

Fear-Driven Dialogue: A Linguistic Study of *Death Knocks and Death*

Mohammed A. Abou Adel*

Department of Arabic Language and Literature, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, UAE University, Al Ain, UAE

Ayman I. Elhalafawy

English Language and Literature at Faculty of Arts, Kafrelsheikh University, Kafrelsheikh, Egypt

Samir H. Khalifa

Medical Sciences and Preparatory Year Department, North Private College of Nursing, Arar, Saudi Arabia

Ahmad M. Al Mahamed

Department of Languages, College of Arts, Education and Social Sciences, Abu Dhabi University, Abu Dhabi, UAE

Fatma T. El-Zaghal

English Language and Linguistics at Faculty of Arts, Tanta University, Tanta, Egypt

Abstract—This study explores how fear as a mood state affects conversational patterns and shapes communicative behavior. It offers a novel perspective on how fear influences both verbal and nonverbal interactions. Drawing on dialogues from Woody Allen's *Death Knocks* and *Death*, the analysis employs Conversation Analysis by Jack Sidnell (2010) and the multimodal extensions proposed by Lorenza Mondada (2019). The study addresses a notable gap by applying both Conversation Analysis (CA) and Multimodal Conversation Analysis (MMCA) to Woody Allen's modern drama, where gestures, posture, and movement are central to meaning-making. The study also moves beyond single-discipline approaches by adopting an interdisciplinary framework that brings together applied linguistics, theatre studies, and emotional psychology. This allows for a deeper understanding of how theatrical discourse is shaped under the pressure of existential emotion and offers a genuine contribution at the intersection of these knowledge domains. The findings indicate that fear disrupts logical conversation, resulting in brief, tense exchanges characterized by emotional rigidity and cognitive imbalance. The study contributes to improving dialogue management in real-life interactions and dramatic scripts, particularly in contexts of psychological tension. Future research may examine how other emotions—such as joy, anger, or anxiety—shape conversation to deepen our understanding of the relationship between emotion and communication.

Index Terms—multimodal conversation analysis, Fear of Death, Woody Allen, *Death Knocks*, *Death*

I. INTRODUCTION

Communication is a vital aspect of our daily lives, and the conversational patterns we follow play an important role in determining the success of our interactions. By being aware of verbal and nonverbal cues and respecting cultural differences, one can enhance communication skills. Communication patterns may vary depending on the context, culture, and the purpose of communication (Shahbar, 2024). Many factors affect communication styles, such as the psychological state of the speaker, the motivation behind the dialogue and mental pressures. According to Uddin (2023), communication barriers can hinder our ability to communicate effectively, leading to misunderstandings and missed opportunities. Identifying these barriers becomes the first step in overcoming them. Communication barriers, generally, may include language barriers, cultural barriers, and psychological barriers. If the speaker does not speak in the listener's own language, it may lead to confusion and misunderstanding (Yuldasheva, 2024).

According to Mazeland (2006), conversation analysis (CA) has made a growing contribution to a number of established domains in applied linguistics. The study of conversation analysis is incorporated into more traditional linguistic fields like discourse analysis, pragmatics, or (interactional) sociolinguistics. One can comprehend meaning, power relationships, and social structures that are ingrained in spoken language through conversation analysis (Antaki, 2008; Adel, 2019). Methods of conversation analysis vary, and for many linguists such as Wooffitt (2008), Sidnell (2010), and Clift (2016), conversational aspects include turn taking, repair, and adjacency pairs in addition to openings and closings. In order to accomplish specific objectives, the two involved parties must alternate roles during the communication process. The most common elements in CA include analyzing data itself, being aware of the context of conversation, categorizing data in order to specify the best method for analyzing conversation, and visualization, which is latent in predictive analysis.

This study belongs to the field of applied linguistics, particularly within the area of discourse and conversation analysis, adopting a multimodal approach to investigate interactional meaning-making. Although numerous studies have examined fear from psychological perspectives, they have overlooked the dynamic relationship between emotion and language. Moreover, most studies have treated dramatic dialogue as a purely textual phenomenon, disregarding the multimodal aspects that shape communication on stage. This gap underscores the need for an analytical framework that integrates verbal and nonverbal modes to capture the full complexity of fear in interaction. Accordingly, the central research question asks: How does the fear of death shape, disrupt, or transform communication patterns in Woody Allen's *Death Knocks* and *Death*?

The methodology examines real-time interaction between characters, attending to fine details of conversational organization, including pauses, gestures, intonation, and body movement. This study differs from previous work by combining verbal and nonverbal analysis of theatrical dialogue and by focusing specifically on fear as a psychological state rather than on general character or script analysis. It also demonstrates Woody Allen's ability to challenge traditional views of death by presenting it in a relatable, often humorous, manner.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent scholarship has significantly broadened the scope of Multimodal Conversation Analysis (MMCA), offering valuable tools for studying how speech, gesture, gaze, and movement work together in interaction. Van de Mierop (2020) demonstrates how multimodal cues influence participation and turn-taking, revealing that conversational authority often stems from embodied signals rather than words alone. Doehler et al. (2021) similarly show how speakers use subtle actions—such as hesitations, shifts in gaze, or changes in posture—to manage delicate responses and negotiate interpersonal alignment. Such developments have been supported by new technological tools like ConAn (Penzkofer & Müller, 2021), which strengthens the precision of multimodal transcription. Further contributions from Lilja (2022) and Pellet-Rostaing et al. (2023) highlight how individuals coordinate linguistic, visual, and affective resources in constructing meaning and engagement, while Tomasine (2024) illustrates the role of multimodality in managing multiple activities during assessment tasks. Alqahtani (2024) adds another dimension by examining how power relations are enacted through language and embodied conduct. More recently, MMCA research has moved into new contexts: Jang et al. (2025) explore immersive multimodal systems that integrate gesture and gaze into chatbot communication; Hassan et al. (2025) analyze how spatial positioning structures safety dialogues; Zhou (2025) investigates identity construction in multimodal English conversations; and Chang et al. (2025) outline a methodological model for capturing the structural organization of multimodal interaction. Collectively, these studies showcase MMCA's growing sophistication and reinforce its relevance for analyzing complex, embodied communication such as theatrical performance.

