A critical review on the study of threatening in English

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Abstract: Despite the fact that threatening in languages is common in ordinary verbal communication, it has not received much attention from academic studies because of its "negative" nature. Muschalik's monograph *Threatening in English: A Mixed Method Approach*, mainly based on the theory of Face Threatening Speech Act by Brown and Levinson (1987), takes 301 categories of threatening expressions in judicial proceedings as the corpus with qualitative and quantitative methods, brings a new perspective for pragmatic research, especially speech act research, and deepens people's understanding of relevant issues. Initiated by Muschalik's book *Threatening in English: A Mixed Method Approach*, the paper is to make a critical review on the studies of threatening in English and propose some new directions for the study of threatening in languages.

Keywords: speech act; face threatening; pragmatic effect; judicial

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1. Introduction

Since Wittgenstein (1953) presented the famous idea that "the meaning of language lies in its use", usage-based view on language began to come into the scope of language philosophers. For example, Austin (1962)'s *How to Do Things with Words* put forward speech act theory and Searle (1969)'s *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* made some efforts to revise Austin's speech act theory. Thanks to Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), the study of doing things with words has become a significant topic in pragmatics. However, in the academic research, although threatening by language is regarded as an important speech act in our daily language, scholars have paid little attention to it. Julia Muschalik's monograph *Threatening in English*: a mixed method approach (2018. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, p. xiv+246), based on 301 US judicial litigation cases (Corpus of Judicial Opinion), applies multiple research methods to conduct a systematic research on threatening expressions in English, which is not only a new idea for the study of threatening words, but also a new development in pragmatics, especially in

speech act theory. Based on previous studies, taking 301 judicial litigation cases in the United States as a corpus, this book is divided into six chapters to systematically study the forms and functions of threatening. Initiated by Muschalik's monograph *Threatening in English*, the paper is to make a critical review on the studies of threatening in English and propose some new directions for the study of threatening in languages.

2. Literature on threatening in language

Of the previous studies on threatening in language, there are two major approaches, which are from the perspective of speech act theory and from an interdisciplinary approach respectively.

2.1. From speech act theory

In 1998, the paper "Threatening Revisited" by Fraser attempts to identify common formal features of threats. Fraser (1998: 165) notes that "a threat typically takes the form of a declaration, with the speaker as the agent, with a condition possibly present". For example,

(1) I'm going to get you.

(2) I'll punish you one day.

In examples (1) and (2), the agent is I. The present condition of example (1) is that the agent (the speaker here) will seize the addressee, which can be regarded as the present condition of threatening. The present condition of example (2) is that the agent (the speaker here) will chasten the addressee, which can be viewed as the present condition of threatening. Examples (1) and (2) can be regarded as "most direct verbal threats", which means that "either the addressee is to satisfy some condition(s), or the speaker will bring about an unfavourable state of the world" (Fraser, 1998: 167).

As Muschalik (2018: 2) points out, there is a predominantly functional understanding of speech acts in general and threatening in particular in the field of pragmatics. Threats are issued "in order to make [a target] behave or feel in a particular way" (Storey, 1995: 74) or to "[coerce] and [manipulate] the target into (not) doing something" (Limberg, 2009: 1376).

(3) Get off my back, will ya? I told you I'd do it when I got the time.

(4) I can't take you anymore. Give me more space.

The addressers of examples (3) and (4) are to make the addressees behave in a particular way, which is to make the addressees leave the addresser alone otherwise the addressees will be punished or will take the consequences. As a result, Storey (1995) and Limberg (2009) put great emphasis on the study of the function of threatening, and put little efforts on the concern of the forms of threatening because forms of threatening usually are hard to describe.

Davis (1997) and Gales (2010) conducted some applied studies on threat assessment, focusing on linguistic features that are seen as possibly revealing the seriousness of a threatening message, such as verbal aggression markers and authorial stance (cf. Muschalik, 2018: 4). They believe that there is a hierarchy of threat in ordinary communication. For instance,

(5) I will kill you.

(6) I will not let you go out to play.

The seriousness of threat of example (5) is much higher than that of example (6) because the former will take the life of the addressee but the latter is to just punish the addressee by taking his or her play time.

2.2. From interdisciplinary perspective

Taking both sociological and psychological perspectives, Beller et al. (2005) and Hepburn & Potter (2011) have focused on the use of threats as an instrument of social power and influence and have highlighted the conditional nature of threats (cf. Muschalik, 2018: 4). For instance,

(7) NORTH KOREA has vowed to counter "nuclear with nuclear" against the US and committed to building up its "nuclear war deterrent".

