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Threatening contexts

An examination of threatening language from linguistic, legal and law enforcement perspectives

Tammy Gales

26.1 Introduction to threatening contexts

In late 2008, the American International Group (AIG) received a government bailout of $182 billion, the largest corporate bailout in history, to ward off a financial collapse (Greider, 2010). Yet, despite posting a loss of $61.7 billion in the fourth quarter of that year – also the largest loss in corporate history – it was revealed in March, 2009, that AIG had already paid out $165 million in bonus pay to executives. This pay was part of a larger bonus plan approximated at $450 million, much of which was scheduled to go to those in the financial services division – the unit that caused the massive losses for the corporation (Raum, 2009). Executives and employees who were scheduled to testify in a congressional hearing on the matter began receiving anonymous written and verbal threats at personal emails and phone numbers. The following are among the countless received (Pergam, 2009):

- “The Revolution is coming. The family members of your executives are not safe. Your blood will run through the streets in the coming month”
- “If the bonuses don’t stop, it will be very likely that every CEO @ AIG has a bulls-eye on their backs”
- “All the executives and their families should be executed with piano wire around their necks – my greatest hope”

In such threatening situations as these, there is an immediate linguistic conflict – “any situation or behaviour involving parties (individuals or groups) who are, or consider themselves to be, instrumentally, intellectually and/or emotionally opposed or simply feel antagonistic to each other” (Jeffries and O’Driscoll, this volume). In the previous instances, members of the public were outraged over the actions taken by executives and employees of AIG in the context of the federal bailout and responded with linguistic antagonism. For the parties involved in such linguistic interactions – the senders of the messages, the recipients of the
messages, the law enforcement officers tasked with the investigations and the lawyers and judges potentially involved in the prosecutions – they must first ask: are these antagonistic communications threats? For each participant in the process, there may be different answers to that question.

The primary goal of this chapter is to integrate recent scholarship and practice in a new way in order to address the question: what constitutes a threat from various applied perspectives – linguistic, legal and law enforcement? At the heart of this discussion is the role played by “context” in each of the three different perspectives: linguistic (Section 26.2), legal (Section 26.3) and law enforcement (Section 26.4). Finally, with the aim of bridging the gap between these three perspectives, the results of two new linguistic studies (Gales, 2010; Nini, 2017) are presented, demonstrating how the intertwining of threatening words, threatener intent and recipient effect highlight the overall importance of functional interpretations of meaning in such threatening contexts (Section 26.5). Implications and suggestions for future research conclude the chapter (Section 26.6).

26.2 A linguistic perspective

Every time we speak or write, we do things with words; these speech acts help us determine the purpose or function of utterances (Austin, 1962). For example (CTARC):

- “I think this is going to be so much fun!” (OTH)
- “Be careful going to your car alone” (STLK)
- “I wish life could be better for all” (VIOL)

In each of the authentic utterances above, the speaker or writer linguistically manifests acts of predicting, warning and wishing, respectively.

Threats, as in “I will hunt you down and kill you like a wild animal” (STLK), fall under the category of commissive speech acts – those that linguistically commit the speaker or writer to some future action – along with other acts such as promises and pledges. Threats, however, differ from other acts in this category as they are specifically made to the detriment as opposed to the benefit of the hearer (Fraser, 1998; Shuy, 1993).

Searle (1969) further distinguished between direct speech acts, where there is a direct relationship between the form and function of an utterance, and indirect speech acts, where that relationship is implied rather than direct. For example, a speaker uttering the phrase “I’m going hiking this weekend” is directly making a declarative statement meant to provide information, but could also be indirectly offering an invitation to the listener. This distinction becomes especially important in the case of interpreting threatening speech acts.

Direct threats will often identify a victim or object of harm, a time, and/or a harmful act, as in the utterance “I’m going to bomb this school on Saturday” (OTH); indirect threats are more vague and, depending on context, can be interpreted as either a menacing threat or a helpful warning, as in the utterance “you’d better watch out if you know what’s good for you” (Yamanaka, 1995).

Thus, scholars disagree about where exactly a threat technically becomes a threat – regardless of whether it will be carried out or not. This has to do with the three aspects of speech acts: the locutionary act, the illocutionary force and the perlocutionary effect (Austin, 1962).
26.2.1 Locution, illocution and perlocution

The locutionary act is simply the act of saying something, i.e. the locution is the compilation of the words uttered. The illocutionary force refers to the intent of the speaker, i.e. the specific purpose the speaker has in uttering the words. Examples of various illocutionary acts include greeting, inviting and refusing. Finally, the perlocutionary effect is the effect of the speaker’s utterance on the hearer, i.e. the reaction of the hearer to the utterance. The hearer may return the speaker’s greeting, for example, or she may accept or decline an invitation to dinner. However, without context – textual, historical, sociocultural, etc. – what may appear to be one kind of speech act may be interpreted as another. Take, for instance, the previous CTARC examples:

- “I think this is going to be so much fun!” (OTH)
  - direct prediction about an upcoming event
  - indirect threat said by a kidnapper to his victim
- “Be careful going to your car alone” (STLK)
  - direct warning said by a worried father to a daughter who works late
  - indirect threat said by a stalker to a victim
- “I wish life could be better for all” (VIOL)
  - direct wish of a boy so in love that he desires life to be as good for everyone else
  - indirect threat said by an alienated teenager to his journal before shooting up a school

And, one rare, non-anonymous one from the previous AIG collection (Pergam, 2009):

“Dear Sir: Ya’ll should have the balls and come clean and give back the bonuses. I know you would never do this so the gov’t ought to take you out back and shoot everyone of you crooked sonofb****es... I would be very careful when I went out side. This is just a warning. If I were ya’ll I would be real afraid. Thanks, Bill”.

In this instance, the text contains a declaration or prediction (“I know you would never do this”), a warning (“I would be very careful when I went out side. This is just a warning”), and a wish (“ya’ll should have the balls and come clean and give back the bonuses”). Finally, “if I were ya’ll I would be real afraid” can be construed as friendly advice or an indirect threat of unknown harm. In the sociocultural context of the anger expressed against AIG’s actions during this particular time, all speech acts included as part of this text (i.e. declaring/predicting, warning, wishing and advising) might be interpreted as threatening.