In parallel, literary and linguistic scholarship underscores the importance of integrating text-based and performance-based approaches when analyzing dramatic dialogue, particularly in emotionally charged contexts. Alhourani et al. (2025a) demonstrate how linking linguistic analysis with theatrical expression uncovers deeper cultural and emotional layers, as shown in their study of identity in Malik's *Unveiled*. Moreover, Alhourani et al.'s (2025b) related work on Parks' *In the Blood* emphasizes how trauma shapes communicative behavior, highlighting the strong connection between psychological states and conversational patterns—an insight that aligns closely with the present study's focus on fear. Elhalafaway et al. (2025) further argue that gesture, voice quality, and stage movement are central to meaning-making, reinforcing the need for a multimodal approach when examining dramatic texts. Together, these contributions affirm the value of combining Conversation Analysis with MMCA to understand how emotions—especially fear—structure dialogue, influence interactional rhythm, and shape characters' communicative behavior in Woody Allen's *Death Knocks* and *Death*.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach within the framework of Conversation Analysis (CA) as presented by Sidnell (2010) and expanded by Mondada (2019) through a multimodal perspective. It examines how fear as a psychological state shapes verbal and non-verbal interaction in dramatic dialogue. CA provides the tools to analyze how fear disrupts, delays, or restructures conversational flow, while the qualitative design allows in-depth exploration of turn-taking, meaning-making, and multimodal resources. The study focuses on two one-act plays, *Death Knocks* and *Death*, which center on the theme of death, offering a rich context to analyze fear in both speech and embodied behavior.

Sidnell's (2010) CA framework guides the analysis of conversation openings and closings, adjacency pairs, turn-taking, TCUs, sequential organization, preference structures, and repairs. Mondada's (2019) multimodal approach incorporates multimodality, multisensoriality, temporal organization, embodied orientation, sequentiality of actions, and the material environment, highlighting how bodily actions co-construct meaning. Dialogues are analyzed according to CA conventions, with attention to stage directions and nonverbal cues. Scenes dominated by anxiety and fear are segmented and coded, examining pauses, hesitations, overlaps, interruptions, sequence shifts, repairs, gestures, gaze, sudden movements, freezing, and spatial changes. Stage directions in the published texts provide the primary source for non-verbal features. The analysis proceeds through familiarization, scene segmentation, and coding, allowing the researcher to interpret how fear affects conversational coherence, rhythm, and structure, and how embodied actions reinforce or counter verbal

expressions. By situating dialogue within its multimodal performance context, this methodology moves beyond purely linguistic analysis, capturing the embodied enactment of mood states such as fear.

IV. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

In this study, the researcher attempts to shed light on the conversational patterns in some selected plays written by Woody Allen. She endeavors to elucidate the significance of context in shaping the conversational pattern. The context here is not only limited to the linguistic one, but also refers to the message behind the events of each play and the psychological health that prompts each character to arrange the conversational pattern in different ways. The researcher has chosen Woody Allen's plays because he is the first playwright to embody the fear of death in most of his plays and show its effect on the way characters organize the dialogue. Also, Woody Allen's plays are characterized by the smoothness of the dialogue, being rich in all types of dialogue such as pauses, overlaps, backchannels, adjacency pairs, preference, turn-taking, and repair.

Conversational Patterns in *Death Knocks* (1968)

Death Knocks is a play by Woody Allen. It takes place only between two characters: Nat, the tragic hero, and Death. The play is considered a series of unconventional conversations, especially in its opening, because the prevailing psychological atmosphere in the play is Thanatophobia. In analyzing that play, the researcher examines the mechanisms of social interaction, concentrating on the micro-level aspects of talk. The dialogue between the two characters in this play is designed in a disjointed manner. It is full of pauses, reflecting the state of tension and dread associated with the fear of death. The repetition of certain phrases and the overlapping of voices reveal an inner anxiety, making fear seem present as a hidden third party in the dialogue.

Dialogue 1

Nat: Who are you?

Death: Death

Nat: Who?

Death: Death. Can I sit down?

I'm shaking like a leaf.

Nat: Who are you?

Death: Death. You got a glass of water?

Nat: Death? What do you mean, Death?

Death: Is it Halloween?

Nat: No

Death: Then I'm Death.

Now can I get a glass of water or a Fresca? (Allen, 1968, p. 1)



Figure 1. A Scene From *Death Knocks*
(Joshi, 2020, 00:00:57)

At the beginning of the play, Death horribly appears to Nat. As a result, Nat feels afraid, and his speech becomes disorganized. According to Afzali (2013), not all human beings believe in death, even when faced with it, considering themselves more powerful than it. Out of Nat's fear, he uses rising intonation and single words, repeating his question to Death, "Who are you?" three times without taking pauses. With his quick tone, Nat uses unrelated short answers; the length of the conversation is not fixed between them. He uses stress on the interrogative word "who" and talks before Death reaches possible completion. According to Levinson (2012), concerning "mapping actions," where each turn in conversation maps out actions, Death appears for a particular task which is ending the life of Nat. Although Death should be more dominant out of his position and status as an angel of death, the order of speaking isn't decided in advance.