(8) Trump said that he would retaliate if the Tehran government struck again at U.S. interests in Iraq.

The threats from examples (7) and (8) can be regarded as the instrument of social power and influence, in which the addressers are to issue the instrument to threat the addressees to stop doing something otherwise the addressees will take the serious consequences.

2.3. Some shortcomings of previous studies

As is shown above, it's in the year of 1953 that Wittgenstein (1953) proposed the usage-based language view. From that time on, scholars both in language philosophy and in linguistics began to take notice of language use from the perspective of linguistic studies. Unfortunately, despite the fact that threatening in languages is common in ordinary verbal communication, it has not received much attention from academic studies because of its "negative" nature. Take two significant scholars in the study of speech act as examples. Austin (1962: 150) points out that these classes of utterance, classified according to their illocutionary force, by the following more-or-less rebarbative names: Verdictives, Exercitives, Commissives, Behabitives, Expositives. By taking a critical view on Austin (1962), Searle (1969) found some problems in Austin's classification of speech act and reclassified the speech act into five categories: Assertives, Representatives, Directive, Commissives, Expressives, Declarations. But both Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) did not pay attention to threatening in language, which is an important ordinary language phenomenon in daily communication.

As Muschalik (2018: 3) points out that the focus of most previous studies on threatening was not on simply creating an inventory of the linguistic features in threatening utterances, but on an examination of the precise contexts in which speakers use threats. Muschalik (2018: 4) found that the scarce empirical studies on threatening language reveal that a number of expectations about the frequency of particular linguistic features in threats are not confirmed by corpus-based studies.

In short, the previous studies on threatening in languages are in some way scarce, which means that most studies are not comprehensive because they do not take an overview on both forms and functions (such as social functions) of threatening in languages. Fortunately, Muschalik's

Threatening in English: a mixed method approach, based on 301 US judicial litigation cases (Corpus of Judicial Opinion), applies multiple research methods to conduct a systematic research on threatening expressions in English, which can be viewed as an interesting and enlightening probe into threatening in English.

3. Major contributions from Muschalik's *Threatening in English*

Taking 301 judicial litigation cases in the United States as a corpus, Muschalik's *Threatening in English* can be divided into six chapters to systematically study the forms and functions of threatening. This section offers a brief introduction to the major contributions made by Muschalik's *Threatening in English*.

Chapter one mainly introduces the previous studies of threatening and the main research idea of this book. By probing previous researches about threatening in languages, the author firstly points out that due to the heterogeneity of syntactic form and the uncertainty of semantic content, its definition has aroused a lot of controversies (Fraser, 1998; Solan & Tiersma, 2005). Previous studies are mainly based on a functional perspective, and threatening is regarded as a special category of speech act. So, the threatening can be defined as:

(1) to make a target object behave or feel in a specific way (Slorey, 1995: 74);

(2) or to coerce and manipulate the target into not doing something (Limberg, 2009: 1376).

Muschalik admits that this definition relegates the form of threatening in languages to a secondary position, which deserves to reconsider. In addition, the author also introduces the study of threatening by Gales (2010). With 103 subjects, Gales (2010) examines the prototypicality of threatening through experiments, which includes direct threats, conditional threats and veiled threats. According to the common usage of threatening, their shares of percentage are 54% of conditional threats, 37% of veiled threats and 9% of direct threats. This research approach inspired Muschalik's interest in verbal threatening, who explores the relationship between empiricism and pragmatics. Undoubtedly, the studies of pragmatics in the recent decades have demonstrated a tendency of empiricism, in which research methods have been inspired by corpus linguistics and an experimental paradigm has been conventionalized, that is to say, the research method in pragmatics has largely depended on corpus. However, a variety of scholars have found that some important expressions in language may not be covered even in a large corpus, which will cripple the strength of corpus-driven pragmatic research. This is also the inadequacy of corpus-driven pragmatic research. Especially for studying speech acts, some corpora do not fully reflect the current state of language (Jucker, 2009: 1620). Muschalik suggests that the previous researches on threatening-centred case analysis have made some progress in the field, but they, to some extent, have neglected the significance of corpus-driven empirical research. This is also the academic gap to be filled in this book.

Chapter two discusses the basic concept of threatening and other related issues. As for the definition of threatening, the author firstly cites the definitions of threat utterance and the act of threatening from *The Oxford English Dictionary*, and then suggests that most definitions are not based on actual language data but on reflections of linguistic expressions. After analyzing the illocutionary act of threatening, Muschalik proposes the idea that threatening in languages needs to

meet three conditions:

(1) The speaker has the motivation to threaten the hearer;

(2) The speaker believes that this action will lead to the hearer in a difficult position;

(3) Through putting the hearer on the awareness of the condition (1), the speaker can threaten the hearer.

