

# Female Growth through Turn-Taking Analysis in *Thelma & Louise*: A Feminist Journey

Xixi Qian \*

School of Foreign Studies, Anhui University, Hefei 230093, Anhui, China

\* Corresponding author: Xixi Qian

**Abstract:** This study employs the turn-taking theory as a framework to delve into the intricate character development and feminist themes embodied in the film *Thelma & Louise*. Through a rigorous quantitative analysis of conversational exchanges, the study illuminates Thelma's transformation from a subjugated housewife to an emblematic figure of feminist resistance. The evolution in Thelma's conversational patterns, particularly in terms of turn length and topic control, serves as a mirror reflecting her escalating autonomy and defiance towards patriarchal constraints. This analysis underscores the film's profound depiction of female empowerment and solidarity, offering a critical lens through which to interrogate gender discourse and societal norms. Thelma's odyssey, thus, stands as a poignant exemplification of the relentless pursuit of identity and freedom, leaving an indelible mark on feminist discourse and discourse analysis alike.

**Keywords:** Turn-taking Theory, Feminist Consciousness, Character Development, Conversation Analysis, Gender Discourse.

## 1. Introduction

Dramatic stylistics is an interdisciplinary research method that combines dramatic literature and linguistics. With linguistics as a means, it aims to analyze the language of drama, trying to point out how dramatic works can express conflicts, shape characters, highlight themes and strengthen dramatic effects, so as to help readers fully achieve a deeper understanding of dramatic works [1]. Conversation analysis is a common research method of dramatic stylistics, and the turn taking mechanism is often used to analyze character images, power relations, and plot development.

As a classic feminist film, the two heroines in *Thelma & Louise* expressed their awakening of feminist consciousness and their resistance to the patriarchal society with death after experiencing a series of accidents on the way to travel. Based on turn-taking theory, this paper tries to quantitatively analyze the psychological changes of Thelma, one of the heroines, and to explore how Selma grew up from an innocent girl into a woman with independent personality, and how this change promoted the development of the film plot.

## 2. Turn-taking Theory

In 1974, American sociologists Harvey Sacks and Emanuel A. Schegloff [2] systematically put forward the core content of conversation analysis -turn taking theory. Generally speaking, it is regarded as a turn from the time when the speaker initiates the topic to the time when the topic ends. Turn taking is a basic component of conversation, including two factors: first, the right to speak, and second, the content expressed by the speaker. The speaker chooses to use different syntactic units according to the conversation context, such as words, phrases and sentences. The listener anticipates the length of time of the syntactic unit and infers the time point when the speaker stops speaking, so as to smoothly take the turn and change into the role of the speaker. In a word, turn-taking, as the name implies, means the roles of speaker and listener change constantly. Yule [3] emphasized this embodies discourse power control, revealing speaker dynamics and

hidden power struggles. Applied to drama stylistics [4], turn-taking analysis examines power relations and plot through five dimensions: topic control (initiation, development, shift); turn length (duration/word count); turn types (initiative, responsive, follow-up); interruptions and monologues; and control strategies (pre-sequences, pauses, paralinguistics). This comprehensive framework is applied herein to analyze character dialogues in *Thelma & Louise*.

## 3. Application of Turn-taking Theory in Conversations of Movie *Thelma & Louise*

### 3.1. Introduction to Movie *Thelma & Louise*

The 1991 cinematic release of *Thelma & Louise* marked a seminal moment in feminist film history, sparking extensive debate and acclaim [5]. Centered around the lives of Thelma, a submissive housewife, and Louise, a resilient restaurant waitress, the narrative unfolds as they embark on a weekend getaway seeking respite. However, their journey is abruptly disrupted when Thelma narrowly escapes a violent assault at the hands of a misogynistic hooligan named Harun in a rural bar. In a moment of righteous indignation, Louise fatally shoots Harun, transforming both women into fugitives on the run. Their subsequent flight to Mexico serves as a poignant exploration of the pervasive male oppression they encounter within the patriarchal fabric of society [6]. Instances such as Jody's deceitful exploitation of Thelma's affections and subsequent theft, as well as relentless sexual harassment from a truck driver, underscore the relentless challenges they face.

