

REPORTED THREATS: THE ROUTINIZATION OF VIOLENCE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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Abstract

This study offers new insights into the complex and underexplored nature of reported threats. Combining the theoretical framework of speech act analysis with the concept of reported speech, the study finds six categories of reported threats, uncovering ones that have been overlooked by existing scholarship thus far. The texts presented are derived from audio-recordings of 847 interviews carried out in four Central American countries: El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Panama between 2010 and 2014. References to threats and threat narratives came from school teachers, community leaders, police officers, clergy, and members of municipal violence prevention committees. The interpretation of indirect and implicit threats are made in the social context of communities under siege, that is, under constant attack by local gangs, many of whom are connected to national gangs and international narco-trafficking cartels. The credibility of the different types of threats is evaluated, using Goffman's (1981) insight into the complexity of speaker roles in face-to-face interaction.

Keywords: Threats; Speech acts; Reported speech; Language crimes.

This study focuses on the classification and interpretation of a speech act: Threats. Threats are an especially meaningful form of speech act since they can be language crimes (Shuy 1996). Threats share features in common with other speech acts, such as warnings and predictions (Fraser 1998; Solan and Tiersma 2005). However, when a particular set of contextual factors can be seen to accompany the speech act, much of the ambiguity disappears, and recipients of the speech act will clearly understand its illocutionary force and interpret it as a threat. This study will go beyond pragmalinguistic work that has been carried out thus far on the analysis of threats, as we show below. In doing so, it will uncover forms of threats that have not been discussed in either theoretical or empirical previous studies of threats.

In crime-ravaged Central America, violence-related threats are a way of life. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC 2014) has reported that for at least the last decade, murder rates in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras are among the

highest, if not the highest in the world, exceeding European rates by 40 to 80 times.¹ One major source of the criminal threats and related violence are violent gangs and international drug cartels. Stimulated in part by the narcotics trade, but also by a wide range of criminal activity, children as young as eight and nine years of age become involved in the illegal activities of transnational gangs such as “Calle 18” and “Mara Salvatrucha” (also known as “Mara 13”), as well as scores of local, neighborhood proto-gangs.

An opportunity to study threat-related language crimes emerged out of a broader study in which the two co-authors of this paper have been involved. Beginning in 2010, the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), hosted by Vanderbilt University, undertook a multi-country, multi-year, multi-method impact evaluation of the United States Agency for International Development’s (USAID) community-based violence prevention programs in Central America (Berk-Seligson *et al.* 2014).² The study was based on the selection of “at-risk” neighborhoods in high-crime municipalities in these four countries. The neighborhoods were chosen based on above-average levels of unmet basic needs, under- and unemployment, single-parent households, and children not attending school on a regular basis. The study was multi-method, involving both quantitative and qualitative components. The findings of the quantitative component are summarized in Berk-Seligson *et al.* 2014. The present paper explores the qualitative component of the study. Between 2010 and 2014, 847 community “stakeholders” (school teachers, police officers, community development leaders, clergy, members of municipal crime prevention councils, at-risk youth) were interviewed in Guatemala (N=264), El Salvador (N=319), Honduras (N=63), and Panama (N=201).³ These digitally recorded interviews and their transcriptions form the data base for this study. The data base is an especially rich source of linguistic examples of threats, emerging, as it does, from

¹ Homicide rates in the “Northern Triangle” of Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras) have varied from a low of 40 per 100,000 to as high as nearly 100 per 100,000. These are *national* figures, with the rates in rural areas generally being far lower than in urban areas. Homicide rates in some cities are far higher than these national rates.

² This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 14th International Pragmatics Conference in Antwerp, Belgium, July 26-31, 2015. The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of USAID and LAPOP in providing the resources necessary for carrying out this research.

³ The extracts found throughout this article come from transcriptions of digitally recorded one-on-one interviews. The interview process was preceded by a series of focus groups, which were intended to inform the content of the questionnaires to be used during the interviews. We were present during the early focus groups, and trained the interviewers in qualitative interviewing techniques over a period of a week in San Salvador. The first wave of interviews, which were carried out in El Salvador, were conducted by three interviewers, all of them middle-class college-educated Salvadorans with previous interviewing experience. The remaining interviews were conducted by one of these Salvadorans, a young man in his mid-twenties, who was the only one tenacious and fearless enough to travel alone to the other Central American countries to set up the interviews, carry them out without logistic support, and stick with the project to the very end. Having one interviewer conduct over ninety-percent of the interviews had the distinct advantage of providing uniformity across countries and across the years. The interviews themselves relied on semi-structured questionnaires, each one designed specifically for a different stakeholder group. They deliberately included open-ended questions, to allow for narration. With the exception of community development leaders, who were interviewed in their homes, the stakeholders were interviewed in their place of work (police stations, school buildings, churches, municipal government offices), or place of recreation (e.g., youth outreach centers). Every effort was made to provide privacy for the interview event. The interviews were uploaded daily to a secure cloud server located at the university where the researchers are based, so that the lead qualitative researcher (one of the authors of this article) could monitor the quality of the interviews, and regularly give the interviewer feedback on his performance.

troubled neighborhoods in high-crime countries, as many interviewees reported that they or their family members had been targets of threats, mainly for the purpose of extortion.⁴ In addition, the police officers who were interviewed reported that threats related to extortion were among the most common crimes they dealt with. According to some of our interviewees and in the opinion of numerous observers, some members the police force are in league with the gangs. Not surprisingly, therefore, many people in these countries do not trust the police, and are afraid to call them to report threats of extortion or other crimes. On those occasions when citizens report threats to corrupt police, the very act of reporting them can result in further threats, this time by the authorities themselves, and, ultimately, by the gangs.

This paper analyzes narratives of Guatemalans, Salvadorans, Hondurans, and Panamanians, recounting threats that had been made to them or to people they know. It shows that threats are alluded to in various ways, including the use of the Spanish verb *amenazar* ('threaten'), its corresponding noun *amenaza* ('threat'), and the verb *matar* ('kill'). They are also talked about through the use of 'reported speech,' in six different ways. Moreover, we found, they are referred to via many indirect, circumlocutious linguistic mechanisms, often occurring over a series of turns, and requiring prior sociocultural knowledge to understand their force.

1. A pragmalinguistic analysis of threats

What constitutes a threat from a pragmalinguistic point of view? Over the past thirty or more years, scholars' thinking about this question has evolved considerably, broadening what was initially a relatively narrow definition to one that today encompasses a wide range of utterances that are interpreted as threats based on the context in which they are made. Not long after the publication of Searle's (1969) seminal work on indirect speech acts, linguists began applying the notion of felicity conditions to a broad range of speech acts, using them to distinguish between closely related speech phenomena. Thus, Fraser (1975, as summarized in Gingiss 1986: 156) determined that threats required the following conditions:

- C1 The speaker intends to convey a proposition *p*, which specifies a future action;
- C2 The speaker intends that *p* be taken as presenting an action which
 - a. is going to occur (perhaps conditionally)
 - b. has consequences disadvantageous to the hearer
 - c. the speaker recognizes responsibility for carrying it out
- C3 The hearer recognizes the intentions stated in C1 and C2.

