

Analysis of Conversation Structure in the 2024-2029 NTB Governor Candidate Debate: A Pragmatic Approach in Regional Head Elections

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Received: April 2026; Revised: June 2026; Accepted: July 2026; Published: September 2026

Abstract

Political debates in Regional Head Elections (Pilkada) serve as strategic arenas in which candidates construct credibility, project leadership, and negotiate public image, yet research on subnational debates remains limited, with most studies focusing on national contests and isolated pragmatic dimensions. This study addresses this gap by examining the 2024 West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) gubernatorial debate through an integrated conversation-analytic and pragmatic framework. Using a qualitative interpretive design, the study analyzed verbatim transcripts of all three official debate sessions involving the three candidate pairs, examining turn-taking, interruptions, and adjacency pairs alongside speech acts, conversational maxims, and politeness/impoliteness strategies. The researcher served as the primary instrument, supported by a structured coding sheet, with data credibility strengthened through repeated verification against original recordings and peer checking. Findings reveal four interrelated patterns: interruptions and overlaps functioned as tools for interactional control and topic redirection; commissive and directive speech acts served as dominant persuasive resources for projecting commitment and challenging opponents; politeness strategies mitigated disagreement while impoliteness enabled credibility attacks; and candidates strategically observed or flouted cooperative maxims to manage accountability and control the debate agenda. The study concludes that political credibility in regional debates is constructed through an integrated system of interactional and pragmatic strategies shaped by local governance priorities, community values, and closer candidate-voter relationships, distinguishing subnational debates from national political discourse and warranting context-specific analytical attention.

Keywords: Political debate; Pragmatics; Conversation analysis; Politeness; Election

How to Cite: Riyanto, A. A., Asyar, M., Jauhari, A., Pratama R., J.R., & Umami, M.A. (2026). Analysis of Conversation Structure in the 2024-2029 NTB Governor Candidate Debate: A Pragmatic Approach in Regional Head Elections. *Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, 6(3), 1364-1377. doi: <https://doi.org/10.36312/jolls.v6i3.4805>



<https://doi.org/10.36312/jolls.v6i3.4805>

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INTRODUCTION

Political debates constitute a central form of institutionalized political communication in Regional Head Elections (Pilkada), providing candidates with a publicly mediated forum in which to articulate policy priorities, demonstrate leadership competence, and differentiate themselves from their opponents. Their significance extends beyond the transmission of campaign platforms, as debates enable voters to evaluate how candidates define political problems, justify proposed solutions, respond to criticism, and construct credible leadership identities. In this highly competitive setting,

language functions not simply as a vehicle for conveying information, but as a strategic resource for projecting competence, governing capacity, and political readiness. Political debates may therefore be understood as arenas of discursive contestation in which candidates negotiate credibility, manage public image, and position themselves in relation to opponents, moderators, and the electorate (Ilie, 2021; Montgomery, 2019). The structured yet pressurized conditions of debate interaction may also generate relatively spontaneous and revealing responses, allowing candidates to be assessed under comparable communicative constraints. Consequently, debates provide voters with opportunities to evaluate not only policy competence, but also integrity, responsiveness, emotional control, and persuasive effectiveness (Wodak, 2021). Each utterance produced in this context thus performs both an informational and a strategic political function, carrying significance beyond its literal or propositional content.

Political debates are institutional speech events governed by turn-taking procedures, time limits, moderator interventions, predetermined themes, and mediated audience participation. These constraints regulate the organization of talk while shaping candidates' interactional styles, speaking opportunities, and argumentative strategies. Conversation-analytic research shows that turn allocation, interruptions, overlaps, and adjacency pairs can indicate interactional authority, discursive control, and perceived competence in institutional media encounters (Heritage & Clayman, 2021; Hutchby, 2017; Greatbatch & Clark, 2018). These structural arrangements also influence candidates' ability to control topics, respond to attacks, and frame issues for particular constituencies (Ekström, 2020; Montgomery, 2019). Strategic non-responses and equivocation may disrupt expected conversational sequences, allowing candidates to avoid direct accountability while maintaining an appearance of responsiveness (Bull, 2021; Bull & Strawson, 2020). Thus, each utterance addresses a substantive issue while simultaneously contributing to political image, legitimacy, and relational positioning.

