



A Pragmatic Representation of Threatening in Arabic Messages: A Case Study of Court Interactions

A. A. Ahmed   K. H. Hussein  

University of Mosul, Iraq

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Correspondence:

Abeer Abdul-Qader Ahmed
abeer.22ehp30@student.uomosul.edu.iq

Abstract

Threatening language is a ubiquitous feature of human communication, with the potential to elicit fear, anxiety, and even violence. In Arabic-speaking cultures, where honor and reputation are deeply intertwined with identity, threatening language can be particularly potent and insidious, using it as a means of social control and manipulation. This study investigates the pragmatic representation of threats in Arabic messages, with a focus on the linguistic features that contribute to the effectiveness of threats. Drawing on a corpus of authentic Arabic texts, this research employs a pragmatic analysis to examine the speech acts, politeness strategies, and interactional features that speakers (threateners) employ to convey threatening messages. The findings demonstrate that threatening in Arabic communication is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, characterized by a range of pragmatic mechanisms that serve to intimidate, coerce, or manipulate the recipient. The findings highlight the need to distinguish between different types of threatening language, such as direct vs. indirect and explicit vs. implicit threats. This study contributes to our understanding of the pragmatics of threatening in Arabic communication and has implications for the development of effective strategies for managing and mitigating threatening behaviour in a range of contexts.

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تمثيل تداولي للتهديد في الرسائل العربية: دراسة حالة للتواصلات القانونية

عبيد عبدالقادر احمد   وكمال حازم حسين  

جامعة الموصل

المستخلص

تعتبر لغة التهديد سمة شائعة في التواصل البشري، ولها القدرة على إثارة الخوف والقلق وحتى العنف. في الثقافات الناطقة بالعربية، حيث تتداخل الكرامة والسمعة بشكل عميق مع الهوية، يمكن أن تكون لغة التهديد فعالة وخبيثة بشكل خاص، إذ تُعتبر وسيلة للسيطرة الاجتماعية والتلاعب. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التحقيق في التمثيل التداولي للتهديدات في الرسائل العربية، مع التركيز على الخصائص اللغوية التي تسهم في فعالية التهديد. استناداً إلى مجموعة من النصوص العربية الحقيقية، يستخدم هذا البحث تحليلاً تداولياً لدراسة أفعال الكلام، استراتيجيات الأدب، والميزات التفاعلية التي يستخدمها المتحدثون.

(المهددون) لنقل الرسائل التهديدية. تظهر النتائج أن التهديد في التواصل العربي هو ظاهرة معقدة ومتعددة الأبعاد، تتميز بمجموعة من الآليات التداولية التي تعمل على تخويف أو إكراه أو تلاعب بالمتلقي. تسلط النتائج الضوء على الحاجة إلى التمييز بين أنواع مختلفة من لغة التهديد، بما في ذلك التهديدات المباشرة وغير المباشرة، والتهديدات الصريحة والضمنية. تُساهم هذه الدراسة في فهمنا للتداولية المتعلقة بالتهديد في التواصل العربي، ولها آثار على تطوير استراتيجيات فعالة لإدارة وتخفيف السلوك التهديدي في مجموعة من السياقات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الرسائل التهديدية، التداولية، أفعال الكلام، استراتيجيات الأدب، نظام تبادل الأدوار.

1. Introduction

Threats and blackmail have become increasingly prevalent in modern society, with serious consequences for individuals, communities, and social relationships. In this age, language has become a powerful tool for manipulation, coercion, and harm, playing a significant role in such behaviors (1). As a language with rich cultural and linguistic heritage, Arabic is not immune to this phenomenon. Threatening messages in Arabic have been reported in various contexts, including online and offline communities, educational institutions, and even within families. The study aims to investigate the pragmatic aspects of threatening and blackmailing in Arabic messages, focusing on the linguistic features and strategies that threateners employ to manipulate, coerce, and harm their victims (2 & 3). By examining authentic Arabic messages, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how language is used to achieve communicative goals, including those that are harmful (4). For example, the use of language is influenced by context, since terms like "love" or "darling" may be perceived as patronizing or offensive in formal settings, but not in intimate contexts (5).