Nat dominates the wheel of conversation from the moment Death appears. Fear and unexpectedness lead to a deliberate

violation of the natural conversational rules. According to Al-Mamoory and Al-Ghizzy (2023), when displaying communication in pairs of utterances, openings and closings are crucial components. Conversational openings and closings employ adjacency pairs. Examples are "Hello," "How are you?" "See you later," and "Bye." Although Death visits Nat for the first time, the exchange does not follow the conventional opening sequence; their dialogue begins without any greeting or pre-sequence. Greetings typically establish mutual orientation between participants at the beginning of any dialogue.

Turn-taking is the fundamental mechanism that regulates conversational flow, ensuring that speakers alternate smoothly and cooperatively to maintain mutual understanding (Meyer, 2023). Nat's way of turn-taking reflects his attempt to take control of the situation through his rapid and short questions. The conversation is also not dominated by asymmetrical adjacency pairs out of fear; each question does not receive the expected response. Repair is latent in formulation and clarification caused by disbelief. Also, for preference and sequential organization, the structure of the conversation reveals a deliberate deviation from the expected social responses. The sequential organization is not linear; it is characterized by disruption followed by reorganization. Death asks Nat to get a glass of water or a Fresca and to sit down, but Nat ignores his request. One's expectation of adjacent pairs in the form of request-response has been left stranded. Nat ignores Death's request. Also, when Death asks Nat questions, Nat's response does not display full conviction but rather a reluctant alignment with Death's claim, shaped by fear and uncertainty. Nat's second response, saying "no" reflects a correct adjacent pair when Death asks, "Is it Halloween?" For Death, he starts to repair the overlap, clarify his identity, and give answers to Nat's questions. Death says, "Then I'm Death".

Fear is also reflected upon Nat's body language. He resorts to nonverbal resources such as freezing and stiffness, wide open eyes, nervous gestures, forward lean, and vocal hesitation to express his astonishment. His tense, uneasy gaze and the way he opens his hands subtly convey fear, tension, and a sense of disbelief. The sensory environment is embodied through the calm voice, the dim lighting, and the trembling tone. The emotional atmosphere is perceptible through multiple sensory channels. Multiple temporalities coexist in this scene; Death's speech and movements unfold timelessly since he is associated with eternity. Nat's reactions are hurried, and this contrast creates the dramatic tension between life and death. Nat dominates the spatial composition, having control over the scene.

For materiality, the embodied presence of the two characters creates meaning. Death's dark robe materializes power and Nat's physical withdrawal embodies vulnerability. According to Mondada (2019), in social interaction, materiality refers to the way tools, objects, and spaces are active resources, not passive backgrounds since participants engage with material resources. Each material element has an organizational force in the sense that it facilitates possibilities for interaction. In moments of fear, moving away from an object or escaping from loud noises reorganizes spatial/material relations. Hence, materiality translates fear into physical actions and supports interaction.

Dialogue 2

Nat: Now, wait a minute

Death: I'm sorry. I can't help you.

Nat: You look a little like me.

Give me some time.

Death: I can't. What do you want me to say?

Nat: One more day. You play chess?

Death: No, I don't.

Nat: You play gin rummy?

Death: Do I play gun rummy?

Nat: You're good, huh?

Death: Very good.

Nat: I'll tell you what I'll do (Allen, 1968, p. 4)



Figure 2. A Scene From *Death Knocks*
(Joshi, 2020, 00:04:37)

In dialogue 2 topic shift is motivated by fear. Both Nat and Death take turns, but for the second time, Nat breaks the natural flow of the conversation and changes the pace of the dialogue by talking about another topic to calm down. Nat tells Death that he looks like him, and this is considered irrelevant regarding the main context of the dialogue. Nat constantly interrupts Death and reiterates his desire not to go with him. Nat's state of confusion urges him not to give a chance for Death to respond. He keeps his verbal turn longer than usual. He prolongs the dialogue as if it could give him a better chance to live. Both Nat and Death use adjacency pairs of request and refusal. Death says, "I'm sorry," and "I can't." Rejecting requests is a dispreferred response in the CA preference strategy. Nat then asks Death to play with him, but Death doesn't refuse that time. These adjacency pairs are unbalanced as Nat asks many questions and Death gives short answers. This behaviour reflects an asymmetry in power relations between them.

Nat begins to take pauses before speaking to mark interruptions and overlaps. When Nat decides to exploit his intelligence and forget his fear, the pattern of conversation changes since his psychological state has become stable. For preference, Death's refusal to Nat's requests from the beginning reflects unfavorable responses. Nat's new request to play games to save his life reflects his escalating tension and fear. Nat uses repair to defuse the situation or redirect the conversation. Upon refusing Nat's request, Nat repairs the critical situation by turning it into a friendly game. Death himself uses repair when he says, "Do I play gun rummy?" It is an example of repair initiation by misunderstanding. In talking about playing, Nat asks Death whether he is good at playing or not, saying, "You are good, huh?" "Huh" as a backchannel signal denotes asking. For sequential organization, this dialogue progresses from rejection and pleading to negotiation, then playing and bargaining. This is considered a natural sequence under the pressure of fear.

Body language and nonverbal cues complete the verbal dialogue, enriching its meaning. According to statistics given by the University of California, 7% of human communication is limited to words only, while 55% depends on body language, movements, and gestures, and 38% on the tone of voice and the pauses used. Body language is the language that is most responsible for effective human communication (Almotery et al., 2024). Nat starts to stand up to confront Death as an attempt to save his life. He tries to regain control by extending his hand over Death's face as a sign of challenge. Nat tries to create a safe distance in confronting Death through words and movements. His fear begins to transform from physical paralysis to defensive activity. Nat's tone of voice changes during defence and persuasion from a trembling tone to a calm, persuasive one.

Dialogue 3

Nat: So I'll see you tomorrow.

Death: What do you mean you'll see me tomorrow?

Nat: I won the extra day. Leave me alone.

Death: You were serious?

Nat: We made a deal.