Pragmatic theory complements conversation analysis by explaining what candidates accomplish through utterances produced within particular sequential positions. A response to an accusation, for example, may function not only as an answer but also as a denial, justification, counterclaim, promise, or attack. Candidates therefore use language to negotiate power, manage face, and pursue persuasive goals under institutional pressure. Austin's view of utterances as social actions and Searle's classification of speech acts into representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives remain important for identifying the communicative force of debate contributions. Representative acts may establish factual authority or defend policy positions, while commissives project responsibility and future oriented leadership. Directives can influence audience evaluation or pressure opponents, whereas expressives such as criticism, indignation, empathy, and approval intensify the emotional framing of an exchange (D'Errico, 2019; Perez & Fernandez, 2022). Speech acts should therefore be examined as sequentially embedded strategies that contribute to credibility, confrontation management, and the projection of governing readiness.

Grice's cooperative principle further explains how meaning is strategically managed in political debates. The maxims of quantity, quality, relevance, and manner establish expectations for informative, truthful, relevant, and clear communication. However, candidates often selectively observe or deliberately flout these maxims, particularly those of relevance and quantity. Indirect, incomplete, overly broad, or tangential answers may be used to avoid unfavourable questions, redirect attention, or protect public image (Waddle, 2021). Such departures do not necessarily represent communicative failure. Instead, they may generate implicatures that signal political positions or shape audience interpretation without making the speaker's intentions

explicit. Candidates may also recontextualize earlier statements, competing narratives, or external events to support immediate argumentative goals (Fetzer, 2018). Selective cooperation can thus function as a form of discursive control through which candidates manage accountability and influence the debate agenda.

Politeness and impoliteness theories offer another perspective on how candidates manage interpersonal relations, authority, and conflict. Brown and Levinson's face-management model and Leech's politeness framework explain how speakers mitigate disagreement, express respect, and maintain interactional cooperation. Culpeper's (2011) impoliteness framework, by contrast, treats face-threatening behaviour as a deliberate resource in adversarial communication. Positive politeness may construct solidarity with voters, while negative politeness allows candidates to disagree without appearing openly disrespectful. Impoliteness strategies, including direct attacks, sarcasm, intensified face threats, and mock politeness, may delegitimize opponents, challenge credibility, gain interactional control, and project decisiveness (Blitvich, 2018). Their interpretation nevertheless depends on the mediated nature of debates, since candidates address both immediate interlocutors and a wider public audience. Broader expectations concerning gender, leadership, and political legitimacy also affect how facework and impoliteness are evaluated (Savigny, 2020). At the grammatical level, mood, modality, and clause structure further enable candidates to express certainty, obligation, evaluation, and authority (Fanani & Setiawan, 2020).

Taken together, political debates constitute complex pragmatic and interactional environments in which meaning emerges from the relationship between linguistic form, sequential organization, institutional constraints, and strategic intent. Turn-taking, speech acts, maxim management, and facework should not be treated as separate categories because they interact in shaping how candidates construct authority, manage confrontation, and project competence before multiple audiences (Ilie, 2021; Heritage & Clayman, 2021).

Despite these developments, political debate research remains largely focused on national presidential and parliamentary contests, with many studies examining only one pragmatic or interactional dimension. Integrated analyses combining conversational organization and pragmatic strategy remain limited, particularly in regional and subnational contexts. Regional debates are shaped by distinctive local identities, policy priorities, cultural norms, and political power relations (Setiawan, 2024; Wijaya & Rahman, 2023). In these settings, credibility depends not only on general leadership appeal but also on candidates' familiarity with community concerns, locally specific problems, and regional values. Such conditions influence acceptable levels of directness, politeness, impoliteness, and adversarial communication. Regional debates also commonly focus on concrete issues such as infrastructure, tourism, agriculture, public services, and socioeconomic inequality. They therefore possess distinct pragmatic and interactional characteristics and should not be treated merely as smaller versions of national political debates (Ekström, 2020; Hariyanto, 2023).