⁴ Although the demographic characteristics of the interviewees were noted, in this paper we do not disclose this information for three reasons. First, all respondents were guaranteed anonymity. Second, the approval of the interview protocol from the Vanderbilt Institutional Review Board included the explicit guarantee of anonymity. Given the leadership position of these community stakeholders, the inclusion of a number of demographic characteristics of these stakeholders could lead to their identification. Finally, given the extremely violent nature of this part of the world, our own ethical standards preclude us from revealing anything about these study participants that could possibly identify them and thereby make them targets of retaliation.

Beyond these conditions, Fraser postulated three other ones that could be expected to be met, but were not necessary for the successful performance of a threat (Fraser 1975: 171):

- A1 The speaker believes that the effect of the action specified is disadvantageous to the hearer.
- A2 The speaker believes that he is capable of bringing about the action specified.
- A3 The speaker intends to bring about the action threatened.

In an article in which he revisited the illocutionary act of threatening, Fraser (1998: 161) revised the conditions in the following way:

- C1 The speaker's intention to personally commit an act (or be responsible for bringing about the commission of the act);
- C2 The speaker's belief that this act will result in an unfavorable state of the world for the addressee;
- C3 The speaker's intention to intimidate the addressee through the addressee's awareness of the intention in C1.

Fraser points out that C3 is crucial for a speech act to be taken to be a threat, even if the addressee does not recognize it as such, because "Inherent in every threat is the intention to send fear" (Fraser 1998: 161). Crucially, addressee recognition of the speaker's intention to intimidate is not present in Fraser's (1998) reformulation of this speech act, whereas it was a core feature of his original (1975) conceptualization. Furthermore, Fraser's first formulation did not include the distinction between direct and indirect threats, whereas the later analysis allowed for this possibility, including the possibility that some speech acts could not be determined with certainty that they were in fact threats (Fraser 1998: 162). Scholars working in the field of language and law began using the notion of indirect speech acts, and applying them to threats. Thus, Gingiss (1986), using Labov and Fanshel's (1977) conceptualization of indirect requests, applied their analysis to witness testimony in a trial in which the defendant was a teamster, and demonstrated that the defendant's statement to the witness could indeed be taken to be a threat. Labov and Fanshel's notion, according to Harris (1984: 248), looks at utterances in context, and so "implicit threats can only be interpreted in terms of their underlying proposition on the basis of shared knowledge of the situation," whereas Searle (1971) defines propositions "basically with reference to isolated sentences and regards the underlying semantic content of a sentence as the proposition" (Harris 1984: 248). Harris, too, aligns herself with Labov and Fanshel on this issue.

Solan and Tiersma, who bring to their analysis legal and linguistic training, point out that, "Threats—like other speech acts in general and like crimes of language in particular—tend to be made indirectly" (Solan and Tiersma 2005: 204). For them, too, context is crucial in interpreting the illocutionary force of a speech act. And while they agree with Fraser's (1998) reformulation of the conditions that are required for an utterance to be considered a threat, they add one additional condition: That "a threat must *appear* to be sincere" (Solan and Tiersma 2005: 203).

Other scholars of language and law similarly diverge from Searle on the role of context in interpreting speech acts in general, and threats in particular. Storey (1995), in her essay examining the language of threats, finds context to be a crucial determiner of illocutionary force. For her (Storey 1995: 74), “Whether or not a message is a threat will depend upon several factors, such as the *intent* of the speaker, the *understanding* of the hearer, and the *context* of the utterance,” and “because the interaction of language and context is inherently and ultimately unpredictable, it is surprisingly – if not impossibly—difficult to construct a context-independent definition of ‘threat’”. Fraser (1998: 162) strongly disagrees, arguing that, “it is indeed possible to get a context-independent definition of a threat, but virtually impossible...to determine with certainty when a threat has been made.”

The notion of indirect threats inevitably led to the recognition that context was indeed crucial to the determination of whether someone’s words had the illocutionary force of a threat. And if such words did not constitute a threat, then what were they? The speech act that most closely resembles a threat is a warning. Shuy (1996: 98) has compared threatening with warning and finds that they have only one characteristic in common: They both are utterances made from the speaker’s perspective and not from the hearer’s. On every other dimension they differ. According to Shuy, threats are made for the speaker’s benefit, warnings are not; threats are made to the hearer’s detriment, warnings are not; in making a threat, the speaker controls the outcome, in uttering a warning s/he does not; when a warning is uttered, the hearer controls the outcome, but when a threat is made, the hearer does not. Fraser (1998: 166), however, disagrees with Shuy’s characterization, in several respects. For Fraser, neither a threat nor a warning is to the speaker’s benefit; while the speaker controls the outcome in making a threat, it is not so clear if he or she does so when issuing a warning; and it is not clear if the addressee controls the outcome in receiving either a threat or a warning. Fraser (1998: 164) highlights the ambiguity of the definitional problem, arguing that because threats and warnings are closely related to each other, sometimes the distinction between the two is blurred.

Because threats and warnings are speech acts that have so much in common, a given utterance could be interpreted as one or the other, that is to say, it could be ambiguous. Fraser (1998), Shuy (1996), Solan and Tiersma (2005) all make this point. Solan and Tiersma (2005: 204) say that threats “may be phrased in ambiguous terms to give them plausible deniability.”⁵ According to these scholars, threats are often intentionally ambiguous. In the case of police/citizen interaction, it is often very difficult to determine which speech act has been uttered, since according to Shon (2005: 843), “intimidation and coercion is what the whole business is about,” and, “The difference between warnings and threats...is that one contains more of it,” since “coercion permeates

⁵ Plausible deniability has been used for discourse purposes other than just threats, as Bogen and Lynch (1989) demonstrate in their analysis of Oliver North’s testimony during the Iran-Contra hearings, which took place during the U.S. presidency of Ronald Reagan. As Bogen and Lynch (1989: 221) conclude, in distinguishing between conversational stories and conventional history, the distinctions “...can be used by a witness to build a plausible basis for disavowing implications drawn from the record and for producing narratives whose temporal references, along with their causal and motivational implications, cannot be checked determinatively against the record. Instead...a witness can contextually elaborate an organization of details that privatizes the story and marks it ‘for limited distribution only.’ Instead of facilitating a movement from biography to history, a witness can embed his story within a set of local entitlements that resist translation into a generalized narrative.”

the infrastructure and ideology of police work....” Based on his observations of police traffic stops and routine patrol work, Shon concludes (2005: 829) that warnings and threats, both direct and indirect, share one essential trait: Force. He argues that, “there is no interpretive context free of coercion in the context of police-citizen encounters,” and therefore the difference between warnings and threats is “the ordinal level of force embedded in the intention of speakers and in the unfavorable consequence suffered by the addressee” (Shon 2005: 829).

Based on this review of the literature on threats as speech acts, we seek to add to existing linguistic understanding of threats by illuminating the existence of threat types that go beyond the already well known distinction between direct and indirect threats. Our analysis does so by using a series of examples of reported threats, drawn from our research in Central America. In so doing, we take the position that context often is crucial in determining when a threat has been made, when the words alone do not make the illocutionary force of a threat sufficiently transparent.