Death: Yeah, but

Nat: Don't "but" me. I won twenty-four hours.

Come back tomorrow.

Death: I didn't know we were actually playing for time.

Nat: That's too bad for you. You should pay attention. (Allen, 1968, p. 7)



Figure 3. A Scene From *Death Knocks*
(Joshi, 2020, 00:09:34)

This dialogue reflects how conversational patterns and social behavior differ with the difference of the psychological states of the involved participants. When Nat starts to play, he exchanges his serious tone for a playful one. By forgetting fear, he stops repeating words and questions, replies directly, and explains. Turn-taking in this dialogue takes place quickly; there are no periods of silence, and the situation this time is going in Nat's favor. Nat achieves success over Death, defeats him, takes the initiative, and interrupts Death. Nat's fear drives him to speak quickly before Death's refusal to their deal regarding the game. The process of turn taking between Nat and Death is presented in turn construction units

(TCU) where they use different sentence structures, including sentences, clauses, phrases, and lexical items. They anticipate completion to TCU, targeting this point as a suitable place for starting a new talk. For sequence organization, the dialogue progresses from explanation to insistence and justification. Each sentence is stronger than the previous one. Adjacency pairs used in this dialogue show the conflict between realistic perception (Death) and defensive illusion (Nat). Nat's fear makes him give a response that is logically inconsistent but psychologically consistent with his desire to survive. Death starts to use derogatory questions and back channel signals like "yeah." He feels stressed out of defeat, repeating Nat's words in a denouncing manner.

Since Nat feels at ease upon forgetting the idea of death, his speech starts to be organized. Nat starts to use complete sentences, give orders and dispreferred responses in responding to Death to show his refusal to Death's authority. He says, "Come back tomorrow," "Leave me alone," and "See you tomorrow." By contrast, Death starts to feel interrupted upon his failure, starting to ask more derogatory questions such as "you were serious?" and "from what account?" He uses backchannel signals such as "yeah, but..." Moreover, like Nat at the beginning of the conversation, he repeats the interrogative word "what?" out of surprise. His speech starts to be random and disorderly. Death just tries to repair the misunderstanding, but Nat refuses this repair, saying, "You should pay attention".

For paralinguistic features, Nat's tone in imperative sentences reflects triumph and agitation at the same time. His body language appears strongly defensive. Nat's expanded fingers and open postures become an attempt to show dominance and impose his perspective. Spreading fingers here does not suggest self-confidence but rather an attempt to impose authority. For Death, he appears weaker than Nat in this scene, and his joined fingers suggest indifference and indicate a restrained, evaluative stance. Death speaks calmly, surrendering to a reality that he finds unacceptable. His body appears closed, suggesting a loss of control as if he is in a defensive position. Hence, all movements appear synchronized with the chosen words, and the interaction displays an embodied asymmetry.

Dialogue between characters in this play does not adhere to the main dialogue strategies; it lacks a natural conversational opening in the opposite of what happens between characters when they meet for the first time. "Topic shift" as a conversational strategy is employed when Nat exploits the game between him and Death to escape the predicament in which he is placed. Also, certain strategies are used, such as preferred and unpreferred responses, requests for clarification, exchange of roles, and correction of what is said. The closing stage of the conversation doesn't include the use of descending intonation or an atmosphere of politeness and comfort between the two parties. Since fear is the main theme in this play, Nat's fear makes him be involved in more activities, including speech and bodily perceptions. In talking to Death, objects that Nat is occupied with are sensory entities with tangible properties, such as his glasses, his newspaper, and the playing cards. He interacts with these objects to hold on to reality and to forget fear. He sometimes withdraws from verbal interaction to concentrate on other senses.

Conversational Patterns in *Death* (1975)

Death deals with a thorny topic that Woody Allen previously raised in 1968, which is escaping from death. The play revolves around Kleinman, who is awakened by a group of people who throw him into a futile pursuit of the serial murderer, and he finds himself forced to face this fate. During the chase, Kleinman meets several characters who participate in a plan that is unknown to him, and each of them gives their opinion on the matter of the chase. While the group is busy searching for the murderer, Kleinman finds himself face-to-face with the murderer. Fear of death is the main theme in the two selected plays. There is a similarity between the openings of the two plays: *Death* and *Death Knocks*, and thus the conversational patterns in both plays seem similar.

Dialogue 1

Al: We need you. Get dressed.

Kleinman: What?

Sam: Let's go.

Kleinman: What is this?

Al: Come on, move.

Kleinman: Move where? It is the middle of the night.

John: The killer's been spotted. They saw him entering the park.

Kleinman: What killer?

Victor: This is no time for babbling.

Kleinman: Who is babbling? What killer? I'm in a deep sleep? (Allen, 1975, p. 48)



Figure 4. A Scene From Woody Allen's One Act Plays *Death & God*
(Slater, 2019, 00:07:20)

Unlike *Death Knocks*, in *Death*, conversations take place between various characters who seem afraid of confronting death, and this is reflected in their way of speaking. The play starts with the appearance of Kleinman, with his rising intonation and a drop in pitch. Upon hearing knocks on the door, Kleinman starts to employ short signals of surprise in the form of a question to denote disbelief, confusion, and surprise, such as "huh?" It is used as an inquiry for receiving an affirmative reply. The strangers who come to Kleinman at midnight give orders from the moment they see him without using greetings. They say, "Hey," as an interjection to call attention. Kleinman repeats his question word "what," so an atmosphere of turbulence prevails. He also uses exclamation marks and more interrogative questions, such as "which maniac?" and "which strangler (Allen, 1975, p. 49)?" Kleinman repeats the declarative sentence "I'm coming" (p. 46) and replies to their orders with condemnation or ignorance, and this is a dispreferred response concerning CA. All of them are talking quickly, and Kleinman keeps interrupting them.

