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Threatening. An ambivalent discursive practice between trust and violence[1]

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Abstract In this paper, our focus is on elucidating the role of symbolic practices in the manifestation of human violence. We aim to demonstrate how the distinction between verbal and physical violence, often perceived as clear-cut, becomes considerably ambiguous and challenging when examining real-life scenarios. Within distinctly human interactions, the delineation among various forms of violence is not starkly defined but rather exists along a blurred continuum. Specifically, we aim to address the following inquiries: Does the propensity for aggression in human beings fundamentally hinge upon the possession of language? If so, in what manner does language influence this propensity? To explore these questions, we focus our analysis on the discursive practice of threat. We regard threat as both an exemplary and borderline case, which proves invaluable in highlighting the nuanced interplay between language and violence.

Keywords: Language, Violence, Threat, Trust, *Ethos*

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0. Introduction

In this article, we will discuss threatening as a particularly interesting case of the violent use of words. Threatening is, in fact, a complex discursive practice, at once an exemplary case and borderline case, which is particularly interesting for bringing out the ambivalence of the relationship between language and violence. In this way, it is possible to problematise the idea - rooted in our tradition and still dominant in the debate on these issues - that words would mainly have the function of mitigating violence or even overcoming it. This idea of the mitigating power of the word has been present since the

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origins of Western thought, in which the *topos* that sees *logos* (language/reason) and *bia* (force/violence) as alternative poles is strongly rooted, and attributes to the first of these poles a civilising function and the power to get us out of the feral condition, thus placing us in a presumed position of privilege and superiority over other animal species[2].

If it is true that this idea – in its various articulations – grasps an important aspect of the role of language in the definition of human nature. In that case it risks, however, concealing another no less important one: speech and symbolic practices also can empower violence, when it comes to provoking it, deferring it or helping to bring it about, thus opening the space to a specifically human, but no less dangerous, form of violence.

This is not a contradiction, but the clue of the co-presence of two intertwined aspects that make language an intrinsically ambivalent phenomenon, an ambivalence that already emerges in the word *pharmakon*, which in classical Greek thought was also used in reference to the word with its double meaning of antidote and poison. Threat – as we will try to show – precisely because of its nature as a borderline and exemplary case may prove to be a good point of observation to reflect on this ambivalence.

1. A complex discursive practice

The intertwining of language and violence in the case of threat is quite obvious and, moreover, clearly emerges if we look at the definitions of the verb 'to threaten' in the most widely used dictionaries, from which it emerges that the act of threatening is linked to the foreshadowing of harm, evil, revenge, to carry out one's purpose or with the aim of intimidating, inducing one to do something or to desist from an attitude, an action.

In the literature, the topic of threat is mainly addressed either within the framework of argumentation theories (Walton 2000) or in pragmatics, both within the conceptual framework of language act theory (Weill 1993) and within (im)politeness theory (Limberg 2008, Limberg 2009, Culpeper 2011).

We do not address this debate here, but merely observe that – perhaps confirming the peculiarity of this discursive practice – all these approaches encounter some difficulties in describing and categorising threat, difficulties due precisely to the multifaceted nature of this linguistic phenomenon. In argumentation theory, threat is considered as a type of fear appeal argument, comparable to the *ad baculum* fallacy, and the main issue that emerges is precisely on "where to draw the line, distinguishing between the fallacious and legitimate cases" (Walton 2000: XIII).

Regarding the pragmatic perspective, for example, Isabelle Weill (1993: 86), in attempting to define threat from Austin's theory of speech acts revisited by Searle, considers that it can fall into at least four of the five categories of speech acts. It can fall into the category of assertive, since "the data are specified with vigour"; it can be considered a directive act, since "the purpose is to make others perform actions opposed to his wishes or interests"; it can fall into the category of commissive, since "the speaker undertakes to initiate an action of a certain kind"; it can also fall into the category of expressive since it expresses "resentment or aggression".

As far as the (im)politeness theory is concerned – which is framed within the Gricean framework – it considers threat as a particular case of impoliteness in the use of language and yet these analyses show how the overlap of impoliteness and threat is not so peaceful (Culpeper 2011: 72).

