

Gender Variation, Indirectness, and Preference Organization in Threat Responses

Ronald Geluykens & Holger Limberg
Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg*

Abstract

In the pragmatic literature, a lot of attention has been paid to the politeness implications of using certain so-called face-threatening acts (or FTAs; Brown and Levinson 1987). However, the literature thus far has been limited in various respects. First of all, only a small subset of acts have been examined (notable requests and apologies). Secondly, the interactive dimension of FTAs, and in particular their behavior in terms of preference organization, has been largely ignored. And finally, the perlocutionary dimension, i.e. the role of reactions to face-threatening acts (which may be face-threats in themselves) has not been given the attention it deserves.

This paper employs controlled-elicitation data for investigating reactions to one particular type of FTA, viz. threats. Threats are intrinsically highly face-threatening, so responding to them carries a high degree of face threat (especially if such responses are dispreferred, i.e. do not attempt to fix the social conflict caused by the threat itself). In this paper, we will therefore determine, first of all, whether negative reactions to threats are dispreferred in quantitative terms. Secondly, we will examine to what extent certain types of redressive action correlate systematically with preference organization. Thirdly, we will investigate the effect of one particular type of social variation, viz. the speaker's gender, influences threat responses, both in terms of preference organization and in terms of the politeness strategies involved.

Results show (a) that non-compliance with a threat is indeed dispreferred in social terms, (b) that such dispreferred responses require more redressive action, and (c) that threat responses are subject to gender variation on both these levels. We would like to claim therefore, that use of such discourse completion test data can be useful for analyzing interactive features of FTAs, if used sensibly and, ideally, in combination with other types of (naturally occurring) data.

Keywords: Variation, Gender, Politeness, Adjacency Pairs, Face-Threatening Acts

1 Introduction

Verbally threatening somebody is an intrinsically highly offensive and impolite social activity, and must therefore be regarded as a potentially very damaging 'face-threatening act' (or FTA for short, cf. Brown and Levinson 1987). Despite the obvious face risks

* Questions and comments should be addressed to Ronald Geluykens, at ronald.geluykens@uni-oldenburg.de.

involved in uttering verbal threats, they have hitherto received little attention in the literature on impoliteness or relational work (but cf. Fraser 1975, 1998, Harris 1984, Song 1995, Limberg and Geluykens 2007, Limberg 2008 and, for a psychological perspective, Tedeschi 1970, Heilman and Garner 1995, Beller 2002, Beller and Bender 2004).

Even though “[i]t may be the case that certain acts are conventionally associated with impoliteness” (Mills 2005: 265), threats still deserve to be treated in their specific context. Social variation may exist in threat exchanges and this can affect the ongoing interaction as well as its possible outcome. Therefore, our focus in this study is the immediate response as a first reaction to such offensive acts.

The social weightiness of a verbal threat poses severe problems for the interlocutor to whom the threat is directed. Verbal threats obviously expect some kind of response on the part of the addressee. However, such responses have received even less attention in the pragmatic literature (but see Limberg and Geluykens (2007)). This paper develops an analytical framework for such threat responses (henceforth TRs), and attempts an empirical analysis of TRs from two perspectives (cf. Limberg 2003).

First of all, this paper looks into the role of speakers’ gender in TRs and, in doing so, tries to provide some evidence that gender-based variation exists in conversational interaction, and more specifically in the realization of FTAs.

Conversational strategies, and in particular the extent to which they are gender-based, have attracted a growing interest since the 1970s (e.g. Tannen 1990, Coates 1993, Hirschman 1994, Holmes 1995, Mills 2003). Herbert (1990), for example, found significant differences in the acceptance of compliments made by female speakers. Similar results for gender-preferred response behaviour can be found for less ‘social’ speech acts, such as complaints (Geluykens and Kraft 2007). Much of this research is based on naturally occurring interaction and relies on qualitative interpretation of specific interactions rather than quantitative evaluation (but see Geluykens and Kraft 2007).