Against this background, the present study examines a regional gubernatorial debate in West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) through an integrated conversation analytic and pragmatic framework. At the interactional level, it investigates turn-taking patterns, interruptions, adjacency pairs, and candidates' responses to questions, criticism, and challenges. At the pragmatic level, it examines speech acts, the observance and strategic flouting of conversational maxims, and politeness and impoliteness strategies. By combining these dimensions, the study approaches political debate not as a series of isolated speeches, but as a dynamic multiparty interaction in which meaning and political identity are continuously negotiated among candidates, moderators, opponents, and audiences. It thereby extends political discourse analysis into an underexplored

subnational context and conceptualizes language as a strategic resource for constructing credibility, managing confrontation, claiming authority, and negotiating public image within a competitive local political arena.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative interpretive design integrating conversation analysis and pragmatic discourse analysis to examine the interactional organization and strategic use of language in the 2024 West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) gubernatorial debate. This design was appropriate because the study aimed to explain how political meanings and images were constructed through naturally occurring institutional interaction rather than to test causal relationships or quantify linguistic effects.

Conversation analysis was used to examine turn-taking, interruptions, overlaps, adjacency pairs, repair, and extended interactional sequences. Pragmatic discourse analysis was then applied to identify the communicative functions of candidates' utterances, including asserting, promising, criticizing, defending, challenging, mitigating face threats, and avoiding direct responses. This sequential-pragmatic approach recognizes that the meaning of an utterance depends not only on its linguistic form but also on its position within an interaction and its relationship to preceding and subsequent turns (Yeomans, 2023). The study did not measure actual effects on voters. References to perlocutionary effects were therefore limited to effects projected or pursued by candidates, such as inviting approval, directing audience evaluation, or undermining an opponent's credibility.

Research Object

The research object comprises the complete verbal interactions in the NTB Governor Candidate Debate, conducted in 2024 for the 2024–2029 gubernatorial term. The corpus includes all three official debate sessions involving: Sitti Rohmi Djalilah and W. Musyafirin, Candidate Pair Number 1; Zulkieflimansyah and H.M. Suhaili Fadil Tohir, Candidate Pair Number 2; and Lalu Muhamad Iqbal and Indah Dhamayanti Putri, Candidate Pair Number 3. All three sessions are included through total corpus sampling. This approach provides a comprehensive account of language strategies across different debate themes, candidates, and interactional situations.

The primary object of analysis is the candidates' language strategies, particularly: turn-taking, interruptions, overlaps, and response patterns; speech acts and implied meanings; observance or flouting of conversational maxims; politeness and impoliteness strategies; and political functions such as credibility construction, authority projection, image management, accountability avoidance, and opponent delegitimization. The main unit of analysis is the candidate's utterance within a conversational turn. However, each utterance is interpreted in relation to the preceding and following turns. This prevents statements from being analyzed outside their interactional context.

Candidate answers, rebuttals, criticisms, promises, questions, denials, and evaluations constitute the primary data. Moderator utterances are included only when they provide relevant context, such as introducing a topic, allocating turns, reformulating questions, or controlling the debate.

Data Sources

The primary data are transcripts from the three official debate recordings published on the KPU NTB YouTube channel. The audiovisual recordings serve as the original data source, while the transcripts function as the main analytical corpus. Each recording is viewed repeatedly and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts identify

speakers, turn boundaries, pauses, interruptions, overlaps, emphasis, and moderator interventions when these features affect interpretation. Hepburn and Bolden (2017) explain that transcription is an analytical process because interactional details may influence how an utterance is understood.