And then the author points out that it becomes necessary to inspect the threatening in languages both from two aspects: form and function. Based on the former researchers and in combination with the author's own research perspective, the author analyzes systematically the form of the threatening: conditionality, futurity, violent verbs, taboo words and weapons. Furthermore, the author inspects the function of threatening from two dimensions systematically: (1) power and demands: threats as a tool of manipulation; (2) power and face: threats as a form of impoliteness. And this chapter also discusses context problem of threatening from two sides: (1) power and distance as social context; (2) the blend of power and distance between the speaker and the hearer.

Chapter three is the description of data collection and research methods. There are mainly two paradoxes in previous studies when collecting corpus: the inductive method of collecting corpus may lose the authenticity of the corpus; the corpus collected in the original way may not cover all language phenomena. As for the corpus of threat words, Leech (1983: 105) said frankly, threat and other conflicting words are marginal language phenomena in communication. Culpeper (2011: 9) harbors the viewpoint that impolite expressions in daily language are relatively scarce in daily context, and it is difficult to collect data in this respect. Therefore, it is very hard to find corpus of threats even in the American Contemporary English Corpus (COCA) (see Kasper, 2008: 282). Consequently, the study of threats based on randomly collected corpus and existing corpus has the problem of missing data, which should be excluded. Thus, the author has systematically demonstrated the feasibility of using 301 cases in U. S. judicial proceedings as the research corpus.

Chapter four explores the form of threat. The prevailing opinion in the literature appears to be that a threat's form is largely indeterminate. However, some scholars have pointed out that threats have typical formal features and even rigid patterns, both of which have not yet seen any empirical verification. Based on the corpus of Judicial Opinions, this chapter analyzes and demonstrates the typical formal features of threat, trying to answer three research questions:

(1) Are there typical features that occur in the majority of threats and do these features correspond to the generalizations we find in the literature?

(2) How frequent are the features and how are they distributed? Is any feature so frequent as to reach the status of a pervasive conventional feature of threatening language?

(3) How do the features relate to each other, i.e, do some of them regularly occur together? Are these patterns meaningful?

The author has systematically analyzed the formal features of 301 categories of threat by analyzing 3612 specific expressions and taking 10 variables as investigation units, which are respectively: CONDITIONALITY, FUTURITY, TYPE OF VERB, AGENT, PATIENT, PP_I, PP_YOU, TABOO LANGUAGE, MENTION OF WEAPONS, RELATIONSHIP OF THREATENER

AND TARGET. Through the analysis, the author answered the above three research questions:

(1) There are typical features that occur in the majority of features, but these features don't correspond to the generalizations we have found in the literature.

(2) The frequency of these formal features is different, and some features are so frequent as to reach the status of a pervasive conventional feature of threatening language.

(3) Formal features are interrelated to form a certain pattern, and the pattern itself is meaningful.

Chapter five discusses the function of threats. Illocutionary force of threats is one of the focuses of Speech Act Theory, which has been described a lot in the current literature, but not much based on the real corpus. This chapter systematically elaborates on the function of threats on the basis of 301 Corpus of Judicial Opinion. Four research questions on the threats' function are proposed in the chapter:

(1) Can existing candidates for functions of threatening be attested in the present data?

(2) Can the contexts in which speakers threaten be categorized?

(3) Are contextual differences reflected in the form of the threats?

(4) Can the form of a threat serve as a predictor of its function?

Combining with the features of the form of threats, which have been addressed in chapter four, the author, supported by the corpus, analyzes the function of threats from three aspects:

(1) assessing the threatening of Pre-event and Post-event;

(2) manipulative and retaliative threatening;

(3) the form as a predicator of function.

This chapter also answers the above four research questions respectively:

(1) The corpus of this research can mostly support the existing candidates for functions of threatening;

(2) The contexts of threatening can be assorted;

(3) The diversities of contexts are in connection with the form of threats;

(4) Pragmatic functions of threats can be almost calculated by the form of threats.

Here, it is necessary to point out that there are two major functions of threatening in language.

(1) manipulation;

(2) retaliation

For instance, the threats in examples (9) to (11) all have a manipulative function.

(9) If you are afraid for Alexander and his life in this case you must do right for your son, you must pay.

(10) You better not snitch or tell.

(11) Sarvjit. If ur a government witness signal me by not responding to this message. But if ur a friend call me.

The threats in Examples (12) to (14) all have a retaliative function.

