We Shall Be Watching You, You're Going to Die,* and Other Threats:
A Corpus-Based Speech Act Approach

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Abstract: Using a speech act approach, this paper examines the similarities and differences between English-language threats made by terrorists and those made by non-terrorists, with a focus on pronoun use and sentence-type. Both groups employ a variety of sentence-types in their threats, but use declarative statements most often. 1st person nominative pronouns occur as subjects of clauses much more frequently than 2nd person pronouns in both the terrorist and non-terrorist threat data. Non-terrorist threats, however, make significantly more use of the 1st person singular nominative pronoun, while terrorist threats use the 1st person plural nominative pronoun more frequently.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Speech act theory has been a widely studied topic in linguistics. From its proposal by Austin (1962) and continuation by Searle (1969), speech act theory and specific speech acts such as requests *(Please pass the salt),* promises *(I promise I will marry you one day)*, and apologies *(I am sorry about that)* have been examined extensively. Studies have looked at speech acts proper, their constituent parts, their felicity conditions, and their grammatical features. Research has also focused on the relationship between the speakers and addressees involved in speech acts, as well as on the effect speech acts have on their addressees. These studies have combined syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, and discourse analysis approaches to the study of speech act theory.

Threats such as *Give me your money, or I'll shoot, I'll get you one day,* and *Touch that and you die* have been examined in Austin and Searle's speech act theory, as well as in terms of Grice's (1975) maxims. However, the lack of in-depth study on threats and the speech act of

threatening is the impetus for the current study. The purpose of this pilot study is to examine the similarities and differences between threats made by terrorists and those made by non-terrorists, specifically with regard to certain lexical and grammatical structures. While the fundamental components of all threats are similar in nature, this research is based on the hypothesis that the two groups use language differently when making threats.

2.0 CORPORA AND METHODOLOGY

For the current study, I compiled naturally-occurring English data that included threatening[1] emails, letters, hate mail, ransom notes, and even tape-recordings, collecting the texts from public websites on the Internet. Several of the texts are documents that were made public during or after criminal investigations. Many of the other texts, to the contrary, have been made public only via the Internet, by means of weblogs or personal websites on which the recipient wanted to make public the writer's threatening behavior.

The first corpus is a 4,059-word corpus of documents containing threats that were written or spoken by individuals with no known ties to terrorism (hereafter referred to as the non-terrorist threat corpus). I further reduced this corpus to a mini-corpus of 697 words (hereafter called the non-terrorist threat mini-corpus), comprised of only the sentences and/or clauses containing threatening utterances within the larger corpus. The second corpus is a 2,172-word corpus of documents containing threats written by individuals with known ties to terrorism (henceforth designated the terrorist threat corpus). I further reduced this corpus to a mini-corpus of 539 words (henceforth referred to as the terrorist threat mini-corpus), comprised of only the sentences and/or clauses containing threatening utterances within the larger corpus.

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[1] Fraser (1976), Searle and Vanderveken (1985), Vanderveken (1990) and Fraser (1998) suggest that a threat occurs when the speaker intends to intimidate the addressee by an act that is not for the benefit of the addressee, but rather a detriment, and no obligation is involved.

The lexical aspect of this study focuses only on the most frequently used words, even though much of the lexis of threats is distinct (Sears 2005). Using the Wordsmith Tools software package as a concordance tool, I ran word lists for both corpora. I proceeded to compare the frequency of words in each corpus to the frequency in the related mini-corpus in order to determine how common certain words are within the overall corpus and then within just the threatening utterances. I then compared the frequency of words in each mini-corpus to determine the difference in usage of these words by individuals associated with terrorism versus those with no known terrorist ties.

3. 0 WORD FREQUENCY

As with most corpora in English, the most frequent words found in both sets of data are function words, including personal pronouns, articles, prepositions, and short copular and/or modal verbs, as illustrated in Figure 1 (Sears 2006). However, personal pronouns occur more frequently in my corpora than any other function word types, which shows a marked difference from the most frequently-occurring words in other corpora. For instance, in the Brown Corpus of Standard American English (over one million words), the most frequent function words are articles, prepositions, and conjunctions, with only one personal pronoun, *he*, occurring as the tenth most frequent word. The present study does not focus on all of the most frequent words, but primarily on the personal pronouns.

