

PAPER

THE DUAL STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONAL FEATURES OF THREAT AS A SPEECH ACT

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Abstract

The speech act of threat is a complex communicative phenomenon that exhibits features of both commissive and directive acts. Classical interpretations classify it as a commissive act, while other scholars emphasize its directive nature, highlighting the demand aspect inherent in a threat. Modern research, including Wierzbicka, Schelinger, Pocheptsov, Gotlib, and Volf, demonstrates that a threat's semantics combines the expression of potential negative consequences with the speaker's intention to influence the addressee's behavior. Pragmatic analysis identifies key components: the addressee's non-compliance, the speaker's capability and intention, and the social goal underlying the threat. Consequently, the speech act of threat should be considered a dual-component, context-dependent phenomenon, integrating directive, commissive, and expressive elements.

Key words: speech act of threat, commissive–directive acts, menace (menasiv), directive, pragmatic components, illocutionary act, semantic structure, verbal influence, hypothetical situation, social goal

Introduction

As noted earlier, a substantial body of literature has been devoted to the classification of speech acts. Nevertheless, utterances with different communicative orientations remain insufficiently studied across various languages. More detailed analyses have primarily focused on illocutionary acts expressed by means of performative verbs, in which the verb explicitly names the speech

act (e.g., I inform you that..., I admit that..., etc.). The situation is different with utterances that do not possess any performative expression at all (for example, verbs such as to flatter or to threaten). Such speech acts have not yet received comprehensive treatment, as also noted by E.S.Petelina: “the nature of these illocutionary acts has not been sufficiently studied, nor has their classification been developed, and the specifics of their use in language have not been established”.

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Therefore, special attention in the analysis of such speech acts should be directed toward the study of lexical, grammatical, lexico-grammatical, and prosodic means of expression. The syntactic structure of the utterance also plays a significant role.

Materials and Methods

The object of the present study is the speech acts of threat and warning. The semantic and pragmatic features of these types of utterances allow them to be grouped together and defined as speech acts expressing a warning of an undesirable action. The examination of speech acts with the meaning of warning an undesirable action begins with the speech act of threat (SAT). The speech act of threat is interpreted ambiguously in the works of both domestic and foreign linguists. In the classical interpretation, the speech act of threat is classified as a commissive speech act ("statements of intention" in Austin's terms), in which the speaker undertakes an obligation to perform a certain future action. This condition characterizes commissives and makes it possible to classify the speech act of threat as such, despite the fundamentally opposite preparatory conditions of commissives: in the case of a promise, the hearer prefers the performance of the action by the speaker, whereas in the case of a threat, the hearer suffers harm as a result of the speaker's action.

On the other hand, the speech act of threat is also included among directives (Searle), which is likewise supported by a number of convincing arguments, since a threat is inherently a form of demand. "The content and goals of directives (orders, commands, instructions, advice, requests, etc.) consist in the speaker's expression of the desire to induce the addressee to perform a required action".

The fact that the speech act of threat is classified either as a commissive or as a directive is apparently explained by its complex dual nature. However, in such classifications only one aspect of the menacing utterance is taken into account. A more detailed analysis of this speech act leads to the conclusion that the semantics of threat includes, on the one hand, a demand, and on the other hand, a promise of negative consequences.

M.Hentschel attempts to resolve this contradiction by advancing the hypothesis of the existence of complex speech acts. In his classification, the speech act of threat should be attributed to the group of mixed commissive-directive speech acts, namely to that subgroup in which the commissive action is performed after the realization of the directive, and where the necessary and sufficient condition for the implementation of the directive action is the speaker's expression of intention.

A. Wierzbicka interprets the speech act of threat as a message about future events that are undesirable for the addressee, with the purpose of influencing the addressee's behavior, that is, of eliciting or preventing a certain action. From this perspective, the central component of a threat (according to Wierzbicka) is "the desire to make someone do (or, more precisely, not do) something." The conditions for the realization of the speech act of threat are formulated as follows: "assuming

- that you do not want to do what I want,
- and wishing to induce you to do it,
- and wishing to prevent your possible disobedience,

I say: If you move, I will shoot."

The author considers the absence of an explicit performative expression such as I threaten you... to be insignificant from the standpoint of semantic structure. "If it can be shown that an expression of this kind constitutes an implicit but integral part of the utterance (primarily on the basis of intonational evidence), it must be included in the semantic representation of the utterance".

