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PhD Abstracts

Ideologies of violence: a corpus and discourse analytic approach to stance in threatening communications

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If you change the hours of service on
January 4, 2004 I will turn D.C. into a ghost town
The powder on the letter is RICIN
have a nice day
Fallen Angel

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This authentic threat asserts impending fatal injury. Because of the dangerous nature of threats, investigators must immediately ask: Is the intent real? Is the threatener likely to act? With real lives at risk, using the *linguistic* information available to answer these questions quickly and accurately is of great importance. Yet, because most scholarship on threats has focused exclusively on behavioral characteristics or on their relation to individual linguistic forms (e.g., Rosenfeld and Harmon 2002, Meloy and Hoffmann 2008, Smith 2008), there is still a substantial lack of understanding of the discursive nature of threatening language and a lack of empirical evidence demonstrating how threateners encode their level of commitment to the proposed act or reveal their attitudes about the victim. The purpose of this research, then, is to explore the ways in which interpersonal stances, or a speaker or writer's commitment to or attitudes about a person or proposition (Biber et al. 1999), are manifested and function in threatening communications.

The construct of stance is a rich interpersonal resource used to create attitudinal meaning, position social actors, and reveal commitment and intent (Martin and White 2005). It provides a link between personal identity, social action, and culturally-situated meaning (Jaffe 2009, Johnstone 2009), and authorial stances can be expressed through a wide range of lexical and grammatical devices (Thompson and Hunston 2000). This research utilizes a triangulation of methods to uncover patterns of epistemic and affective meaning that are ideologically associated with and that exist within the genre.

First, through a survey of threatening language ideologies, I synthesize how three communities of practice (COP) – scholars, practitioners, and students – view stance in threats; I find that their ideologies overwhelmingly construct a genre committed to violence and threatener control, wherein authorial intent is more strongly attributed to threats possessing characteristics intuitively linked to threatening language, such as modals of commitment (e.g., *must*, *have to*), adverbs of certainty (e.g., *definitely*, *undoubtedly*), and violent action verbs (e.g., *kill*, *stab*).

Second, through a corpus-based analysis of 470 authentic threat letters, collected over one year at the Academy Group, a behavioral analysis firm of former F.B.I. Supervisory Special Agents, I outline how grammatical markers of stance – modals, adverbials, and complement clauses – are actually distributed in threats. I uncover an unexpected set of interpersonal functions associated with these markers – functions that mitigate or *weaken* the threatener's stance. Pragmatically, these markers allow the threatener to save face and adhere to societal norms of politeness, despite the fact that, in a majority of cases, the threatener is anonymous. This finding is contradictory to the surveyed impressions about threatening language as a whole, which focus, rather, on forms that function to *strengthen* the threatener's stance, thus violating social norms.

For example, according to the COP survey, threateners would be expected to strengthen their role or apparent level of commitment to their threat by using rhetorical devices such as direct declaratives (e.g., the prediction modal *will*: *I will make you pay if it is the last thing that I do on this earth*) rather than weaken their role or commitment level by using mitigating devices (e.g., the possibility modal *may*: *it looks like the end may be near, the end for you*).

Further analysis of these grammatical markers of stance revealed that particular linguistic forms were significant or salient to different threat realization categories, e.g., prediction modals (*will*, *be going to*) were significant ($p < .05$) to non-realized threats. However, when examined in detail, each highlighted form performed a variety of different functions, some of which occurred equally in both realization categories, emphasizing the importance of examining function over form alone. Additionally, the distribution of strengthening and weakening functions did *not* divide neatly along threat realization lines, as was expected by the surveyed COP, i.e., threats that have been carried out *and* those that have not been carried out are composed of a combination of functions that both strengthen and weaken the threatener's stance. Threateners, then, regardless of their intent to carry out a threatened act, take stances that both violate and adhere to social norms even though our folk linguistic impressions (Preston 2007) about threatening language present a highly dichotomous picture of what threatening language is and how threateners demonstrate their intent to carry out a threatened act. This process of erasure, wherein a linguistic phenomenon is made invisible in order to match the ideological frames of an individual or social group (Irvine and Gal 2000), has barred us from perceiving threatening language in its entirety; this can have grave implications for those assessing and analyzing threatening language.

Finally, using the resources of Appraisal analysis (Martin and White 2003, Martin and Rose 2003), I present the discourse analytic findings from two threat cases; the first of which supports and enhances the form-based functional patterns previously identified through the corpus analysis, while the second challenges these findings, demonstrating, again, that even though a variety of linguistic patterns may be significant to each category of threat (realized vs. non-realized), threateners use a myriad of rhetorical strategies to convey interpersonal meaning. This finding supports previous studies that question the use of linguistic form as an indicator of behavior (e.g., Lord et al. 2008), as threateners, like all social actors, have access to an array of semiotic resources, which are variously constructed for different purposes and are all dependent on their culturally-situated context (Halliday 1978).

Thus, the triangulation of methods utilized in this research enables the investigation of stance to move fluidly across multiple semiotic planes, starting with ideologies about authorial stance in threats and moving through the lexical and

grammatical forms marking stance to the interpersonal stance functions identified by the prosodic repetition of evaluative language across a text. Ultimately, this multifaceted approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of the theoretical construct of stance and the performative nature of threatening.

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