【Symposium】

# MH370 Press Conferences:
# Interaction and Institutional Power Relation

Asniah Alias[1], Sharifah Nadia Syed Nasharudin[2],Marlyna Maros[3]

## Introduction

A press conference is a systematic form of public presentation and the questioning of all classification of public personalities which usually organized for the purpose of distributing information to the media. A press conference or media event is commonly held to broadly deliver important information about certain issues such as new political programs and also in connection with a crucial event like a national catastrophe.

The most recent issue in Malaysia that creates extensive polemic is the Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 bound for Beijing which was reported missing on 8th March 2014. Starting from the day of the incident, a series of press conferences were held in broadcasting the latest progress of the crisis. Due to the controversy it created, the matter was reported widely all around the world. Being an unusual incident in aviation history, the press conferences were extensively covered by local and international media. As it was an international event, the press conferences were organized following the standard format and procedures despite having a different political system compared to other countries mentioned in the previous studies such as US and Canada.

Existing studies on power relation in press conference basically came to a conclusion that either politicians or journalists have higher degree of control over the interaction. For example, Bhatia (2006) asserted that power imbalance among the interactants and the nature of press conferences which is institutionalized and

[1] Asniah Alias, PhD candidate, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), asniah@gmail.com
[2] Sharifah Nadia Syed Nasharudin, Masters candidate, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), shana_aidan@yahoo.com
[3] Marlyna Maros, Associate Professor in Sociolinguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), marlyna@ukm.edu.my

formalized benefit the politicians to control the interaction while Clayman and Heritage (2002a, 2002b, 2006) suggested that live event like a press conference gives advantage to journalists pressing questions to limit politicians' response. However, Eshbaugh- Soha (2003) noted that press conference is an uncontrolled setting that neither politicians nor reporter can be presumed to have control over the interaction.

Research on the press conference interaction is very limited though. This study was intended to fill in the gap of the existing studies by looking at the press conferences in a different context especially press conferences organized by Malaysian government. The aim is to investigate how the access to the floor is decided and regulated in MH370 press conferences and how it is related to territorial power of the participants involved. In achieving this objective, seven (7) video clips of MH370 press conferences were analyzed guided by the following research questions:

i. How is turn-taking decided and regulated in MH370 press conferences?
ii. How is territorial power portrayed in MH370 press conference?

## I　The conceptual framework

This study was conducted based on two main concepts (i) Conversational Analysis (CA) of institutional interaction and (ii) Fairclough's power behind discourse. The study focused on turn-taking and how it relates to power representation of the discourse. Figure 1 below illustrates the conceptual framework underpinning the study:
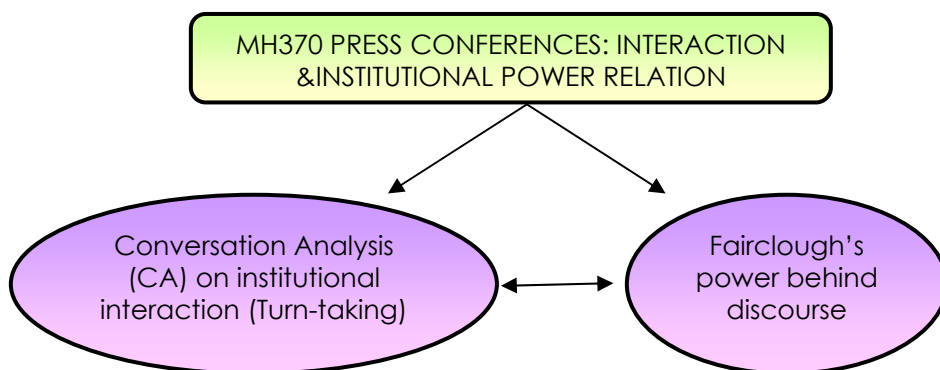


Figure 1: The conceptual framework for interaction and institutional power relation in press conference.

## 1. Conversation Analysis (CA)

Conversation analysis (CA) is one of the popular approaches to the study of discourse. CA is the study of natural talk in interaction and aimed to see how people communicate, either casual or institutional (in the school, government office or any other establishment). Developed by Harvey Sacks (2000) in the 1960's, and historically predating CDA, CA draws from ethnomethodology and tends to focus solely on participants' own sense making of their talk, and does not consider the broader influence of cultural discourses. Ethnomethodology was developed by the sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1967) to explain and study how social order is constructed and maintained (quoted from Gale, 2010). Conversation analysis (CA) draws its focus primarily on talk, but integrates also the nonverbal aspects of interaction in its research design. According to Woofit (2005), "the analysis of CA is always based on audio or visual recordings of interaction, which are carefully transcribed in detail. The research should be "data-driven" in the sense that concepts and hypotheses should be based on careful consideration of the data, recordings and transcript, rather than drawn from theoretical preconceptions or ideological preferences". Based on the above premises, CA approach suits this study well.