Since the data-gathering approach used for the qualitative component of this study involved the use of a semi-structured open-ended questionnaire, which allowed participants the opportunity to narrate freely, there was no way to collect tokens of threats as they actually occurred in real time. As a practical matter, tape recording direct threats at the community and household level is a near-impossible task for the researcher. One has to be on the scene, with recording device at the ready and, then, further, have obtained the permission of speakers engaged in a conversation that might involve threats and warnings, in order to avoid violating human subjects’ ethical requirements, not to mention laws that might make surreptitious recording without the permission of the speakers downright illegal. And if the threat was made by phone, which was often the case, it would not have been heard by the researcher in any event, without tapping phone lines or hacking into cell phone communications. As a result, the tokens of threats that were gathered were in the form of reported speech recorded during our extended interviews that took place over a four-year period in four countries.

1.1. *Reported speech*

Speech acts such as threats do not occur in isolation. They are embedded in discourse, often in two-party or multi-party interaction. One frequently occurring feature of discourse is reported speech. And reported speech we found to be a common mechanism for relating instances of threats. According to Holt (2009: 190):

Typically the term ‘reported speech’ is used to refer to the presentation of discourse that purports to be from a prior occasion, and may originate from another author. It is often used as a synonym of ‘quotation’ or ‘citation’. The category includes, for example, the replaying of the words of another speaker, or the same speaker on a previous occasion, in spoken discourse.

The significance of reported speech, according to Goffman (1979), is that it contributes to “the authoritativeness of stance, perspective, or ‘footing’” (Silverstein 1993: 35). This has been shown to be an especially important discourse mechanism exploited both by interrogators and witnesses/defendants in forensic cases (Berk-Seligson 2009).

Reported speech is generally considered to be constructed in two ways: Direct reported speech and indirect reported speech. Direct reported speech, also referred to as ‘direct quotes’ or ‘constructed dialogue’ (Tannen 1986: 1989), “...appear as an exact replica of the words spoken in historical context. They make the performed words appear close to the historical words, and in so doing, enliven those historical words, giving them an aura of objectivity and authority” (Matoesian 2001: 110). Lucy (1993: 177), too, finds an “association between direct report (or literal re-enactment) and perceived authoritativeness. Direct quotation is apparently perceived as more authoritative because listeners recognize that such reports are relatively less subject to alteration in the speaker’s interests....” Furthermore, direct reported speech has an evidential function: It provides evidence (Galatolo 2007: 212). In Galatolo’s (2007: 13) words, in reference to witness testimony, quotation is “an opportunity to directly verify what the witnesses have previously said,” so that when the direct reported speech comes after an evaluation, “the witness has the possibility of objectifying that evaluation, making it seem factual.” However, as Holt (2009: 202) concludes from her own research and that of others, “it is likely that it (direct reported speech) is rarely verbatim, yet speakers often treat it as providing evidence.” According to Clift and Holt (2007: 12), speakers use direct reported speech to make their claims more robust. Briggs (1996: 27) says that, “reported speech provides speakers with a powerful rhetorical device for distinguishing nonnative messages as simple repetitions of the words of others.” Voloshinov (1973 [1930] 122-123) makes the point that, “the use of reported speech in both judicial and rhetorical speech fosters clear-cut boundaries between narrated and narrative events; the higher the placement of an utterance in the social hierarchy, the more sharply defined the boundary” (Briggs 1996: 26).

The contrast between direct and indirect reported speech is made by Toolan (2001: 124). According to him, while “direct reported speech pretends to be a faithful verbatim report of a person’s actual words,” in indirect reported speech “the narrator’s words and deictic orientation are foregrounded as the reported speech becomes subordinate to the main reporting clause.” There are, however, hybrid forms that amalgamate features of indirect and direct reported speech. These have been called ‘free indirect’ or ‘quasi-direct speech’ (Holt 2009: 194).

When speech crimes such as threats are talked about—whether they are reported at a police interview or recalled on the witness stand-- the purportedly superior evidential function of direct reported threats over indirect reported threats in forensic contexts can be potentially particularly powerful. Yet the use of direct reported speech when the speaker is an ‘animator’—to use Goffman’s (1981: 128) terminology—that is, the ‘sounding box’ (the person who verbally produces the words) for the ‘principal’ (‘the party to whose position the words attest,’ i.e., the one who authorizes the production and composition of the words), who in turn is quoting the ‘author’ (‘the agent who scripts the lines,’ that is, the one who composes the words) is actually less reliable than indirect reported speech in cases where the animator has heard the words directly from the author him or herself.

In the analysis that follows, we show that threats are talked about in a variety of ways: From simple references to them, to generic reported threats, implicit threats, indirect reported threats, direct reported threats, and ambiguous threats.

1.2. How threats are talked about in Central America

References to threats abound in the responses of community members in the four countries. As one Salvadoran community development leader put it, extortion and murder had become “our daily bread,” when a gang took control of his neighborhood. The responses to questions about what sorts of crimes occur in their communities yielded repeated reports of attempted extortion and a generalized sense of fear of physical harm if payments to gangs were not made, as well as fear of retribution from extortionists if victims reported these crimes to the police. The threat tokens that emerged from the 847 interviews reveal that threats are being made by various societal sectors: School teachers and administrators are being threatened by their students and by gang members who are no longer associated with their school; students are being threatened by fellow students, for the purpose of extortion; youths threaten to report their parents to the authorities for child abuse; parents threaten school administrators when the former meet resistance from the schools in admitting their children who had been expelled from other schools; youths are threatened by the police. In short, threats are the “daily bread” and fabric of life in Central America.

Unlike forensic cases where it is debatable if what was said by person A to person B was in fact a threat, in the past two decades or so, with astronomical rates of extortion and murder tied to the narco-trafficking industry and the powerful hold of transnational and local gangs on communities throughout the Northern Triangle of Central America, no reasonable person would question that threats are being made routinely, and that, consequently, people have been living gripped by fear. It is not surprising, in this context, that Salvadoran and Honduran children have been attempting the perilous journey of illegal entry into the United States.

2. Six forms of threats in Central America

We were able to classify the threats recorded in this study into the following six categories:

- (1) References to threats
- (2) Generic reported threats
- (3) Implied threats
- (4) Indirect reported threats
- (5) Direct reported threats
- (6) Ambiguous speech acts (interpretable as either warnings or threats).

In the analysis below, we provide examples of each of these forms.

2.1. References to threats

References to threats were heard throughout the interviews. For example, in describing gang members, one of the characteristics regularly pointed out by community leaders, school personnel, and at-risk youth, is the use of threats. The following response of a Salvadoran youth to the question, “How can you tell if a young person belongs to a gang

here in the Zaragoza area? How can you identify a young gang member if you don't know the person?" was as follows:

Extract 1

- 1 Youth: You can identify him by his vocabulary.
- 2 Interviewer: What is that vocabulary like?
- 3 Youth: That vocabulary is, is usually **full of, of arrogant threats**, of machismo
- 4 most of all, you see, and words that only they know, as I just mentioned.

We will see other references to threats embedded in discourse that includes the other threat categories. The word 'extortion' (in Spanish *extorsión* or, colloquially, *renta*) by definition presupposes an element of threat. As one dictionary defines it, extortion is "the practice of obtaining something, especially money, through force or threats."