We will not go into further detail, also because our aim is not to propose a new description of threat as a linguistic act or as an argumentative move, but – as mentioned – to use

[2] See Buxton (1982), Fontana (2017), Serra (2020) for more on this topic.

threat as a paradigmatic case of the complexity of the relationship between language and violence.

We can formulate, in short, the topic that interests us here with a few questions: does threat avoid, anticipate, and amplify or, again, substitute physical violence? Or does it do – as the case may be – each of these things? Or does the threat disrupt or strengthen social structures? Does it build or demolish power relations?

The purpose of a threat is, in fact, mostly to avoid carrying out the very violence threatened, it would, so to speak, have an 'economic' function (Gambetta 2009 and Schiller 2021): if the threatened subject is overwhelmed by fear and bends to the threatener, actually the threat has mostly achieved its purpose. In this sense, the threat can then be said to avoid the exercise of physical violence by the threatener. In cases where – whatever the intention of the threatener physical – violence is realised, it may instead be said that the threat merely anticipates (or prefigures) the physical violence and thus, in a certain sense, amplifies it, cumulates with it. Finally, one may ask whether in any case the threat (whether the threatened act is carried out or not) does not – in any case – enact a form of violence, and then one can also say that the threat replaces violence, takes its place – in the ambivalent sense clarified earlier – besides the fact that it can trigger chain reactions of physical and verbal violence. As Judith Butler observes, "although the threat is not quite the act that it portends, it is still an act, a speech act, one that not only announces the act to come but registers a certain force in language" (1997: 9). Therefore, threat can be considered, in any case, a violent act in itself.

To answer these questions, it seems to us more profitable to use not so much the notion of linguistic act in the strict sense, but that of discursive practice, referring also to some categories of classical rhetoric, in the conviction that in this way both the contiguity between verbal and non-verbal and the complexity of the relationship between language and violence can better emerge.

By discursive practice, we mean that type of social practices in which the linguistic component plays a constitutive (though not necessarily exclusive) role, i.e. those practices in which words contribute to the realisation of the practice itself (and not simply accompany it) by interweaving with other non-linguistic actions. Possible examples (but in a certain sense all human practices can be said to be discursive): a pleading ritual, an oath, a marriage, a quarrel, an interrogation, a court hearing, but also a conversation in the drawing room, a lecture.

From this point of view, a discursive practice is something broader than a speech act. Indeed, generally, a discursive practice includes a multiplicity of speech acts but also other non-linguistic actions that concur to realise it. In some respects, a 'discursive practice' could be compared to what Leech (2014) calls a 'speech event' or to what Austin called the 'total speech situation' (1962), although it has more blurred and less rigid contours. Or, even better, a 'discursive practice' has many features in common with Wittgenstein's language game understood as "the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven" (§7). Indeed, as Wittgenstein himself clarifies in § 23 of *Philosophical Investigations* "here the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life". In short, a discursive practice is a social practice in which verbal and non-verbal actions co-occur and together contribute to the full realisation of the practice itself.

This ability to hold language and the activities with which it is interwoven together is one of the strengths of ancient rhetoric and, in particular, Aristotelian rhetoric, to whose conceptual apparatus we shall resort to highlight certain aspects of the threat.

2. Between human and non-human

To make our point clearer, it may be useful to make a further clarification, namely that a threat is not necessarily a linguistic act nor even a performative one in the strict sense (even in the sense that it is possible to threaten without words). Think, for instance, of a gun being pointed, a raised axe, glue in a shop lock, or, recalling a famous scene from *The Godfather*, a horse's head between the sheets of a powerful music producer's bed. But there is more. Even non-human animals do something like threatening. As Eibl-Eibesfeldt observes, verbal threatening can be compared to certain forms of ritualisation of aggression also present in other animal species that have the very purpose of avoiding combat through a gesture or posture that mimics combat itself (especially intraspecific) (1975). Although comparable to these ritualisations of aggression, the discursive practice of threat is not simply a threat expressed through language (communicated in words), but something structurally different: it neither replaces nor simply accompanies bodily gestures and actions but is interwoven with them in an inseparable unity that has its peculiar characteristics and cannot be traced back without fully coinciding with the gnashing of teeth. The presuppositions behind such questions is that language has a pervasive and transformative capacity, i.e., as Lo Piparo has well pointed out, speaking is not so much a unique and species-specific bio-cognitive activity that is added to other activities that man has in common with other living beings, but rather an activity that, from the moment it arises, reorganises and makes specific all human cognitive activities, including those that man shows he has in common with non-human animals: perception, imagination (*phantasia*), memory, desire, sociality" (2003: 5). If this were true, it should then also apply in the case of aggression and violent practices.

