanyam& Smahel, 2011). These can encompass many digital platforms such as social media, online forums, blogs, and other online venues where individuals participate in discussions and debates.

During online disputes, individuals employ diverse tactics to shape and showcase their identities, including:

1. **Self-presentation** refers to participants presenting themselves in a specific manner, using elements like their username, avatar, or profile information to convey a particular image or identity (Strimbu & O'Connell, 2019).
2. **Language and tone**: The language and tone employed in online arguments can effectively communicate various aspects of an individual's identity, including their level of knowledge, their political alignment, and their convictions (Rabiah, 2012).
3. **Argumentation style** refers to how individuals articulate their arguments and engage with others. It can provide insights into their identity, including their capacity for empathy, aptitude for critical thinking, and openness to considering alternative perspectives.
4. **Participants** can draw upon their experiences or background to bolster their arguments, unveiling facets of their identity such as ethnicity, gender, age, or socioeconomic class.
5. **Authority citation:** Participants can reference experts, research, or other authoritative sources to bolster their arguments, demonstrating competence or intellectual rigor.
6. **Interacting with others**: How individuals interact with others in online discussions, whether through civil discourse or personal insults, can provide insights into their identity, such as their regard for others or their openness to considering differing perspectives.

The question arises regarding how speakers in online debates strategically position themselves, either aligning their coverage with or diverging from their interlocutors, to construct their professional identity through implicit negation. This process of identity construction has consequences for establishing interpersonal rapport and the level of politeness exhibited during interactions (Li, 2021). Finally, identity formation in online arguments is a complicated and diverse process. Individuals employ many tactics to shape and showcase their identities, adapting them to different contexts and objectives. In addition, it is essential to note that online identities may not necessarily correspond to offline identities. People often utilize online platforms to explore multiple identities or express some aspects of themselves that they may not feel comfortable revealing in person.

2.3 Conversational Analysis Theory

Conversation analysis is a research method that examines social interactions by analyzing language use in talks. It emerged from research in the 1960s and early 1970s by Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson, and their students. It helps in steering customer journeys based on customer perspectives. This linguistic discipline examines spoken and non-spoken actions during conversations to understand interpersonal dynamics. It is a branch of discourse analysis focusing on the structure and organization of communication (Sidnell, 2016).

However, conversation analysis focuses on turn-taking, the act of speakers alternating speaking roles in a conversation. This field examines the rules, customs, and tactics used to initiate, maintain, and conclude dialogues. Turn-taking analysis explains how speakers synchronize their roles and manage conversation progression.

Additionally, conversational analysis in pragmatics studies meaning formation during conversations, examining implicatures, indirect speech acts, and presuppositions. Discourse analysis studies language usage in different contexts. In this regard, conversation analysis methodologies include microanalysis, macro- analysis, and ethno -methodological analysis. Microanalysis analyzes single elements, macro- analysis studies broader patterns, and ethno-methodological analysis explores social norms and practices.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Preliminary

This study used a qualitative research methodology, namely conversational analysis (CA), to investigate the online arguments and the process of constructing identities among participants. Conversation Analysis (CA) is a method that emphasizes the methodical examination of language usage in social interactions. It has been extensively employed in research on the formation and negotiation of identity.
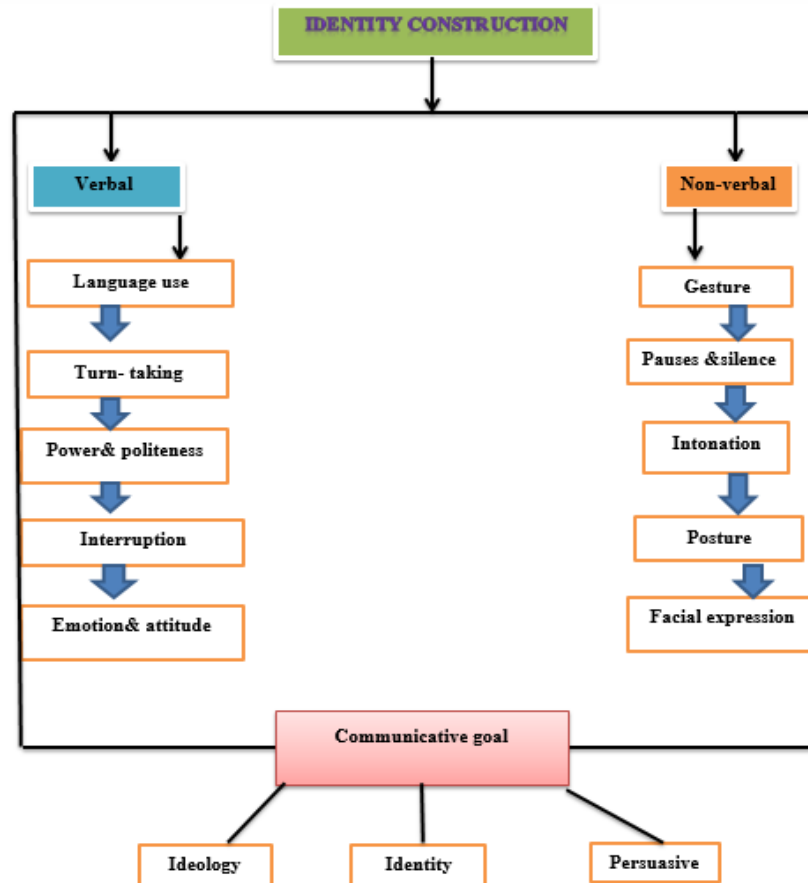
3.2 Data Collection