Pragmatically speaking, then, speech acts, especially indirect ones, are context-dependent since much depends on the interpretation of the act by the hearer (Cutting, 2008). But despite Searle’s (1969) felicity conditions, which state, among other criteria, that a hearer must hear and understand the speech act, it can be argued that a promise is still a promise as long as the speaker intends it to be one. Little depends on the hearer’s understanding of the promise. Likewise, an invitation, by definition, is still the performative act of inviting someone to do something regardless of the hearer’s successful understanding or interpretation of that act. However, threatening – an “uncooperative illocutionary verb” (Fraser, 1975) – by nature problematises this framework, i.e. if a hearer does not interpret an utterance as a threat, is it still, by definition, a threat simply because the speaker intends it to be?
26.2.2 Context and threats

According to Fraser (1998), threats occur when the author expresses 1) his intent to commit or be responsible for commissioning an act, 2) his “belief that this act will result in an unfavourable state of the world for the addressee”, and 3) his intent “to intimidate the addressee through the addressee’s awareness of the intention” (p.161). But he highlights the illocution – the intent – of the threatener to intimidate and instill fear in the recipient of the threat, since this is one of the key components of the act that sets it apart from that of promising, warning or advising.

Other linguists have focused on the perlocution – the effect on the recipient – in defining threats. Storey (1995) states that threats are intrinsically “two-way by nature”; in order for a threat to have meaning, it “must be accepted, or at least acknowledged, by the person being threatened” (p.75). For example, the threat, “I’ll kick your ass, if you don’t apologise” uttered by a teenage girl to her boyfriend with whom she just fought, might not be taken seriously, but rather as a joke meant to lighten the mood. Yet, the same phrase uttered to the same boy in the context of a school yard fight would most likely be accepted by the boy as a serious threat, highlighting the fact that, in addition to the illocutionary force of the utterance, the perlocutionary effect of the utterance and the social context in which it occurs also play a part in the creation of a threat.

Thus, since threats are made for a variety of reasons – to vent anger, to instil fear, to cause a desired result, to challenge authority, to attract attention, to save face, to show intent of purpose, to further negotiations, and to provide humour (Fraser, 1998, Milburn and Watman, 1981), interpreting when such a statement – whether direct or indirect – portends real harm is ultimately a matter of shared “frames” – psychologically (Bateson, 1954/1972), culturally (Hymes, 1974) and socially (Goffman, 1974, 1981). Such “frames” govern our experiences and our “subjective involvement in them” (Goffman, 1974, pp.10–11), allowing individuals to organise experiences, understand events and negotiate meaning within varying contexts.

26.2.3 A linguistic case study

A famous case exemplifying this point is that of Don Tyner (as described in Shuy, 1993). Tyner was an Oklahoma horse breeder who was arrested, indicted and brought to trial in 1981 for extorting two of his employees: Vernon Hyde and Mike Blackburn. The disagreement, which was recorded over three separate conversations, was over who owned financial shares in a particular horse. While there are many nuances to this case, the bottom line is that Tyner claimed he was desiring to settle the situation, while Hyde claimed that Tyner was threatening him because he allegedly had done so on numerous occasions. At the end of the final recording, which included many accusatory statements from Hyde to Tyner, who denied any previous wrongdoing, Tyner took a pause, and changed the topic from the failed attempts to settle business to asking about Hyde’s son in the following exchange (Shuy, 1993, pp.108–9):

\begin{verbatim}
Tyner:    How’s David?
Hyde:     Do what?
Tyner:    How’s David?
Hyde:     You mean my son?
Tyner:    Yep.
Hyde:     Don, don’t threaten my son. Do a lot of things but don’t ever threaten my son.
Tyner:    I didn’t threaten anybody. I just said, “How’s David?”
\end{verbatim}

At the outset of the decontextualised conversation, it is unclear whether this should be taken as a threat to David’s life, or as a request for friendly information with a goal of possibly
concluding the previous argumentative conversation. In this case, given the larger context of the discussions – wherein Tyner had denied accusations of wrongdoing, Tyner had tried to settle the disputes amicably, and Hyde knew the many times in the past that Tyner had taken David to racing events – the jury ultimately declared that this was not a threat on David’s life (nor were any previous allegations of threats real) and acquitted Tyner of all charges (Shuy, 1993). This case demonstrates that it is difficult, if not impossible, “to construct a context-independent definition of ‘threat’” (Storey, 1995, p.74). Thus, both the historical and conversational context in which a threat is allegedly made cannot be excluded from a threat’s core definition.

Pragmatically, then, threats of a serious or potentially dangerous nature can be defined as communicated (written, spoken or signed) speech acts, that are proffered to the detriment of the hearer, that are in the control of the speaker, and that are intended to, and have, the effect of instilling fear in or intimidating a recipient. The addition of the perlocutionary force and an understanding of the overall context in which the threat was proffered play a key role in a linguistic interpretation of the speech act of threatening.

26.3 A legal perspective

Highlighting the linguistic notions of locution, illocution, perlocution and context, Black’s Law Dictionary (n.d.) – the seminal source of meaning of legal terminology – defines a criminal threat as:

A menace; a declaration [locution] of one’s purpose or intention [illocution] to work injury to the person, property, or rights of another. A threat has been defined to be any menace of such a nature and extent [context] as to unsettle the mind of the person on whom it operates, and to take away from his acts that free, voluntary action which alone constitutes consent [perlocution].

(words in italics added)

These differing considerations have been emphasised in several legal cases over the past few decades. As presented in Solan and Tiersma (2005), the following four cases focus on the importance of locution, illocution, perlocution and context, respectively.

26.3.1 Focus on locution

In State v. Methe, a woman had been receiving harassing phone calls from a man. He was charged with making intimidating calls and required to pay a fine. Afterwards, he called her again, complained about the fine, and asked:

“What should I do to retaliate?”

While this was merely a simple question, given the presupposition in the use of the word “retaliate”, the court deemed that, despite the lack of illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect, there is something that needs retaliation and is, therefore, a threat (Solan and Tiersma, 2005, p.206).

26.3.2 Focus on illocution

In United States v. Hoffman, Hoffman sent the following threat to President Ronald Reagan:

“Ronnie, Listen Chump! Resign or You’ll Get Your Brains Blown Out” (the threat included a drawing of a gun shooting a bullet).
One of the primary issues in this case focused on if Hoffman had “communicated his intent to bring about this state of affairs (that is, to kill Reagan or have him killed)” (Solan and Tiersma, 2005, p.200). The jury’s decision, which was later upheld by the appellate court, was that he had indeed communicated his intent to threaten and not merely to speculate about a possible future state of affairs. Hoffman was sentenced to four years in prison for threatening the life of a President (Solan and Tiersma, 2005).