In dialogue one, since the strangers fail to choose an appropriate setting, the dialogue seems pointless. It doesn't include the two primary phases of any ordinary dialogue: the opening stage and the closing stage. It lacks greetings, falling intonation, formulaic expressions, discourse markers, and pre-closings. Turn-taking doesn't proceed naturally. The strangers take turns and give orders to Kleinman, giving him no chance to understand. They don't adhere to the main rules governing turn-taking. Kleinman's role becomes restricted to expressing astonishment, hesitations, and asking questions. However, the strangers don't focus on any arranged set of repair techniques. Despite referring to the killer as John, Kleinman asks, "What killer?" So, the trouble source lies in not understanding what happens.

The stage of "repair initiation" starts when Kleinman asks many questions for clarification. Starting to provide information about the killer is the "repair outcome." Kleinman's insistence on asking many questions for clarification is considered "a second repair initiation." Kleinman then interjects and breaks in, so the interruption seems competitive. He only begins to show politeness once he starts to understand. He says, "You can relax (p. 51)." However, when they begin to suspect him, Kleinman starts to use requests, silence, more declarative sentences, rising intonation, and long pauses to show innocence. As a result, they begin to depend on backchannel signals such as "uh-huh" to show understanding. One of them begins to show anger, asking him not to ask questions again. He also uses interjections such as "well" before his requests to introduce a remark.

For action sequencing and nonverbal cues, the sequence of actions is disrupted; the dialogue doesn't follow a request-response pattern. There is a series of overlapping sequences. This reflects the lack of shared understanding. Concerning preference organization, all responses seem dispreferred and face-threatening for Kleinman, and Kleinman's responses also seem dispreferred for the strangers. Kleinman shows intense fear, shock, and a feeling of helplessness by putting his hands on his head as a way to protect his body mentally and physically. He shows astonishment towards an unbearable reality. All involved characters in this dialogue fail to foster understanding, build relations, or communicate well out of fear.

Dialogue 2

Kleinman: Doctor!

Doctor: I'm dying.

Kleinman: I'll get a doctor.

Doctor: I am a doctor.

Kleinman: Yes, but you are a dying doctor.

Doctor: It's too late he caught me... ugh...

There was no place to run.

Kleinman: Help! Help! Somebody come quickly!

Did you get a good look at him?

Doctor: No, just suddenly, a stab in the back.

I'm dying, Kleinman. (Allen, 1975, p. 82)



Figure 5. A Scene From Woody Allen's One Act Plays *Death & God*
(Slater, 2019, 00:33:38)

The dialogue begins unnaturally between Kleinman and the doctor, as is common in plays where the emotional context influences the conversational pattern. Kleinman expresses his exclamation upon seeing the doctor dying. There is a natural and sequential system of turn-taking in this dialogue. Both the doctor and Kleinman take turns without any interruption from the other. Due to the high tension and fear, Kleinman expands the role and holds the floor for a longer period, expressing the internal state of anxiety. Kleinman starts to direct two questions to the doctor to change the pace of the dialogue, which is considered a set of declarative sentences from the beginning. The adjacency pairs illustrate the dynamic interactions between the statement and response, the statement and correction, and the question and answer.

In this dialogue, there are two types of repair mechanisms. In saying, "I'm a doctor," the doctor performs self-initiated self-repair, and in saying "yes, but you are a dying doctor," Kleinman performs other-initiated other-repair. "The trouble source" is the point where both Kleinman and the doctor signal the problem. The moment when they start to repair each other's utterances is called "repair initiation." The moment when they appear cooperative, accepting each other's repair attempts, is called "the outcome." Regarding repair mechanisms, the speaker performs a self-repair in a self-initiated manner. The recipient performs a repair in self-initiated other-repair. Other-initiated self-repair occurs when the recipient signals a problem in the speaker's speech, and, in return, the speaker clarifies the utterance. In other-initiated other repair, the recipient signals the problem and corrects it (Mills & Redeker, 2023). Out of repairing each other's responses, most responses are dispreferred ones in the context of CA. However, this doesn't suggest any disagreement between the two parties; they just provide clarification. Regarding sequence organization, the sequence begins with shocking information and ends with a dramatic escalation. Each utterance builds on the previous one and contributes to the escalation of the situation until the tragic end of the doctor's death.

Nonverbal cues, including prosodic and paralinguistic ones, help in embodying the atmosphere of horror in this scene. The vocalized particle "ugh" used by the doctor, pauses, overlaps, and the falling intonation reveal both fear and annoyance. It is part of turn- turn-constructive units presented by Sidnell (2010). It fills the gap during thinking or denotes moments of realization before completing speech. Pauses taken by the doctor don't mean a sequence break, but they are used as a sign of a repair initiation coming. Multiple sensory cues such as sight, touch, gestures, and facial expressions play a vital role in conveying the psychological atmosphere of the scene. The faint, trembling voice, the dying breath, and the dying body are all material resources that express the suffocation of time and space. Therefore, materiality contributes to the creation of fear in this scene. Kleinman's touch on the doctor's body and the glances exchanged between them constitute both physical and tactile dimensions of multimodal interaction. This dialogue is considered a series of intertwined temporal events. The scene reveals the time of the external event, the time of the internal feeling of fear, and the time of the inevitable end. The enclosed space, darkness, and the lack of an escape route are all material elements that create the psychological pressure.

Dialogue 3

Maniac: Kleinman?

Kleinman: Who are you?

Maniac: The homicidal killer.

Can I sit down? I am exhausted.

Kleinman: You are---the killer?

Maniac: Sure. Don't get excited.

I am armed.

Kleinman: You---You are going to kill me?

Maniac: Of course. That's my specialty.

Kleinman: You---You are crazy.