In Honduras, where extortion is most commonly referred to as *la renta*, it is also called *impuesto de guerra* ('war tax'). This label is used by gangs as another term for 'protection racket,' or extortion. Most commonly demanded of business owners, it has now extended to individuals who own houses or even simply cars, informants reported. And sadly, it has now included school personnel. As one Honduran school teacher said,

Extract 2

- 1 The collection of war tax is frequent in schools. The war tax is collected by the
- 2 gangs; they demand money from the schools for, for protection, to put it like that,
- 3 but it's for themselves. That's what the war tax is, and now they're imposing this
- 4 tax on the schools, so imagine the situation we have. Not to mention that it
- 5 happens to businesses; they're collecting from the businesses and the schools, the
- 6 educational centers.

In discussing how children join gangs, teachers and police reported that in Central America today, children as young as 8-years old are involved in gangs. Teachers explain that one factor that pushes children into gangs is threats and intimidation by gang members. As one Honduran teacher put it,

Extract 3

- 1 Sometimes **by means of threats**, other times arising from the children's needs,
- 2 kids are easy prey for deceit, you know, because they are told, "You are going to
- 3 have all this," things they've never had and, and they, they, they give it, they give
- 4 it to them. For example, a kid who lives in a depressing environment, to put it that
- 5 way, who sleeps on the floor, goes around barefoot, these kids are easy prey for
- 6 an, for one of these organizations.

2.2. Generic reported threats

More than any other form of threat, generic reported threats were heard with the greatest frequency in the interviews. Just as narratives can be told in generalized or habitual terms

(Polanyi 1985; Trinch and Berk-Seligson 2002), so too, can threats. They can be formed in either the past or present tense, and superficially appear to be said as quoted (i.e., direct reported) speech, but the framing around the quote indicates that this is habitual behavior, rather than a specific instance of it. Furthermore, it is clear from the discourse in which the quote is embedded that the recipient of the threat is not a specific person, but some generalized, unspecified addressee. In Extract 4, the speaker is a Honduran youth, who explains how people lose their homes to gangs if they do not come up with sufficient extortion money.

Extract 4

1 In all the neighborhoods there are gangsters and they don't just kill people or sell
2 drugs: they also evict people from their homes. They get a message, and they're
3 told, "**We need your house. You have 24 hours to clear out; if you don't, you'll**
4 **have to pay us this much,**" a large sum of money. Well, the people get out, leave
5 their house and see if the police will help them, see if the government will help
6 them get their house back. The president is certainly not going to come to say to
7 them [the gangsters], "Give them back their house."

A Honduran elementary school director from San Pedro Sula explains that the "war taxes" result in students dropping out of school, because their families are forced to move to other communities or to other cities to escape persecution and extortion threats, and ultimately murder.

Extract 5

1 In general, it's in elementary school where it's most commonly found...because
2 people who leave this school, it's because of, uh, crime, mmm, you understand?
3 If I have to pay the war tax, I have to move to another city, you see. "**They killed**
4 **my cousin and I have to go somewhere else because they're looking for us.**"
5 That, those are the most common cases of kids dropping out.

The reported speech is generic, in that it is an example of the typical kinds of things that students have told this school director, in explaining why they are dropping out of school. It may very well have been said by a particular student, but it could have been said by any of his students. It might even represent the words of a hypothetical student.

Interestingly, this example of a generic reported threat and those found in Extract 6 below, are not introduced by framing devices that refer to some speaker, such as, "They'll say," "A kid will say," and so on. In the following extract, a Salvadoran young man explains how you can tell if a girl or a woman belongs to a gang.

Extract 6

1 Youth: Women, women's social structure makes them passive, peaceful, and to
2 use tender language, to put it that way. That's the stereotype. So a lot of women,
3 when they use coarse language, it makes them feel powerful. Not here, but when
4 they go to vulnerable communities. Normally, most of the territories where there

5 is gang presence, people are aware of it, so they're watchful when gang people
6 start using that kind of coarse, making threats, and using intimidating language. It
7 also could be that you wouldn't conclude that a woman isn't a gang member, but
8 you get the notion that she is. The language is very specific, "**You don't know**
9 **who you're messing with,**" or, "**You don't know that I'm not here by myself.**"
10 So you can determine that she's with somebody.

The implicit threat is that she has a boyfriend who is a gang member, and that by "messing" with her, the person is messing with him, and with the gang in general. It is clear from the context that the generic reported threats are being attributed to women who are associated with gangs, even though there is no framing device indicating a source of the threat tokens.

Another Salvadoran youth uses generic reported threats to describe the situation in his school, namely, that students threaten teachers, rather than the other way around. He uses the generic threats to give examples of what he means.

Extract 7

1 Yes, that is, it's like, like harassment, but vice versa. Before you'd see the teacher
2 harassing the student; today it's just the opposite. Now the student harasses the
3 teacher, and in that sense the teacher's life is at risk. We must remember that a
4 teacher will be assigned to a school for a year or two, or maybe three or four years.
5 He or she is not going to go elsewhere, and to hear a threat like, "**I'm going to**
6 **kill you,**" or "**I'm going to go after you,**" I think that for anybody, it's, it's
7 enough to cause serious psychological harm, I think.

Whereas reported threats can appear without framing devices, such devices can occur following the reported threat, as in the case of the first of two threats that appear in Extract 8 below. In this extract, one reference to a threat (lines 12-13) and two generic reported threats (lines 14-16) are embedded in the response of a Salvadoran youth who answers the question, "How did you know if a male or female classmate was involved in a gang?"

Extract 8

1 Youth: Well, at that time since there was no, no type of, of, of, type of umm, uh,
2 freedom of expression, let's put it like that. At that time if someone was a gang
3 member, uh, the person was, was easy to spot. For example, if we talk about their
4 clothing, normally these young people wore black shirts, uh, with, with a hoodie
5 over their heads, uh, baggy pants—I don't know what they call them...they're a
6 little like shorts; they fall below the knee but don't reach the ankles. Maybe jeans,
7 or something that had 'NY' on them, like 'New York' or something like that. So,
8 uh, it was really easy to tell who they were by their baseball caps worn backwards,
9 the way they walked, their demeanor; their vocabulary was very strange, and in a-
10 in, in some, it was their body language when they talked among themselves, and
11 also the-their choice of words, you know? It, i-, it's very interesting how they talk

12 to each other. They have their own code to communicate. Also, another way, uh,
 13 that you could tell who they were was that, that **sometimes they would threaten**
 14 **others**, uh, I mean when they didn't want to do what they were told, or they
 15 wanted to do whatever they wanted, they would make threats. "**I'm going to**
 16 **throw you to the gangs**," things like that are very typical of what they would say.
 17 Uh, or "**You don't know who you're messing with**," or, or, but in spite of that,
 18 something interesting would happen. There was not such a wave of murders like
 19 there is now. Th-, that was something ve-, very, very different because it was like,
 20 how can I say this? Uh, I mean, yes, they were from the gangs, and yes, everybody
 21 knew that some were delinquents because they'd steal, sometimes they'd steal
 22 from other, other, other students right there in the classroom. They'd see that the
 23 girls were from, from nicer neighborhoods, you know? And, and that, that they
 24 know how they dressed and how much they'd buy to eat at the school cantina, and
 25 they had them well identified, umm, and they would blackmail them, or they'd
 26 have crushes on them, flirt with them, because some of them were pretty. (Laughs)
 27 So that's it.