(12) Merilyn McClure, the crimes that you have committed on carries a death sentence. So that what you have coming is death. You are not going to get away.

(13) I'm going to get you for lying in court, you fat bitch.

(14) I'll be the one to get you, no matter how long it takes me. If I don't get you, I will get Iris or Christie or whoever close to you

In short, Muschalik (2018: 177) restresses the basic idea about the two functions of threatening in language.

The results confirm our assumption that features are distributed differently across the two functions. Not all of the effects that were found proved to be statistically significant, but tendencies were nonetheless visible. It was found that there is a slight disposition for manipulative threats to contain conditional language, futurate expressions with reduced predictive strength, such as will, and even more often no futurity. Furthermore, manipulative threats more frequently contain non-violent verbs and both agent and patient of a potential future action are not explicitly referenced. Threats with this function appear to be more frequently hearer-oriented or directive.

Chapter six is a summary, which mainly explains major points of this research, summarizes the "pair" bond between the form and function of threats based on the Speech Act Theory. This chapter emphasizes communicative strategies of threats and further stresses the view that the form of manipulative threats is relatively fuzzy while that of retaliative threats is rather direct. It also analyzes the potential risks and advantages possibly initiated by threatening in language. Muschalik (2018: 182) restresses the significance of the study:

In order to incorporate an aspect of social context into the analysis, it was further examined whether the relationship of threatener and target influences the form of threats. The findings suggest that the relationship has some influence on the form of threats, but the nature of the effect was not always conclusive, with one exception; the common assumption that less powerful speakers less often utter threats. This major finding points out one significant aspect about the relationship between social power and threatening in languages. At last, this chapter indicates the probable development approach of the threat research.

4. A comment on Muschalik's *Threatening in English*

From the literature of threatening in languages, we reach the conclusion: despite the fact that threatening in languages is common in ordinary verbal communication, it has not received much attention from academic field because of its "negative" nature. For instance, the number of papers on threatening in Chinese from CNKI is only eight up to July 15, 2020, which is a very small number compared with the studies on other speech acts. So, Muschalik's *Threatening in English*

published in 2018 has become a significant achievement for the study of threatening in languages. Muschalik, mainly based on the theory of Face Threatening Speech Act by Brown and Levinson (1987), takes 301 categories of threatening expressions in judicial proceedings as the corpus and conducts an empirical study on threatening in English. Muschalik, by applying qualitative and quantitative methods, brings a new perspective for pragmatic research, especially speech act research, and promotes the understanding of relevant issues. Generally speaking, five pieces of strength of Muschalik's study are concluded as follows.

First of all, Muschalik's *Threatening in English*, based on present conditions, reviews the historical research of threats and shows the new direction of its research. The author takes the historical research of threatening in languages as the main line, together with the historical research of modern pragmatics, especially the speech act theory, which systematically explores the historical studies on threatening in English. Besides, the author points out the shortcomings and problems of the current research on threatening in languages, which covers a wide-range perspective, from theoretical aspect to corpus collection, from research methods to research questions as well. Furthermore, based on the speech act theory, Muschalik's *Threatening in English* makes a great promotion on the study of speech act theory and threats, using big data with 301 categories of threatening in English from American judicial proceedings as research corpus. What's more, in the last part of Muschalik's *Threatening in English*, the author explores the possible directions of research on threatening in languages.

Secondly, the author puts the theory of the unification of linguistic form and function into practice, which shows innovativeness on research methods:

(1) attempts to infer pragmatic functions of threatening through examining its form;

(2) provides new methods for selecting and analyzing corpus in pragmatic studies, which particularly deal with the threatening form and functional features from qualitative and quantitative aspects.

All of these emphasize that linguistic form and function should be unified, so that research methods should not only be based on mass data but also contain qualitative analysis to achieve dialectical unity between qualitative and quantitative aspects.

The third strength of the study lies in the scientific use of specific corpus. Muschalik holds that semantic and functional features of threatening haven't yet been testified in corpus, which has resulted in the lack of corpus study on threatening in languages. Therefore, the corpus-based method applied in the study is in line with linguistic studies against the background of mass data. The author admits that there are four advantages based on the collection of 301 categories of threatening in English in judicial opinions:

(1) authenticity in the corpus from judicial opinions.

(2) representativity of the corpus, in which 301 categories of threatening in English involve not only serious criminal cases, but also trivial life disputes.

(3) being pragmatically annotated, in the conversations both parties including the threatener and the threatened can directly identify the threatening in languages in judicial lawsuit text.

