

Examining the use of fillers in a presidential debate: a case of Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump

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ABSTRACT

While many studies have focused on non-native English speakers, this present study aims to examine fillers in the context of native English speakers. Despite their native proficiency, both Clinton and Trump employed fillers during the presidential debates, making them pertinent subjects for analysis. By analyzing the use of fillers in this context, the present study seeks to provide a reference for EFL learners on incorporating fillers as a strategy in spontaneous speech. Data were taken from YouTube videos, which were Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump on presidential debate as the primary data, and analysed qualitatively. Findings showed that there were two types of fillers, unlexicalized and lexicalized fillers. In addition, the findings also demonstrated that there were three functions of fillers found: hesitating, empathizing, and mitigating.

Keywords: Discourse analysis, EFL, fillers, Presidential debates

INTRODUCTION

While communication is a fundamental aspect of everyday human life, the use of language symbolized by words is a crucial means of expression. However, this communication process is not without imperfections, as individuals may encounter speech delays, pauses, restarts, and fillers. Fillers, such as “uh” or “um,” stand out as a commonly observed phenomenon that interrupts the flow of speech (Erten, 2014). Erten suggests that fillers are perceived as flaws in speech, but Clark and Fox Tree (2002) argue that fillers serve a communicative function, despite lacking primary meaning. Integral to communication, fillers offer a strategic means of conveying meaning within an utterance rather than constituting the meaning itself.

Contrary to the perception of fillers as meaningless words, psycholinguistic viewpoints, such as Tottie’s (2011), recognize fillers as more than flaws in speech. Instead, they are treated as interruptions in speaking time or even as a form of meaningful noise. During conversations, individuals often resort to expressions like “well,” “let me think,” or “actually” to introduce a delay when faced with conversational difficulties. These fillers, also known as pausing or hesitation phenomena, represent commonly occurring features in natural speech (Richards and Schmidt, 2012).

Numerous studies have explored fillers, revealing insights into their various uses. Rose (1998) identified filled pauses as stalling and filling acts during which speakers prepared their subsequent utterances. Corley and Stewart (2008) found that speakers use fillers when uncertain about their next utterance. Furthermore, Fatihurrahman (2016) investigated the use

of fillers by Indonesian EFL learners during proposal presentations, discovering that the use of fillers was influenced by surprise due to uttering the wrong word.

While many studies have focused on non-native English speakers, this research aims to examine fillers in the context of native English speakers. Despite their native proficiency, both Clinton and Trump employed fillers during the presidential debates, making them pertinent subjects for analysis. By analyzing the use of fillers in this context, the present study seeks to provide a reference for EFL learners on incorporating fillers as a strategy in spontaneous speech. The research question guiding this study is: What are the types of fillers frequently used by Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in the Third Presidential Debate? By conducting this research, the intention is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the types and functions of fillers, challenging the common perception of fillers as speech imperfections.

LITERATURE REVIEW

HESITATION

Hesitation is a phenomena when the speaker feel doubt during the speech. Rieger (2003) state that hesitations are pauses of varying length, which are usually not left unfilled. They usually occur when the speaker losing for words or engaged in cognitive or verbal planning. Native speaker fill the hesitation pause with variety of fillers including non-lexical fillers such as lengthening or stretching sounds, and quasi-lexical fillers such as repetition of one or several lexical item.

Hesitation happens to all of speakers in the world whether they are native speaker of their language or not. This phenomenon most happened in non-native speakers, because when they are using a language which is not their first language, they have to translate the words, phrases, even sentences before uttering it, and they have to find appropriate word to be uttered next. In doing so, they have to do some activities to keep their conversation or talk run well, such as hesitating, repeating, pausing, and filling the empty time by making fillers. Schiffrin (1987) defined hesitation as “sequentially depend elements which bracket units of talk which can facilitate listener comprehension and help smooth”. From that point of view, it can be inferred that hesitation such as fillers, repetition, and silent pause may help both interlocutors while speaking and listening.

PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

Presidential debate is a debate between the candidates of president. Benoit et al. (2007) explain that presidential debate is a debate among candidates for countries leader occur around the world. Debates between the leaders candidate addressing many of the same topics at the same times which helps voters choose between those contenders. Most debates are 60 – 90 minutes long, affording voters more opportunity to learn about the candidates and their position on the issues. It can be conclude that presidential debate is also used as a campaign tool to inform voters about the candidates.

Presidential debates are also broadcast on television. Televised political debates has several important advantages. Coleman (2000) offers several reason about these events: Firstly, televised debates are the best way of reaching a large audience of voters. Most voters obtain their political information from television more than any other source . . . Secondly, there is an impressive body of data to indicate that televised debates have an educational impact . . . Thirdly, televised debates help to equalize access to the mass media . . . Fourthly, televised debates allow the public to come as close as they can to auditioning the candidates for national

leadership . . . Another advantage to the democratic process of television debates is that they force rivals to know each other's positions. (pp. 9_11)

Debates offers voters an opportunity to compare the candidates by discussing same topics. Candidates may face unanticipated questions from opponent which mean a candid view of the candidates.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Discourse analysis is a branch of linguistics study. According to Pamolango (2016) discourse analysis is a primarily a branch of linguistic study examining the use of language by its native population whose major concern is investigating language functions along with its forms, produced both orally and in writing. Moreover, identification of linguistic qualities of various genres, vital for their recognition and interpretation, together with cultural and social aspects that support its comprehension, is the domain of discourse analysis. To put it in another way, the branch of applied linguistics dealing with the examination of discourse attempts to find patterns in communicative products as well as and their correlation with the circumstances in which they occur, which are not explainable at the grammatical level. Discourse analysis is concern in the use of language that is how individuals accomplish personal, social and political through language (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007).

WOMEN'S LANGUAGE FEATURES

Women's language features are several aspects of language used by women to differentiate between women and men's language characteristics (Lakoff, 1975). The features that are stated include tag questions, lexical hedges, rising intonation on declaratives, precise color terms, empty adjectives, intensifiers, hypercorrect grammar, superpolite forms, emphatic stress, and avoidance of swear words (cited in Holmes, 2001). One of the feature is lexical hedges or filler. Lexical hedges or filler are the sign of someone's lack of confidence in conveying ideas or something. The use of lexical hedges aims to avoid the gap which occurs in the conversation. It is also used to start another topic with the coherence with the previous topic that is discussed. These lexical hedges are produced to make the conversation stay on the track.

METHOD

To achieve the study's objectives, a discourse analysis was conducted. Discourse analysis, as defined by Hodges et al. (2008), involves studying and analyzing the use of language. Starks & Brown Trinidad (2007) add that discourse analysis is concerned with language in use, examining how individuals accomplish social, personal, and political goals through language. The primary data were taken from a YouTube video featuring the third presidential debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Additionally, the transcript of the debate was used as secondary data to reference the expressions of both debaters in the video. The data selection is based on the need for spoken data, and the video was used alongside the transcript. The source of this research's data was the fillers that occur in the third presidential debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, extracted from a YouTube video titled "The Third Presidential Debate: Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump (Full Debate) | NBC News," with a duration of 115 minutes and 59 seconds. The transcript was retrieved from <https://www.politico.com>.

FINDINGS

Findings revealed that the filler “uh” is the most frequently used by Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in their debate with the amount of 95 frequency, followed by filler “well” with 44 occurrence. There are fillers that only used by one of them and not used by the other. To make the data clearer, the findings will be shown in the table below.