## 2. Fairclough's power behind discourse

The idea of 'power behind discourse' is that the whole social order of discourse is put together and held together as a hidden effect of power. Fairclough (1989) has suggested three aspects of 'power behind discourse', i.e. of hidden effects of power which are; (i) standard language, (ii) particular discourse types which can be considered 'effects of power' (e.g. medical, education, law, religious discourse types), and (iii) access to discourse and the power to execute and impose constraints on access.

## 3. Press Conference

A press conference is an institutionalized form for meetings between politicians and journalists. It is used usually by the Government to announce policies, programs, decisions, etc. Clayman (2006), who focuses on US presidential press conferences, claims that in comparison with the news interviews the press conference is a situation which favours the public figure. On the other hand, Swales (1990) and Bhatia's (1993)

definition of genre found 'press conference' as constituting a broad category of conventionalized communicative events covering many domains, such as sports, religion, business, law, and medicine, among many others. In recent days, press conference is a very important platform for politicians to bridge them with the public. Supporting this is as stated by Eshbaugh-Soha (2003) that "press conference is one of the most important vehicles by which presidents communicate to the media and public".

Suggested by Ekstom (2006), many press conferences are governed by four conditions which are; (i) it often happens that numerous journalists who take part in a PC allowed to ask questions and follow them up, (ii) the talk in press conferences is organized according to the general principles of turn-taking that participants talk one at a time (cf Sacks, Schegloff and Jeffersson 1974 p 699), (iii) there are deadlines in time that limit the room for questions and (iv) the political press conference is an arena where two institutions meet (politics and journalism) with partly conflicting missions, and competing claims of representing the general public.

Previous studies on press conference indicate that there are conflicting and complicated relationships between the participants. Clayman and Heritage (2002a) claimed that "politicians' competence to answer pressing and tricky questions is tested, at the same time as hierarchies between journalists and media organizations are negotiated and demonstrated". In different research on American press conferences, Clayman and Heritage (2002b) developed a unique conceptualization for the study of question strategies focusing on various forms of adversarialness. Based on the studies, the overall issues that have been analyzed are the ways presidents reacted in various situations and possible factors influenced when and how often press conferences are arranged (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2003; Kumar, 2003; Manheim & Lammers, 1981; Lammers, 1981).

Looking at power relation in press conferences, Eshbaugh-Soha (2003) in his study came to a conclusion that press conference is "an uncontrolled setting that presidents will avoid" and in other contexts as "unique public events over which presidents have substantial discretion and control". This finding was reinforced by Bhatia (2006) and Clayman and Heritage (2006). Bhatia (2006) in his study of two-party press conferences draws to a close that the political press conference is marked by power asymmetry that benefit the politicians. He also claimed that press conferences at their core are pervaded by the politicians' power to control the interaction. On the contrary, Clayman and Heritage (2006) suggested that pressing

questions in the press conference limit politicians' room for action.

In conclusion, the aforementioned studies have shown how complicated and different each press conference can be for the participants to establish their roles.

## II    Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature where a combination of two approaches was applied; Conversational Analysis (CA) of institutional interaction and Fairclough's power behind discourse theory.

### 1. Sample

Seven (7) press conferences regarding the incident of the missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 dated from 8 March 2014 to 16 March 2014 were downloaded from *astroawani.com* and *Youtube.com*. The reason of choosing online recourses is due to their easy access. They were analyzed making it possible to observe the pattern.

### 2. Participant

The participants of the study are the spokespeople who are also politicians (prime minister and minister) and journalists who involve in the interaction during MH370 press conferences.

### 3. Research procedure

In conducting this research, the procedures implemented were:
   (i) Collecting the online video-taped data.
   (ii) Transcribing the videos using Jefferson's transcription convention.
   (iii) Analyzing the transcribed data for recurring pattern by applying the proposed framework.

### 4. Data analysis

The transcriptions of those seven (7) press conferences followed the system developed

by Gail Jefferson that is predominant in studies utilizing conversational analysis approach. According to Ekstrom (2006), research in this tradition has resulted in extensive knowledge regarding the organization of talk, turn-taking, sequencing, the "one-at-a-time" rule in conversation, pre- and local allocation of turns, specific interactional mechanisms, invitations, next-speaker selection devices, overlapping talk and interruptions making it a strong reason for the choice of this approach. The framework of Conversation Analysis of institutional interaction based on the work of Harvey Sacks (Jefferson 1992) was central to the analysis. The main focus was on the various interactional mechanisms and techniques for the allocation of turns.

## III　　Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings based on the two research questions followed by the overall discussion of how power is portrayed in the press conferences through turn-taking and mechanism of interaction.

