

## *Original Paper*

# A Pragmatic Study of Prosecutors' Questioning Strategies in Simpson Case from the Perspective of the Goal-driven Principle

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### **Abstract**

*This study applies the Goal-driven Principle proposed by Liao Meizhen. A case analysis method is adopted, and typical excerpts are drawn from the trial transcript of the Simpson case. Two core research questions guide the inquiry. First, what questioning strategies do prosecutors employ during cross-examination? Second, how do these strategies serve the prosecutors' litigation purposes within the framework of the Goal-driven Principle? The findings show that prosecutors rely on four main strategies: repetition, presupposition, elicitation, and interruption. Repetition undermines witness credibility by forcing the witness to confront contradictions. Presupposition pushes controversial claims into the background, thereby constructing a narrative favorable to the prosecution. Elicitation uses frame presupposition to steer witnesses toward expected answers, though it remains vulnerable to procedural restrictions. Interruption competes for turn-taking control, yet it can be nullified by judicial intervention. This study achieves two goals. It demonstrates the applicability of the Goal-driven Principle to adversarial courtroom discourse as well as offering a workable analytical framework for understanding the pragmatic mechanisms that underlie prosecutors' questioning strategies.*

### **Keywords**

*the Goal-driven Principle, questioning strategies, Simpson case*

## **1. Introduction**

The Simpson case is often called the "Trial of the Century" in American legal history. Many people believe its outcome was heavily influenced by whether the prosecutors' questioning strategies succeeded or failed. Prosecutors Marcia Clark and Christopher Darden used various questioning strategies when they cross-examined defense witnesses. They wanted to break down the defense's narrative and build a case for guilt. But some of their strategies did not work as intended. Some even backfired, because they

violated procedural rules or because the judge stepped in. This situation raises a key question. Under what conditions can prosecutors' questioning strategies serve their litigation purposes? And what factors cause a strategy to fail? To answer these questions, this study introduces the Goal-driven Principle proposed by Liao Meizhen. We take goal relationships as the core analytical element. Then we examine how prosecutors' questioning strategies operated in the Simpson case.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 *The Goal-driven Principle*

The Goal-driven Principle was proposed by Liao (2005). It states that any rational speech act performed by a rational person is driven by goals. To speak is to express goals, to act on goals, and to realize goals. This principle puts goals at the center of pragmatic research. It argues that goals drive the generation of discourse, run through the entire discourse, and determine both discourse structure and strategic choices. Liao further points out that goals are not isolated. Instead, they form a system that is structured, hierarchical, and organic. A discourse activity has an overall goal. Below that overall goal there are several sub-goals. Below those sub-goals there may be even smaller sub-goals. This creates a goal system network, where every sub-goal serves the overall goal. Beneath it are several sub-goals. Beneath those sub-goals may be sub-sub-goals. This forms a goal system network. All sub-goals are subordinate to the overall goal. Moreover, in interpersonal interaction, participants' goals form different goal relationships, which can be classified into three types: (1) goal convergent: both parties have identical or similar goals, tending toward cooperation, with simple and smooth interaction structures; (2) goal conflicting: incompatible goals, tending toward non-cooperation, with complex interaction structures, often featuring repetition or "lame structures" (questions without answers); (3) goal neutral: the speaker's goal is neither beneficial nor harmful to the hearer, with a tendency toward cooperation but variable efficiency. Goal relationships directly affect discourse cooperation, interaction structure, and discourse cost. In courtroom cross-examination, the prosecutor and the defense witness typically hold conflicting goals. The prosecutor wants to undermine the witness's credibility and build a guilt narrative. The witness wants to maintain credibility and support the defense. Because of this conflict, prosecutors cannot rely on cooperative questioning. They must adopt coercive and controlling strategies.

### 2.2 *Questioning Strategies in Courtroom Discourse*

Gibbons (2003) and Archer (2005) were early researchers who proposed two major functional categories for courtroom questions: information-seeking and confirmation seeking. This classification became an important foundation for later work. Archer (2005) went further and proposed up to 17 question types, including WH-questions, polar questions, tag questions, declarative questions, and echo questions. That provides a detailed framework for classifying courtroom questions by their form.