In the specific case of aggression, we follow Virno (2013) when he argues that the possession of language – far from representing an enhancement of our instinctive sociality – is instead precisely what can weaken it to the point of suspending it, just to later allow a reconstruction that is never identical to the primitive one and always at risk of being lost again. In this sense, then, language inaugurates a new form of all-human violence. This is certainly not to be understood in the sense of a superiority over other animal species. Language does not bring us out of an allegedly primitive state of ferinity but is part of this same ferinity and helps to shape it.

3. The advantages of indirectness

If we look at the threat as a discursive practice or language game, a decisive aspect that is closely linked to the verbal component is indirectness which – as we shall see – has important consequences concerning the exercise of violence, which is a possibility provided uniquely by the linguistic component. By 'indirectness' we mean the fact that often the most effective threats are those in which the threatened act is only alluded to, which is why it may also be difficult to recognise it. The explicit conditional form ("if you (do not) do *x* I will do *y* to you") – generally considered the standard linguistic form of the threat – is not, on closer inspection, the most widespread form. This is both because there may be cases of threats that are not explicitly conditional (i.e. in which the threatened action is not subordinated to anything else, e.g. "I'll kill you") and because it may be (deliberately) concealed behind other forms of linguistic acts (e.g. the advice, the warning or even the promise, e.g. "I advise you not to show your face again") or completely devoid of textual indicators (e.g. "I'll see you outside!", "I'm looking at you!", "What a nice dog you have" said to the neighbour with a pesky dog)[3].

[3] For more details see Walton (2000: in particular 125-128) and Schiller (2021).

This typical indirectness of the threat is, on the other hand, one of the forms in which semantic obliquity is substantiated, that tendency to use semantically oblique, non-direct or transparent terms (Di Piazza 2009) which – not by chance – is a characteristic trait of secret and criminal structures such as, for example, the Sicilian mafia, in which recourse to the threat is vital in the management of power inside and outside the organisation.
Indeed, indirectness and the allusive dimension magnify the threatening power of words and aim to amplify the threatened person's reaction of fear. To give just one example, in an interception between a mafioso and another one who had gone to his house for mediation, the former concludes the conversation in this way: "So, the situation is this. If you are sincere with me, I will be grateful and pleased with your sincerity. But be careful because if I realise that you are not sincere, I might be very sorry and annoyed, especially because I made you come to my house" (Morosini 2009: 55).
The implicit that creeps into the boss's words makes the threat even more macabre and effective, that is, more capable of generating fear, which is the perlocutionary effect typically associated with this linguistic act or – to use rhetorical terminology – the *pathos* that the threat typically pursues. In fact, the interlocutor – even in the absence of explicitly violent words and explicit references to the threatened act – grasps the threatening force and imagines an even worse scenario than the one that could be grasped with completely explicit words.

4. Imagining evil

It is precisely this aspect of imagination that represents another language-related component of human threatening. In the case of verbal threatening, in fact, fear is also realised through the ability of words to foreshadow imminent dangers. It may be useful here to recall the way Aristotle in *Rhetoric* (1382a 20- 1383a 15) describes the *pathos* of fear: "a sort of pain and agitation derived from the imagination (*phantasia*) of a future destructive or painful evil" (1382a 21-22). Words, and in particular certain forms of expression such as hyperbole, metaphors, and metonymy (what Aristotle calls *asteia*, 'urbanities'), have the power to arouse precisely this *phantasia*. More precisely, to have this power is specific to all those forms of expression that are capable of "bringing-before-the eyes" (*pro ommaton poiein*), representing them in action (*Rhet.* 1410b 34; 1411b 22-1412a 10). This is what is called 'clearness' (*enargheia*) in the rhetorical tradition. A vivid threat, then, is one that – thanks to the power of words – 'brings before the eyes' of the threatened person the foreshadowed action or an aspect of it (or, as is often the case, its effects), showing it to him as imminent and therefore capable of arousing fear. One example among many possible, taken from the Homeric tradition, is this in which Achilles speaks to the dying Hector: "not even so shall thy queenly mother lay thee on a bier and make lament for thee, the son herself did bear, but dogs and birds shall devour thee utterly" (*Iliad*, XXII, vv. 348-354). As can be seen, here too the threatened action ('the non-burial') is not explicitly stated, but the effects of this action are vividly enunciated to further intimidate the threatened. This is a kind of indirectness that differs from that of the previous examples, in which the threatened action could only be inferred by the threatened person from elements outside the sentence actually uttered.
Vividness and indirectness are, therefore, different aspects that in some cases may be intertwined if not overlapping; in any case, both are important for the effectiveness of the threat and both are related to language. It is difficult to imagine this variety of ways with sometimes unforeseen consequences in the case of the gnashing of the dog's teeth or the wolf, trying to avoid a fight. The intervention of language not only has a communicative