RQ1: *How is turn-taking decided and regulated in MH370 press conferences?*

Based on the seven (7) MH370 press conferences, there was a consistent and fixed format implemented in the interaction. It followed the following common order:
  (i) Opening
  (ii) Individual voice
  (iii) Interactional phase
  (iv) Closing

These overall phases match completely with what Bhatia (2006) identified. He categorized the press conference's interactional format as (1) The opening phase, during which the host of the conference welcomes the attendants; (2) The individual voice, during which the politicians make their statements; (3) The interactional phase, during which the journalists ask questions and the politicians answer; (4) The closing phase, during which the chairperson who has served as host for the conference rounds it off and thanks the attendants.

This following section looks at some of the existing techniques used when turns are allocated, given and taken. It is through these techniques that pre-established

roles, and an asymmetrical distribution of turns, can be reproduced (Thornborrow, 2002: 4). The way turn-taking is decided and regulated in MH370 press conferences will be explained following the sequence of the phase mentioned above.

(i) Opening

During the opening, the chairperson welcomes the audience and explained the purpose of that particular session of press conference. He will then pass the floor to the minister involved. The chairperson was not interrupted by anyone during this phase.

(ii) Individual voice

During this phase, the minister or authority involved made statement. In all seven (7) PCs examined in this study, the minister gave statement on the current progress of the SAR mission. After he has finished, he signalled to the chairperson to continue with the next phase.

(iii) Interactional phase

The interactional phase is the most complex phase of the four pre conferences studied. During this phase, a question and answer (Q&A) session was held for journalists to have opportunities posing their questions to the minister or authority involved (in this case the CEO of Malaysia Airlines and DCA officer). There were three types of turn-taking techniques used by the spokespeople and journalists:

・Partly gestures and body language

A number of different next speaker selection techniques are used by the spokespeople in MH370 press conferences. As mentioned by Schegloff (1996), gestures in conversation are mainly a speaker's phenomenon. Pointing with the hand, nodding combined with eye contact, and partly verbal expressions, in which name is the most frequently used technique for addressing the next speaker (cf SSJ 1974 s 717). Body language and verbal expressions are used in combination. For example, during this session *Prime Minister turns his gaze, nods at a journalist, pointing his finger and says "Yes, Siva".* This technique has given a clear cut that the journalist named Siva has the next turn to speak.

・Self-select

Another technique of turn-taking used by the participants in MH370 press conferences is self-select. Usually done by the journalist, he/she self-selected him/herself by starting the conversation or asking question without having to wait for instruction of the next-speaker selection. This resulted in either (i) the person receives a turn and the opportunity to ask a question without competition; (ii) Competition (simultaneous talk) arises but the person receives a turn; or (iii) Competition arises and the person loses the turn.

・Interruption

Interruption is one of the acts that have been relatively analyzed within CA. The study conducted by Esaiasson and Håkansson (2002) indicated that starting in mid-1970s, journalist interruption of politicians is much more frequent than the other way around. However, in the recent study, it was not very obvious that the journalist interrupted a lot. However, there was still evidence of interruptions done by a few journalists in an attempt to gain the floor to ask question.

(iv) Closing

During the closing session, the chairperson concludes and closes the press conference.

Apparently, the journalists have restricted access to question during MH370 press conferences. There was limited chance for them to do a follow-up question due to time constraints. The allocation of a turn (by spokesperson or chairperson) was aimed at ensuring fairness, efficiency and harmony but these were seen as incompatible demands. However, the journalists, especially local journalists, seemed to cooperate one another and use their turns to press a spokesperson on a certain question even though they were competing turn with each other and have an interest in asking their own questions. This gives the impression of adhering to the cultural norms and rules in Malaysia that members of all ethnic group accord primacy to the group rather than to the individual, and work steadfastly to promoting group harmony and solidarity more than individual success (Jamaliah Mohd. Ali, 2000).

RQ2: *How is territorial power portrayed in MH370 press conference?*

Answering the second research question, there were two elements that can be used to symbolize power which are; (i) allocation of turn, and (ii) the use of pronouns.

These can be seen as follows:

(i) The power of the ministry/authority talking without being interrupted when answering questions (most of the time).

(ii) The power of the chairperson in controlling the event. The chairperson has the power to close the press conference despite the fact that journalists were still trying to take turns for additional questions.

(iii) The power of the authorities in-charge of certain issue to respond when the respective ministers did not attempt to answer.
      *Dato Seri Hishamudin: "....that the DCA officer will have to answer"*

(iv) The power of the ministry to select next speaker. Verbal selection technique is used in which name and formal identity is preferred to give a stronger control than partly gestures and body language.
      *Prime Minister: "Okay Siva" (while nodding and pointing his finger to the journalist)*

(v) The power of journalists to take to the floor or compete for the turn through overlapping talk and self-select turn taking.