A simplified conversation-analytic transcription system is used because the study focuses on language strategies rather than detailed phonetic features. Each excerpt is assigned a code indicating the debate session, speaker, and turn number. Original video timestamps are also recorded to enable verification. The transcripts are organized according to debate session, thematic segment, speaker, and interactional sequence. Including all sessions reduces the risk of drawing conclusions from isolated or selectively chosen statements.

Research Instrument

The researcher functions as the primary research instrument because pragmatic interpretation requires sensitivity to linguistic form, context, sequential organization, and political intention. A structured coding sheet is used to support systematic analysis. It includes: debate session and theme; speaker and candidate-pair identity; turn number and timestamp; preceding utterance; relevant transcript excerpt; interactional feature; pragmatic category; linguistic evidence; implied meaning; interactional function; and political function. Interactional categories include interruption, overlap, adjacency pair, topic shift, delayed response, repair, direct response, partial response, and strategic non-response.

Pragmatic categories include representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, implicatures, maxim flouting, politeness, impoliteness, and strategic indirectness. Oswald (2023) notes that political argumentation frequently depends on implied meanings that go beyond literal statements. Politeness and impoliteness are identified contextually. Criticism is not automatically classified as impolite. Its degree of directness, sequential position, target, and face-threatening effect are considered. Culpeper (2011) stresses that impoliteness must be interpreted through both linguistic form and social context. A single utterance may receive more than one code when it performs several functions. However, the dominant strategy is determined from its primary interactional and political purpose.

Data Analysis

The analysis is conducted through five stages. First, the three recordings are transcribed, checked, and organized according to session, theme, speaker, and turn. The researcher repeatedly compares the transcripts with the videos to ensure accuracy. Second, the transcripts are divided into interactional episodes, including question-and-answer sequences, rebuttals, candidate-to-candidate exchanges, responses to criticism, and moderator interventions. Ilie (2022) argues that political questions and answers should be analyzed as interconnected actions rather than isolated utterances. Third, conversation analysis is applied to examine how candidates obtain, maintain, challenge, or surrender speaking turns. Attention is given to interruptions, overlaps, topic shifts, delayed responses, repairs, and strategic non-responses. Fourth, pragmatic analysis is used to classify speech acts, implied meanings, conversational maxims, and politeness or impoliteness strategies. Each interpretation must be supported by linguistic evidence and sequential context. Epistemic expressions of certainty, doubt, evidence, or disagreement are also examined because they may strengthen a candidate's authority or weaken an opponent's claim (Cuenca, 2023). Fifth, the findings are compared across the three debate sessions and candidate pairs. The comparison identifies recurring strategies, differences in interactional style, responses to particular themes, and changes across sessions. The analysis also considers when candidates engage directly with opponents

and when they avoid confrontation, since both choices may serve political purposes (Koch & Küpfer, 2025).

Frequency counts may be used to support the description of recurring patterns, but interpretation remains qualitative. A strategy that occurs rarely may still be politically important if it changes the direction of an exchange or strongly affects an opponent's public image. The credibility of the findings is strengthened through repeated checking against the original videos, consistent documentation of coding decisions, review of ambiguous cases, and peer checking of selected data. Alternative interpretations are considered before conclusions are drawn. The study does not aim for statistical generalization. Instead, it provides an analytical explanation of how interactional and pragmatic strategies function in a regional electoral debate.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Analysis of the three sessions of the 2024 NTB gubernatorial debates identified four interconnected patterns of language use. First, interruptions and overlapping speech were used to control speaking space and redirect the discussion. Second, commissive and directive speech acts functioned as the candidates' main persuasive resources. Third, politeness strategies helped candidates manage disagreement and maintain a legitimate public image. Fourth, the observance and strategic violation of conversational maxims enabled candidates to manage accountability, redirect difficult questions, and foreground favourable political narratives.

These findings show that debate language performed more than an informational function. Candidates used interactional and pragmatic strategies to construct leadership identities, challenge opponents, protect their public image, and influence the direction of the debate.