function but – as we are trying to show – modifies the very act of threatening, making its effects more unpredictable.

5. The risks of indirectness

What is implicit, unspoken, but also metaphors, hyperboles and metonymies are thus modalities through which meanings emerge, camouflage themselves, and re-emerge in a continuous language game that allows those who conduct it to exploit uncertainty, ambiguity, to exercise a form of violence that is increasingly more symbolic (Bourdieu 1997) and increasingly less physical. The semantic obliquity typical of threats is not only linked to its greater effectiveness but also to the possibility – on the part of the threatener – "to achieve a plausible deniability" (Walton 2000: 104). Indeed, it is precisely this inherently allusive and indirect nature of the threat, that both enhances its violent character and allows its 'cancellability' (to use Gricean terminology) and thus can make it difficult to identify (with the advantages that this, in some contexts, may entail).
This aspect can have two other consequences that can be considered mutually symmetrical: the risk of over-interpretation and the risk of non-recognition. There is an emblematic case in this regard, the 'good wish' made by the mafia boss Michele Greco to the judges of the so-called *maxiprocesso* against the Sicilian mafia held in Palermo in the mid-1980s, just before they retired to the closed session: "I wish you peace, Mr. President. I wish you all peace because peace is tranquillity and serenity of spirit and conscience. And for the task ahead of you [...] serenity is the fundamental basis for judgment. These are not my words, they are the words of our Lord, who recommended it to Moses: 'When you have to judge, let there be the utmost serenity, that is the fundamental basis'. And I wish you again, Mr President, that this peace will accompany you in the rest of your life, beyond this occasion". This "wish" for peace has been variously interpreted, probably over-interpreted. It has been seen by most as an allusive threat to the possible consequences of an unwelcome judgment on the Mafia bosses. However, one of the typical consequences of using implicit may been triggered, i.e., an over-interpretation of the speaker's intentions. According to Lupo, for example, it is plausible that the boss "did not intend here so much to threaten the judges as to reiterate – evoking no less than the word of Our Lord – that the brotherhood [the mafia] was composed of moderate and reasonable people who would become reasonable and moderate again tomorrow if an agreement was reached" (Lupo 2008: 213). Or, again on the same episode, Piero Grasso, one of the judges at this *maxiprocesso*, recalled that "they were ambivalent signals, which serve to those who perceive them, while they can be denied if you want to distance yourself by saying that he was an old person and that if you then challenge him, it becomes a defence. I understood it in the best sense, I didn't let myself be impressed at all, while I must say that some others grasped a threatening meaning" (Viviano 2008: 153).

6. Threat and trust

This possibility of over-interpretation or, alternatively, of non-recognition and then of the fallibility or unpredictability of consequences, also sheds light on another important aspect: as in all language games in which the aspect of indirectness prevails, the practice of threatening brings out once again the ineradicable and constitutive role played in the production of meanings by all the aspects that only seemingly are less important in a communicative practice: prior knowledge, social roles and power relations between participants, previous discourses; the pragmatic context, in short (Walton 2000: 106).

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It is precisely by virtue of its ability to bring out these elements – anything but external to the communicative process – that, as we anticipate, the point of view of classical rhetoric still proves to be heuristically fruitful.