2.3. Implied threats

Given the pervasive atmosphere of violence erupting at any moment in the Northern Triangle of Central America, fear is felt by the communities targeted by organized criminal groups. And the fear was expressed in many of the interviews conducted for this project. School teachers and school administrators were particularly frightened of their students, and of gang members no longer enrolled in their schools, or who had come from other communities to prey on their students. The fear is not merely linked to extortion, but to threats of murder. In El Salvador, newspaper headlines such as this one from August, 2011 (*RT Actualidad* 2011) struck fear into the hearts of teachers: "More than one-thousand teachers threatened with death in El Salvador." The article began with the subheading, "Some one-thousand teachers in El Salvador have reported death threats that they have received in the past eight months for not paying extortion money demanded of them by the violent gangs operating in the country." Another article from the same date published outside of El Salvador says that, "It is estimated that 75% of teachers are being extorted in that country, according to the daily newspaper, which also informs that eleven teachers have been murdered." The same article continues, saying, "Salvadoran teachers' unions say that teachers receive death threats if they do not pay the 500, 1,000, 2,000 up to 3,000 dollars in extortion payments demanded by gangsters, reported the DPA."⁶

Given news article such as these, and the fact that the interviewer who conducted the large majority of the interviews was himself a Salvadoran, it is not surprising that even when threats are not reported directly or indirectly, they are alluded to implicitly. In the following statement of a Honduran schoolteacher, no version of the word 'threat' is used, yet it is understood to underlie the substance of the confrontations being referred to by this teacher, as the word 'murdered' is used in the same sentence:

⁶ The DPA is the Department of Political Affairs of the United Nations. It provides daily news reports on the internet about political topics, covering the world.

Extract 9

1 Even when a student needs to be reprimanded, teachers need to be careful how
2 you speak to that student because we've had confrontations with students in gangs
3 and students involved in crime, yes. We wouldn't be the first teachers murdered
4 by a student, you see. Yes, the incidence is high.

A similar sense of fear is conveyed by a Salvadoran school director (Extract 10, below). In her narrative about the boys who had dropped out of school, she uses reported speech (once removed), to repeat what one of the teachers had told her, namely, that these boys had told the teacher to give good grades to the girlfriend of one of them. The sentence itself would be interpreted as an implicit threat, even if it weren't preceded by the narrator's reference to the case being "about a teacher who was intimidated by a couple of guys who didn't attend school here."

Extract 10

1 Well, we have had some drop-outs here because the students don't agree with the
2 rules that they have to follow. Here **we are under the threat** of not being able to
3 discipline the students. All we can really do is make suggestions, and we do this
4 in fear, *a lot of fear, and we do it with the utmost caution*⁷ with a lot of common
5 sense to avoid being called out and so we won't be "marked," as they say in their
6 jargon. So one case I could tell you about is a teacher who was intimidated by a
7 couple of guys who didn't attend school here. **They told her to give good grades**
8 **to the girlfriend of one of them.** *That is a conflict, and we know it.* What we told
9 the girl was that we didn't have any problems with anyone from outside the
10 school, but to try to keep her relationship with her boyfriend separate, very
11 separate from the school and not carry it on inside the school. So when students
12 here try to find a way to shield themselves behind these guys, we are put in a
13 complete, a complete state of having our hands tied, to put it like that. *We have no*
14 *authority, we cannot take action.*

The sense of fear is expressed by a Honduran community board member. His statement that he and the other board members do not threaten any one is surprising, although further discourse explains it, and it stands in juxtaposition to the implicit message that they have been threatened by the extortionists. References to murders have taken place, to "unseen eyes watching us," that people in one of their committees having been murdered, together imply that threats had been made along the way.

Extract 11

1 As representatives of the boards, we would meet with the police and plan what to
2 do in the community at the security committee meetings. But unexpectedly we

⁷ Italics are used to represent emphatic speech. Bold type font is used to highlight threats.

3 started seeing, as they say, that whatever we told them, somebody else had already
 4 found out that we wanted to improve things in the community. So, what
 5 happened? We chose to, to withdraw from these security committee meetings out
 6 of fear, because there were indeed murders, there were murders. So we and the
 7 board presidents started taking precautions, you see, because we could see that we
 8 were in danger. And even as representatives of the community that we are, we
 9 have to be very careful because there are unseen eyes watching us. Wherever we
 10 go, somebody is watching. All we're trying to do is to do good for the community.
 11 **We don't threaten anyone...** because we know what can happen, and there's no
 12 one to protect us. As my colleague said, people on the security committee were
 13 murdered.

In the following extract, that threats were made is implicit in two utterances of the speaker, a Salvadoran community leader. The discourse marker *verdad* ('right') implies that the interviewer would understand the significance of receiving a phone call demanding money—that the interviewer and leader share cultural knowledge in this regard. Any adult living in El Salvador in the past several years would have understood this.

Extract 12

1 Leader: Um, well, umm, about the middle of last year, uhh, well, **I received a call**
 2 **on my home phone, you see, demanding a sum of money**, right? The caller
 3 identified himself as a gang member. And, uhh, well, since we are on the, on the
 4 Prevention Council, you see, uh, the inspector had given us the number to a direct
 5 line, his cell phone, and he told us that for any emergency, well, we should call
 6 him without hesitating for whatever reason, you see. So immediately after the call,
 7 I called him, and, well, he told me some instructions to follow, you see –
 8 disconnect the phone, not to answer it—only answer calls from known numbers.
 9 Those were the instructions I followed, you see, after we were contacted by the
 10 police. Later, it happened again because **there were other people, a few days**
 11 **after that call there were people, a neighbor lady said that there were some**
 12 **men at the corner asking for me by my full name**. So then, I asked the inspector
 13 again to file the complaint, to make a police report, a more formal report, but he
 14 said no, that it was, you know, maybe just a coincidence, you see. So then, well,
 15 just recently my son was mugged, and we thought better of making a police report.
 16 Because, well, we see that there's, that there's no, I mean, there's no response....

That the speaker was communicating to the interviewer that she had been threatened is clear not only from her own narrative (e.g., the caller identifying himself as a gang member and demanding money from her; asking about her whereabouts, specifying her name), but also from the fact that the interviewer, three turns later, asks her: "And in the end, what was the outcome of those, those threats made to you on the phone?" He labels as threats what the speaker had alluded to only indirectly, without using any form of the word 'threat'.⁸

⁸ The use of reported speech to tell stories about fights and threats is examined by Shuman (1986) in her ethnography of storytelling practices among middle-school students in the United States. Her study

Interviewees in the Northern Triangle countries reported being mistreated by the National Police and being victims of corruption on their part. In some of the interviewees' narratives, stories of threats emerge. The following narrative (Extract 13), told by a Catholic catechist leader of his church, includes two threats: The first an implicit threat by a police officer (lines 2-3), and the second one an implicit, veiled threat (lines 8-9) by the narrator, who is the father of the boy being victimized by the police. The father's threat is to report the police misconduct to the Inspector General's Office (the equivalent of the U.S. Internal Affairs Office). It is only in the second turn at talk, when the interviewer probes and asks what the outcome was of this event that the narrator uses indirect reported speech to replicate the threat of another police officer, directed at an associate of his from his church. This leader reports that the police threatened his friend in the following way: **"The cop threatened him and told him that if he said anything about it to anyone, that he'd be around and later take other measures with him."** The following extract (#13) represents the father's response to the interviewer's question, "What experiences has your family had with the police?"