(vi) The power of ministry to insist on taking more questions. The Prime Minister interrupted the flow of the press conference and approved to accept another one question.
      *Prime Minister: "Ok. I'll take one more question"*

The findings in this study show that even though turn is tied to a respective journalist and spokesperson at one time; interruptions, overlaps and latching seemed readily tolerated.   It is because, various level of power representation overlapping the role of all participants involved in MH370 press conferences. The common handling of MH370 press conferences is complex in nature as it includes many competing participants. However, it can be said that the spokespeople appears to have higher degree of control over the interaction. The interaction was dominated by the spokespeople as they were the authorities who have an exclusive access to the institution. The spokespeople power over the institution has somehow restricted the

journalists from controlling and creating controversy on the issue.

## 4.　Discussion

The findings are in line with what have been suggested by Ekstrom (2006) which stated interaction and territorial power relation can be seen through these elements:

①Institutional arrangement

The territorial power in institutional interaction is closely related to the formalized arrangements that distinguish what had been recognized as a certain type of interaction and that participants do not argue or challenge (with few exceptions) but instead cooperatively obey the arrangement. MH370 press conferences followed closely the arrangement of the institution.

② Techniques of distributing/taking turns

Turn-allocating resources have been described as one of the basic resources in the organization of turn-taking (Schegloff, 2000: 42) and through this, it can be seen that the power represented by both spokespeople and journalists.

③Interruptions & overlaps in interaction

In public events like press conference, interruptions can show intentional demonstrations of power. By interrupting, one does not only stops the other person from continuing, but also shows one's power to take the floor, to influence and even oppress other people. However, in this study,　interruptions amongst spokespeople is generally not viewed as encroaching the verbal territory of another but rather joint presentation of their views.

## Ⅳ　Conclusion

This study was conducted with the main aim to investigate how the access to the floor is decided and regulated in a press conference and how it is related to institutional power of the participants involved. Although this study is only limited to the press conferences which were held during the entire reporting of MH370 incident that took

place in Malaysia, it provides evidence supporting the notion that turn taking has a strong relation to representation of power in an institutional interaction such as press conferences as implied in Bhatia (2006).

With respect to how power over the public talk is regulated, the results of this study show that institutional power and the turns allocation in MH370 press conferences is closely related to each other Besides, press conference is considered as a platform of the struggle between politicians, journalists and the media they represent. Therefore, it can be concluded that press conferences are used by politicians as a tool to communicate with the public. Through press conferences, politicians exercise what they want people to believe hence this has been translated into distrust among people in relation with MH370 issue.

Other than that, the findings derived from this study are also beneficial for the language experts in private sectors as well as associated authorities as a guideline to determine what type of turn-taking strategies and arrangement are suitable to be used in organizing press conferences especially in relation to a worldwide issue such as the incident of MH370. This effort is believed enables to restore Malaysia's reputation in managing press conferences during crisis. Future research should acknowledge different type of interaction element other than turn-taking so that it can help researchers to observe power representation in a different context.

## 《References》

Bhatia, Aditi (2006) "Critical discourse analysis of political press conferences", *Discourse and Society,* 17(2), pp.173-203.

Clayman, Steven & Heritage, John (2002a) "Questioning Presidents: Journalistic Deference and Adversarialness in the Press Conferences of Eisenhower and Reagan", *Journal of Communication,* 52(4), pp.749-775.

Clayman, Steven & Heritage, John (2002b) *The News Interview: Journalists and Public Figures on the Air*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ekström, Mats (2006) "Interviewing, quoting, and the development of modern news journalism: A study of the Swedish press 1915–1995", Ekström, Mats, Kroon, Åsa & Nylund, Mats (ed), *News from the Interview Society*, Göteborg: Nordicom.

Eshbaugh-Soha, Matthew (2003) "Presidential press conferences over time", *American Journal of Political Science*, 47(2), pp.348-353.

Jamaliah Mohd Ali (2000) *Verbal Communication: A Study of Malaysian Speakers,* Kuala Lumpur, University Malaya Press.

Robin Wooffitt (2005), *Conversation Analysis and Discourse Analysis: A Comparative and Critical Introduction*, London: Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Sacks, Harvey, Schegloff, Emanuel A. & Jefferson, Gail (1974) "A simplest system the organization of turn-taking for conversation", *Language*, 50(4), pp.696-735.

Schegloff, Emanuel A. (1996) "On some gestures' relation to talk", Atkinson, J Maxwell & Heritage, John (ed), *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schegloff, Emanuel A. (2000) "Overlapping talk and the organization of turn-taking for conversation", *Language in Society,* 29(1), pp.1-63.

Thornborrow, Joanna (2002) *Power Talk: Language and Interaction in Institutional Discourse,* London: Longman.