TABLE. 1 TYPES OF FILLERS

No.	Fillers	Types of Fillers				Total
		Unlexicalized		Lexicalized		
		Hillary Clinton	Donald Trump	Hillary Clinton	Donald Trump	
1	uh	77	18			95
2	um	8	2			10
3	aay	2	0			2
4	well			29	15	44
5	I mean			0	7	7
6	You know			20	3	23
7	I think			6	3	9
8	OK			0	3	3
9	look			2	4	6
10	let me tell you			0	10	10
11	Repetitive words			4	5	9
12	Direct correction			2	10	12
Total		87	20	63	60	230
		107		123		

The table above shows the results of the types of fillers used by Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in the third presidential debate. The researcher found that unlexicalized fillers have fewer types compare to lexicalized fillers but the fillers “uh” which is unlexicalized fillers is the most frequently used during the debate. After the researcher observed about the filler words occurred in Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump debate, the researcher found that filler “uh” is the most frequently used when they were thinking about next utterances.

From the table above we can see that there are filler word that only used by one of the debaters and not used by the other. There are filler “aay” that only used by Hillary Clinton, and filler “OK” that only used by Donald Trump. The different use of fillers indicates the different way of both speakers in using the filler word in their speech. In data analysis the researcher present the types of fillers which are unlexicalized fillers and lexicalized fillers, and 5 Function of fillers which are hesitating, empathizing, mitigating, editing term and time creating devices. Here are the following discussions about the types and function of fillers used by Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in the third presidential debate.

TYPES OF FILLERS

Fillers can be divided into two types. Rose (1998) divided fillers into two types. The first types is unlexicalized fillers and the second types is lexicalized fillers. Here are the following discussion about the types of fillers in Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump Third presidential debate. There are two types of fillers that will be discussed in this part which are unlexicalized fillers and lexicalized fillers.

UNLEXICALIZED FILLERS

Unlexicalized Fillers are non-words fillers which speaker use to indicate hesitation while the speaker think to say the next utterances (Rose, 1998). Unlexicalized fillers are fillers that have no literal meaning. Rose (1998) stated that a pause might be filled with any of the following phonetic combinations: *a, am, u, um, e, em, m*. from the definition above, it can be conclude that any of sound with no literal meaning produced by the speaker while pausing can be defined as unlexicalized fillers.

In line with the purposes of research, the researcher investigate the types of fillers that occurs in the third presidential debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. From the debate, the researcher found 238 fillers in total with the unlexicalized fillers appears 107 times. And below are examples of the utterances by both debaters that contains unlexicalized fillers.

DATA 1

*CLINTON: ... a decision that has undermined the **uh** election system in our country because of the way it permits dark, unaccountable money to come into **uh** our electoral system. ...*

The data was taken in the first topic deals with the Supreme Court topic. The moderator asked the two candidates where they want to see the court take the country, and what is their view on how the Constitution should be interpreted. Hillary Clinton argue that Supreme Court need to stand on the side of American people, not on the side of powerful corporation and the wealthy. And she wants to prevent money politics in the electoral system.

In the data above the speaker which is Hillary Clinton make some slight pauses when she were talking. During the pauses, she uttered a word “**uh**” several times. The word “**uh**” itself can be classified into unlexicalized fillers because it has no literal meaning, and it would not change the meaning of the sentence in the speech. In this data, the word “**uh**” appears as a result of the speaker was thinking of the next utterances. Filler “**uh**” is also the most frequently used during the debate.

DATA 2

*TRUMP: Well, the D.C. vs. Heller decision **um** was very strongly -- and she was extremely angry about it. ...*

The data was taken in the first topic. The moderator ask the candidate about what they want to see the court take the country and how the constitution should be interpreted. Trump said America need supreme court that is going to uphold the second amendment. He also stated that the justice he will appoint will be pro-life, have a conservative bent and will be protecting the second amendment.

In the data above, Donald Trump produce the word “**um**” in the middle of the sentence. The word “**um**” itself appears one time and can be concluded as a result of the speaker was

thinking about what to say next. It proved by him adding some slight pause when uttering the word. Same with the word “uh”, the word “um” is also classified as unlexicalized fillers. As explained in the chapter two unlexicalized fillers is a word that has no literal meaning and it cannot change the meaning of the sentence.