Conversation Structure and Turn Management

Although the debates were formally regulated by moderators and fixed speaking times, the interaction was marked by recurring interruptions, overlaps, rapid rebuttals, and competition for turns. Candidates did not rely solely on the speaking opportunities allocated by the moderator. They also intervened during opponents' explanations to challenge claims, introduce counterarguments, and redirect attention toward alternative issues.

Table 1. Interactional Patterns in the Debate

Interactional feature	Observed pattern	Pragmatic function
Interruption	Intervening during an opponent's explanation	Gaining conversational control
Overlap	Simultaneous speech during disagreement	Contesting interactional dominance
Topic redirection	Shifting from a proposed programme to previous policy failures	Reframing the debate narrative
Rapid rebuttal	Responding immediately after criticism	Maintaining authority and visibility

One example occurred when Zulkieflimansyah presented a programme concerning natural resource management and Sitti Rohmi Djalilah interrupted by characterizing the proposal as an unrealized promise from the previous administration. The intervention shifted the focus from the content of the proposed programme to the

credibility of its implementation. The interruption therefore functioned not merely as a disruption of turn-taking but as an attempt to redefine the issue under discussion.

A similar pattern appeared in policy exchanges in which candidates responded rapidly after being criticized. These responses allowed speakers to prevent an opponent's interpretation from remaining unchallenged. However, the data also indicate that interruptions were more effective when they were concise, relevant, and directly connected to the preceding statement. Aggressive or weakly related interruptions risked appearing disruptive rather than persuasive.

Speech Acts and Political Image Construction

Commissive and directive speech acts were particularly prominent in the candidates' discourse, while assertive and expressive acts supported broader forms of political positioning.

Table 2. Major Speech Acts and Their Functions

Speech-act type	Form	Political function
Commissive	Promises to improve health, education, and public services	Projecting commitment and credibility
Directive	Questions and challenges directed at opponents	Applying pressure and guiding audience evaluation
Assertive	Evaluations of previous policies and regional conditions	Displaying knowledge and analytical competence
Expressive	Appreciation of workers and expressions of concern	Constructing empathy and solidarity

Candidate Pair Number 1 frequently used commissive statements concerning improvements in public services, especially health and education. These promises projected future-oriented leadership and presented the candidates as responsible for delivering concrete policy outcomes. The repeated use of the inclusive pronoun *we* also constructed a collective political identity and emphasized shared institutional responsibility. Candidate Pair Number 3 similarly employed commissive acts related to accessible public services and community welfare. Statements concerning healthcare services located closer to local communities associated the candidates with inclusiveness and responsiveness. Expressive acts, such as appreciation for health workers, teachers, and community members, further supported an image of empathetic leadership.

Candidate Pair Number 2 relied more visibly on assertive and directive acts. Evaluative statements describing previous development policies as expensive or poorly targeted presented the speaker as critical and analytically oriented. Questions concerning programme financing simultaneously functioned as requests for information and challenges to the feasibility of an opponent's proposal. The findings therefore indicate that different speech acts contributed to different dimensions of political image. Commissives projected responsibility and commitment, directives enabled challenge and persuasion, assertives displayed competence, and expressives constructed social and emotional alignment.

Politeness and Face Management

The candidates used both positive and negative politeness strategies to balance disagreement with the need to maintain public legitimacy. Positive politeness was

generally realized through appreciation, agreement with part of an opponent's statement, inclusive language, and references to shared regional interests.

Table 3. Politeness Strategies in the Debate

Strategy	Realization	Function
Positive politeness	Acknowledging an opponent's effort before criticizing it	Reducing the force of disagreement
Negative politeness	Expressing respect while maintaining a different position	Preserving the opponent's autonomy and legitimacy
Inclusive pronouns	Repeated use of <i>we</i> and <i>our</i>	Reducing social distance
Appreciation	Praising workers, communities, or public institutions	Constructing an empathetic image

For example, Sitti Rohmi Djalilah acknowledged Zulkieflimansyah's efforts in developing tourism before arguing that further improvement was necessary. This formulation reduced the directness of the criticism and presented the disagreement as constructive rather than hostile. Negative politeness appeared in expressions that explicitly respected an opponent's perspective while rejecting the argument. Such formulations allowed candidates to maintain clear political differences without entirely abandoning the institutional expectation of respectful conduct.