The dataset for this study comprises an online debate, with an argument spanning a duration of 30 minutes including two participants. The debates were chosen based on its pertinence to current social and political matters. The debates was held on a widely used internet forum and was selected based on its degree of participation and contentiousness. The data is a debate between Richard Wolf and Jean Epstein, Capitalism vs. Socialism: A Forum Debate.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data underwent analysis using CA techniques, including sequential analysis, turn-taking analysis, and member-identification analysis. The study employed sequential analysis to investigate the progression of conversation and the ways in which participants employed language to shape and negotiate their identities. The study employed turn-taking analysis to investigate participants' use of language elements, including tone, to convey their intentions and attitudes during conversation. The study employed member-identification analysis to investigate the process by which participants defined their own identities and the identities of others in the debate, as well as how these identities were negotiated and disputed.

3.4 Theoretical Framework Adopted from the Conversational Analysis Theory by Sacks et al. (1970).

Data Analysis

Potential Debate between Jean Epstein and Richard Wolff over the dichotomy of Capitalism versus Socialism: Conversation Analysis (CA) is a sociological theory that examines how individuals use language and dialogue to shape and navigate their identities. During a debate, individuals formulate and deliver their arguments. Additionally, they shape and discuss their identities as authorities, supporters, or adversaries through their interactions. In the dispute between Epstein and Woolf, it is evident that both speakers employ the pronoun "I" with regularity, albeit in distinct manners. Epstein, advocating for the proposition, used the pronoun "I" to indicate his authority and knowledge. He frequently employs expressions such as "I argue," "I believe," and "I think," which establish him as an authoritative and self-assured speaker. Epstein employs the pronoun "I" in this manner, a deliberate strategy to develop a persona characterized by strength and persuasiveness in advocating for his perspective. Conversely, Woolf opposes the proposition and uses the pronoun "I" in a more hesitant and modest manner. He frequently used expressions such as "I am uncertain," "I am not persuaded," and "I am not an authority," which present him as an

uncertain and receptive speaker. Woolf constructs an identity as a discerning and deliberate critic of the proposition by employing the pronoun "I" in this manner.

Another approach to examine the language usage in this debate is to observe how the speakers employ lexical and grammatical structures to express their views. Epstein uses a variety of linguistic and grammatical structures, such as metaphors, analogies, and logical deductions, to effectively communicate his thesis. He employs these frameworks to construct a compelling argument in support of his stance and to establish himself as a well-informed and proficient advocate. Conversely, Woolf utilizes a deliberate and careful method, employing vocabulary and sentence structures to express his doubt and disapproval of the idea. He uses expressions such as "I'm uncertain," "I'm unconvinced," and "I lack expertise" to establish himself as a contemplative and discerning evaluator of the argument.

Furthermore, the speakers apply non-verbal communication, including vocal intonation; both individuals employ diverse intonation patterns to communicate their points. Jean Epstein adopts a more balanced and controlled tone, whereas Richard Wolff utilizes more inflected and expressive intonation. Such as, "I don't think that's a fair characterization of capitalism. "I don't think that's a sustainable way to organize a society.".

Concerning gestures, both speakers employ hand gestures to accentuate their arguments, while Jean Epstein employs more refined and intentional motions. At the same time, Richard Wolff utilizes more vibrant and lively gestures, such as physical gestures, such as in "I mean, come on, the Soviet Union was a basket case." and "I think that's a recipe for disaster". In this regard, posture and facial expression were also used by both participants, who exhibited composed and receptive posture throughout the debate. Jean Epstein maintains an upright position and direct eye contact with Richard Wolff. On the other hand, Richard Wolff leans forward and employs more animated facial expressions to underscore his arguments. Moreover, facial cues are also used to present their arguments and establish their stance in the debate. Epstein employs a self-assured and powerful vocal tone while sustaining direct eye contact with the audience to communicate his commanding presence and extensive knowledge effectively.