Amidst this backdrop of adversity, Thelma's transformation from a compliant housewife to a defiant feminist warrior becomes a pivotal narrative thread. Her evolving mindset is keenly reflected in her dialogues with various characters, revealing a profound awakening. Consequently, this paper meticulously selects and examines seven pivotal conversational exchanges within the film, employing a turn-taking analysis framework. Through this lens, we aim to unravel the intricate layers of Thelma's transformation, showcasing the empowering narrative of women's resilience

and the ultimate act of defiance as they choose to drive off the cliff, symbolically rejecting the oppressive patriarchal order and asserting their autonomy [7].

### 3.2. Analysis of Conversations in the Movie *Thelma & Louise*

#### 3.2.1. Analysis of Conversation One

T1 Louise: Hey, how are you doing, little housewife? You're all packed? We're out of here tonight.

T2 Thelma: Well, wait now. I still have to ask Darryl if I can go.

T3 Louise: You mean you haven't asked him, yet? Thelma, for Christ's sake! Thelma, is he your husband or your father? It's just two days, for God's sake. Don't be child. Tell him you're going with me. Tell him I'm having a nervous breakdown.

T4 Thelma: That don't carry much weight with Darryl. He already thinks you're out of your mind...Are you at work?

T5 Louise: No. I'm calling from the Playboy Mansion. I'll call you right back.

**Table 1.** The Data of Conversation One

Characters		Thelma	Louise
Control of topics		Less control	More control
Turn-type	initiation	0	2
	response	2	0
	Initiation after response	0	1
Turn-length (times)	Total turns	2	3
	Total words	31	69
	Average turn length	15.5	33
Interruption and Monologue	/	0	0
Turn-control strategy	Pre-sequence	0	0
	Space-making	0	0
	Paralinguistic feature	0	0

This part is the first impression of the heroine Thelma on the audience. The initial segment of the narrative serves as the audience's primary encounter with the protagonist, Thelma, portraying her first impression. During this interaction, Thelma receives a telephone call from Louise, who initiates a conversation by inquiring about Thelma's preparedness for an upcoming trip. Thelma's response, indicating a need to consult with her husband before committing, reveals a layer of her decision-making process. Notably, Louise's subsequent remarks suggest a perception that Thelma lacks individual autonomy and encourages her to disentangle from her husband's influence. However, Thelma dismisses this notion lightly, shifting the focus by inquiring about Louise's professional status, effectively concluding the dialogue.

A closer analysis of the conversational flow underscores a distinct asymmetry in terms of both initiative and verbal output [8]. Louise takes the lead, initiating two topics and responding to one of Thelma's queries, averaging 33 words per turn. Conversely, Thelma contributes merely two turns,

neither of which originates a new discussion, with an average length of 15.5 words. This pattern highlights Louise's dominance in the dialogue, granting her control over the agenda and discourse. Moreover, Thelma's reliance on consulting her husband prior to making decisions regarding social engagements underscores her traditional role as an obedient housewife, lacking in personal initiative. This dynamic interaction thus offers insight into Thelma's character and her position within the societal framework depicted.

#### 3.2.2. Analysis of Conversation Two

T1 Thelma: Louise, where are we going?

T2 Louise: I don't know. I don't know. Just shut up so I can think.

T3 Thelma: Shouldn't we go to the cops? I mean, I think we ought to tell the police.

T4 Louise: Tell them what, Thelma? Just what do you think we should tell them, huh?

T5 Thelma: I don't know. Just tell them what happened.

T6 Louise: Which part?

T7 Thelma: All of it. That...That he was raping me.

T8 Louise: Jesus. About a hundred goddamn people saw you dancing cheek to cheek with him all night! Who's gonna believe that? We don't live in that kind of a world, Thelma. God damn it! Pull over!

T9 Thelma: crying--

T10 Louise: Thelma. Thelma. I'm gonna stop someplace for a cup of coffee and then. Just for a second, and then I'm gonna get it together. And we'll figure out then what to do. Everything will be fine, alright?

T11 Thelma: crying—

**Table 2.** The Data of Conversation Two

Characters		Thelma	Louise
Control of topics		Less control	More control
Turn-type	initiation	2	0
	response	4	1
	Initiation after response	0	4
Turn-length (times)	Total turns	6	5
	Total words	37	101
	Average turn length	6.17	20.2
Interruption and Monologue	/	0	0
Turn-control strategy	Pre-sequence	0	0
	Space-making	0	0
	Paralinguistic feature	2	0

In the wake of Louise's defense against Harun's attempted assault, Thelma and Louise's flight began. Immediately after the incident, they fled and discussed their next move. Thelma, uncertain, sought Louise's opinion, while Louise's initial negative response stabilized the situation by urging silence, allowing her time to think. Thelma then suggested involving the police, showing her desire for resolution. Throughout, Louise took a proactive role, questioning, assessing, and

comforting the distressed Thelma.