The TRs in our database, elicited under controlled circumstances, support the argument that female responses to threats are more polite than male ones. This observation is grounded on the assumption, following Brown and Levinson (1987), that there is some kind of intrinsic link between language structure (level of directness – indirectness) and its perceptions of (im)politeness. Even though politeness and impoliteness are multi-layered and complex terms, for the purpose of the present study we adopt a more narrow, functional perspective along the lines of many traditional paradigms following Brown and Levinson’s face-saving theory (for more recent discussions on politeness and different forms of relational work see Watts (2003), Locher (2004), and Christie (forthcoming)).

Secondly, it can be argued that, in terms of sequential organization, the sequence threat / threat response forms a so-called adjacency pair (Sacks et al. 1978). Since TRs can exhibit various degrees of compliance or non-compliance with the conditions stipulated in the threat (cf. *infra*), and since some responses are preferable to others for regulating the degree of face threat involved, we will attempt to show that the concept of preference organization (Schegloff and Sacks 1973), especially in its pragmatic sense (see Bousfield 2007), can be a useful analytical tool for investigating TRs.

Before going into detail, it may be useful to discuss threats and TRs in some more detail, in particular in terms of speaker intentions and face considerations. Threats coerce the addressee into performing or refraining from a certain act that s/he would not do under normal circumstances (cf. Limberg and Geluykens 2007). Our paper concentrates on one particular threat format, viz. the explicit contingent form (“If you do (n’t do) X, then I will do Y”) which comprises a realistic option for the addressee to circumvent the punishment that the speaker threatens with. The non-contingent form (“I will do X.”) is less interesting from this point of view, since any TR will not affect the outcome of the threat exchange (assuming that the threatener then also implements Y). Moreover, the syntactic structure of contingent threats provides the addressee with direct clue as to how to interpret the act. Fraser (1998) argues that a threat must always be inferred because there is no guarantee that a threat has actually been made. If, however, the unfavourable consequences are made explicit, then the addressee can choose to respond, addressing the purported claim inherent in the directive (X) and/or the pending consequences (Y).

A successful outcome, from the threatener’s [speaker’s] point of view, is the expression of compliance, i.e. the addressee shows, to a lesser or greater extent, his/her willingness to comply with the desired act. As Brown and Levinson (1987, cf. also Goffman 1967), point out, threats are a salient example of an FTA with multiple face threat implications: they impose highly not just on the addressee’s positive and negative face, but also threaten the speaker’s face if the elicited response is in turn confrontational, and the proposed act is not complied with. Minimizing the face threat when performing the act (e.g. “If you do X, then I might perhaps do Y”) would undermine its purpose and be counterproductive to its perceived severity. TRs, on the other hand, can be expected to carry some ‘redressive action’ to minimize the face threat whether addressees show compliance or non-compliance towards the speaker.

2 Research Design

Previous research on threats has either concentrated on similarities and differences between threats and relating speech acts such as warnings or promises (cf. Fraser 1975, Heilman and Garner 1975, Peetz 1977, Song 1995, Beller et al. 2005), or they are carried out in specialized fields where threats are used on a ‘regular’ basis as in children’s discourse, legal discourse or in negotiations (cf. Benoit 1983, Harris 1984, Gibbons et al. 1992).

Our concern was to elicit verbal responses that are typical of everyday conversation. Therefore, we used a written questionnaire Discourse Completion Test (DCT) with hypothetical situations collected under controlled circumstances among native English students (for more details cf. Limberg 2003). Despite several concerns about the usefulness of DCTs as a research method, we value it as an efficient data collection source for the study of (face-threatening) speech acts (see Golato 2003, Limberg and Geluykens 2007). On the one hand, DCTs do not guarantee that the elicited TR will be comparable to one which is naturally occurring; as such, our TRs have the same disadvantages as similar data elicited

though DCTs in other studies. On the other hand, using DCTs allows us control over all the social variables involved in the interactions, and in particular the speakers' (and hearers') gender and the degree of social distance between speaker and hearer. We believe these advantages outweigh the drawbacks, although this should not absolve us from the task of comparing our findings with those from more natural environments (ideally spontaneous conversations). Doing this lies outside the scope of the current paper, however.

Our concern was to collect a sufficient amount of TRs from different participants and to see how these speakers are inclined to respond when confronted with a threat. Table 1 presents a summary of the scenarios presented to respondents.