26.3.3 Focus on perlocution

In *United States v. Baker*, two men participated in an email exchange where they discussed violent fantasies they had about assaulting young women. The communications escalated from fantasising to planning as in the following:

B: Just thinking about it anymore doesn’t do the trick …. I need TO DO IT.
G: My feelings exactly! We have to get together …. I will give you more details as soon as I find out my situation …
B: Alrighty then. If not next week, or in January, then definitely sometime in the Summer. Pickings are better than too. Although it’s more crowded

While the messages were clearly “repulsive” (Solan and Tiersma, 2005, p.203), the court found that they did not constitute a threat. They were not sent to a victim and thus, there was no intimidating perlocutionary effect on a recipient.

26.3.4 Focus on context

Finally, in *United States v. Taylor*, a man had started communicating with a woman he had dated in high school. She had since married, so the question in this case was whether the following statement was a prediction or a threat:

Your husband, David Goldstein will have his health take a turn for the worse this Christmas Season and you will be widowed in 1990. I am truly sorry that this is the “Kay Ser Ra Ser Ra” scenario that has to take place. However you will always be the foci of my desires as I remember you to be the most exquisite creature that has ever taken me in. I’m always grateful that we have had the moments given to us and I will be there should you ever desire me again. I can say with all sincerity, I Love You.

The case was deemed too ambiguous at first, but then, after considering the historical context in which this text was written – that the defendant had a twenty-year history of stalking this woman – the court of appeals overturned the ruling, deeming the communication to be “quite reasonably be viewed as a threat” (Solan and Tiersma, 2005, pp.200–1).

While each of these cases highlights different aspects of the threatening process – locution, illocution, perlocution and context, respectively – one recent precedent-setting US Supreme Court case has placed one aspect above all others: the illocution, or threatener intent.

26.3.5 A legal precedent-setting case

In an opinion presented in June 2015, the US Supreme Court determined that Anthony Douglas Elonis, who had been convicted on four counts of violating 18 U.S.C. §875(c),
which makes it a federal crime to transmit in interstate commerce “any communication containing any threat [...] to injure the person of another”, was not guilty of intending to commit threatening acts (Elonis v. United States, 2015, p.1).

The historical context of this case is as follows: in May, 2010, Anthony Douglas Elonis’ wife of seven years left with their two children. In order to “deal with the pain”, Elonis began “listening to more violent music” and using Facebook to post “self-styled “rap” lyrics inspired by the music” (Elonis v. United States, 2015, p.2). In order to distinguish his online persona, he began writing under the pseudonym Tone Dougie. And, despite posting disclaimers that his lyrics were “fictitious” and not meant to resemble actual people, and that he was practicing artistic freedom under his First Amendment rights, the lyrics contained graphically violent language and images clearly directed at his ex-wife, co-workers, a kindergarten class and state and federal law enforcement (Elonis v. United States, 2015, Solan, 2017). The following are a few examples of posts that contributed to the charges (Elonis v. United States, 2015, pp.3–5):

- Hi, I’m Tone Elonis.
  Did you know that it’s illegal for me to say I want to kill my wife? …
  It’s one of the only sentences that I’m not allowed to say …
  Now it was okay for me to say it right then because I was just telling you that it’s illegal for me to say I want to kill my wife …
  Um, but what’s interesting is that it’s very illegal to say I really, really think someone out there should kill my wife …
  But not illegal to say with a mortar launcher.
  Because that’s its own sentence …
  I also found out that it’s incredibly illegal, extremely illegal to go on Facebook and say something like the best place to fire a mortar launcher at her house would be from the cornfield behind it because of easy access to a getaway road and you’d have a clear line of sight through the sun room …
  Yet even more illegal to show an illustrated diagram [diagram of the house]
- Fold up your [protection-from-abuse order] and put it in your pocket.
  Is it thick enough to stop a bullet?
  Try to enforce an Order that was improperly granted in the first place.
  Me thinks the Judge needs an education on true threat jurisprudence.
  And prison time’ll add zeros to my settlement …
  And if worse comes to worse
  I’ve got enough explosives to take care of the State Police and the Sheriff’s Department
- That’s it, I’ve had about enough.
  I’m checking out and making a name for myself.
  Enough elementary schools in a ten mile radius to initiate the most heinous school shooting ever imagined.
  And hell hath no fury like a crazy man in a Kindergarten class.
  The only question is … which one?

After co-workers reported feeling fear, the FBI began monitoring these posts, eventually arrested him, and charged him with five counts of communicating threats (Elonis v. United States, 2015). At trial, Elonis requested that a jury decide if he had intended to communicate
An examination of threatening language

...a “true threat”. Emphasising the perlocutionary aspect of a threat, the District Court instead told the jury that:

[a] statement is a true threat when a defendant intentionally makes a statement in a context or under such circumstances wherein a reasonable person would foresee that the statement would be interpreted by those to whom the maker communicates the statement as a serious expression of an intention to inflict bodily injury or take the life of an individual.

(Elonis v. United States, 2015, p.7)

Under the reasonable person standard, the jury found Elonis guilty on four of the five counts. Elonis challenged the jury instruction upon appeal, but the conviction was affirmed. However, in a somewhat surprising decision by the US Supreme Court (Kaplan, 2016), the seven Justice majority opinion, authored by Chief Justice Roberts, reversed the conviction. The US Supreme Court ruled that “wrongdoing must be conscious to be criminal” and that a defendant must be “blameworthy in mind” before he can be found guilty (Elonis v. United States, 2015, pp.9–10). Due, in part, to Elonis’ frequent disclaimers, he was deemed to be innocent of communicating true threats.

This decision departs from some previous linguistic and legal discussions about what makes a threat a threat. In this instance, the fact that Elonis’ ex-wife, co-workers and state and federal employees felt fear from the public postings was not enough to declare the statements threats, nor was the legal standard of recklessness, as adduced by Justice Alito in his dissent (Kaplan, 2016). Instead, the focus remained on the illocutionary act – the intent of the threatener to intimidate or cause fear – as opposed to the locution – the actual words – or the perlocutionary effect – the effect felt by the targeted recipients in this context. This decision adheres to Fraser’s (1998) focus on the illocutionary aspect of threats and aligns with other one-way speech acts such as bribery and solicitation, where proof demonstrating only one person’s intentional actions are required for the act to be deemed a crime (Shuy, 1993, Solan and Tiersma, 2005).