Conversely, Woolf employs a restrained and contemplative tone while deliberately avoiding direct eye contact to express his doubt and disapproval. "I think that's a myth that's been perpetuated by the capitalist class." (gesture), and "I think that's a misleading way to frame the issue.". The use of intonation in certain speeches reflects the message that he wants to pay the audience's attention to, such as in "I think that's a cop-out, Jean."

The argument also exposes the power relations among the participants. In the context of the discussion, Jean Epstein possesses greater social and cultural influence due to his support of capitalism, the prevailing economic system in the United States. Conversely, Richard Wolff possesses less social and cultural capital due to the perception that socialism is frequently regarded as a minority or extreme philosophy. The interruptions and simultaneous speech can be seen in this debate, which can be interpreted as a means of managing power dynamics. For instance, Jean Epstein frequently interjects during Richard Wolff's discourse to dispute his arguments or elucidate his stance.

Regarding emotion and attitude, both participants exhibit self-assurance and strong belief in their arguments, with Jean Epstein demonstrating a higher level of assertiveness and certainty in his perspective. At the same time, Richard Wolff displays greater passion and emotional

expression in his arguments. Likewise, intervals of quiet and pauses occur during the debate as both participants take time to collect their thoughts or address each other's points. Jean Epstein pauses at a higher frequency, which suggests a more intentional and reflective manner. In his speech," Well, that's an exaggeration, Richard." (pause) and " I think we need to create a more nuanced understanding of the role of markets and the role of government in society." (pause). In contrast, Richard Wolff employs pauses to provide more impromptu and emotionally charged comments. Such as in "I disagree, Jean. I think that's a fundamental misreading of history." (pause) and "I think that's a misunderstanding of the nature of socialism." (pause)

Additionally, the power and politeness in this debate are reflected by Jean Epstein, who, as a proponent of capitalism, possesses greater social and cultural influence within the argument due to capitalism's prevailing status as the dominant economic system in the United States. Richard Wolff, in contrast, possesses less social and cultural capital due to the perception that socialism is frequently regarded as a minority or radical philosophy. Nevertheless, both participants consistently exhibit a courteous and respectful demeanor throughout the debate.

4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Examining the online argument between Epstein and Woolf using conversational analysis theory uncovers valuable insights about how identity is formed in this particular setting. Firstly, the approach emphasizes the significance of language use in creating and negotiating social identity. Epstein and Woolf employ language strategically to position themselves and their opponent in the discussion and identify themselves with specific ideals and views. Epstein's employment of metaphors and analogies establishes him as an authoritative and compelling proponent, whereas Woolf's employment of hesitancy and uncertain language presents him as a contemplative and deliberate critic. Secondly, the study used conversational analysis to explore how online argument participants use language to form and negotiate their identities and how power dynamics and social environment impact these encounters. It found that individuals use various linguistic characteristics, such as pronouns, modality, and tone, to navigate their identities and establish dominance. The findings underscore the significance of identity in online discourse and the interplay between language and power dynamics.

Finally, the study highlights the importance of non-verbal communication in expressing ideas and establishing debate stances. Epstein's confident demeanor and aggressive tone of voice strengthen his influence, while Woolf's measured and contemplative demeanor makes him a cautious critic. The analysis emphasizes the role of context in shaping identity in discourse, with online settings, discussion subjects, and viewers influencing speakers' language and non-verbal cues. Epstein's influence as an influential advocate is determined by his use of language and non-verbal communication.

5. CONCLUSION

After analyzing the data and explaining the identity construction in online debate, the researcher concludes that the discussion between Epstein and Woolf underscores the intricate and ever-changing process of constructing one's identity in online conversations. Both

speakers shape and negotiate their identities through their language use and non-verbal communication. The setting of the discussion also influences the constructed identities.

Besides, Epstein's utilization of metaphors and analogies establishes him as an authoritative and compelling proponent. In contrast, Woolf's employment of hesitancy and uncertain language presents him as a contemplative and deliberate critic. The speakers' identities are not static but continually formed and discussed through linguistic expression and non-verbal interaction. Conversational analysis theory emphasizes the importance of language and non-verbal communication in shaping identity in online debates, enhancing our understanding of the processes involved in constructing and negotiating identity. Conducting a study on online arguments using conversational analysis theory might yield useful insights into how language and non-verbal communication influence identity and meaning in online environments. By analyzing participants' linguistic patterns and non-verbal cues in online arguments, we can better comprehend the intricate and ever-changing process of constructing one's identity in these settings.

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