Extract 13

1 My son especially. One day he was, well, on a street corner with his friend on
2 their bicycles. **A policeman and two soldiers came around, and the cop told**
3 **my kid that the bike he had looked a lot like one that had been stolen from**
4 **his son, OK?** "So go ahead and take it if you want to." When I was called over
5 there, the soldier was questioning him, and I said to the soldier, "You, you don't
6 have to question anybody here; the one who does the questioning is the cop.
7 You're just back-up." At the time they didn't have the practice of doing joint tasks.
8 **So I took down the number of his... and I told him right then, "If you are**
9 **saying that this was stolen, then take it, but to make sure, we're going to the**
10 **Office of the Inspector General, you know?"** "No, no," the cops said. "Well,
11 you make accusations, interrogate, but this is an insinuation of robbery." So then,
12 since that incident I see that the police are following bad procedures. And people
13 don't talk.

This incident demonstrates that some community leaders stand up to the police and even the military, when they believe that they or their family have been treated unjustly.

found that, "The configuration of tellers and listeners and their relationship to the disputants and witnesses were essential parts of the storytelling situation... Thus the relationship between text and context operated on three temporal levels: the description of the past situation, the immediate storytelling situation, and the ongoing situation" (Shuman 1986: 24). The fact that the person who listened to stories of threats in this Central American situation of pervasive violence was not part of the speech communities to which the narrators belonged, and therefore had no relationship to either the recipients or the sources of the threats, or to any potential witnesses to the threatening behavior being reported, means that the threat reports recorded in Central America might in some ways be systematically different from those analyzed by Shuman.

2.4. *Indirect reported threats*

Indirect reported threats were found very infrequently in the interviews and when they did appear, they often co-occurred with direct reported threats in the same turn at talk. Indirect reported threats in and of themselves do not devalue the legitimacy of a threat token, something that is consistent with a major position in the anthropology of violence in Latin America, namely, Michael Taussig's (1986: 3) claim that "most of us know and fear torture and the culture of terror only through the words of others."

Apparently the Central Americans who were interviewed preferred to use direct reported speech in recounting threats, or else generic reported speech or simply references to threats. It is easy to see why direct reported threats would be chosen over indirect ones, as they give greater authority and evidential value to their words. Why, however, the interviewees preferred generic reported speech to real instances that they knew of is not clear. What is clear is that mere references to threats is an indication of unwillingness to elaborate, or to bring up real cases altogether. The motive might be fear or mistrust of a stranger (i.e., the interviewer).

In one instance of an indirect reported threat (Extract 14), the president of a community development association in Guatemala recounts an incident involving a lynching, and in the narrative, he mentions the threats made against a woman who was going to testify against the defendants in this case. This kernel of a narrative is about corruption in the justice system in the context of regularly occurring lynchings in certain regions of Guatemala. Lynchings refer to a variety of means used by communities to carry out vigilante justice, that is, taking the law into their own hands. Sometimes the lynchings involve burning the victim alive, at other times it could be stoning to death or beating to death, or simply beating the person very badly. Interestingly, in the narrative the only direct quote is the one attributed to the mayor of the town. The other tokens of reported speech, including the reported threat, are made indirectly. The narrator laughs twice in the course of the telling, both times in relation to the mayor's comment and the public's reaction to it, which was to express support for lynching. In addition to the indirect reported threat (lines 18-21), there is also a reference to threats (line 16).

Extract 14

1 The event I'm telling you about, that lynching, that really was an
2 international news story, you know. The one I was telling you about, about
3 the two children, it was an international news story, you see. Well, this
4 poor youngster, well, they did kill him and, and on the next day I was
5 telling you about, the mayor spoke out and said, "With that news story, we
6 have gone around the world, you know, with that lynching" (laughs) and
7 the people shouted back that they should do it again (laughs), you know,
8 in the interest of killing those same people, you see, because by the same
9 token, you, I think that security, and talking about this, about how the
10 authorities operate, I think that we're in a bad way, you know, because
11 these people were in jail for a week and then they were out and do the same
12 thing, and in Cobán, right, because, really, we had found out that afterward
13 one of them was doing the same thing in Cobán, you know, uh, I think, uh,

14 why? Because of the very fear of the people, you see, when people are
15 fired up, something has just happened to them, they're ready to kill them,
16 or stone them, or beat them, and when they have to go to the Supreme
17 Court of Justice and make declarations and look at him in the face, they
18 don't want to do it, and why? **Because someone will make threats**, you
19 see. As a matter of fact, we found out that this latest bunch I've been telling
20 you about, the three robbers that were captured, **one of the attorneys went**
21 **to the lady to ask her how much she wanted to not testify against them,**
22 **and if she wouldn't take the bribe, she should expect consequences**
23 **because if she testified, there were plenty of people on the outside.** Can
24 you believe that this very well-known attorney would do this? What have
25 we come to, even among ourselves, you know, because he's an attorney
26 from Tactic, you see....

In an interview with a Salvadoran school director, the director recounts the kinds of crimes that were being made in her school when gang influence was at its peak. She points out stealing and extortion as the most common crimes.

Extract 15

1 Sure, they would steal cell phones, and how can I say this, um, they'd steal money.
2 They even **made threats**. It's just that people, how can I say this, here in the
3 administrative offices I'm sometimes the last one to find out about these situations.
4 **One time they were waiting for the cantina supplier outside to extort him, to tell**
5 **him that if he didn't give them such and such an amount of money, he wasn't**
6 **going to go in.** Even that I found out about it only after it was over. "And why don't
7 you say something when it's happening? [I asked]" I mean, so that I can act: call the
8 kids to the office, call the police and explain that a crime was committed. But only
9 after it was over. That's how far it got to –extorting people who, who were coming in
10 to the school.

2.5. Direct reported threats

Many interviewees, in narrating their own experiences or those of others made use of several types of reported speech within the same speaking turn. One Salvadoran school director's response to the question, "Do gang members who are not students in this school come here to persuade other youths to join their gang?" was the following account (Extract 16). She begins with her arrival at this school, and goes on to describe her efforts to get rid of the youths who were not enrolled and who appeared to be members of gangs. This leads her to recount the problem that one schoolteacher had with one particular student of hers and a friend of his who was a gang member and who was not a student in the school. In the telling, she uses a number of different speech acts: (1) self-quoting a polite request directed at the non-student to leave the premises and refrain from entering the school (lines 4-5), (2) a generic threat by gang members to vandalize the school property (lines 12-13), (3) a direct quoting of the schoolteacher, demanding that

the student remove the graffiti he had painted on something in the classroom (lines 14-15), (4) a directive from the gang member to the student, ordering him not to follow the teacher's instructions (lines 17-18), (5) the teacher's insistence with the student to do what she had told him to (lines 18-19), (6) an ambiguous speech act that could be interpreted as a threat or a warning, that he risks getting expelled if he does not remove the graffiti (lines 21-22), (7) a reference to a threat made by the student to the teacher (line 22), (8) a direct reported threat issued by the school director to the student, telling him that she was told that he had threatened the teacher, and that if he plans on continuing to make threats, she and the teacher will go to the police, and consequently he will go to jail (lines 25-27). The narrative tries to replicate the interaction between the teacher, student, and gang member, on the one hand, and subsequently between the school director (the narrator and 'animator'), the teacher, and the student. It is clear from the narrative that the director was not present at the first interaction, and therefore is reporting on the basis of the reported speech of the teacher, whereas she is reporting on interaction that she personally was party to in the second interaction, and thus was reporting on reported speech.