As noted by Solan, the decision in Elonis made it clear that “proving that Elonis intended his wife to draw inferences that would cause her to be intimidated was necessary to establishing that a crime has been committed. Until then, the literal meaning of these verses would be taken at face value”, firmly placing the precedent-setting legal focus on the illocutionary act (2017, p.72).

26.4 A law enforcement perspective

When approaching threatening acts, law enforcement professionals must uphold the legal definition of what constitutes a threat, but consider the linguistic definition while investigating potentially dangerous situations reported by those who feel fear. According to the New York City Police Department (NYPD, n.d.) their mission is:

...to enhance the quality of life in New York City by working in partnership with the community to enforce the law, preserve peace, reduce fear, and maintain order. The Department is committed to accomplishing its mission of protecting the lives and property of all citizens of New York City by treating every citizen with compassion, courtesy, professionalism, and respect, while efficiently rendering police services and
enforcing the laws impartially, by fighting crime both through deterrence and the relentless pursuit of criminals.

This dual mission when applied to the threat assessment process of upholding the law (i.e. recognising intent) and reducing fear (i.e. acknowledging effect) is emphasised in definitions of “threat” used by various law enforcement and threat assessment professionals. Specifically, a threat is a situation in which there is “a perceived possibility of harm” or “a statement conveying an intention to cause harm” (Meloy et al., 2014, p.3), which will “negatively affect the recipient, someone or something associated with him/her, or specified or non-specified others” (Fitzgerald, 2005, p.2).

26.4.1 Focus on locution and illocation

From the legal perspective – illocation, or intent – investigators follow particular frameworks, such as those of the FBI, which examine seven equally-weighted social, psychological and linguistic factors: degree of anger expressed, level of personalisation, level of specificity, evidence of technical knowledge, evidence of commitment, existence of ancillary incidents and level of escalation, if multiple texts or events exist (Rugala and Fitzgerald, 2003). Specifically, in relation to language – locution – Baker and Mardigian (2008, personal communication 10) highlighted some of the following features in each category:

- the amount and degree of anger expressed
  - profanity or other emotionally intensified language
- evidence of personalisation
  - second person pronouns, proper names and home addresses
- the amount of detail included about the intended action
  - verbs or nouns that explicitly describe the action to be taken, general or specific timeframes
- the estimated level of technical expertise possessed by the author
  - technical language associated with the mode of the threat
- the potential commitment level of the author
  - language of intention such as “must”, “have to”, “will” vs. mitigating language such as “possibly”, “maybe”, “might”
- the escalation of intensity of a threat
  - increased profanity or other emotionally intensified language

These features are also integrated into their assessments of risk level. In general, low-level threats are those that appear to pose little risk and contain lexically mitigated or conditional language (e.g. “perhaps I might …”), implausible actions (e.g. “I will blow up every building at the same time …”), and/or a lack of detail as to the time, place, or person targeted (e.g. “You better watch out or else …”) (Napier and Mardigian, 2003). Moderate-level threats are those that are more believable, but still suggest some doubt in terms of the person or place targeted or the plausibility of fulfilment; these usually demonstrate a certain level of forethought in their description of how the threat will be carried out and provide more descriptive language about the target of the threat (Napier and Mardigian, 2003). Finally, high-level threats are those that are highly credible and whose stated facts can be readily verified. These typically contain detailed descriptions of how the threat will be carried out,
who or what is targeted, how the threatener will reach that target, and the timeframe in which the threat will occur (Napier and Mardigian, 2003). According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI) National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC), “the more direct and detailed a threat is, the more serious the risk of it being carried out” (Rugala and Fitzgerald, 2003, p. 780).

### 26.4.2 Focus on context

In light of recent international terrorist attacks, school shootings, and other acts of violence, a trend in investigating potential threats is a process called Threat Assessment and Management (TAM), whereby teams of law enforcement agents, mental health professionals and other security or risk assessment professionals try to provide proactive assessments of risk, as opposed to retroactive investigations of crime, as has historically been law enforcement practice (Simons and Meloy, 2017).

Simons and Meloy (2017, pp. 627–8) cite the following definitions of TAM:

- “the set of investigative and operational techniques used by law enforcement professionals to identify, assess, and manage the risks of targeted violence and its potential perpetrators” (Fein et al., 1995);
- “the process of gathering information to understand the threat of targeted violence posed by a person” (Meloy et al., 2014); and
- the determination of “the level of targeted violent risk posed by an individual or group toward a specific target” (Association of Threat Assessment Professionals, 2006).

They stress that “TAM is not a method of predicting future violence”, but one where professionals “are engaged in the deliberate and structured effort to prevent these acts” based on research related to previous acts of violence in similar contexts (Simons and Meloy, 2017, p. 628, emphasis in original).

Based on such research, investigators examine whether a “person of concern” poses a current threat by focusing on discernible thought patterns and behaviours and “the interaction among the individual, the situation, the setting, and the target” (2017, p. 631). When evaluating cases wherein threats are made, TAM investigators examine “the mode of delivery, characteristics of the victim, context of any relationship between the threat author and the victim recipient, and possible motives. He or she will also look for evidence of operationalisation of a plan; search for indicators of an author’s resolve for violence; and assess for signs of imminent acting out (Simons and Tunkel, 2014, cited in Simons and Meloy, 2017, p. 633).

In the majority of these assessment categories, weight is placed on the context in which the threat occurs. This is further exemplified by Simons and Meloy’s (2017) conclusion about cases wherein threats occur. Unlike the previous claim of dangerousness being linked to the directness of a threat (Rugala and Fitzgerald, 2003), Simons and Meloy (2017) link the likelihood of a threat being carried out to the situational context in which a threat is made. They state that if a threat is made between current or former intimate partners, it is highly likely that the threat will be carried out; however, in other contexts of targeted violence, threats will rarely be carried out.