Figure 1: Word Frequency in Non-terrorist and Terrorist Threat Corpora and Mini-corpora

Non-terrorist Threats				Terrorist Threats			
Corpus		Mini-corpus		Corpus		Mini-corpus	
word	freq	word	freq	word	freq	word	freq
YOU	200	YOU	45	TO	101	THE	29
THE	160	I	35	THE	99	TO	27
TO	138	TO	31	WE	80	OF	17
AND	100	AND	21	OF	61	WE	16
OF	89	YOUR	21	AND	41	OUR	14
I	80	THE	14	YOU	41	YOU	13
YOUR	76	WILL	14	OUR	39	AND	10
A	71	IN	11	IT	33	BE	10
IN	58	OF	10	A	31	WILL	10
ARE	43	THIS	10	WILL	31	US	7

3.1 Pronoun Frequency

The most frequent word in the non-terrorist threat corpus is the 2nd person nominative pronoun *you* (lemmatized to include the cliticized forms *you'll* and *you're*),[2] occurring in the corpus 200 times. *You* appears more than twice as often as the 1st person singular nominative pronoun *I* (including *I'm* and *I'll*), which only occurs 80 times. *You* is also the most frequent word in the non-terrorist threat mini-corpus, occurring 45 times, while *I* occurs 35 times.

In the non-terrorist threat corpus, less than 23% (45 of 200) of the occurrences of *you* are located within the mini-corpus, while almost 44% (35 of 80) of the occurrences of *I* in the corpus are located in the mini-corpus. This means that a large percentage of the pronouns in the larger corpus is actually confined to the threatening utterances. 44% of the occurrences of *I* show up in the 697-word mini-corpus of threats, while the other 56% of the occurrences are spread out over the remaining 3,300+ non-threatening words in the corpus.

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[2] While *you* can be either singular or plural, the number of the pronoun is not examined in this study. The number cannot always be determined, as it is not always clear if the intended recipient of the threat is one or more individuals. For purposes of this study, therefore, only the use of the pronoun in relation to other pronouns is examined.

The most frequent word in the terrorist threat corpus is *to*, and the most frequent in the mini-corpus is *the*. However, personal pronouns combined occur more frequently than any other word type. The 1st person plural nominative pronoun *we* occurs 80 times, almost twice as often as *you*, which occurs 41 times. In the terrorist threat mini-corpus, *we* occurs 16 times, *you* occurs 13 times, and the 1st person plural objective pronoun *us* occurs 7 times.

In the terrorist threat corpus, less than 32% (13 of 41) of the occurrences of *you* are located within the mini-corpus, which is not much different from the frequency of *you* in the non-terrorist threat corpus and mini-corpus. However, the frequency of 1st person nominative pronouns does differ significantly between the two corpora. In the terrorist threat corpus, only 20% (16 of 80) of the occurrences of *we* are located in the mini-corpus, showing that a much smaller percentage of that pronoun, as compared to the frequency of *I* in the non-terrorist threat corpus, is actually located within the threatening utterances. Therefore, 20% of the occurrences of *we* show up in the 539-word mini-corpus of terrorist threats, while the other 80% of the occurrences are spread out over the remaining 1,600+ non-threatening words in the corpus.

4.0 PRONOUN USE

What is most interesting about the use of personal pronouns is how they occur grammatically within these threatening utterances. The use of *you* was divided into four grammatical categories: subject, object (direct, indirect, or object of preposition), subject of if-clause, and vocative (see Figures 2 and 3)

In the non-terrorist threat mini-corpus, *you* occurs as subject 17 times, as object 26 times, as subject of an if-clause 3 times, and as a vocative 3 times, as illustrated in 1-4 respectively.

(1) *You*'ll never see your gnome again.
(2) I'm going to kill *you* tonight.
(3) IF *YOU* DON'T STOP WITH YOUR MADE UP SHIT . . .
(4) *You* limp little woman.