In particular, the Aristotelian notion of *ethos* as rhetorical proof is useful for bringing out the decisive role of the relationship between speakers (their status and power relations) in the discursive practice of threat. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle identifies the means of persuasion internal to the rhetorical *techne* (*entechnoi pisteis*), i.e., those means of persuasion that the speaker elaborates on the basis of the rhetorical method. These means are *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*, corresponding respectively to the character of the speaker, the emotional reaction of the listener, and the topic of the discourse. By *ethos,* then, Aristotle means the role that the speaker's character plays in making a speech persuasive and is thus closely related to the notions of trust and credibility. It constantly accompanies any *logos*, any discourse, it is its shadow (Garver 1992).

To better understand the discursive practice of threat, it may also be useful to consider the *ethos* of the threatener[4]. Indeed, in order for threat to work, it must be part of a (anomalous) trust relationship, where the threatener is supposed to be credible. At least in a certain sense, therefore, threatening must also appeal to a form of cooperation, albeit perverse.

In the construction of this credibility/trust both the *doxa* and the *ethos* of the threatener count. According to Aristotle, *doxa* is the fame and reputation of the threatener, his status but also – if the threatened act requires it – his physical strength. *Ethos*, on the other hand, is the credibility that emerges from the speech itself, hence from the very manner of threatening and not from the pre-existing reputation. The type of threat the threatener chooses to make (explicit, direct, indirect, allusive, ironic, sarcastic, bloody, etc.) is in turn an indicator of the threatener's own personality, and his or her ability to find the 'right' threat can be decisive in achieving perlocutionary effects.

It is when the threatener becomes trustworthy that he can realise one of the possible purposes of the threat – perhaps the main one – namely avoiding physical violence. Symmetrically, therefore, if the threat has not been effective and the threatener has not followed up the threat with the threatened act, this inevitably leads to a loss of prestige on the part of the threatener, a loss of trust on the part of the threatened and, ultimately, a reshuffling of power relationship.

After all, threatening is one of the human practices that essentially has to do with power relationships and, again, a certain ambivalence emerges: does the threat disrupt social relations or is it a form (albeit violent) of *reciprocity*? At least in a certain sense, in fact, it is a way of binding the two interlocutors (and the potential witnesses) and constructing (or overturning) the power relationships. Whoever threatens, in fact, commits themselves to an extent and somehow limits their freedom, and, more noticeably, the threatened individual is, albeit forcibly, drawn into a relationship that compels them to make a choice. The ultimate goal of the one who threatens (whether they intend to carry it out or not) is, ultimately, to display a form of superiority (physical and/or social), not only to the direct recipient of the threat but also to any potential witnesses, the 'third party', who (as is the case in other aggressive verbal practices) plays a role far from passive. Depending on the contexts, status, and relations between speakers, the presence of a 'third party' can modify the discursive practice of threat in different ways. To give just one example, the reputation of the threatener – if the threat occurs in the presence of a 'third party' – is even more at stake, both in the sense that it is put at greater risk and in the sense that it can be further enhanced.

[4] On the role that trust and speaker's character play in the practice of threatening, see Walton and Macagno (2007) and Kimball (2006).

7. Conclusions

As we have tried to show, the verbal practice of threatening – borderline and exemplary case at the same time – calls into question certain clear-cut oppositions too often taken for granted, such as that between physical and verbal, aggregating and disrupting, mitigating, and amplifying, cooperative and non-cooperative. The role played by trust in the realisation of threat can also be seen as an indicator of the complexity of this violent discursive practice. To take up, then, the question posed at the beginning (does the threat avoid, anticipate and amplify or, again, substitute physical violence?), we could answer that the threat is capable of avoiding but also anticipating, amplifying and, again, substituting physical violence [5] and that the variety and unpredictability of these possibilities can be traced back to the possession of language: rather than choosing between these alternatives, the more interesting answer is that the threat is capable of realising all of them.

Exercising violence, in all its possible forms, for the human animal is never entirely independent of language. The ability to speak is both a mitigating factor and an amplifier of violence. Being linguistic animals does not, therefore, make us necessarily milder animals, nor does it guarantee us any escape from the state of ferinity. The animal endowed with *logos* remains merely a creature capable of exercising specific forms of violence and, simultaneously, a creature capable of opposing this violence, without ever having guarantees of success.

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[5] On how to understand the idea that language can substitute physical violence see Piazza 2019.

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