The dialogue dynamics revealed a balance, with Thelma initiating twice through inquiries, indicating reliance on Louise. However, Louise's detailed responses, averaging 20.2 words per turn, demonstrated her discursive control, resilience, and assertiveness, highlighting Thelma's indecisiveness and emotional immaturity, exemplified by her continuous crying.

A deeper analysis showed a hierarchical structure [9]. Louise, with three turns including two topic initiations, dominated with an average turn length exceeding 33 words. Thelma's limited participation, restricted to two turns without topic initiation, and an average of 15.5 words per turn, showed her passive stance. This disparity underscored Louise's control, mirroring her assertive personality. The dialogue also revealed Thelma's need for her husband's approval, emphasizing her submissive nature as a traditional housewife, contrasting with Louise's autonomy.

In total, there were 11 turns, with Thelma having 6 and Louise 5, seemingly equal. However, Thelma's topic initiations were interrogative, seeking Louise's guidance, reflecting her confusion and reliance. Louise, though not initiating topics, responded to Thelma's turns, answering questions and offering comfort, with an average turn length of 20.2 words. This showed Louise's control over the conversation, highlighting her strong character, while Thelma's indecision, lack of experience, and immaturity were further emphasized by her constant crying, illustrating her vulnerability.

### 3.2.3. Analysis of Conversation Three

*T1 Thelma: Oh, God! Damn it! I've never been lucky! Not one time! The son of bitch burned me. I don't believe it. Louise? You okay? Louise, I'm sorry. I mean it. Louise, it's okay.*

*T2 Louise: No, Thelma. It's not okay. It's definitely not okay. None of this is okay. I mean, what are we gonna do for money, huh? How we gonna get gas? I mean, trading on our good looks? I mean, oh, God damn it, Thelma, it's not okay.*

*T3 Thelma: Louise. Hey, now you listen to me. Don't you worry about it. You hear me? Come on, stand up! Louise, just don't you worry about it. You hear? Come on. Get your stuff and let's get out of here. Come on. Here we go.*

*T4 Louise: crying—*

**Table 3.** The Data of Conversation Three

Characters		Thelma	Louise
Control of topics		More control	Less control
Turn-type	initiation	1	0
	response	1	2
	Initiation after response	0	0
Turn-length (times)	Total turns	2	2
	Total words	77	46
	Average turn length	38.5	23
Interruption and Monologue	/	0	0
Turn-control strategy	Pre-sequence	0	0
	Space-making	0	0
	Paralinguistic feature	0	1

In an unexpected turn of events, the funds procured by

Louise from her boyfriend and entrusted to Thelma's safekeeping were unlawfully appropriated by the perpetrator, J.D. The subsequent discourse, initiated by Thelma, unfolded with a distinct emotional intensity. She vocalized her indignation towards J.D.'s act in an unprecedentedly forceful tone, while simultaneously offering reassurance to Louise. Louise, responsive to the topic, concurred with the gravity of the monetary loss and expressed her anxiety about the uncertain path ahead. This conversational exchange highlights a significant shift in the dynamics and personalities of Thelma and Louise, deviating from their prior interactions.

An in-depth analysis of the conversation reveals a notable disparity in the power distribution and linguistic contributions [10]. The dialogue comprises 4 conversational turns, with Thelma occupying a dominant position by initiating the topic and contributing a total of 77 words across 2 turns, as opposed to Louise's 46 words. This imbalance underscores Thelma's control over the discourse and her position of superiority. Notably, her speech is characterized by an abundance of imperative sentences, employed to comfort Louise in a commanding manner. Conversely, Louise's expressions of concern regarding their future were framed in a questioning tone, reflecting her vulnerability. From a paralinguistic standpoint, Louise's emotional distress is palpable, as she succumbs to despair, crouching and weeping uncontrollably. In stark contrast, Thelma displays an uncharacteristic composure, her countenance devoid of fear and her voice resolute. This pivotal event marks a transformative moment for Thelma, as she sheds her former fear, embracing a newfound strength and assuming a more protective role on Louise, thereby symbolizing a profound character development.