Situation 1	male policeman threatens addressee because of a parking offence	S > H
Situation 2	male fellow student threatens addressee because of breaking a promise to proofread a term paper	S = H
Situation 3	niece threatens addressee because s/he sent her to bed earlier than usual while baby-sitting	S < H
Situation 4	female train guard threatens addressee because s/he is unable to produce a ticket	S > H
Situation 5	female flatmate threatens addressee because of not doing his/her chores	S = H
Situation 6	little brother threatens addressee because s/he borrowed his digital camera without permission	S < H

Table 1: Overview of the Threat Situations

This controlled elicitation method allowed us to integrate the sociocultural variables gender and (less relevant to our purposes) social power systematically into the situations. In half the situations (scenarios 1, 2, and 6), the threatener is male and in the other half female (scenarios 3, 4, and 5). It is the respondents' gender which is the focus of the current investigation. While gender as a social variable is somewhat transparent in these situations, power is even more contested as a social construct in interaction. Given the constraints that the research method has, it is however justifiable to draw a preliminary threefold distinction of social power: the threatener can exert power over the addressee (scenarios 1 and 4), s/he can be dominated by the addressee (scenarios 3 and 6), or threatener and addressee can be on an equal footing (scenarios 2 and 5). Each situation thus represents a particular gender / power type. Overall, 1272 native English responses were collected, half of them given by female respondents (including one 'opting out' case).

3 Preference Organization

Sequential organization in conversation asks for an addressee's turn that is related to the speaker's first turn. In our scenario, the threat is the first part of the adjacency pair (threat - TR) and the response constitutes the second part (Sacks et al. 1978). Five different types of adjacency pair second parts can be identified in the data.

With an (unmitigated) preferred response (compliance, C), the addressee indicates that he is willing to adhere to the threatener's demands and to soften the confrontational atmosphere in that situation, such as in the following example (all examples are taken from situation 4):

- (1) Fine, I'll buy another ticket. (C, S 4, f 36)

Non-compliance (NC), on the other hand, is a dispreferred response where the addressee is, by no means, willing to comply with the prior demand. This type of response risks inherent costs because it is predestined for further confrontations and face loss on both sides:

- (2) I have a ticket though, and I'm not paying a fine for something I haven't done.
(NC, S 4, f 89)

These two examples are explicit responses from both ends of the response scale. The core (head act) of these responses contains a clear phrase of acceptance ("I'll buy another ticket.") or rejection ("I'm not paying a fine.") corroborated by minimal supportive moves. These types of responses can be marked as "bald on record" responses, following Brown and Levinson (1987), as there is little or no redressive action on the part of the addressee.

These two basic categories (C and NC), which represent, respectively, the opposite ends of the preferred / dispreferred distinction, proved insufficient to analyze the responses provided in our data. Given the fact that threats are highly face-threatening and that they are also used because the addressee has acted inappropriately in some respects, the majority of responses makes use of indirectness by supplying "supportive moves" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 275). Such responses leave room for interpretation and further negotiation, as they hint towards either compliance (Tendency towards Compliance, or TC, as in example (3)) or non-compliance (Tendency towards Non-Compliance, or TNC, as in (4)) without explicitly stating it:

- (3) I definitely bought a ticket, but it's just disappeared.
Could I buy another one from you now? (TC, S 4, f 1)
- (4) I just bought one, if you don't believe me it's your problem not mine!
(TNC, S 4, f 80)

Willingness to comply in (3) is shown by the supportive move ‘offer of repair’, which can be interpreted as a means to save the speaker’s face and repair any mistake previously made. On the other hand, supportive moves can also be used with dispreferred responses, as in (4), where the addressee’s response aggravates the conflict and causes further damage to the speaker’s face. In the context of a pragmatic-oriented approach to preference organization, it seems clear that the first (TC) is a preferred response while the second (TNC) is a dispreferred response.