Maniac: Sure I am crazy. (Allen, 1975, p. 101)



Figure 6. A Scene From Woody Allen's One Act Plays *Death & God*
(Slater, 2019, 00:49:51)

Fear reaches its climax in the third dialogue as Kleinman meets the killer for the first time, and this naturally reflects on the pattern of conversation. Maniac starts talking to Kleinman without using greetings; he uses elliptical questions, and Kleinman, as a reaction, uses information-seeking questions. Out of Kleinman's fear, he adopts long pauses, delays, repetition, and falling intonation. His speech in this dialogue is restricted to rhetorical interrogative questions; he doesn't use any declarative sentences. Turns are organized in sequence, and there are no overlaps. Maniac dominates turn-taking, while Kleinman only asks questions to seek information. Kleinman's turns are responsive. This pattern shows asymmetry in turn distribution. However, in reaction to Maniac's request, "Can I sit down?" Kleinman ignores responding to it; he disrupts the turn-taking system. This is considered a dispreferred action displacement or sequence disruption.

Adjacency pairs are core units of conversation, linking an initial action with a predictable response to maintain coherence and manage interaction (Nonomura & Mori, 2025). All adjacency pairs used in the form of questions and answers show deviation from preferred responses since Maniac always provides confrontational answers, not socially unfamiliar ones. Hofstetter (2020) explains that each action recalls another relevant one as in "questioning" and "answering." Giving a reaction becomes a sign of understanding. For preference organization and repair mechanisms, Maniac uses dispreferred responses to create a dominant identity. This is called "dispreferred turn-format," as Sidnell (2010) puts it. Also, in reaction to Kleinman's questions, Maniac does not make any self-repair or clarification; he only creates deliberate interactional trouble. Regarding sequence organization, this dialogue progresses through predictable sequences. The sequence develops gradually towards a dramatic climax. Regarding action formation, Kleinman adopts topic shift in responding to the request for permission presented by Maniac. Vocal tones of the two characters support the ascending sequence of the conversation.

Like all previous dialogues, non-verbal communication plays a decisive role in conveying messages. Kleinman puts his hand on his cheek, covering his eyes as a non-verbal cue expressing intense fear. This frequently occurs in Woody Allen's plays. It is a trial for protecting oneself and hiding feelings of fear. Maniac puts his hand on Kleinman's shoulder, and this gesture suggests threat and physical control. Since looking directly at the camera creates a direct connection with the audience, both Maniac and Kleinman look at the audience with a scary look to convey psychological fear. Multisensoriality serves as a means of conveying feelings of control and fear. For multiple temporalities, different actions continue, such as threats, while others are instant, such as sudden replies. Mondada (2019) asserts that each interactive moment is connected to its time, overlapping with others to form the complete meaning. In this dialogue, lighting, close distance between characters, body itself, and the place as a space taken for interaction are considered interactive resources. Dim lighting, for example, denotes horror.

Dialogue 4

John: Kleinman... what was he like?

Kleinman: Like me.

John: What do you mean, like you?

Kleinman: Oooh... You gonna listen to Jensen or you gonna listen to me?

John: All right, don't get angry...

Kleinman: All right, then, don't talk like a jerk... He looked like me...

John: Bring him some water.

Kleinman: What do I need water for?

John: Are you afraid to die?

Kleinman: It's not that I'm afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens.

Oh... oh... ugggmmfff. (Dies) (Allen, 1975, p. 106)



Figure 7. A Scene From Woody Allen's One Act Plays *Death & God* (Slater, 2019, 00:53:16)

In this dialogue, there are many characters involved in the scene, but two characters are only talking to each other: John, the police officer, and Kleinman. Without greetings, the officer asks many questions and gives commands. Kleinman's responses are short and defensive since he is dying. The change-of-state token "Oooh" is used by Kleinman to express resentment. It functions as a pause to turn the dialogue in his favor and to disrupt the natural flow of dialogue. There is no natural turn-taking sequence; there is a shift from a question-answer sequence to a question-question sequence in replying, "You gonna listen to Jensen...?" Then, the pattern of adjacency pairs changes to a request and a protest question. Kleinman says, "What do I need water for?" After that, a natural turn-taking sequence of a question and answer appears. Some contextualization cues, such as "Oooh" used by Kleinman and "All right" used by John, reflect John's cooperation and Kleinman's resentment.

Since repair mechanisms are related to authority and agitation, different kinds of repair appear in this dialogue. In asking, "What do you mean, like you?" John makes other-initiated self-repair. Since Kleinman replies wrathfully, the situation returns to repair failure. Kleinman, then, makes self-initiated self-repair when he clarifies the matter, saying, "It is not that...?" Regarding preference organization, most responses are dispreferred, especially Kleinman's ones in protesting against John's questions. Also, instead of thanking John for ordering some water for him, he provides a contradictory response. In addition, in responding to John's question, "Are you afraid to die?" Kleinman gives a detailed response instead of giving answers with either "yes" or "no," and this reflects his hesitation and imbalance. John, by contrast, gives a preferred response in responding to Kleinman's question, saying, "All right, don't get angry." Fear creates progressively escalating stress in the sequence of this dialogue. According to Pillet-Shore (2017), preference organization organizes a variety of activities, including agreements and disagreements, acceptances and declines. Preferred turns are face-affirming, whereas dispreferred ones are face-threatening. While dispreferred second pair-parts are typically delayed or mitigated, preferred second pair-parts are produced promptly and without delay.

In interaction, Mondada (2019) calls for focusing on the senses, as people experience the world through bodily and sensory perceptions. Objects and materials are therefore not merely tools to be used but sensory entities with tangible properties that participants orient to within interaction. The tactile sensation in this dialogue plays a vital role in conveying meaning, and facial expressions are not clear. All the investigators lean towards Kleinman with pity. There is no physical distance between all characters. John's tone is low, reflecting his anxiety. Likewise, Kleinman's tone of voice sounds low, reflecting his surrender, fear, and inner tension. The chronological sequence creates a gradual escalation of fear. The investigators' body language reflects an attempt to intervene and protect Kleinman, while Kleinman's hunched body on the stage with his hands on his knees reflects pain and surrender.