LEXICALIZED FILLERS

Lexicalized fillers are fillers in form of word or short phrase, such as *like, well, yeah, sort of, you know, if you see what I mean*, and so on (Rose, 1998). Baalen (2001) also states that lexicalized fillers consist of phrases *you know* and *I mean* which are mostly used when a speaker is grouping for words but does not want to give up the claim to the floor. The researcher found there are 9 types of filler which included in Lexicalized fillers.

TABLE 2. LEXICALIZED FILLERS

Types of Filler	Hillary Clinton	Donald Trump
Well	<i>Well, first of all, I support the Second Amendment. I lived in Arkansas for 18 wonderful years.</i>	<i>Well, first of all, it's great to be with you, and thank you, everybody. The Supreme Court: It's what it's all about.</i>
I Mean	-	<i>... the D.C. vs. Heller decision um was very strongly -- and she was extremely angry about it. I watched. I mean, she was very, very angry when upheld.</i>
You know	<i>You know, I think when we talk about the Supreme Court, it really raises the central issue in this election</i>	<i>You know, WikiLeaks just actually came out -- John Podesta said some horrible things about you, and, boy, was he right.</i>
I think	<i>Well, I think when the middle class thrives, America thrives.</i>	<i>I think I should respond to that. First of all, I had a very good meeting with the president of Mexico.</i>
OK	-	<i>What I'm saying is that I will tell you at the time. I'll keep you in suspense. OK?</i>
Look	<i>... And, you know, look, I understand that Donald's been uh strongly supported by the NRA.</i>	<i>Look, she's been proven to be a liar on so many different ways.</i>
Let me tell you	-	<i>Let me tell you, Putin has outsmarted her and Obama at every single step of the way.</i>
Repetitive words	<i>Well, first, when I -- when I hear Donald talk like that and know that his slogan is "Make America Great</i>	<i>We're going to have trade, but we're going -- we're going to terminate it, we're going to make a great trade deal</i>

	<i>Again," I wonder when he thought America was great.</i>	
Direct corrections	<i>I am hopeful that the hard work that American uh military advisers have done will pay off and that we will see uh a real -- a really successful military operation.</i>	<i>I am a very strong supporter of the Second Amendment. And I am -- I don't know if Hillary was saying it in a sarcastic manner</i>

The data above, was taken by determining the sentences utter by both candidates that containing lexicalized fillers. The lexicalized fillers in data above are the word marked in bold. From the data, we can see that lexicalized fillers can be in form of words or in form of short phrase. They still have their own lexical meaning but it cannot change the meaning of the sentence even they are exist or not. Thus, a word or short phrase that has literal meaning but not important as part of the sentence can be considered as lexicalized fillers. Therefore, whether those word were in the sentence or not, they could not change the meaning of the sentence.

FUNCTION OF FILERS HESITATING

Hesitating, a mark of hesitation or hesitating devices is one of the function of fillers (Stenstrom, 1994). Wu (2001) clarify that fillers occur when the speaker must stop to think about what he/she will say next and when the speaker was composing a sentence. Most of filled pauses (*ee, em, err, uhm, ah, hm, et cetera*) are used as the breathing pauses, such pauses generally match semantic-syntactic boundaries (Stenström, 1994). Therefore, fillers are used for hesitation purposes.

In this study, fillers as mark of hesitation is the most appeared in the video. This is an example of fillers as mark of hesitation.

DATA 1

WALLACE: ...First of all, where do you want to see the court take the country? And secondly, what's your view on how the Constitution should be interpreted?...