The majority of the reponses in our data can be put into one of these four categories; however, we have included a fifth ‘open-ended’ (OE) category to account for those (relatively rare) TRs where it is unclear whether they will lead to compliance or not, as in example (5):

(5) I really did buy a ticket, but I can't find it. (OE, S 4, f 42)

Only the following course of the threat exchange will reveal more about the addressee’s intention of complying or rejecting the threat. It is impossible to judge from this utterance whether or not the threat will be successful.

Total in %	C	TC	OE	TNC	NC
Male	10.62	15.74	1.65	16.52	5.43
Female	8.03	23.05	1.57	14.79	2.60
Total	18.65	38.79	3.22	31.31	8.03

Table 2: Total Percentages of Responses in all Categories

Table 2 shows the relative frequencies of the five major TR categories in our data. Several conclusions can be drawn from this. First of all, it is clear that compliant strategies (i.e. C and TC) are more frequent than non-compliant ones (i.e. NC and TNC): 57.44 % of TRs are compliant, versus only 39.34 % non-compliant TRs. This result confirms what we would expect given that C and TC reflect preferred responses (see Limberg & Geluykens, 2007, for a more extensive discussion). Secondly, the frequencies in Table 2 show that speakers are more likely to formulate TRs indirectly, accompanied by supportive moves, rather than baldly on record (as shown by the higher percentages in the TC and TNC categories compared to the C and NC categories). Thirdly, the results give a clear indication of gender variation; it is to this factor that we will turn in the next section.

4 Gender Variation in Response Types

Before returning to preference organization and response types, we will first examine average response length (in words) of the TRs in our data. The consistent pattern through all six situations shows a 30 % surplus in the average response length in the female data (as shown in Table 3 below). Keeping in mind that these (raw) figures reveal hardly anything about the direction that the response aims at, they nevertheless show that female addressees tend to respond more verbosely, and, hence, employ more mitigating and/or aggravating strategies in their compliance or non-compliance responses, respectively (although, strictly speaking the increased verbosity might be due to other, hitherto unexamined, factors).

Situation	AUL Male (in words)	AUL Female (in words)	Verbosity Difference in %
1	11.78	14.34	21.73
2	12.56	16.00	27.42
3	13.94	16.77	20.30
4	14.96	19.31	27.61
5	12.42	18.81	51.51
6	10.42	14.11	35.41
Average/situation	12.68	16.52	30.66

Table 3: Average Utterance Length (AUL) of TRs

	Male	%	Fem	%	Total	%
Preferred (C + TC)	335	52.8	395	62.1	730	57.4
Open-ended	21	3.3	20	3.1	41	3.2
Dispreferred (TNC + NC)	279	43.9	221	34.7	500	39.3
Total	635	100	636	100	1271	100

Table 4: Gender Specific Response Types

Extending the analysis further in this direction, we compared differences in compliance rate between the male and female data. Here, the results (Table 4) clearly show gender-related variation. Female addressees are more likely to comply with a threat than their male counterparts (395 vs 335 in total, or 62.1 % vs 52.8 %). Conversely, dispreferred responses mirror these results: 43.9 % vs 34.7 % non-compliant responses for male and female speakers respectively. As pointed out in section 3, overall results support our hypothesis that TRs tend to comply rather than not to comply (57.4 % preferred vs 39.3 % dispreferred for all speakers).

A closer look at the four main response categories (C, TC, TNC and NC) underlines certain gender specific strategies. As shown by Table 2 in section 3, male addressees are inclined to respond baldly on record to a greater extent than female addressees. Moreover, the TC category has a female surplus while the picture is reversed for the TNC category.

A polite response seeks agreement and avoids disagreement (Leech 1983, Brown and Levinson 1987). These two strategies belong to the positive politeness strategies of claiming common ground, which is directed to the addressee (in our case threatener's) positive face, i.e. his/her "positive consistent self-image" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61). Agreeing with others, showing consideration for their needs and complying with their demands is, according to Brown and Levinson's theory and further supported by others e.g. Holmes (1999: 336), one aspect of polite behaviour. So, generally speaking, women tend to show more polite responses to threats than men. Early studies have attributed women's rather formal and 'polite' speech to their social status (cf. Trudgill 1975, Lakoff 1989). In our current context of threat responses, status differences between men and women are irrelevant. Instead, it seems that women may be more sensitive towards the potential conflict in these situations perhaps because they consider to a greater extent whether their behaviour may have caused the threat in the first place. Thus, they try to soothe the atmosphere by showing consideration and accepting their faults rather than making excuses or starting an argument. Put differently: women might display greater sensitivity towards contextual factors.