V. CONCLUSION

Through study and analysis, it becomes clear that in moments of fear, conversational patterns undergo noticeable shifts, as speakers tend to modify their linguistic choices, turn-taking behaviors, and response timing in order to manage heightened emotional pressure. Such changes often manifest through shorter utterances, delayed responses, increased interruptions, and a greater reliance on nonverbal cues, all of which reflect the speaker's attempt to regain control over the interaction. The concept of death functions as a powerful psychological and linguistic force capable of reshaping the structure, tone, and dynamics of human dialogue. Fear of death not only alters lexical choices and rhetorical strategies but also drives speakers towards heightened emotional expression, reduced cognitive elaboration, and increased reliance on affiliative, defensive, or ritualistic forms of language.

Moreover, the study proves that fear of death functions as a powerful force, restructuring human dialogue across several interconnected dimensions. Existential fear impacts the embodied and spatial dimensions of communication. Gestures, posture, vocal qualities, and spatial positioning reveal heightened anxiety and serve as mechanisms for emotional regulation or symbolic stability. Dialogue under fear is compressed, metaphorically intensified, and marked by shifts in

turn-taking, politeness, and coherence. These patterns demonstrate that communication under existential threat is both a cognitive negotiation and a survival strategy. By integrating linguistic and psychological perspectives, the study highlights how fear transforms dialogue into a multisensory, temporal, spatial, and embodied experience. The findings underscore the value of interdisciplinary approaches to understanding extreme emotional states and their implications for clinical communication, crisis interactions, and interpersonal discourse.

REFERENCES

- [1] Adel, M. A. (2019). The semiotics of paratexts in Haifa Betar's novel *Bleeding Dreams: A study in modern literary criticism*. *An-Najah University Journal for Research – B (Humanities)*, 33(6), 963–972. <https://doi.org/10.35552/0247-033-006-003>
- [2] Alhourani et al. (2025a). Decolonizing the Stage: Exploring Postcolonial Narratives and Identity in Rohina Malik's *Unveiled*. *World Journal of English Language*. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v16n1p95>
- [3] Alhourani, M. et al. (2025b). Beyond the Mother Knot: Trauma and Intersectionality in Suzan-Lori Parks' *In the Blood*. *Theory & Practice in Language Studies (TPLS)*, 15(8). <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1508.05>
- [4] Afzali, K. (2013). Character revelation and dialogue interpretation through Politeness theory and Conversation analysis in dramatic discourse: The case of Woody Allen's *Death Knocks*. *Journal of Language and Literature*, 2(6), 43-54.
- [5] Allen, W. (1968). *Death knocks*. The New Yorker.
- [6] Allen, W. (1975). *Without Feathers*. New York: Random House.
- [7] Al-Mamoory, S. et al. (2023). A pragmatic study of turn-taking and adjacency pairs in online conversations. *International Journal of English Language Studies*, 5(2), 84–93. <https://doi.org/10.32996/ijels.2023.5.2.8>
- [8] Almotery, A. et al. (2024). Bridging Communication Gaps: A Study on Effective Patient Communication Among Respiratory Therapy Students and Interns. *Cureus*, 16(5). <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.60484>
- [9] Alqahtani, D. (2024). Conversation Analysis: The Case of the Power of Language. *Egyptian Journal of Linguistics and Translation*, 12(1), 174-193. <https://doi.org/10.21608/ejlt.2023.238051.1041>
- [10] Antaki, C. (2008). Discourse analysis and conversation analysis. *The SAGE handbook of social research methods*, 431-446. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446212165.n25>
- [11] Chang, K. K. et al. (2025). *Multimodal conversation structure understanding*. arXiv. Accessed 23rd November, 2025, from <https://arxiv.org/abs/2505.17536>
- [12] Clift, R. (2016). *Conversation analysis*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139022767>
- [13] Doehler, S. et al. (2021). Multimodal Assemblies for Prefacing a Dispreferred Response: A cross-linguistic Analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 689275. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.689275>
- [14] Elhalafaway, A. et al. (2025). From Text to Performance: A Lehmannian Study of Postdramatic Strategies in Churchill's *Escape Alone* and Stephens' *Light Falls*. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 6, 1824-1832. <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1606.04>
- [15] Hassan, S. et al. (2025). Coherence-driven multimodal safety dialogue with active learning for Embodied Agents. In *Proceedings of the 24th International Conference on Autonomous Agents and Multiagent Systems (AAMAS 2025)* (pp. 950-958). International Foundation for Autonomous Agents and Multiagent Systems. <https://doi.org/10.5555/3709347.3743614>
- [16] Hofstetter, E. (2020). Sequence Organization: Understanding What Drives Talk. In A. De Fina & A. Georgakopoulou (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Discourse Studies* (pp. 121–142). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108348195.007>
- [17] Jang, J. et al. (2025). *Enabling Chatbots with Eyes and Ears: An Immersive Multimodal Conversation System for Dynamic Interactions*. arXiv, pre-print arXiv:2506.0042. <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2025.acl-long.1519>
- [18] Joshi, A. (2020, January 30). *Death Knocks (a Play by Woody Allen) -The Drama Club, BITS Goa*. [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTFgacD3k0Q>. Accessed 27th December, 2025.
- [19] Levinson, S. C. (2012). Action formation and ascription. In J. Sidnell & T. Stivers (Eds.), *The handbook of conversation analysis* (pp. 103–130). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118325001.ch6>
- [20] Lilja, N. (2022). Multimodal conversation analysis as a method for studying second language use and learning in naturally occurring interaction. In *Gesture and multimodality in second language acquisition* (pp. 204-228). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003100683-9>
- [21] Mazeland, H. (2006). Conversation analysis. In K. Brown (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of language and linguistics* (2nd ed., Vol. 3, pp. 153–162). Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B0-08-044854-2/00314-X>
- [22] Meyer, A. S. (2023). Timing in conversation. *Journal of Cognition*, 6(1), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.5334/joc.268>
- [23] Mills, G. J., & Redeker, G. (2023). Self-Repair Increases Referential Coordination. *Cognitive Science*, 47(5). <https://doi.org/10.1111/cogs.13329>
- [24] Mondada, L. (2019). Contemporary issues in conversation analysis: Embodiment, materiality, multimodality and multisensoriality in social interaction. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 145, 47–62. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2019.01.016>
- [25] Nonomura, R., & Mori, H. (2025). Who speaks next? Multi-party AI discussion leveraging the systematics of turn-taking in Murder Mystery games. *Frontiers in Artificial Intelligence*, 8, 1582287. <https://doi.org/10.3389/frai.2025.1582287>
- [26] Pellet-Rostaing, A. et al. (2023). A multimodal engagement model integrating conversational, visual, and affective signals. *Frontiers in Computer Science*, 5, 112-130.
- [27] Pillet-Shore, D. (2017). Preference organization. In J. Nussbaum (Ed.), *The Oxford research encyclopedia of communication*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.132>
- [28] Penzkofer, A. et al. (2021). ConAn: A usable tool for multimodal conversation analysis. In *Proceedings of the 2021 International Conference on Multimodal Interaction (ICMI '21)* (pp. 341–351). ACM. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3462244.3479886>
- [29] Shahbar, H. (2024). Developing intercultural competence: The role of communication in the adaptation of Saudi women in Canada. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 12, 595–613. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2024.1212039>
- [30] Sidnell, J. (2010). *Conversation analysis: An introduction*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