It should be noted that attempts at an unambiguous interpretation of the speech act of threat can also be found in the works of domestic linguists, etc.]. N.D.Arutyunova, adopting Wierzbicka's definition of threat ("a message about future events undesirable for the addressee with the aim of influencing his or her behavior, that is, of eliciting or preventing a certain action," 1987), identifies the logical-semantic structure of the speech act of threat in the use of a series of sentences containing an imperative and a future tense verb form indicating the possible consequences of non-compliance with the inducement.

In her book *Functional Semantics of Evaluation*, E.M.Volf treats a threat as an expressive, namely as an emotional reaction of the speaker to harm inflicted upon them (thus considering only the second component of the complex structure of threat). According to E.M.Volf, a threat is usually expressed by asserting a future action or a presumed future action that is negative for the addressee and may or may not be carried out. In this sense, the speech act of threat is regarded as a variety of promise.

According to D.N.Shmelev, when expressing a threat, the speaker “demonstrates readiness to prevent a certain action or determination to punish the interlocutor if the latter dares to carry it out.”

Results and Discussion

It is also necessary to mention the doctoral dissertation by T. N. Schelinger [230], which considers the speech act of threat (SAT) as a speech act located on the periphery of the functional-semantic field of directives (alongside advice and warning). According to the author, the field method is more appropriate for analyzing utterances that lack a performative verb, since sharp boundaries between such speech acts do not exist. T. N. Schelinger identifies the following pragmatic components of a threat:

1. The addressee is not interested in performing the action;
2. The speaker is aware of the addressee's lack of interest;
3. The speaker is capable of carrying out the action mentioned in the threat;
4. The speaker is interested in eliciting a specific behavior from the addressee;
5. The speaker intends to perform the action mentioned in the threat.

In G. G. Pocheptsov's classification, the speech act of threat occupies a special position and is termed a “menace” (*menasiv*). The author notes that menacing utterances share many characteristics with promissive acts (prospective nature of action, several features of role structure), but “the conditions for the realization of menaces are opposite to those typical of promissives: the addressee is not interested in performing the action referred to in the utterance.” Furthermore, the

author emphasizes that the speaker's sincerity is essential in utterances containing a threat, as a threat does not materialize if the speaker does not regard the object of the threat as “extremely undesirable for the addressee.”

Although Pocheptsov points out that the subject of speech refers to the future, he stresses that “the author of a menacing utterance does not act as a guarantor of the reality of the future event” and may threaten an event whose occurrence is beyond their control (e.g., ‘He will give it to you’—the author's example). Consequently, there are no restrictions on the sets of role structures in menacing utterances.

In her dissertation, N. V. Gotlib relies on the notion that “threats are attempts at influence aimed at changing the context in which the intended addressee makes a decision”, and consequently defines the speech act of threat as a two-component structure: the first component is an inducement (requirement), while the second constitutes a hypothetical situation. This hypothetical situation is proposed as an alternative to the first component. The first and second components are connected by a disjunctive relationship (“either–or”) or conditional relations in the form of logical implication (“if...then”). According to N.V.Gotlib, the primary component is the requirement. If it is absent, the utterance, although retaining features of the second component—the promise of negative consequences for the addressee—cannot truly be considered a threat. In this case, it is rather an emotional reaction to previously inflicted harm and may be interpreted as an expressive act (cf. E.M.Volf).

Furthermore, in her study, the author analyzes various types of threatening situations and concludes that the leading factor in shaping a threat situation is the parameter of the “social goal,” which she considers as the “goal–motive” and which determines the type of social situation [84].

Conclusion

The speech act of threat represents a complex and multidimensional phenomenon within human communication. It combines features of both commissive and directive acts: the speaker

undertakes an obligation or demonstrates willingness to execute an action, while simultaneously demanding or influencing the addressee's behavior. Research by Wierzbicka, Schelinger, Pocheptsov, Gotlib, and Volf emphasizes that the act's semantic and pragmatic structure includes the speaker's intention, the addressee's potential non-compliance, possible negative consequences, and the social context or goal motivating the threat.

Importantly, the threat does not necessarily require an explicit performative verb; intonation, syntactic structure, and implied meaning contribute to its communicative effect. Thus, the speech act of threat should be understood as a dual-component, context-sensitive act, integrating directive, commissive, and expressive elements, whose realization depends on situational, cognitive, and social parameters.

Foydalanilgan adabiyotlar

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