5 The Use of Supportive Moves

In addition to the general response type (preferred vs dispreferred) that was marked by the head act, addressees make use of different supportive moves to downgrade or upgrade a response. We distinguished between two types of moves: those that have a mitigating effect (MSM) and those that have an aggravating effect (ASM). The former group contains utterances that show respect for the face needs of the interlocutor, whereas the latter are of a highly offensive nature and offend against the face wants of the threatener. Some examples of mitigating moves from different scenarios are:

- (6) *Sorry, I'll move it for you.* (S1/f21) ['apology']

- (7) *I've been really busy. I haven't had the time, but I appreciate your help and I'll make it up to you.* (S2/f99) ['grounder']
- (8) *Sorry I'm only going to be a few seconds. Please can I stay?* (S1/m88) ['cost minimizer']

Examples of aggravating moves include:

- (9) *I don't need your help anymore. Some friend you were I was only using you.* (S2/m65) ['aggravation']
- (10) *Do it yourself thick shit!* (S2/m71) ['insult']
- (11) *I've got exams and if you don't take this into account, I won't when you have exams.* (S5/f48) ['counterthreat']

Supp. Move	Female	%	Male	%	Total	%
Mitigating	644	89.6	422	75.9	1066	83.6
Aggravating	75	10.4	134	24.1	209	16.4
Total	719	100	556	100	1275	100

Table 5: Correlation between Gender and Supportive Move

		Male	Female	Total
MSM	Apology	129	188	317
	Grounder	230	352	582
	Cost minimizer	20	40	60
ASM	Aggravation	52	40	92
	Insult	30	8	38
	Counterthreat	23	16	39

Table 6: Three Most Frequently Used Supportive Moves

Even here, differences continue to emerge and reveal a link between gender and the type of supportive move. Table 5 shows that 60.4 % of the mitigating supportive moves are provided by female respondents (644/1066) vs 39.6 % by male ones (422/1066), and that only 35.9 % of all aggravating supportive moves are provided by women as opposed to 64.1 % by men. Table 5 also shows, incidentally, that MSMs far outweigh ASMs: 83.6 % of all supportive moves are mitigating overall.

To round off our discussion on gender, we will have a closer look at the three most frequently used mitigating and aggravating supportive moves (Table 6). Once again, the figures support the view that female responses to threats are less confrontational and more polite because they use more strategies that save the speaker's face than strategies that enhance the offensive atmosphere.

6 Conclusion

This analysis has revealed several tendencies with regard to threat responses. First of all, we have argued that the ethnomethodological concept of preference organization can also be a useful tool for analysing TRs, adapted to controlled contexts. The majority of TRs yielded preferred (compliant) responses regardless of the gender of the addressee. Secondly, gender (of the addressee) has a major influence on the response type chosen, in that the female data revealed more compliant responses than the male data. Tentatively expressed, female speakers are more likely to comply with a threat than their male counterparts. Thirdly, apart from the general response strategy, we had a look at different supportive moves and their use in TRs. Mitigating moves, such as apologies, are employed more by women, while aggravating moves, such as counterthreats or insults, are used more by men. These findings contribute to our conclusion that female TRs are less aggravating and more polite than male ones. At this point, it is important to mention that other contextual factors, apart from gender or social power, may influence the addressee's response, such as the threat's level of severity and the type of inappropriate behaviour by the addressee that caused the threat in the first place.

As for implications for further research, we think that this study can serve as a basis for future research in a more cross-disciplinary context. From a linguistic point of view, this study can be extended towards an intercultural dimension. Furthermore, it has implications for foreign language learning (and teaching), since L2 learners need to be able to familiarize themselves with the threat response realizations in the target language. Finally, from a cognitive point of view, the emotional dimension of threats and its effects on TRs should be investigated more thoroughly. We can only hope that this preliminary study has made a small contribution to this complex multidisciplinary dimension.

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