Extract 16

1 That was the problem that, well, when I got here, we did do that...when I came
 2 here everything was in complete disorder, so much so that even I was afraid when
 3 I came to school; these kids came, you know, all tattooed and lounging on the
 4 little tables as if they were at home. So I started getting them out of here, but
 5 gingerly, you know, "Look, son, you can't be here...you're not a student...right?
 6 Uh, go away"...and...very timidly I started getting rid of them and the problem
 7 started to resolve. But then we started filling up again, they...they started sending
 8 me students. I mean that was their strategy. When I got here, well, there weren't
 9 many gang member students, but the ones who were came to school at whatever
 10 time they felt like. When I got rid of them, they started sending me all of them,
 11 then when the student says he's coming and they start sizing up whether the kid
 12 could be a gang member, whether he's a gang sympathizer. (These kids) make
 13 their own groups, and (they say) "**Look, we're gonna break this, we're gonna**
 14 **put graffiti all over this.**" Not normal, because he's a kid who was told...he put
 15 the sign up, you know, and the teacher was in the back and didn't see it. "**Look,**"
 16 the teacher says she told him, "**You're going to take the paint off of that.**" "Not
 17 me, miss." Uh, "No. Tomorrow I'm going to bring some paint." And when the
 18 kid was leaving he was stopped by the boy who is a gang member, who said to
 19 him, "**So who are you going to pay attention to? The old lady or me? You're**
 20 **not taking the paint off that.**" "**Oh, no,**" the teacher told him, "**you're going to**
 21 **do what I say.**" The next year the guy didn't come back, which we were happy
 22 about. The teacher told the student that the other guy wasn't coming back. She
 23 told the kid, "**You're risking getting expelled if you don't remove the graffiti**
 24 **like I told you to,**" and **she received threats from this same kid**, but...no... I
 25 don't know...she and I may be a lot alike. And I tell her, "Look, we've got to
 26 take action and, may God help us." So then we called him, "Look here, we're told
 27 that you threatened the teacher," "No, Ms., no." I told him, "**Watch out because**
 28 **if we go to the police, you're going to jail,**" I told him, "**for making threats,**

29 **and we don't want this to go that far. You've behaved badly.** "I know,
30 ma'am." So that's it, you know, that's it, but we do get threats, uh huh....

Whereas teachers are regularly being threatened by students and gang member friends of theirs who have dropped out of school, students are also being threatened by gangs. Out of desperation, they go to their teachers for some sort of protection or advice. The following extract (#17) presents one such case. It gives the narrative of a Panamanian teacher who serves as the coordinator of psychological services of her school. She tells of the case of a student in her school who came to her to report that she had been threatened by some gang members in a public park, as a way of sending a message to her brother, who belonged to a rival gang. The psychological counselor quotes what the girl had reported to her, which in turn appears to have been direct quotes of threats issued by the gang. It comes in answer to the question, "Have youngsters from, from the community who are gang members come into the school to commit some, some type of violence or crime here?"

Extract 17

1 No, fortunately they have not. Uh, we haven't gotten to, to that extreme; no we're
2 not there, and thank God for that. Regarding other groups that might want to come
3 here, from another gang in the area who know that some guy from their gang goes
4 to this school, no. We have had, for example, uh, a little case this year of a girl
5 who told us that she was threatened. Because her brothers, even though they are
6 not, they are not here at school, they're adults, right. But she's here, she comes to
7 this school. And some members of a rival gang said, "**Where is your brother?**"
8 She was approached around (Name of Park) and the guy told her, "**Take care of**
9 **yourself because we're watching you.**" I mean, **she felt threatened.** "**You are**
10 **so-and-so's sister.**" She didn't respond to this; she didn't say whether he was or
11 not. And this guy, and he said to her as she was walking away, "**I know that you**
12 **are (name's) sister, and I know where to find you, so tell your brother to**
13 **watch out for you because he knows what's up.**" I mean, like what, what we
14 understood from the girl is that they want to attack her brother, but since they can't
15 get to him, they will get to her. When she came to tell us that, she said, "And my
16 brother is, they are getting ready because, uh, I saw the guy's face and I told my
17 brother what he looked like." This is a situation that can lead up to a confrontation
18 because the sister was threatened. So then we said, "Well, tell your mother to
19 come here to the school because we need to talk to her because we really can't
20 take you back and forth to school every day. But your mother does have to protect
21 you and file a police report, you see, as a mother, as your mother." Because they
22 are facing a constant violent situation, indeed; two sons who are gang members,
23 two of the girl's brothers. One of them was already murdered. So that's the only
24 case we have, but no one has come into this school to commit any act of
25 aggression, violence or, or activity with somebody who is directly connected to
26 the school, no. But the girl was approached at (Name of Park) after she had left
27 school for the day.

It is clear both from the direct reported speech of the student through the counselor and from the circumstances explained about the student's brothers being members of a rival gang, one of whom had already been murdered by the other gang, that a credible threat had been made against this girl. And the school administration believed it. However, as the counselor said, they cannot be escorting students to and from school; they do not have a staff big enough for this, and it is the obligation of mothers (fathers are not mentioned because so many are absent from the household) to provide protection for their children.

From a linguistic perspective, we see reported speech layered upon reported speech. While we see tokens of direct reported speech in the words of the narrator, we do not have access to the report of the source, the student. In effect, we have the phenomenon of intertextuality—a notion that has its origins in the work of Kristeva (1980) and Bakhtin (1981, 1986). Successfully used in forensic contexts by Cotterill (2002) and Matoesian (2001), according to Cotterill (2002: 150), “Intertextuality...concerns the extent to which any single text incorporates and/or acknowledges its interaction with other texts, both past and present,” and both Cotterill and Matoesian make use of the “Bakhtinian notions of heteroglossic potential and dialogic connectivity” in their analysis of the adversarial legal process (Cotterill 2002: 150). The problem that we face in making the connections between the speech reported by many of our Central American interviewees and the reported speech that they in turn quote, is that we have no access to the original reported threats. Unlike investigators in forensic cases, as social scientists we do not look for the persons from whom the original reported speech came to ask them what had happened to them. Thus, we cannot make the heteroglossic linkages, and have to rely on the words of our research participants, which we assume must diverge to some degree from the reported speech that they are quoting, although not for any nefarious reasons (i.e., we are not expecting the interviewees to have lied or made up these reported threats).

2.6. *Ambiguous threats*

Perhaps the most intriguing category of threats that were uncovered through the interviews were “ambiguous threats,” that is, speech acts that could be interpreted in one of two ways: As either threats or as warnings. Two instances of ambiguous threats stand out from among the tokens found.