2. Problem of the Study

Despite the importance of threatening language, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding of the pragmatic mechanisms underlying threatening language in speech acts, impoliteness, and turn-taking, especially in legal interactions.

3. Aims of the Study

The study aims to:

1. Explore the pragmatic form and function of threatening speech acts in legal interactions.
2. Investigate the use of politeness strategies in threatening language, examining the role of impoliteness maxims in shaping the interactions.
3. Explore the interactional features of threatening language, examining the turn-taking rules and signals that are used in threatening language.

4. Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What speech acts are used by Arabic-speaking threateners to coerce victims?
2. How are politeness strategies violated to assert power of threateners?
3. What rules or signals are used to control turn-taking when interacting?

5. Literature Review

Pragmatics sheds light on how speakers convey meaning beyond the literal interpretation of words and phrases, considering factors such as social context, shared knowledge, and speaker intentions (Yule, 2016). In the context of law, pragmatics is significant in forensic discourse and conversation analysis, as it helps to understand the dynamics of politeness and impoliteness, and how professional speakers employ coercion and confrontation when engaging with lay speakers (6).

5.1 Forensic Linguistics

Forensic linguistics, a field that intersects language and the law, involves the application of linguistic principles and analysis to investigate language-based evidence within criminal documentation (6). This field has its roots in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with early documented uses of linguistic evidence in court cases, such as Evan's case in 1965 (7), where linguistics experts examined a letter by Evan and found differences in writing style compared to an earlier sample, suggesting identity concealment. Since then, scholars like Jan Svartvik and Roger Shuy have published seminal works on the intersections between language and law (Shuy, 2005), defining forensic linguistics as a distinct interdisciplinary field. As Douthwaite and Tabbert (2022) (8) noted, "Crime is a window on the world; it reflects the socioeconomic structure of society, its values, its attitudes, and the social conflicts and social dysfunctions characterizing any given society at a given time". This perspective is relevant when considering the role of pragmatics in language crimes, as it highlights the importance of understanding the social and cultural context.

5.2 Threatening Messages

Threatening messages are a unique form of communication that requires careful linguistic analysis, and are categorized as written or spoken threats, with written threats including traditional letters, emails, or any form of written communication where threatening language is used (6). In terms of characteristics, threats share common features like menacing, alarming language designed to frighten or coerce recipients, ambiguous references to planned harm, lack of identifiable sender information or signed name, and irregular format/handwriting to conceal identity.

5.3 Speech Act Theory

Speech Act Theory, developed by Austin (1962) (9) and Searle (1969) (10), refers to the actions performed through language, encompassing various categories of acts. Searle's five categories offer a framework for understanding language functions in communication. Directives, commissives, representatives, expressives,

and declarations are the five categories, each with its own distinct purpose (11). Directives influence behavior, commissives convey commitment, representatives represent beliefs, expressives convey emotions, and declarations establish realities (12). For example, "I'm going to get you for lying in court, you fat" is a commissive speech act as the speaker threatens the victim and insults him with a derogatory word at the end "fat" . There are four types of directions of fit between the mind and the world for these five speech acts. The mind-to-world direction of fit involves assertions aiming to match the mind's thoughts to the world (12). The world-to-mind direction of fit includes desires and directives that aim to change the world to match the mind's thoughts. The double direction of fit involves acts of declaration, while the empty direction of fit involves emotions and expressive acts (13). Searle also delves into the fascinating concept of indirect speech acts, which occur when the speaker's utterance meaning and the literal meaning diverge (12)

5.4 Politeness Theory

Geoffrey Leech's (1983) (14) foundational work establishes politeness through the General Strategy of Politeness (GSP), a framework for cooperative communication. Impoliteness, by contrast, represents a shift away from the General Strategy of Politeness (GSP) in violating its basic maxims, including the Generosity Maxim, Tact Maxim, Approbation Maxim, Modesty Maxim, Agreement Maxim, and Sympathy Maxim (15). Violations of these maxims can take various forms, such as threats and curses, unmitigated commands, direct expressions of antipathy, self-aggrandizement, and direct contradictions. An example could be "I'm terribly pleased to hear that your cat died" (Leech, 1983, (14) . This would be highly impolite, as it expresses joy over the hearer's misfortune.