However, international research on courtroom questioning has mostly focused on question syntax (e.g., Aldosari, 2024) or on dimensions of power and gender. For instance, Conley and O'Barr (1998) distinguished between "powerful" and "powerless" language styles. They showed how questioning styles

reflect and reinforce institutional power. Ainsworth (2006) examined gender bias in courtroom language. Gibbons (2003) did provide a typological classification of question functions, but his analysis emphasized information retrieval and challenge functions. He paid less attention to how questioning strategies are selected or how interactions unfold. Furthermore, most existing research has concentrated on lawyers in general, especially defense attorneys. Relatively few systematic studies focus on prosecutors as a specific litigation role. A systematic classification of prosecutors' questioning strategies remains underdeveloped. This is especially true for a framework that includes goal analysis.

Domestic research on courtroom questioning strategies started later and is largely based on China's inquisitorial or mixed trial contexts, with insufficient detailed analysis of prosecutors' questioning strategies in the American adversarial system. Domestic scholars have examined prosecutors' questioning strategies from perspectives such as interruption, presupposition, repetition, and discourse markers, but few have proposed systematic questioning strategies. Liao (2003) classified questions into open-ended and closed-ended based on dominance and information value, proposing a dominance continuum. Zhao (2009) identified strategies such as objection, interruption, contrast, and question form; Liu (2011) and Yin (2016) provided classifications at macro/micro and discourse/sentence levels respectively; Wang (2014) proposed interruption, repetition, roundabout, and progressive strategies; Jiang (2017) focused on three core strategies: repetition, interruption, and questioning types. However, most of these studies are based on Chinese courtroom corpora and lack systematic pragmatic analysis of prosecutors' specific questioning strategies in the American adversarial system and their interaction mechanisms with goal relationships.

Based on the above literature review, this study takes Liao Meizhen's Goal-driven Principle as its theoretical framework, combines it with trial transcripts from the Simpson case, and proposes four representative strategy types employed by prosecutors in cross-examination, analyzing their operational mechanisms from the perspective of goal relationships

### 3. Case Analysis

#### 3.1 Repetition Strategy: Highlighting Contradictions and Undermining Credibility

Extract:

Ms. Clark: In your first statement, you saw the Bronco at 10 p.m. But now you say it's 10:15. So which is it? Did you see the Bronco at 10 or 10:15?

Ms. Lopez: Does it matter?

Ms. Clark: Yes, it matters very much. That's why you are here. Please answer the question.

(Ms. Lopez shrugs)

Ms. Clark: So which is it? 10 or 10:15?

Whatever Mr. Johnnie said I said.

Ms. Clark: No, not what Mr. Cochran says. We need to be told what you saw.

Ms. Lopez: No me Recuerdo. (Spanish: I don't remember)

Ito: Ms. Lopez, in English please, unless you need a translator.

Ms. Lopez: I say I don't remember.

Ms. Clark: You don't remember? Good enough for me, no further questions.

Background: Lopez was a maid at Simpson's neighbor's house. Her statements about the time she saw Simpson's Bronco contradicted each other—initially 10 p.m., later 10:15 p.m. This time point was valuable for the defense's construction of an alibi narrative. Clark's cross-examination aimed to use this contradiction to damage Lopez's credibility.

Clark and Lopez had goals that pushed against each other. Clark wanted to expose the contradiction and make sure the jury saw it. Her aim was to paint Lopez as an unreliable witness. Lopez wanted to dodge the contradiction. She needed to protect her own credibility and keep the defense story intact. Because their goals clashed, Clark could not just ask friendly questions and expect honesty. She had to be forceful. Clark used repetition as her main tool. She used it in two distinct ways. The first was fixed repetition: she asked “10 or 10:15?” not once but twice. That forced Lopez to face the contradiction directly, leaving no room to escape. In the jury’s eyes, the contradiction became frozen. The second was echo repetition: Clark repeated Lopez’s own words “You don’t remember?” back to her. That turned a simple “I don’t remember” into evidence of unreliability. Clark’s goal shifted from getting facts to showing that the witness could not be trusted. In the goal hierarchy, fixed repetition served an immediate sub-goal: fixing the contradiction. Echo repetition served a higher sub-goal: demonstrating unreliability. Together, they pushed toward Clark’s overall goal, which was to damage the defense witness’s credibility.

Regarding goal achievement, Clark's strategy succeeded. Although Lopez never admitted the contradiction, her evasive behavior (shrugging, deflecting to Cochran, switching languages) reinforced the image of an "unreliable witness" that Clark was constructing. Clark's positive termination of questioning ("Good enough for me") indicated she had obtained sufficient evidence to achieve her sub-goal—the jury had witnessed the witness's contradiction and evasion.