The findings show that politeness served two main purposes. It protected the speaker's own public image by presenting disagreement as controlled and rational, and it maintained an acceptable interpersonal atmosphere during confrontational exchanges.

Interruption as an Attack Strategy

Interruptions frequently occurred together with explicit or implied attacks on an opponent's credibility, policy record, or programme feasibility.

Table 4. Interruption and Attack Strategies

Strategy	Observed pattern	Pragmatic effect
Interruptive criticism	Interrupting a proposal with a counterclaim	Weakening the opponent's narrative
Credibility attack	Describing a promise as political rhetoric	Questioning sincerity
Policy challenge	Introducing technical objections during an opponent's turn	Projecting expertise
Rapid rebuttal	Responding immediately to an accusation	Maintaining interactional control

During a discussion of agricultural policy, Sitti Rohmi Djalilah interrupted an opponent by arguing that the programme would not succeed without fundamental change. The interruption combined turn-taking competition with a negative evaluation of policy feasibility. Zulkieflimansyah also challenged opponents by describing certain proposals as political rhetoric that had not previously been fulfilled. Such statements attacked both programme credibility and the reliability of the candidates presenting them.

These findings demonstrate that interruptions can function as attack mechanisms. They allow candidates to seize the conversational floor while directing audience attention toward weaknesses in an opponent's claims. Nevertheless, repeated aggressive interruptions may also create an impression of impatience or disrespect. Their political value therefore depends on relevance, timing, and substantive connection to the issue being discussed.

Cooperative Maxims and Agenda Management

The candidates both observed and strategically departed from the conversational maxims of quantity, quality, relevance, and manner.

Table 5. Maxim Management in the Debate

Maxim	Observed pattern	Strategic function
Quantity	General promises without operational details	Avoiding detailed scrutiny
Quality	Evaluative claims without explicit supporting evidence	Producing rhetorical plausibility
Relevance	Redirecting answers toward favourable issues	Controlling the agenda
Manner	Long, indirect, or ambiguous responses	Maintaining caution and flexibility

The maxim of quantity was not fully observed when candidates presented broad promises without explaining implementation mechanisms, budgets, or timelines. Statements promising improvements in healthcare and education created positive expectations while limiting opportunities for detailed evaluation. Potential departures from the maxim of quality appeared in evaluative claims that were not accompanied by evidence during the debate. Descriptions of previous policies as ineffective or excessively costly relied primarily on rhetorical force. However, these statements cannot be classified as factually false without external verification.

The maxim of relevance was strategically managed when candidates redirected questions toward policy achievements, infrastructure development, or perceived failures of opponents. For example, a question about poverty reduction could be answered through a broader discussion of infrastructure or economic development. Although these topics remained generally related, the shift enabled the candidate to foreground a preferred political narrative.

The maxim of manner was reflected in differences between concise, structured responses and long or indirect answers. Clear responses strengthened impressions of preparedness, whereas diffuse answers could reduce argumentative force. Nevertheless, indirectness sometimes allowed candidates to avoid rigid commitments and maintain strategic flexibility.

Discussion

Interactional Control, Turn Management, and the Performance of Political Authority

The findings demonstrate that conversation structure in the NTB gubernatorial debate was not merely a mechanism for organizing speech exchange but also functioned as a strategic resource for constructing political authority. Interruptions, overlaps, rapid rebuttals, and topic redirections were frequently employed by candidates to negotiate control over the conversational floor and influence how political issues were interpreted. This finding supports previous conversation-analytic research arguing that turn allocation and control of speaking space are closely related to institutional power and interactional dominance (Heritage & Clayman, 2010; Hutchby, 2017). In political debates, controlling when and how one speaks allows candidates not only to present arguments but also to challenge competing narratives and redefine the relevance of issues.