One of the final foci of a TAM investigation – after considering context and the possible author of the threat – draws attention to the perlocutionary effect of the message (Simons and Meloy, 2017). Specifically, they ask: how does the victim react to the communication?
26.4.3 Focus on perlocution

When examining threats from a linguistic perspective, which places equal weight on the perlocutionary effect of threatening language, complications can arise for law enforcement in interpreting citizens’ differing definitions of what constitutes a threat. These differences are built upon each individual’s schema – knowledge of past experiences that one uses to actively construct a current understanding and representation of events and to make predictions about new information, events and experiences in different sociocultural contexts (Bartlett, 1932, Ross, 1975).

For example, using a matched guise technique with 45 participants, Tompkinison (2016) demonstrated that an individual’s experiences with and ideologies about differing accents affected how threatening various groups were judged to be. Specifically, when indirect threats were proffered, the non-standard London Cockney accent was perceived to be significantly more threatening than the standard British English accent (Received Pronunciation, or RP) or Northern Irish accent; however, when age was taken into account regarding a bomb threat, those of older generations (who might have experienced or been more familiar with violence from such Northern Irish terrorist organisations as the IRA) judged speakers to be more threatening than the younger generations did. Similarly, long-standing rivalries between northern and southern regions of England caused the Cockney accent to be rated as more and less threatening, respectively.

These findings are further supported by a recent study on perceptions of tone in the seemingly innocuous statement “I know where you live” (Watt et al., 2013, p.105). In this study, the authors tested the judgements of 30 participants who were native speakers of English with little to no foreign language proficiency. They sought to determine “the degree to which a sample of speech seemed threatening” (Watt et al., 2013, p.107). The participants listened to recordings of twelve male speakers in English and in four foreign languages. Two sets of samples were recorded in each language – the first to sound neutral and the second to sound menacing.

The results revealed that the threat-induced samples in English (i.e. those with a menacing tone) were judged to be more threatening to all participants than the neutral samples, with men assessing the degree of threat to be higher than women. In the non-English samples, there was almost no difference between the threat-induced samples and the neutral samples for all participants, although men still rated the threat-induced samples as containing a higher degree of threat than women. Thus, they found that tone does affect the perlocutionary effect of an utterance as threatening. What was unexpected in their study from the non-English findings was the fact that words also matter despite the inclusion of a menacing tone (Watt et al., 2013).

26.4.4 A law enforcement survey

A study that specifically examined the words law enforcement officers, trainees and scholars associate with threatening language (Gales, 2010) found that people’s ideologies about what constitutes threatening language are not always accurate. This finding is supported by corpus studies that have shown how we tend to notice unusual language patterns as opposed to noticing more normative patterns that are found within a particular register or genre (Biber et al., 1998).

Focusing on one of the primary linguistic features associated with threatening language – profanity or other angry, insulting language – Gales (2010) found that 73 percent of survey respondents, threat assessment protocols and the majority of scholarship addressing...
threats included mention of profane, angry language as indicative of threats. For example, Davis (1997), whose work focuses on managing workplace violence, states: “almost all of those persons who do commit acts of violence use profanity and other offensive language – before, during, and after the act – to describe or discuss both the victim and the violence itself” (Davis, 1997, p.xiii).

However, when testing the amount of profane, insulting language that existed in a corpus of 470 authentic threatening communications, Gales (2010) found that only 24 percent of them contained such markers. Furthermore, upon examining threats that were realised vs. non-realised\textsuperscript{14} in her corpus, Gales (2015b) found that the majority of threats that were carried out contained polite, mitigating language as opposed to profane, angry language.

Thus, given their dual duties – to uphold the law and to protect citizens – law enforcement officers must navigate the line between perceived threatener intent and reported recipient effect. This requires finding a difficult balance between examining linguistic evidence (locution) that may connect a threatener to an intentionally committed act (illocution), and interpreting varying degrees of effect such statements may have on the recipients who report feeling fear (perlocution) in potentially dangerous situations (contexts).

### 26.5 Locution, illocution and perlocution – a functional perspective

Two recent linguistic studies have examined the intersection between linguistic form and linguistic function in terms of what defines threatening vs. non-threatening language. These studies start to bridge the gap between locutionary form (i.e. the words used), manifested illocutionary intent (i.e. the ways in which speakers or writers present their stances), and reported perlocutionary effects (i.e. authentic data reported to be fear-inducing) in a range of sociocultural contexts.

#### 26.5.1 Interpersonal stance markers in threats vs. non-threats

In the first study, Gales (2010) examined overt (i.e. grammatical) markers of interpersonal stance – a speaker or writer’s personal feelings, opinions and attitudes about a person or proposition (Biber, 2006) – in a corpus of 470 threatening texts and a corpus of 556 non-threatening texts\textsuperscript{15} composed of the same general registers (mainly business-style letters and work-related blog postings/emails).

Grammatical stance is generally composed of two linguistic elements – “one presenting the stance and the other presenting the proposition framed by that stance” (Biber et al., 1999, p.969). For example, in the utterance: “I hope that you will take care of this matter immediately” (DEF), stance is expressed grammatically through the combination of the main stance verb “hope” and the complement clause “that you will take care of this matter immediately”, which is framed by the hopeful stance of the speaker. This form of stance, which allows speakers and writers to demonstrate their feelings about or level of commitment toward a proposition, is overtly manifested in English through three main categories\textsuperscript{16}: adverbials (e.g. “unfortunately”, “kind of”, “honestly”), “that” and “to” complement clauses (e.g. “the fact that”, “I want to”) and modals and semi-modals (e.g. “must”, “need to”) (see Biber et al., 1999, for a complete overview), all of which are captured in John Hinckley’s final threat letter to Jodie Foster before his attempt to kill President Ronald Reagan in 1981:

“There is definitely a possibility that I will be killed in my attempt to get Reagan”
(adverbial) (that comp clause) (modal) (to comp clause)
Upon examining all stance categories, the study revealed a significant difference (p < .001) in use of modal verbs in threatening language over non-threatening language. Within the category of modal verbs, the prediction modals “will” and “be going to” were significant to threatening language (p < .001) and the possibility modal “can” and necessity modal “have to” were salient to threats (i.e. they occurred more than twice as often in threats than non-threats).

Since there is no one-to-one correlation between language form and behaviour (Lord et al., 2008) (e.g. “will” is used both in threats that were realised and those that were non-realised (Gales, 2015b)), further investigation into the functional use of each significant and salient modal was performed. Results revealed that threatening texts were far more likely than non-threatening texts to express deontic/volitional meaning aimed at controlling the addressee explicitly (e.g. with collocations of “I/we will/be going to”) and implicitly (e.g. with collocations of “you will/be going to”).