Figure 2: Pronoun Use in Non-terrorist Threat Mini-corpus
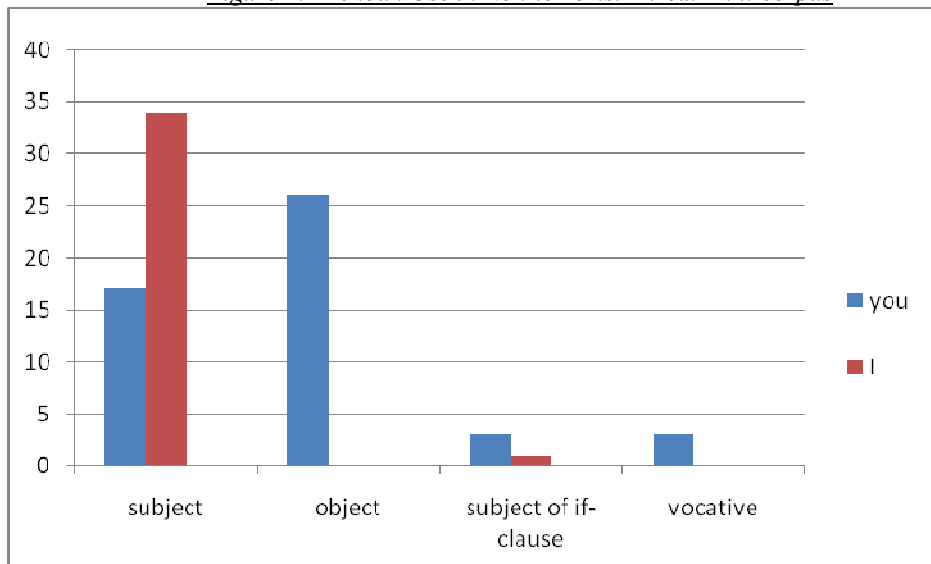
As expected, *I* always occurs as the subject: 34 times as subject of a main clause, and once as subject of an if-clause, as illustrated in 5 and 6. Subjective *I* occurs in the non-terrorist threat mini-corpus more than twice as often as subjective *you*.

(5) And *I*'m going to rape and kill your wife.
(6) If *I* ever find you . . .

In light of the relatively high frequency of objective *you* (26 times) and subjective *I* (35 times), it is surprising that the two pronouns co-occur in only 14 clauses with the following construction: *I* as Subject + Verb + *you* as Direct Object, illustrated in 7.

(7)   *I*   'm going to kill   *you*.
      S   V   DO

This may be explained by examining the referents and addressees of these threats. For instance, in all of the threats that contain *you* as the subject, the addressee of the utterance is also the recipient of the threat. In the threats that have *I* as the subject, however, the recipient of the threat is not always the addressee of the utterance, explaining why *you* is not always the object of clauses with *I* as subject. Sometimes the addressee is being threatened, like when *you* is the

object of the sentence. However, many times the addressee is threatened by promised actions against a third party, i.e. a relative of the recipient, as in 8.

(8) And I'm going to rape and kill *your wife*.

There are also utterances in which *I* occurs as the subject and the recipient of the threat is still the addressee, but the recipient is referred to contextually (without the explicit use of objective *you*), as in 9.

(9) I will break *your back* over my knee.