- [31] Sidnell, J. (2020). *Conversation Analysis*. Retrieved November 16, 2025, from <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003031758-14/conversation-analysis-eva-maria-martika-jack-sidnell>.
- [32] Slater, A. (2019, November 2). *Woody Allen's one-act plays DEATH & GOD* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-TGtq9Z7Tc>. Accessed 27th of Dec 2025.
- [33] Tomasine, J. S. (2024). Multiactivity during formal, formative reading assessment: A multimodal approach. *Frontiers in Communication*, 9, 134-150. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2024.134150>
- [34] Uddin, M. A. (2023). Communication barriers in work environment: Understanding impact and challenges. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 7(11), 1201–1206. <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2023.71118>
- [35] Van De Microop, D. et al. (2020). Investigating the interplay between formal and informal leaders in a shared leadership configuration: A multimodal conversation analytical study. *Human Relations*, 73(4), 490-515. <https://emcawiki.net/VanDeMicroop-et-al2020>. Accessed 27th December, 2025.
- [36] Wooffitt, R. (2008). *Conversation analysis* (2nd ed.). Polity Press.
- [37] Yuldasheva, D. K. (2024). Communication barriers in intercultural communication and ways to overcome them. *European ScienceMethodical Journal*, 2(8), 67–73. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/392135971>. Accessed 27th December, 2025.
- [38] Zhou, Y. (2025). An analysis of English multimodal conversation based on identity construction. *CLEC 2025 Proceedings*, 3, 78-85. https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-430-3_20



Mohammad A. Abu Adel is a scholar specializing in modern Arabic literature. He holds a PhD with honors in Modern Literature (2014), an MA (2009), and a BA (2005) from Damascus University. With 14 years of teaching experience, he has served as an associate professor at Al Yamamah University (2019–2024) and currently teaches at UAE University, UAE. Dr. Abu Adel has authored over thirty publications in globally indexed journals. He is an active member of academic committees, including Course Equivalency and Accreditation. Email: mohamad.abouadel@uaeu.ac.ae & <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7987-5464>



Ayman Elhalafawy is a professor of English Language and Literature and head of Department of English Language at Faculty of Arts, Kafrelsheikh University, Egypt. Prof. Elhalafawy's key areas of research include Minority Literature, Globalization and Literature, posthuman literature, and American Literature. Email: ayman.elhalafawi@art.kfs.edu.eg & <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9115-685X>



Samir H. Khalifa (b. September 13, 1984-) is an Egyptian scholar specializing in modern English literature. He holds a PhD with first honors (2022) from Kafrelsheikh University. His academic expertise encompasses a range of aspects of English literature, including literary analysis and critical theory. Email: samirhashem@nec.edu.sa & <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-8391-4856>



Ahmad Mohammad Al-Mahamed, born in Syria in 1977, has over twenty years of teaching experience. I hold a PhD in Philosophy, specializing in Arabic Language Curricula, from Mansoura University in Egypt, with honors. I also hold a Master's in Education, specializing in Arabic Language Curricula, from Al Ain University in the UAE, with honors (2020). I also hold a Higher Diploma in Educational Development from Abu Dhabi University in the UAE, with honors (2017). And a Bachelor's in Arts, Arabic Language Department, from Damascus University in Syria (2006). Email: ahmad.almahamed@adu.ac.ae ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001>



Fatma T. G. El-Zaghhal is an Assistant Professor of Linguistics, Tanta University, Faculty of Arts, English Department, Tanta, Egypt. Assistant Professor of Phonetics, Tanta Civil University, Faculty of Al-Alsun, Egypt. Certified Consultant at Ifad Academy and Head of the English Department at ARTA Journal. She is a Reviewer of scientific researches and a Member of the editorial board. She is a Holder of TESOL certificate from Arizona State University, the United States. Email: fatma_tawakol@art.tanta.edu.eg & <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2867-9066>