### 3.2.4. Analysis of Conversation Four

*T1 Thelma: Where you going?*

*T2 Truck driver: Fresno.*

*T3 Louise: We've been seeing you all over the place. Why don't you take off those shades? I want to see your eyes.*

*T4 Truck driver: Yeah, I been seeing you, too.*

*T5 Thelma: Yeah, we think you have really bad manners.*

*T6 Louise: Where do you get off behaving like that with women you don't even know? Huh?*

*How'd you feel if somebody did that to your mother? Or your sister? Or your wife?*

*T7 Truck driver: Huh? What are you talking about?*

*T8 Louise: You know good and damn well what I'm talking about.*

*T9 Thelma: I mean, really. That business with your tongue. What is that? That is disgusting! T10 Louise: And, oh my God, that other shit of pointing to your lap. I mean, what is that supposed to mean exactly, huh? Does that mean "Pull over. I wanna show you what a big, fat slob I am"?*

*T11 Thelma: Yeah, or does that mean, "Suck my dick"?*

*T12 Truck driver: You women are crazy.*

*T13 Louise: We think you should apologize.*

*T14 Truck driver: I ain't apologizing for shit!*

*T15 Louise: You say you're sorry.*

*T16 Truck driver: Fuck that.*

*T17 Louise: You say you're sorry, or I'm gonna make you fucking sorry.*

*T18 Thelma: I'll bet you even called us "beavers" on your CB radio, didn't you?*

*T19 Truck driver: Yeah. Sure did.*

*T20 Thelma: Damn! I hate that. I hate being called a beaver, don't you?*

T21 Louise: You gonna apologize or what?  
 T22 Truck driver: Fuck you! Oh! Goddamn, you bitch!  
 T23 Louise: I don't think he is gonna apologize.  
 T24 Thelma: Nah. I don't think so. (shooting)  
 T25 Truck driver: You bitches from hell! God damn it!  
 You're gonna pay for this!

**Table 4.** The Data of Conversation Four

Characters		Thelma & Louise		Truck driver
Control of topics		Less control	More control	No control
Turn-type	initiation	5 / 7		
	response	2 / 2		9
	Initiation after response	0		
Turn-length (times)	Total turns	7 / 9		9
	Total words	64 / 133		45
	Average turn length	9.14 / 14.8		5
Interrupt-ion and Monologue	/	0		0
Turn-control strategy	Pre-sequence	0		0
	Space-making	0 / 3		0
	Paralinguistic feature	1 / 0		0

In the dialogue, Thelma and Louise confront a truck driver who sexually harasses them, deciding to teach him a lesson. The conversation comprises 25 turns, with Thelma having 7, Louise 9, and the truck driver 9. In terms of turn length, Thelma and Louise dominate, with Thelma totaling 64 words and averaging 9.14 words per turn, Louise totaling 133 words and averaging 14.78 words per turn, while the truck driver has 45 words, averaging 5 words per turn. Regarding turn types, Thelma or Louise initiate each topic, with the truck driver merely following their lead, responding, and cursing. Louise holds a slightly dominant position, employing space-making strategies three times, such as insisting the driver apologize. Paralinguistically, Thelma is the first to raise the gun and burn the tanker, demonstrating her resolve.

This confrontation marks a pivotal moment, propelling Thelma and Louise's portrayal of the "big woman" archetype to its peak. It highlights their unwavering commitment to women's rights and their resolute will to defend them [11]. Following this event, Thelma, with Louise's support, begins a journey of self-discovery, culminating in her first emotional expression. This catharsis empowers Thelma to assert her autonomy, transcending into a state of "madness" that signifies profound liberation of her will.

This transformation fuels their unyielding progress, marking the narrative's climax. Thelma's odyssey of self-realization, facilitated by Louise and enriched by various experiences, reaches a pivotal moment where she finds the courage to articulate her feelings. This breakthrough enables

her to fully harness her agency, attaining a state of "insanity" that represents a radical departure from her previous constraints [12]. This exuberant liberation inspires their fearless pursuit and signifies the culmination of the film's narrative arc, leaving a lasting impression on the audience.

### 3.2.5. Analysis of Conversation Five

T1 Thelma: I know this whole thing was my fault. I know it.  
 T2 Louise: Damn it. Thelma, if there's one thing you should know by now, this wasn't your fault.

T3 Thelma: Louise, no matter what happens. I'm glad I came with you.

T4 Louise: Oh, shit.

T5 Thelma: Did you see that guy? He was right in the middle of the road.

T6 Louise: Hold on!

T7 Thelma: I guess everything from here on in is gonna be pretty shitty.

T8 Louise: Unbearable, I'd imagine.