In the terrorist threat mini-corpus, y*ou* occurs as subject of the sentence 5 times, as object 5 times, and as subject of an if-clause 3 times, as illustrated in 10-12 respectively.
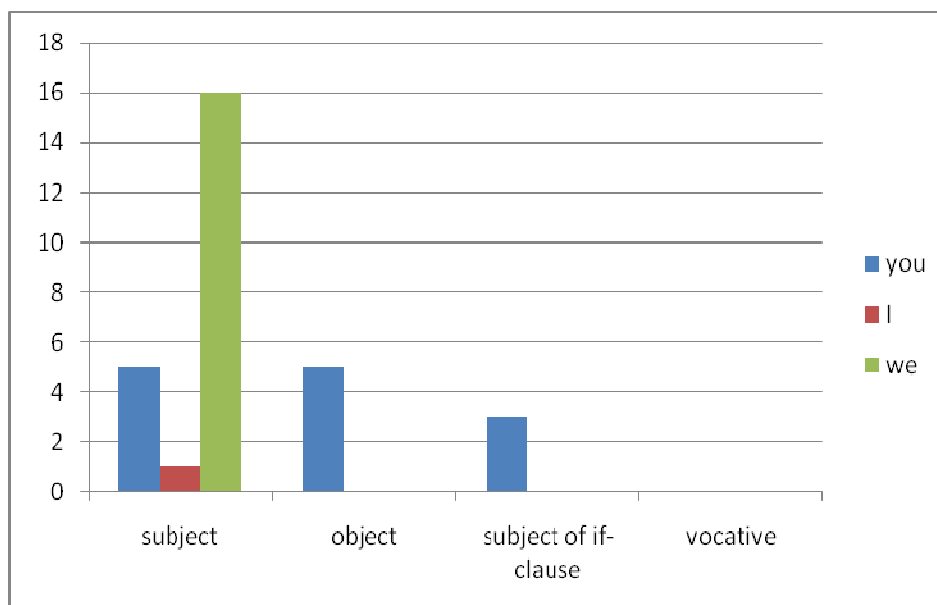
(10) *You* will pay the ultimate price!
(11) This will not only befall *you* . . . but it will also include your loved ones!
(12) If *you* bring violence to us . . .

We always occurs (16 times) as the subject of a sentence or clause, more than three times as frequently as subjective *you*, as illustrated in 13. The 1st person plural objective pronoun *us,* one of the most frequent words in the terrorist threat mini-corpus, occurs 7 times.

(13) *We* shall push the enemy out of the gates . . .

Figure 3: Pronoun Use in Terrorist Threat Mini-corpus

While the 1st person singular nominative pronoun *I* occurs frequently in the non-terrorist threat mini-corpus, it occurs only once in the terrorist threat mini-corpus. Instead, we see the 1st person plural nominative pronoun *we* occurring frequently in the terrorist threat mini-corpus. There are a number of potential reasons why terrorists would use *we* and non-terrorists would use *I,* many of which lie outside the scope of this study. One obvious reason is that the author of a terrorist threat could be a group of individuals, while the author of a non-terrorist threat is only one. However, because some of the authors of the terrorist threat corpus have been identified through criminal investigations, it is known that in many cases, the terrorist threat was in fact made by a single individual. In some cases, it may be that the author, though acting alone, wants the addressee to believe that a group of people is involved in the threat, which may in fact cause more fear or concern to the addressee. The difference in the singular versus plural pronoun use may also be an ideological one: an individual associated with terrorism may act alone when making threats but may be making them on behalf of an ideology shared by others (who may not be aware of the author's threats). Storey (1995) discusses threats made by terrorist organizations, noting that the "sense of the threat is heightened by the whole image of the organization making that threat" (p. 78). Individual authors of terrorist threats may use the plural pronoun as a purposeful tactic to induce a heightened sense of fear. The actual number of individuals linked to terrorism making a specific threatening utterance is less significant for this study. What is important are the different patterns of pronoun use by those with ties to terrorism and those without such ties.

5.0 SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Grammatical structures like sentence-types have been studied extensively in speech act theory (Sadock 1974; Gordon & Lakoff 1975; Sadock 1988; Croft 1994). Some aspects of

grammar that help to distinguish different sentence-types are: intonation, adverbs, connecting particles, circumstances, accompaniments, tense, pronouns, verbal mood, word order, embedded clauses, modal verbs, and infinitives (Austin 1962; Sadock 1974; Fraser 1975; Sadock 1988; Vanderveken 1990; Croft 1994). All of these elements participate in determining not only the sentence-type but also the accompanying illocutionary force. Also, the utterance act types are distinguished by the sentence-types they contain (Davis 2002). Bird (1994) suggests that a correlation exists between the generic acts and certain syntactic forms, like sentence-types; speech act theory accounts for this relationship.

Fraser (1998) examines how a threat is conveyed and how a speaker makes a threat, suggesting that direct verbal threats cannot be made using a performative verb as can some other speech acts, e.g. * *I hereby threaten you*. He then discusses what aspects of threats constitute a direct threat as opposed to an indirect threat and proposes that indirect threats are implied. He states that "most direct verbal threats are conditional: either the addressee is to satisfy some condition(s) or the speaker will bring about an unfavourable state of the world" (Fraser 1998:167). He discusses indirect threats, in which one must infer the unfavorable act to be performed, and the inherent problems of determining whether a threat has actually been made. In this same discussion Fraser suggests that even an interrogative may be perceived as a threat. However, he states, "A threat typically takes the form of a declaration with the speaker as the agent, with a condition possibly present" (Fraser 1998: 165).