*CLINTON: ... a decision that has undermined the **uh** election system in our country because of the way it permits dark, unaccountable money to come into **uh** our electoral system. I have major disagreements with my opponent about these issues and others that will be before the Supreme Court. But I feel that at this point in our country's history, **uh** it is important that we not reverse marriage equality, that we not reverse Roe v. Wade, that we stand up against Citizens United, we stand up for the rights of people in the workplace, that we stand up and basically say: The Supreme Court should represent all of us. That's how I see the court, and the kind of people that I would be looking to **uh** nominate to the court **uh** would be in the great tradition of standing up to the powerful, standing up on behalf of our rights as Americans.*

The data was taken in first topic that talk about the Supreme Court. The moderator ask both candidates about how the candidates want to see the Supreme Court take the country. In this segment, Hillary Clinton has the first chance to speak. During the speech, she produced some slight pauses, and fill the pauses with the word “*uh*” several time. The word “*uh*” has no literal meaning and it also cannot change the meaning of what Hillary wants to say. Therefore the word “*uh*” is considered as a filler word.

In the data above, the word “*uh*” is were said by adding a slight pause. It means that the speaker needed a time to think about the next utterance. The filler “*uh*” occurred five times during Clinton’s turn. The first and the second fillers has a similarity which is used before the speaker want to say about election system. Based on that situation, the researcher conclude that the speaker was hesitating on saying “election system” and produced fillers before saying it. The next fillers are also indicates hesitation because they were said by adding a slight pause. It indicates that the fillers appeared to give the speaker time to think what to say next.

EMPATHIZING

Empathizing or attention-getting device is one of the functions of fillers. According to Stenstrom (1994) fillers can be used as an attention-getting device. It means the speaker can check whether the listener pay attention or not. Stenstrom (1994) also stated that fillers define as an invitation for the listener to be involved in what the speaker says. Kharismawan (2017) added the examples of fillers as empathizing purposes are *well, you know, right, hey*, etc. The data below is an example of fillers as empathizing or attention-getting device in Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump third presidential debate.

DATA 1

WALLACE: We now have about 10 minutes for an open discussion. I want to focus on two issues that, in fact, by the justices that you name could end up changing the existing law of the land. First is one that you mentioned, Mr. Trump, and that is guns. Secretary Clinton, you said last year, let me quote, "The Supreme Court is wrong on the Second Amendment." And now, in fact, in the 2008 Heller case, the court ruled that there is a constitutional right to bear arms, but a right that is reasonably limited. Those were the words of the Judge Antonin Scalia who wrote the decision. What's wrong with that?

CLINTON: Well, first of all, I support the Second Amendment. I lived in Arkansas for 18 wonderful years. I represented upstate New York. I understand and respect the tradition of gun ownership. It goes back to the founding of our country.

The data above was taken in the topic that discussed about guns regulation. The moderator quoted that Clinton was saying that the Supreme Court was wrong on the second amendment that rules the ownership of gun. But in fact the Court ruled that there is a constitutional right to be arms, but a right that is reasonably limited. The moderator ask Clinton what is wrong with that. Clinton in her turn want to convey that she support the second amendment and she knows that guns trade goes back to the founding of the country. However, Clinton believe that there must be reasonable regulation.

In this data, the speaker start the speech with the word “*well*” before she moved to the topic she would discussed. The word “*well*” can be concluded that she wants to get the audience attention. It proofed by her adding the words *first of all* it means that what she want to talk is

important. She want the audience to pay attention of what she would say. The speaker wanted to invite the audience to pay attention to her so she start the speech with the word *well* and added with emphasis phrases.

MITIGATING

Fillers can also serve as mitigating devices. In Baalen (2001) fillers can mitigate utterances in order not to hurt listener's feeling. Fillers can also use as a solidarity marker or politeness device. It meant that fillers were used to make the speech more polite. Fillers like *well*, *ehm*, and *okay* can be functioned as mitigating or politeness device.

The data below shows the example of fillers as mitigating or politeness devices in the third presidential debate between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton.

Data 2.3.1

WALLACE: Mr. Trump, same question. Where do you want to see the court take the country? And how do you believe the Constitution should be interpreted?

TRUMP: Well, first of all, it's great to be with you, and thank you, everybody. The Supreme Court: It's what it's all about. Our country is so, so -- it's just so imperative that we have the right justices.