T9 Thelma: Look, everything we got to lose is already gone anyway.

T10 Louise: Oh. God. How do you stay so positive?

T11 Thelma: You're a good friend.

T12 Louise: You, too, sweetie, the best. How do you like the vacation so far?

T13 Thelma: I guess I went a little crazy, huh?

T14 Louise: No, you've always been crazy. This is just the first chance you've ever had to really express yourself.

T15 Thelma: Good driving.

T16 Louise: Thanks.

T17 Thelma: What the hell is this?

T18 Louise: I don't know. I think...I think it's the goddamn Grand Canyon.

T19 Thelma: Isn't it beautiful?

T20 Louise: Yeah. It's something else, all right.

T21 Thelma: Oh my god! It looks like army.

T22 Louise: All this for us?

T23 Thelma: What are you doing?

T24 Louise: I'm not giving up.

T25 Thelma: Okay, then, listen. Let's not get caught T26 Louise: What are you talking about?

T27 Thelma: Let's keep going.

T28 Louise: What do you mean?

T29 Thelma: Go!

T30 Louise: You sure?

T31 Thelma: Yeah.

The segment of the dialogue under scrutiny commences with the police impeding Thelma and Louise's progress and culminates in their decision to embark on a fateful journey towards the cliff. This conversation, comprising a total of 31 exchanges, divides evenly between the protagonists, with Thelma contributing 16 turns and Louise 15. Analyzing the turn length, we observe that Thelma's 103 words and Louise's 100 words translate into an average length of 6.44 and 6.67 words per turn, respectively, indicating a balanced yet dynamic verbal exchange. Notably, Thelma initiates 13 topics throughout the dialogue, while Louise initiates merely 2, revealing a shift in conversational dominance towards Thelma. This underscores her ascendancy in controlling the discourse, dictating the topics of discussion and their directionality. This transformation signifies a profound evolution from her initial portrayal as an inexperienced young woman seeking Louise's counsel to a confident, autonomous individual.

**Table 5.** The Data of Conversation Five

Characters		Thelma	Louise
Control of topics		More control	Less control
Turn-type	initiation	13	2
	response	2	13
	Initiation after response	3	0
Turn-length (times)	Total turns	16	15
	Total words	103	100
	Average turn length	6.44	6.67
Interruption and Monologue	/	0	0
Turn-control strategy	Pre-sequence	0	0
	Space-making	0	0
	Paralinguistic feature	0	0

During their fleeting escape spanning two to three days, Thelma undergoes a remarkable transformation, maturing into a woman of clarity and resolve. Recognizing the inevitable outcome of surrender as a mere prelude to a patriarchal trial, wherein they would be relegated to the status of women devoid of dignity and autonomy, Thelma resolutely assumes the mantle of leadership [13]. At the dialogue's climax, she boldly suggests to Louise a course of action that embodies the essence of freedom and defiance against oppression—a leap into the abyss. As the car hurtles towards the cliff's edge, Thelma's smile is a testament to her liberation from a society that stifles women's empowerment. In this moment, she transcends her former self, emerging as a true feminist warrior, unshackled from societal constraints and fully realized in her pursuit of individuality and liberty.

#### 4. Conclusion

*Thelma & Louise* is a feminist road movie that transcends the conventional narrative of a revenge tale against patriarchal structures. Rather, it showcases the transformative journey of Thelma, whose personal growth is at the heart of the film's narrative. Over the course of a mere two to three days, amidst encounters with societal injustices, Thelma, facilitated by the support of her companion, embarks on a path of self-discovery and awakening. She swiftly evolves into a feminist protagonist, boldly transcending legal and societal norms, thereby becoming a formidable figure who challenges the patriarchal constructs and champions the rights of women, embodying a heroic spirit in the process.

The application of turn-taking theory to the film *Thelma & Louise* provides a nuanced understanding of Thelma's character arc and the film's feminist message. Based on the theory of turn-taking to quantitatively analyze the

conversations in the movie, we can deeply understand Thelma's growth from a more objective perspective. Thelma's journey from a conversational minor role to an assertive protagonist reflects her deep psychological transformation and her emergence as a symbol of feminist consciousness. The film's enduring impact lies in its portrayal of female solidarity and the resistance against societal norms that seek to suppress women's voices. As Thelma and Louise drive towards the horizon, they leave behind a legacy that continues to inspire and challenge audiences to reconsider the dynamics of power, gender, and discourse.

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