For the current study, I examined the sentence-types in all threatening utterances in the non-terrorist threat mini-corpus and the terrorist threat mini-corpus, as illustrated in Figure 4, dividing them into six categories: negative command, command, command-then statement, if-then statement, question, and declarative statement.

Figure 4: Sentence-types in Non-terrorist Threat and Terrorist Threat Mini-corpora

Sentence-Type	Non-terrorist Threat Mini-corpus		Terrorist Threat Mini-corpus	
Negative command	Don't tell anyone or go to the police about this, because I am watching you closely.	1	No data.	0
Command	GO SOMEWHERE AND DIE BITCH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!	3	Put tote bags on their heads!	1
Command-then	YOU KEEP YOUR TRAP SHUT OR WE'LL SHUT IT FOR YOU	3	No data.	0
If-then	If I ever find you which I'm trying to do, I'm going to beat your head in with a hammer!	5	If the answer is unsatisfactory, we will start building our next bomb.	3
Question	Don't you realize I could have killed you ten times by now?	1	No data.	0
Declarative statement	Now you're dead!	44	For this and other injustices, you will pay the ultimate price!	25

Of the 57 sentences that make up the non-terrorist threat mini-corpus, one is a negative command containing the phrase *don't,* three are commands containing an imperative, three are command-then statements (where a command is given followed by a conjunction and then a result), five are if-then or conditional statements (where a declarative statement is made up of an if-clause followed by a result), and one is a question. The remaining 44 are declarative statements. Of the 29 sentences that make up the terrorist threat mini-corpus, one is a command, three are if-then statements, and the remaining 25 are declarative statements.

In both sets of data, the declarative statement is by far the most commonly found sentence-type of threatening utterance. Because of the various sentence-types found, however, Fraser's (1998) description of threats as typically declarative is shown to be too simplistic, leaving other grammatical constructions unaccounted for. The initial examination of sentence structure in the current study makes it clear that sentence-types need to be examined more in-depth.

One area to be further explored is the form-function correlation. For example, Croft (1994) notes that the major sentence-types do not correspond closely with Searle's (1979) taxonomy of speech act classification: the declarative sentence-type corresponds with the assertives, the interrogative and imperative sentence-types correspond with the directives, but no major sentence-type directly corresponds with the commissives, expressives, and declarations. However, Vanderveken (1990) suggests that a threat is a commissive speech act and that to threaten, one must "commit oneself to doing something to someone with the perlocutionary intention of intimidating the hearer and with the presupposition that it is bad for him" (p. 183). If the commissive act of threatening is most often exhibited in declarative statements, Croft's (1994) theory may be wrong, and perhaps declaratives do directly correspond with commissives. However, the few examples of other sentence-types that constitute threats may address the issue that declaratives do not directly correspond to all commissives. Further examination with a larger corpus of threats compared to other commissive speech acts may help to determine this. The declaratives can be further divided into different types based on verb type and complexity of the sentences. Finding the different constructions would prove useful in not only recognizing various sentence structures but also in determining what constitutes threatening as a speech act.

6.0 CONCLUSION

This article presented a preliminary study of some of the lexical and grammatical issues involved in threats. Further research analyzing a larger set of data must be done to determine more specifically the grammatical constructions involved in threats. The issue of personal pronouns and their use needs to be explored further as well, especially considering the differences of use between terrorists and non-terrorists. These elements are of interest to linguistic theory in detailing the effects of word choice and grammar. This research may also be

useful in the field of criminal justice for determining the nature and seriousness of a threat and possibly even for identifying, based on the linguistic structures, whether a threat is made by a terrorist. Establishing the lexical and grammatical make-up of threats may aid linguists and law enforcement officials alike to determine whether or not an individual is likely to carry out a threat, help uncover who wrote the threat, and also identify linguistic clues to ascertain if the threats can be attributed to authors of previous threats.

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