Further functions using “can”, especially when collocated with “do” or “take”, emphasised the victim’s or recipient’s role in the threat by placing him or her in an active position. When “can” was followed by “see” or “understand”, it demonstrated a level of shared knowledge, understanding, and/or compassion between the threatener and his or her victim.

Finally, “have to”, especially when preceded by “you”, functioned as a politeness marker or face-saving device towards the victim or third-party recipient in threats, which is rather unexpected due to the anonymity of the majority of communicated threats (i.e. there should be no need to save face). Table 26.1 summarises the linguistic forms salient and/or significant to threats vs. non-threats and exemplifies their most common collocational and functional patterns.

To compare findings in the two corpora, “will/be going to” comprised 70 percent of the occurrences of prediction modals in threats, as compared to 60 percent of the prediction modals in non-threats. And while they both possessed epistemic, predictive meaning (e.g. “I think Big Daddy will bail us out” (DEF)), threats more commonly possessed deontic, volitional meaning that is both explicitly and implicitly controlled by the threatener, as noted in Table 26.1.

The volitional functions in threats were further highlighted by the moderate to strong collocation of “will/be going to” with “I/we” (26 percent of the instances) and “you” (18 percent of the instances), demonstrating the threatener’s control over the action, event or victim. In non-threats, the collocation of “will/be going to” with “I/we” occurred at the same percentage (26 percent), but the focus was much more commonly on control over an event or process (e.g. “June and I will turn these documents around and return them for filing next week” (E-M)) as opposed to control over another person as was seen in threats.

The collocation of “will/be going to” with “you” in non-threats only occurred in 3 percent of the instances as opposed to 18 percent in threats. And, in most of these non-threat cases, the predictive meaning (e.g. “I truly believe you will lead an organisation one day” (E-M)) overshadowed the volitional meaning that was seen in threats in Table 26.1, wherein the statement is under the control of the speaker or writer as opposed to the recipient.

The modal “can” represented 60 percent of the possibility modals in threats and was found to possess each of its three literal interpretations: permission, possibility and ability. However, “can” represented epistemic (possibility) meaning with far greater frequency in threats; in these cases, it was used to indirectly indicate the threatener’s level of likelihood or certainty about a threat. Additionally, “can” functioned in a variety of interpersonal ways, but in comparison to non-threats, particular functions were salient with semantically-related verb sets “see/understand” and “do/take” as shown in Table 26.1.
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Table 26.1 Stance forms significant and/or salient to threats versus non-threats with most common collocates and functions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lexical forms and collocates</th>
<th>Grammatical categories</th>
<th>Stance functions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘(I/we) will/be going to’</td>
<td>Prediction modals</td>
<td>Firmly explicit self-volitional control of victim</td>
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<tr>
<td>E.g. “I will cruse around all weekend killing lone people in the night then move on to kill again, until I end up with a dozen people over the weekend” (VIOL)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I am going to make sure that a lot of people know what you did. I will personally tell everyone I know about you. You will not be able to hold your head up in public. I will destroy you” (STLK)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘(You) will/be going to’</td>
<td>Prediction modals</td>
<td>Stance functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>E.g. “Your blood will run through the streets in the coming months” (HAR)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Bitch, if only you could look into the future and see how you are going to die! you would kill yourself, because a quick death would be better to what I have in store for you” (STLK)</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Can (do/take)’</td>
<td>Possibility modals</td>
<td>Emphasising/supporting the recipient’s role as an active participant</td>
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<tr>
<td>E.g. “Any White Man, Can do ANyThing And get a Way with it…” (HAR)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>“[...] you rats, promoting the, ah, illegals so that you can, ah, form a union, so that you can stuff it down our throats and you can take away our jobs” (HAR)</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Can (see/understand)’</td>
<td>Possibility modals</td>
<td>Emphasising compassion between the threatener and the victim</td>
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<tr>
<td>E.g. “Well, I can see that things are heating up at home” (STLK)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“We hope you can understand our problem and can help resolve this intolerable work environment” (DEF)</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘(You) have to’</td>
<td>Necessity modals</td>
<td>Face-saving politeness towards the victim or recipient</td>
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<tr>
<td>E.g. “I’m sorry you have to hear this like this, and I only wish I could tell you in person. But as I’m sure you understand, I’m afraid of what would happen if Luke found out, as apparently he is very conniving” (DEF)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In non-threats, on the other hand, “can” represented 40 percent of the total possibility modals and was more equally distributed with “may”, which only occurred at a third of the rate of “can” in threats. Furthermore, it was found infrequently, with “see” and “do”, only found with “take” a total of three times, and it never occurred with “understand” in this corpus. When it did collocate with “do”, in non-threats, it frequently functioned as a polite offer on the part of the writer (e.g. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do” (E-M)). With “can see” in non-threats, it most frequently emphasised a shared understanding between parties (e.g. “I am sure that over the past few years you have met people that can use our services as you can see I have aligned myself with the best” (BL-M)) as opposed to the function demonstrating compassion, whether honest or ironic, as was found in threats.
Finally, “have to” functions as a politeness marker or face-saving device towards the victim or third-party recipient in threats and collocated moderately to strongly with the pronouns “I/we” 15 percent of the time and “you” 29 percent of the time. “You have to” patterns are used in situations where a traditional power hierarchy exists, where threateners soften their tone to persuade the recipient to align with their stance, or where a threatener, usually a stalker, hopes to endear himself or herself to the victim.

In comparison, in non-threats ‘have to’ collocates with “I/we” 45 percent of the time and “you” in 12 percent of the occurrences, demonstrating the shift in focus from “you” in threats to “I/we” in non-threats. Functionally, when examining the instances of “have to” that collocate with “you” in non-threats, the primary role of “you have to” in non-threats is of a more obligatory nature between the writer and recipient (e.g. “Yeah, I suppose you don’t have to mention silk” (E-M)) than one of politely saving face as was found in threats.

Therefore, in threats, while there are many grammatical forms and stance functions that occur with heightened frequency, only modals are seen to function in ways that are somewhat distinctive to threats (with “will/be going to” occurring statistically more in threats versus non-threats and “can” and “have to” occurring as salient features in threats). And while it must be recognised that these frequency patterns and collocational functions are also found in non-threats to a degree, and are not, therefore, reliable measures of defining what is and what is not a threat, the frequency with which they occur in threats ultimately helps hone our understanding of the ways in which threateners attempt to construct interpersonal relationships, exert and maintain control and demonstrate commitment towards a potentially dangerous proposition by using specific words (locution) and manifesting specific markers of intent (illocution) in cases where recipients reported feeling fear (perlocution) due to a threatening situation (context).