### *3.2 Presupposition Strategy: Implanting Facts and Constructing Narrative*

Extract:

Darden: And he hadn't been relaxed over the prior several months; is that correct?

Reichardt: Yeah...

Darden: Is that correct?

Reichardt: That he seemed more relaxed that evening than previously?

Darden: Yes.

Reichardt: Yes.

Darden: And that is because during the week leading up to that phone call the defendant had been depressed because of his failing relationship with Nicole Brown; is that correct?

Reichardt: I wouldn't say depressed.

Darden: Well, have you ever described to anyone the defendant having been depressed?

Reichardt: At times, but he wasn't depressed all the time.

Darden: Well, during the week leading up to this phone call did the defendant, in your opinion, seem depressed over his failing relationship with Nicole Brown?

Reichardt: At times, yes.

Background: Reichardt testified in direct examination that he had spoken with Simpson on the phone on the night of the murder, describing Simpson's voice as "relaxed" and "pleasant." Darden sought to undermine this defense-favorable testimony and construct a narrative of Simpson's emotional instability and motive for the crime.

From the perspective of goal relationships, Darden and Reichardt were in conflict. Darden's sub-goal was to construct a causal chain: "Simpson was depressed — his relationship with the victim had broken down — motive for murder." Reichardt's goal was to maintain the credibility of his original testimony and downplay the "depression" characterization. Under conflict, Darden could not expect the witness to voluntarily admit "depression" and had to use strategic questioning to implant this claim into the narrative. In terms of strategy selection, Darden used presupposition. He embedded three presuppositions in his questions. First, "he hadn't been relaxed over the prior several months" presupposed Simpson's long-term tension. That established a negative emotional baseline. Second, "the defendant had been depressed because of his failing relationship with Nicole Brown" simultaneously presupposed "depression" and its cause. That established a causal link. Third, "have you ever described to anyone the defendant having been depressed?" presupposed that Reichardt had used the word "depressed" to describe Simpson. That forced him into a contradiction. The core mechanism of presupposition, from a goal hierarchy view, is backgrounding. You take a claim that could be disputed and embed it into your question as if it were an obvious fact. This makes it very hard for the witness to object without looking evasive. By using these presuppositions one after another, Darden slowly turned "depression" from something debatable into a fixed "fact" inside his narrative. That narrative was simple: Simpson was depressed because his relationship with Nicole Brown was failing. And Darden succeeded in planting that narrative into the trial record.

Regarding goal achievement, Darden's strategy succeeded. Reichardt initially resisted by saying "I wouldn't say depressed." But he ultimately admitted that Simpson was indeed depressed "at times." This concession directly contradicted his earlier resistance. It damaged his credibility. More importantly, the narrative that "Simpson was depressed due to his failing relationship" was successfully implanted into the trial record.

### *3.3 Elicitation Strategy: Guiding Expectations but Constrained by Procedural Rules*

Extract:

Christopher Darden: So on the night of the murders you were in an alleyway behind Bundy Drive and you heard commotion near Nicole Brown Simpson's condominium?

Prosecuting witness: Yes, I heard 2 men arguing. The first man said "hey, hey, hey," and the second man yelled at him, uh, he was hard to understand

Christopher Darden: And did the second voice sound as if it was older, more mature than the first?

Johnnie Cochran: calls for speculation, your honor

Ito: sustained, foundational.

Background: A prosecution witness testified that he heard an argument near the crime scene. Darden attempted to use this testimony to link Simpson to the crime scene, suggesting that the second voice sounded older and more mature—implicitly pointing to Simpson, who was older than the first person. From the perspective of goal relationships, Darden and the prosecution witness had congruent goals. Darden's sub-goal was to establish an association between the defendant and the voices at the crime scene; the witness's goal was to cooperate with the prosecution in producing testimony unfavorable to the defense. Under goal congruence, the witness was willing to be guided by Darden, but Darden's strategy selection still faced institutional constraints.

In terms of strategy selection, Darden used elicitation. He employed a frame presupposition to guide the witness toward the expected answer. His question was “Did the second voice sound as if it was older, more mature than the first?” This presupposed a frame. That frame was that there was an age difference and that it was discernible. This presupposition made “yes” the most natural answer. The witness did not need to make any active inference; the question itself led him there. From a goal hierarchy standpoint, elicitation served Darden’s sub-goal of obtaining comparative testimony. But Darden failed to consider a higher-level institutional goal: the procedural rules that limit what witnesses may say.