The data is found in the first segment which talk about Supreme Court. The question from the moderator was where the candidates want to see the Court take the country and how they believe the Constitution should be interpreted. In this data, the one whom asked was Donald Trump. To answer the question, Trump start his turn with greetings since it was his first chance for him to talk. He start his sentence with the word "**Well**" aimed to take the turn to talk from the moderator.

The word "**Well**" itself does not change the meaning of Trump's sentence. Even it is in the sentence or not, the sentence have the same meaning. With Trump starting his speech by using the word "**Well**", it shows that the speaker start the speech in a polite way. He start the speech with greetings before he moved to the topic. In this situation, Trump start the speech with the word "**well**" followed by some greetings to show his respect to the master of ceremony and the audience. It is proved by him saying "*it's great to be with you, and thank you, everybody*". The word "*well*" can be defined as mitigating device, that's proved by Trump saying it with low and polite tone.

DISCUSSION

According to Rose's (1998) theory, there are two types of fillers: unlexicalized and lexicalized fillers. In unlexicalized fillers, three types were identified in this research: "uh," "um," and "aay." These words lack literal meaning and cannot alter the sentence's meaning, classifying them as unlexicalized fillers. Both candidates used "uh" and "um," but Hillary Clinton used them more frequently than Donald Trump. Conversely, "aay" was exclusively used by Hillary Clinton and had a longer duration compared to other unlexicalized fillers.

The subsequent discussion focuses on lexicalized fillers, which have lexical meaning but do not change the sentence's meaning. Nine fillers were identified in this category: "well," "I mean," "you know," "I think," "OK," "look," "let me tell you," and two types involving repetitive words or phrases and direct correction. Hillary Clinton used lexicalized fillers more

frequently than Donald Trump, although two fillers, “I mean” and “OK,” were exclusively used by Donald Trump.

The study also aims to discuss the functions of fillers, which are categorized into five purposes: hesitating, empathizing, mitigating, editing term, and time-creating device. Hesitating purposes occur when the speaker is contemplating the next utterances, involving unlexicalized fillers such as “uh,” “um,” and “aay.” Here, Hillary Clinton used “uh” and “um” more frequently than Donald Trump, while “aay” was exclusively used by Hillary Clinton, indicating deeper contemplation in preparing her next utterances.

The next function is empathizing, which serves as an attention-getting device to invite the listener’s focus. Empathizing fillers, including “well,” “you know,” “OK,” and “look,” were identified in this study. Among these, “OK” was exclusively used by Donald Trump and appeared at the end of sentences.

Mitigating purposes involve using fillers to demonstrate politeness. In this study, the word “well” was identified as a mitigating filler used by Donald Trump. While not altering the sentence's meaning, adding “well” at the beginning indicates the speaker's politeness in taking a turn to speak. Fillers also serve an editing term purpose, rectifying speech errors. The filler “I mean” indicates the speaker's intention to correct their speech. The study observed instances where speakers directly replaced incorrect words with the correct ones.

CONCLUSION

This research aims to identify the types and functions of filler words, as evident in its title, “The Analysis of Fillers used by Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in the Third Presidential Debate”. Using Rose’s (1998) theory for filler types and Stenstrom’s (1994) theory for filler functions, the qualitative research utilizes the transcript of the third presidential debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump as its data source. The primary focus is to examine the types of fillers used and their functions within sentences. Although filler words may not alter sentence meaning, the findings reveal that they serve functions influencing how listeners interpret the speaker's message.

The study distinguishes two filler types: unlexicalized fillers and lexicalized fillers. Unlexicalized fillers, notably prominent in the debate, are predominantly used by Hillary Clinton. Three functions of fillers are identified, including hesitation, empathy, and mitigation. This research offers valuable insights for individuals in the field and can serve as a reference for teachers and researchers interested in studying fillers or filler words. Teachers can incorporate these findings into their lessons to provide students with a deeper understanding of how fillers function within sentences during speech.

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