The present study extends previous findings by demonstrating that interruption in a regional political debate does not necessarily represent conversational disorder or a failure to follow institutional norms. Instead, interruptions may constitute deliberate rhetorical actions designed to redirect the interpretive frame of a discussion. For example, an interruption that shifts attention from a candidate's proposed programme toward

previous policy performance transforms the interaction from a discussion of future plans into an evaluation of credibility and accountability. This observation is consistent with Montgomery's (2019) argument that political debates are simultaneously informational and performative events, where candidates must manage both policy content and public impressions.

However, the findings also reveal that interactional dominance alone does not guarantee persuasive effectiveness. Interruptions were most strategically valuable when they were relevant, concise, and directly connected to the preceding argument, whereas excessive interruptions risked creating perceptions of aggressiveness or disrespect. This nuance contributes to existing literature by suggesting that political authority is constructed through controlled assertiveness rather than unrestricted conversational dominance. Similar observations have been reported in studies of political interviews, where candidates must balance adversarial engagement with expectations of rational and competent communication (Bull, 2021).

Speech Acts and the Construction of Competing Leadership Identities

The dominance of commissive and directive speech acts indicates that candidates primarily constructed leadership identities through commitments, promises, and challenges. This finding confirms Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1969) theoretical perspectives that utterances function as social actions rather than merely conveying information. In electoral contexts, commissive acts are particularly significant because political debates are future-oriented events where candidates must demonstrate readiness to govern. Promises regarding healthcare, education, agriculture, and public services enabled candidates to associate themselves with future improvements and responsiveness to community needs.

These findings are consistent with Perez and Fernandez (2022), who demonstrated that speech-act distribution in televised debates contributes to the construction of political ethos. Nevertheless, the NTB debate provides additional insight by showing that different speech-act configurations correspond to different leadership identities. Commissive acts emphasized responsibility and commitment, directive acts projected critical capacity and accountability, assertives displayed policy knowledge, while expressive acts created emotional connections with citizens.

An important extension of previous research is the contextual importance of regional political communication. Unlike national debates that often emphasize ideological differences or broad national agendas, NTB candidates frequently connected their speech acts with locally meaningful issues, including healthcare accessibility, education, agriculture, tourism, and community welfare. This finding supports Setiawan et al. (2024) and Hariyanto et al. (2023), who argue that subnational political discourse is shaped by local identities and community expectations. Thus, leadership credibility in regional elections is constructed not only through promises of development but also through demonstrations of familiarity with local realities.

Politeness, Impoliteness, and the Management of Political Face

The findings reveal that candidates employed both politeness and impoliteness strategies to manage interpersonal relations and political competition. Positive politeness strategies, such as acknowledging opponents' contributions, using inclusive pronouns, and expressing appreciation toward communities, helped candidates maintain a legitimate public image while engaging in disagreement. This supports Brown and Levinson's (1987) face-management framework, which explains how speakers mitigate potential threats to social relationships.

However, the debate environment also encouraged strategic impoliteness. Candidates used criticism, counterclaims, and accusations of unrealistic promises to

challenge opponents' credibility. These findings align with Culpeper's (2011) argument that impoliteness is not simply inappropriate language but can function as an intentional communicative strategy in adversarial contexts. In political debates, attacking an opponent's policy record or credibility can become a way of strengthening one's own image as competent and accountable.

Nevertheless, the study highlights an important limitation of strategic impoliteness: its effectiveness depends on whether criticism remains connected to substantive governance issues. Attacks targeting policy implementation, financing, or programme feasibility may be interpreted as legitimate political evaluation, whereas personal attacks may reduce perceptions of civility and professionalism. This finding complements Blitvich's (2018) observation that impoliteness strategies in political discourse are closely connected with identity construction and legitimacy negotiation.

Cooperative Maxims, Strategic Ambiguity, and Agenda Management

The findings further indicate that candidates strategically managed Grice's (1975) cooperative maxims rather than simply following them. Departures from the maxims of quantity, quality, relevance, and manner frequently served political purposes, including avoiding accountability, maintaining flexibility, and controlling debate narratives. This finding confirms Waddle's (2021) argument that maxim violations in political communication often represent strategic manoeuvres rather than communicative failure.