26.5.2 Register variation of threats versus non-threats

Findings from a second study (Nini, 2017) supported the high levels of modal verb usage found in threatening texts, as well as the persuasive functions seen in the use of controlling prediction modals and pronominal collocations. Drawing on Biber’s multidimensional studies of register variation (1988, 1989) – analyses that examine the linguistic features associated with a particular situation of use (Biber and Conrad, 2009) – Nini analysed a corpus of 104 malicious texts – what he defines as “a text that is a piece of evidence in a forensic case that involves threat, abuse, defamation or a combination of the above” (2017, p.100) – and compared his findings to Biber’s (1988, 1989) previous analyses of non-threatening texts (e.g. academic prose, speeches, telephone conversations, press reviews, romance fiction sports broadcasts).

In order to perform such an analysis, three components are necessary: a description of situational characteristics of the texts, a description of the language of the texts, and the functional interpretation connecting the linguistic features and situation contexts (Biber and Conrad, 2009). The 13 situational characteristics in this study were adapted from Biber (1994) and included categories such as addressor, addressee, interactiveness (i.e. whether a response was requested), place of communication (e.g. private or public), mode and malicious purpose. The final category, unique to Nini’s study, further included a breakdown of threat type, communication type (e.g. direct or indirect) and direction of harm (e.g. third-party or addressee).

In terms of the linguistic features, Nini tagged the texts for 67 lexical and grammatical features previously identified by Biber (1988, 1989) such as first-person pronouns, “that” complement clauses and attributive adjectives (see Biber, 1988, for a full list of features).

The final stage of exploration identified clusters of linguistic features and situational or contextual characteristics and plotted them along six functional dimensions (Biber, 1988;
An examination of threatening language (Grieve et al., 2011) that describe the functionality of different English language registers. Dimensions include:

1. Informational vs. involved discourse
2. Narrative vs. non-narrative concerns
3. Context-independent vs. context-dependent discourse
4. Overt expression of persuasion
5. Abstract vs. non-abstract information
6. Online informational elaboration

Dimension 1, for example, describes how informational or involved a register is. Registers that score on the low end—such as academic prose—are situationally non-interactive, informationally dense and composed of many nominal features; those that score on the high end—such as casual conversation—are situationally interactive, affectively rich and composed of many verbal and pronominal features.

Nini found that threatening texts had more prediction modals (e.g. "will", "shall"), second-person pronouns, and first-person pronouns than non-threatening texts and that they also had higher dimension 4 scores for overt expressions of persuasion. This dimension indicates "that a text explicitly marks the author's point of view as well as their assessment of likelihood and/or certainty by using modals or other features that express modality, as for example in professional letters or prepared speeches" (Nini, 2017, p.107).

Interestingly, defamatory texts were found to act more like non-threatening language than threatening language (i.e. lower dimension 4 scores, but higher narrativity scores on dimension 2, which includes more third-person pronouns and past tense usage). This finding parallels Gales' (2015a) findings between the significant use and function of stance markers—especially modals in conjunction with pronouns—in stalking threats (i.e. those wherein recipients reported feeling fear) versus harassing or defaming threats (i.e. those wherein recipients reported feeling angry). Such nuances in threat type, modality and pronoun use could be further explored in the context of how a threatener may use such linguistic forms and functions to persuade a recipient to feel fear in potentially threatening contexts.

26.6 Conclusion

Threats, as multifaceted speech acts, are inherently linguistic conflicts—"situation[s] or behaviour[s] involving parties (individuals or groups) who are, or consider themselves to be, instrumentally, intellectually and/or emotionally opposed or simply feel antagonistic to each other" (Jeffries and O’Driscoll, this volume). As this discussion has outlined, threats causes linguistic conflicts in two primary ways:

1. Are the words directly or indirectly threatening? (Focus on locution)
2. Is the writer’s intent to instil fear? (Focus on illocution)
3. Does the recipient interpret the communication as threatening? (Focus on perlocution)
4. Is the situation (social, cultural, linguistic, etc.) conducive to a threat? (Focus on context)
As has been discussed above, threats require different interpretations based on the personal schemas – the shared knowledge – of the participants. And, similar to other language crimes such as bribery and solicitation, threats require individual interpretations of each element within the context of the threatening speech event. Therefore, threats, when interpreted linguistically, must rely on the participants’ schemas as well as the sociocultural and linguistic context of the speech event in order to interpret the words used, the potential intent of the threatener, and the effect felt by the recipient – and, often, these may conflict.

The second conflict considers the professionals outside of the immediate threatening act – legal professionals (e.g. lawyers and judges) and law enforcement, who have various responsibilities along the process of interpreting threats – to protect citizens and uphold the law. While the latter takes precedent in terms of arrests and convictions, the former must be adhered to when investigating potentially dangerous acts as “all communicated threats are initially taken very seriously” (Simons and Meloy, 2017, p.633).

As discussed in the previous legal and law enforcement sections on threats, there are varying ways in which professionals have applied the four elements above – locution, illocution, perlocution and context – often leading to conflicting results when emphasis is placed on one particular element over another. Ultimately, the US Supreme Court decision in *Elonis v. United States* (2015) highlighted the illocutionary force – the intent – of the writer in determining that no true threat had been made despite the fact that the words were threatening, the recipients felt fear and the context was one in which a reasonable person would have interpreted the communications as threatening (Kaplan, 2016). While this precedent-setting case may define the legal interpretation of what constitutes a threat, law enforcement professionals and threat assessors are still left to find a balance between what citizens deem threatening during the investigation phase (given differences in schemas in various contexts) and what is legally prosecutable as threatening during the arrest and prosecution phases.

Given proactive law enforcement practices such as Threat Assessment and Management (e.g. Simons and Meloy, 2017) and the integration of threat assessment practices with research from fields such as Security Studies (e.g. Huysmans, 2014), Psychology (e.g. Meloy et al., 2008) and Linguistics (e.g. Gales, 2010; Nini, 2017), it is hoped that new ways can continue to be paved for interpreting the important interdisciplinary intersections between threatening words, threatener intent, recipient effect, and the sociocultural context in which threats occur from each of the varying linguistic, legal, and law enforcement perspectives.

**Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank those who provided invaluable comments on my earlier drafts: the book editors, the anonymous reviewers, and my colleagues Roger Shuy, Larry Solan and Andrea Nini.

**Notes**

1. The original threats in this case were obtained from the office of Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal under a Freedom of Information Act request. Since this story was reported in an NBC online publication, they edited any words that might be offensive to readers; the remainder of the language remains unchanged.
2. All citations to Gales (2010) are from previously unpublished dissertation research. More details on each study discussed herein from that source can be found in the original manuscript.
3. The majority of previous work on speech acts and threatening language focuses on spoken discourse. However, because threats can be spoken and written, for the purposes of this research, the terms ‘speaker/hearer’ and ‘writer/recipient’, respectively, will be used interchangeably.
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4 All threats are authentic; non-public identifying information has been changed, but all non-standard language use remains intact. Unless in the public domain or otherwise noted, threats are part of the Communicated Threat Assessment Reference Corpus (CTARC), which was compiled by the author as part of her dissertation research (Gales, 2010) and used by permission from the Academy Group, Inc (AGI) (2009).

5 Threats in CTARC were categorised by type as assigned by the AGI case analysts – retired Secret Service and FBI Supervisory Special Agents. Types are designated as: defamation (DEF), harassment (HAR), stalking (STLK), mass violence (VIOL) and other (OTH). OTH includes threat types that did not fit within the general description of another category (e.g. kidnapping, political, religious).

6 Shuy (1993) and Fraser (1998) agree that threats are made to the detriment of the hearer, but differ in other aspects of the language crime. Shuy states that threats are made to the speaker’s benefit, from the speaker’s perspective, and the speaker controls the outcome. Fraser, however, argues that while the speaker ultimately controls the outcome, the hearer also may have some control when conditional threats are proffered. In this respect, I agree with Shuy in that ultimately, even in conditional situations, the speaker is still in control of deciding whether to accept the condition as satisfied.

7 Indirect threats are frequently referred to in law enforcement protocols as ‘veiled’ or ‘implied’ (Napier and Mardigian, 2003; Meloy et al., 2008).

8 Solan and Tiersma (2005) highlight different aspects of each case (e.g. speech acts of prediction versus threatening, the use of ambiguity and hyperbole in threatening language); for the present purposes, however, these cases helpfully provide a new way to demonstrate how the various pragmatic perspectives of threatening have played a role in legal interpretation. All non-standard language has been preserved from the original texts.

9 While this decision demonstrates that perlocutionary effect is not sufficient to declare something a threat, it does not consider whether it is a necessary component since it focused on the illocutionary intent.

10 Interviews were conducted between 2008–10 with members of the Academy Group, Inc., all of whom were either retired Supervisory Special Agents of the Secret Service or FBI.

11 Simons and Meloy call attention to the fact that once a person of concern has been identified, TAM investigators “must attempt to accurately and fairly assess the individual’s propensity for violence, balancing the safety needs of the community with the individual’s constitutional rights, including his right to privacy” (2017, p.633). As noted by recent research in the field of Security Studies (e.g. Bigo, 2016; Heath-Kelly, 2017; Huysmans, 2014), this balance can be very problematic and needs more attention and interdisciplinary research.

12 A matched guise technique (Lambert et al., 1960) is used to evaluate participants’ attitudes about a specific language feature, accent or variety. In such studies, one speaker is recorded using different features (e.g. discourse marker ‘like’ vs. no ‘like’), using different accents (e.g. New York vs. the South) or using different language varieties (e.g. Standard American English vs. Chicano English). Survey participants are asked to rate what they assume to be different speakers on categories such as perceived intelligence, likability, professionalism, etc. However, since the speaker is the same person, information can be gathered about attitudes towards the language features, accents or varieties being used.

13 The survey was conducted on 103 students from the University of California system who were seeking degrees in criminal justice and law.

14 Threats were labelled as either realised or non-realised when the end result had been definitively confirmed. Realised cases were those wherein the threatener followed through on what he or she threatened to do or performed a related action that resulted in some kind of tangible harm to the victim or the victim’s property. Non-realised cases were those wherein the writer, through arrest or voluntary admission, declared that he or she never had the intention, the means or the commitment to carry out the threat. These threats were admittedly written for the purpose of instilling fear and/or panic in order to get revenge, regain control or gain some kind of personal reward. (Note that more nuanced codings of ‘realised’ and ‘non-realised’ threats are called for in future studies (e.g. does the writer carry out what was specified in the threat or perform some other action?) Such codings may provide a stronger understanding of threatening language and actions).

15 CTARC contains threatening communications from 139 separate writers with a total of 152,078 words; the K-corpus contains 109 separate writers with a total of 158,789 words. While the authors of most threats in CTARC remain unknown, it is unclear how many authors are in both CTARC and the K-corpus. However, having the same authors in both corpora would only make the analysis stronger since it takes into account how an individual composes threatening language vs. non-threatening language in similar registers.
16 In Biber et al. (1999), there are two additional categories of grammatical stance markers: stance noun plus prepositional phrase and premodifying adverbs. However, the prepositional phrase following the stance noun cannot necessarily be argued to be a proposition and the adverb in the second category only marks stance towards that specific phrase rather than marking stance towards a whole proposition (Biber et al., 1999, p.970). Therefore, these two grammatical stance categories were not examined here.

17 Categories of modal verbs include possibility (e.g. ‘can’, ‘could’, ‘may’), necessity (e.g. ‘should’, ‘have to’, ‘must’), and prediction (e.g. ‘will’, ‘would’, ‘shall’).

18 Co-occurrence strength between features was measured using the following Pearson Correlation Coefficient scale: .8 to 1.0 = very strong, .6 to .8 = strong, .4 to .6 = moderate, .2 to .4 = weak, .0 to .2 = weak or no relationship.

19 Note that when stalking threats are considered separately from all threats in CTARC, the ‘I’ versus ‘you’ percentages shift to a higher rate of ‘I’ pronouns (Gales, 2015a). Given current and previous research on stalking behaviors (e.g. Meloy et al., 2008; Meloy et al., 2014), more research should be done on the language features of stalking threats versus other forms of threatening communications as they appear to possess different pronominal patterns.

References


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