The first comes from the answer of a Salvadoran Evangelical pastor, in response to a question as to whether or not he had every reported a crime. He relates the experience of someone else, whose identity he is careful to keep anonymous; the pastor is clearly nervous as he recounts the incident, as reported to him by this person.

Extract 18

- 1 Well, it's interesting that I haven't taken it upon myself to make police reports,
- 2 for the same reason, you know. I've been on the verge of doing it, but then I stop
- 3 to think about how others have suffered for going around making police reports.
- 4 We have been the careful ones and even though they demand that, that we not,
- 5 that we not remain silent about crime, we prefer not to say anything, and not to

6 report anyone because we directly trust that God is the one to resolve things. I'll
7 give you an example: Uh, err, this isn't, it's not here. Uh, one time a person, I
8 won't mention his name either, well some thieves broke into his workshop, here
9 in (name of municipality). The person went to the police to file a report. When he
10 filed the report at the station he was told, **"If you're not afraid to die, we'll go**
11 **get the individuals (who did this), and when they're in prison, from behind**
12 **bars they'll order a hit on you. So you see if you're brave enough to make the**
13 **report. We'll dictate it to you. If you're not, we won't."** So this person said to
14 me, "I thought it was better to tell them, 'Erase what I just put in front of you on
15 the table, on the desk, because I don't want to be murdered. I have a family to take
16 care of.'" That says it all, doesn't it? That's why we, we don't need to file police
17 reports either.

Was the police officer in lines 9-12 giving this individual a warning for the latter's benefit, or was he giving him an implicit threat? The second alternative is definitely a possibility if in fact the policeman is in league with the gang members who might end up behind bars. The harsh consequence of filing a formal report to the police, namely that the person reporting the crime will die, on the orders of gang members currently in prison, would be quite a deterrent to anyone hearing this from a police officer. The statement, **So you see if you're brave enough to make the report**, sounds like a challenge, as if the officer were baiting the citizen, or goading him on. This quality leans the interpretation in the direction of a threat.

The second ambiguous speech act was uttered by a Panamanian school director, in response to the question, "What type of disciplinary actions and sanctions do you use for school conflicts?" Her answer was as follows.

Extract 19

1 The discipline we use is to tell them, **"Look, right now the government is giving**
2 **you a scholarship, isn't that so? If you don't buckle down and study the way**
3 **you are supposed to, you're going to lose your scholarship and your mom is**
4 **not going to get the money every month that can help you out a lot and which**
5 **helps with a lot of things."** And they (unintelligible) cry, they cry when you tell
6 them, **"You're going to lose your scholarship; try to behave yourself."** And
7 they're also told, "Well, then, uh, we are giving you plenty of incentives. Uh, if
8 you are misbehaving..." The teachers sometimes penalize them by taking five
9 minutes away from their recess time. When you touch their recess time, that's a
10 big problem for them, because they love their recess time, and the five minutes
11 they have to stay in and keep doing school work while their little classmates are
12 out playing, well, they, they don't like that at all. So there are many ways to deal
13 with this and have the child truly behave...behave proper.

It is quite possible that the school director, in reporting generically on how she uses threats, considered herself to be issuing a warning, having the students' best interests at heart. However, given that students typically cry when they hear such speech acts, it is clear that they interpret them as threats. Whatever the intention of the school director, the children hear these utterances as threats, ones that have serious consequences for them

and for their families, namely, the loss of government ‘conditional cost transfers’ (referred to as ‘scholarships’ by the school system). These scholarships cover the cost of books and mandatory school uniforms, which for many families living at the poverty level, is beyond their financial reach.

3. Conclusions

In legal settings, direct reported threats can have highly impactful value, particularly if the person uttering the words in court who claims to be the victim was in fact the recipient of the threat, and the threat came directly from the author, and not through an intermediary. On the other hand, if the person who is acting as the animator is not the one who received the threat, nor was s/he present when the threat was made to another party, the threat being reported could justifiably have less credibility. However, in a country plagued by threats of violence, including murder if extortion is not acceded to, reports of threats conveyed by animators, in our opinion, are something many if not most Central Americans take at face value, even if the animators were not present at the place and time when the threats were made.

Of the variety of threats that have been analyzed here—referred to, generic, implied, indirectly reported, directly reported, and ambiguous—the type that one would think would have the greatest impact on a hearer is the ‘direct reported threat.’ However, many of the instances of quoting that occur in this data set were performed by animators who attempted to replicate the words of an author with whom they had had no contact; instead, the animator had heard the threat from the principal. The chances that the original speech act was replicated precisely are, of course, very slim, although the gist of the proposition might very well be quite accurate, if the principal was being sincere.

Generic threats may actually be quite accurate in form, even if they do not represent the speech of a specific person in a particular speech event. The fact that in our study generic threats were often quoted with the very same words by different people demonstrates to us that they are in fact being made regularly in this manner in these Central American countries.

Implicit threats, if they were to be entered as evidence in a Central American court, might possibly be accepted as equally credible as direct threats, if they were reported by the recipient of the threat, rather than by a third party. It would seem that a report from a person who was the direct recipient of a threat, no matter what the form in which the threat is reported, would carry more weight than a quoted threat uttered by someone who was not present to hear it uttered by its author.

We conclude that a reported threat that is uttered by someone who heard the threat him or herself, whether they quote the threat, say it indirectly, or through implication, carries with it greater credibility than anything reported through a third (or fourth) party, as the case may be. Thus, Goffman’s (1981) classic insight into the complexity of speaker roles has much to offer pragmalinguistic conclusions about the status of different types of threats, particularly if threats will be reported in legal settings.

In exploring the diversity of forms in which reported threats are made in social interaction, this study has uncovered certain distinctions that have been overlooked until now. Furthermore, our elaboration of a typology of reported threats would appear to “defy some of the major claims made by ‘formal’ pragmaticists about threats as speech acts that

occur because the author of a threat has a particular clear-cut intention of threatening a recipient, who will in turn grasp that bounded intention.”⁹

This study, in departing from the analytic or cognitive schools of pragmatics, and instead relying on interaction, goes beyond canonic pragmalinguistic work on speech acts. As one scholar has noted, “By demonstrating that the narration of vicarious threats is embedded in the micro and macropolitical violent scenarios where interactions unfold,” the study has shown that threats in contemporary Central America tend to be reported indirectly—“either because the animator was not present when the author uttered the threat, or because s/he is trying to protect her/himself.”¹⁰

In short, this study has shown that speech acts need to be viewed in a discourse context, rather than in isolation. And the discourse context must go beyond the speaker turn, and beyond the conversation, to take into account the sociopolitical environment in which the interaction is situated. Context, therefore, incorporates a historical perspective (Wodak 2002). Thus, when people in these Central American countries receive threats, either by phone or face-to-face, they recognize them for what they are and take them seriously, partly because threats have become a part of everyday life in Central America in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Prior to that, death threats abounded during the 1980s civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala. Media coverage of the flight of minors from El Salvador and Honduras in 2015, via perilous land journeys through Mexico and across numerous points of entry along the U.S./Mexico border, attests to the fear that motivates families to send children off by themselves, to risk their lives in the hands of human traffickers, because staying at home is seen as posing an even greater threat to their lives.

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¹⁰ We thank an anonymous reviewer of this manuscript for this insightful comment.

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