For example, broad promises without detailed implementation mechanisms allowed candidates to project commitment while reducing exposure to criticism. Similarly, topic shifts enabled candidates to move from potentially problematic questions toward more favourable narratives. These findings also correspond with Bull and Strawson's (2020) research on non-replying strategies in political debates, demonstrating that avoidance and indirectness may function as deliberate forms of image management.

However, the study contributes a more balanced interpretation by showing that strategic ambiguity produces both advantages and risks. While indirect responses may protect candidates from political vulnerability, excessive avoidance can reduce perceptions of transparency and competence. Therefore, successful political communication requires balancing rhetorical flexibility with sufficient specificity and accountability.

Overall, this study confirms that political debates should be understood as complex interactional environments where linguistic choices, conversational structures, and pragmatic strategies operate simultaneously. Rather than functioning as isolated elements, interruptions, speech acts, face management, and maxim manipulation interact to construct political credibility and leadership identities. The findings extend existing political discourse research by demonstrating that regional debates possess distinctive communicative characteristics shaped by local priorities, social relationships, and expectations of community-oriented leadership.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that language use in the 2024 NTB gubernatorial candidate debates functioned as a strategic political practice through which candidates constructed credibility, negotiated authority, and managed public identity. Using an integrated conversation-analytic and pragmatic framework, the study identified four interconnected dimensions of political communication: turn management, speech-act selection, politeness and impoliteness strategies, and cooperative maxim management. The findings reveal that interruptions, overlaps, rapid rebuttals, and topic shifts were employed to compete for interactional control and influence issue framing. Meanwhile, commissive speech acts enabled candidates to project commitment and governing

readiness, directive acts allowed them to challenge opponents and guide audience evaluation, and assertive and expressive acts supported the construction of competence and social connection. The study further demonstrates that politeness and impoliteness operated as complementary strategies: politeness maintained legitimacy and social harmony, whereas criticism and credibility attacks enabled candidates to differentiate themselves from opponents. Strategic departures from cooperative maxims also revealed how candidates managed accountability and protected political images through selective information, indirect responses, and narrative redirection.

Theoretically, this study contributes to pragmatic and political communication research by showing that political credibility emerges from the interaction between what candidates say and how they manage communication processes. The findings confirm that regional political debates should not be considered merely smaller versions of national debates because local political contexts shape the meaning and effectiveness of communicative strategies. In the NTB context, leadership credibility was strongly connected with representations of local governance capacity, public-service accessibility, community welfare, and familiarity with regional concerns. Nevertheless, the study is limited because it examines only observable communicative practices within debate recordings and does not directly measure their influence on voter attitudes or electoral outcomes. Future studies should integrate audience reception analysis, multimodal discourse analysis, and comparative investigations between regional and national debates to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how verbal, interactional, and non-verbal strategies contribute to political persuasion and democratic communication.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the Rector of Universitas Mataram for the continuous institutional support and facilitation provided throughout the implementation of this research. We are particularly grateful for the research funding granted under the PNPB scheme of Universitas Mataram, which has made the completion of this study possible and to the General Elections Commission (KPU) West Nusa Tenggara for public access to the debate recordings that formed the primary data of this study.

DECLARE THE USE OF AI TOOLS

The authors acknowledge the use of Grok, Perplexity, and Grammarly during the preparation of this research. These tools to assist in the literature exploration, drafting the paper, and improving grammar and clarity of editorial writing. The use of AI in this research aims to increase writing efficiency, improve language quality, and support the information synthesis process without replacing the author's analytical and intellectual role. All ideas, analyses, data interpretations, and conclusions in this manuscript are solely the author's own. The author assumes full responsibility for the entire content of the final manuscript, including the accuracy of the data, the originality of the work, and adherence to ethical standards for research and scientific publication. The use of AI does not diminish the author's academic responsibility for the integrity and validity of this research.

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