As a result, Darden’s strategy failed. The elicitation violated evidentiary rules against witness speculation. A witness can only testify to what he saw or heard. He cannot guess about unobserved characteristics, such as whether a voice sounded older. The defense objected, and the judge sustained the objection. The judge ruled that the question lacked foundation. This failure shows that within the Goal-driven Principle framework, strategy selection is constrained not only by the goal relationship between prosecutor and witness. It is also constrained by the judge’s institutional goal of maintaining procedural legitimacy.

### *3.4 Interruption Strategy: Turn-Taking Competition Constrained by Judicial Intervention*

Extract:

Mr. Darden: Okay. So you had no agreement not to talk to the D.A.'s office?

Dr. Reichardt: No.

Mr. Darden: You had no agreement not to talk to the LAPD?

Dr. Reichardt: No.

Mr. Darden: But didn't you tell Candace Garvey both of those things, that you had an agreement with someone else that you would not speak to the police or the D.A.'s office?

Mr. Cochran: Hearsay.

The Court: Overruled. 770 and 1235, counsel.

Dr. Reichardt: I had an agreement to not talk to ▼

Mr. Darden: ▲ Can you please answer my question yes or no?

Mr. Cochran: He cut the witness off.

The Court: Let him finish answering the question.

Mr. Darden: Please, sir.

Dr. Reichardt: I had an agreement to not talk to the media.

Mr. Darden: So is the answer to my question no?

Dr. Reichardt: No, I did not have an agreement to not talk to the LAPD.

Background: Darden, based on third-party hearsay, suggested that Reichardt had an agreement not to talk to the police or the district attorney's office—implying that Reichardt was concealing information. Reichardt attempted to clarify that the agreement was limited to "the media."

From the perspective of goal relationships, Darden and Reichardt were in conflict. Darden's sub-goal was to maintain the implication that the witness was concealing information. That would damage his credibility. Reichardt's goal was to clarify the limited scope of the agreement and protect his credibility. Under conflict, Darden needed to prevent the witness from completing his clarification. That would preserve the force of the vague implication.

In terms of strategy selection, Darden used interruption. He interrupted just as Reichardt was about to say "to the media." That prevented the presentation of key information. He then immediately imposed a "yes/no" answer framework. That compressed the witness's explanatory space. In the goal hierarchy, interruption served an immediate sub-goal: preventing the witness from presenting unfavorable information. That immediate goal, in turn, served a higher-order sub-goal: keeping alive an implication that hurt the witness's credibility.

But Darden's strategy did not work. The interruption was stopped by judicial intervention. Judge Ito exercised his authority to allocate turns. He told Darden to let the witness finish. That allowed Reichardt to clarify that his agreement was with "the media," not with the police or the prosecution. This factual correction directly undermined Darden's sub-goal. The jury learned that Darden's implication was false. The agreement had nothing to do with hiding information from the authorities.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Guided by Liao Meizhen's Goal-driven Principle, this study has systematically analyzed prosecutors' questioning strategies in the Simpson case. Through case analyses of four strategies (repetition, presupposition, elicitation, and interruption), we have shown how goal relationships and goal hierarchy shape both the choice of strategies and their success or failure.

The findings are as follows. When prosecutors face goal conflict with a witness, they tend to adopt coercive strategies such as repetition, presupposition, and interruption. These strategies help them push sub-goals forward forcefully. When goals are congruent, prosecutors may adopt guiding strategies like elicitation. But even then, they must contend with institutional constraints, such as procedural rules enforced by the judge. A strategy's success or failure depends not only on how well it fits the speaker's sub-goals but also on higher-level institutional goals. One clear example is the judge's role in managing procedure and intervening when rules are broken.

This study has several limitations. First, it is based on trial transcripts from a single case. The

generalizability of its findings therefore requires testing with more cases. Second, the four strategies identified came from analyzing typical excerpts; they do not exhaust all strategy types used in courtroom questioning. Third, this study adopts a qualitative case analysis approach. It focuses on in-depth analysis of strategic mechanisms, without quantitative examination of strategy distribution frequencies. Future research could expand to more cases, refine the typology of prosecutors' questioning strategies, and explore mixed quantitative and qualitative approaches.

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