(4) offering detailed contextual information, in which the integrity of evidence has been emphasized in judicial lawsuit and the threating is also clearly identified by interested parties. All of these constitute context of judicial lawsuit text.

The study at least partially overcomes the deficiencies of empirical study of threatening, more specifically, the shortcomings of corpus-driven study. So, Muschalik provides a new method and beneficial experience for the following pragmatic study by using corpus systematically.

Above all, this book studies an interesting topic in pragmatic studies, providing with scholars a new direction in the field. For instance, Muschalik discusses that scholars like Bellar et al. (2005) and Hepburn & Potter (2011), from sociological and psychological perspectives, view threatening as an important way to exert social rights and influences. This indicates that only by taking a multidisciplinary perspective and using multiple research methods can we promote relative researches, and this can serve as a new direction for threatening study.

It is sure that this book is significant and interesting, but there still exist some shortcomings. One of the shortcomings lies in that this book only deals with English corpus. However, besides the universality of pragmatics, different languages may show different strategies on threatening expressions. So, the width and validity of the conclusions of the book are to be verified by using more evidence from different languages.

5. Future task for the study of threatening

Above all, Muschalik's *Threatening in English* and some literatures in the study of threatening in languages provide with scholars some new directions in the study of pragmatics.

First of all, threatening in languages is intimately related to politeness. As Kasper (1994: 3206) points out, 'politeness' refers to proper social conduct and tactful consideration for others. … 'politeness' as a technical term in linguistic pragmatics refers to a broader, substantially more democratic concept. Since the object of pragmatic inquiry is linguistic action, 'politeness' as a pragmatic notion refers to ways in which linguistic action is carried out—more specifically, ways in which the relational function in linguistic action is expressed. It can be inferred that politeness is significant in daily social life. And we know that threatening is closely associated with politeness. So, threatening in languages has become an important topic in politeness pragmatics.

Secondly, of politeness pragmatics, Fraser (1990) reviews four current approaches to politeness: (1) the social-norm view; (2) the conversational-maxim view; (3) the face-saving view; and (4) the conversational-contract view. It must be admitted that the four approaches to politeness have made great contributions to politeness. For instance, according to Fraser (1990: 220), the first approach to politeness is the social-norm view which assumes that each society has a particular set of social norms consisting of more or less explicit rules that prescribe a certain behavior, a state of affairs, or a way of thinking in a context. A positive evaluation (politeness) arises when an action is congruent with the norm, a negative evaluation (impoliteness-rudeness) when an action is not. Therefore, in people daily verbal communication, there are both positive evaluation and negative evaluation, which should be dealt with in the same weightiness. Unfortunately, the threatening in languages has to some extent been ignored. So the future study on threatening in languages could be included in politeness pragmatics. As a consequence, the research on threatening can get the four approaches to

politeness refined.

Thirdly, from the perspective of constructional grammar, it should be stressed that a construction is a pairing of form and meaning. So, the threatening in language should be regarded as a construction. Therefore, the future study can conduct some systematic researches on threatening constructions in languages, which will contribute to the developments for both constructional grammar and pragmatics. Thus, both positive construction and negative construction, such as threatening in languages, should be explored, so as to make us have a better and deeper understanding of the features of daily verbal communication.

In addition, with the development of experimental pragmatics the future study on threatening in languages can test the motivation and validity of threatening in languages by taking some methods from experimental pragmatics. In this way, scholars can distinguish two types of threats:

(1) threats that are uttered in prospect of an action that threateners either try to prevent or incite;

(2) threats that are uttered in retrospect of events that have somehow negatively affected the target (Muschalik, 2018: 183).

Finally, Muschalik's *Threatening in English* discusses that scholars like Bellar et al. (2005) and Hepburn & Potter (2011), from sociological and psychological perspectives, view threatening in languages as a significant and useful instrument to exert social rights and influences. Due to the complicatedness of threatening in languages, the study on threats should take a multidisciplinary perspective. Only by applying multiple research methods can we promote relative researches, and this can serve as a new direction for threatening study.

In summary, what has been mentioned above is the fact that *Muschalik's Threatening* in English evidences qualitative and quantitative research methods to a systematical study of threat words in 301 US judicial cases, which has a great theoretical value and practical significance. Theoretically, based on Brown & Levinson's (1987) facethreatening speech act, it has propelled the development of speech act theory; practically, the systematic study of threat language corpus in Muschalik's *Threatening in English* sheds some light on people's understanding of relevant issues and provides guidance for effective pragmatic communication in daily language. Assuredly, Muschalik's *Threatening in English* will definitely promote the theoretical study of speech act theory and has expressed a new direction in pragmatics as well.

Conflict of interest

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