5.5 Interactional Features

Turn-taking refers to the orderly exchange of speaking turns during a conversation, governed by rules and mechanisms that ensure smooth and coherent interaction. Violations of these rules can occur, such as one party talks at a time not being upheld, occurrences of more than one speaker at a time, transitions with gap and overlap being common, etc (16) 700-701). In such cases, participants may also use various signals to manage transitions between speakers, such as pauses, which indicate the end of a speaker's turn and signal readiness for the next speaker and may be filled with conventionalized phonemic forms like "uh" and "um" that delay the transfer of the main message (17). Intonation, such as falling or rising pitch, can signal the end of a turn or continuation (16). Overlap, which occurs when one speaker starts talking before the other finishes, showing agreement or enthusiasm (16), can also signal engagement or disapproval (Oreström,

1983, (18). Adjacency pairs, such as question/answer or offer/acceptance, can create expectations for specific responses, and backchanneling, such as concise verbal responses like "mmhm," can be used to show engagement or understanding (19).

6. Previous Studies

Several studies have made significant contributions to forensic linguistics, focusing on the pragmatics of language in threatening communications. Al Asfer's (2021) (20) work on the pragmatics of cyber blackmail in emails provides a comprehensive analysis of the linguistic strategies employed by cyber blackmailers to manipulate their victims. However, the findings of this study are limited by its focus on cyber setting. The studies by Wafaa Sahib Mehdi Mohammed (2021) and Alkumet et al (2021) (21) provide valuable insights into the use of aggressive language in literature and the pragmatics of threatening and warning phrases, respectively. However, their scope is limited to specific literary works and speeches, which may not fully represent broader linguistic contexts, such as everyday conversations or Eastern literature. A more recent study by Etaywe (2024) (22) highlights the importance of considering the social and contextual factors that influence the interpretation of threatening language. This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the discursive pragmatics of terrorist threat texts.

7. Research Design and Data Collection

The study employs a qualitative descriptive research design, utilizing a dataset of four cases of court documents and transcripts of proceedings from the Courts of Investigation on the Right and Left banks of Mosul, as well as the Court of Appeal. The data collection process involves gathering written texts (documented by police reports), recorded speeches, and verbal exchanges, which are scrutinized for their content, context, and linguistic features to identify instances of threats and intimidating language.

8. Model of Analysis

This study employs a comprehensive analytical framework that integrates the Speech Act Theory (10), the Turn-taking System (16), and the Impoliteness Theory (15) to analyze threatening messages in Arabic. The framework identifies four speech acts: directives, assertions, commissives, and expressives, which convey threats, orders, requests, promises, and expressions of anger or frustration. Politeness strategies, such as tact maxim and generosity maxim, are also considered, as well as interactional features like turn-taking rules and signals used in the messages. (See Figure 1)

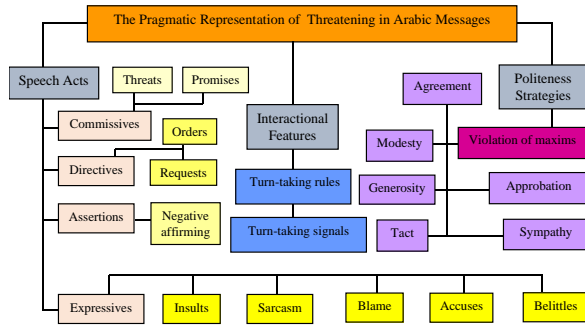


Figure (1) The adopted model based on the Speech Act Theory of John Searle (1969) (10), the Turn-taking System of Sacks et al. (1974) (16), and the Impoliteness (violation of maxims) of Leech(15)(2014)

9.Data Analysis

This section outlines the procedures employed to analyze the diverse datasets gathered from various sources, focusing on applying an adopted model to interpret and make sense of the data related to threatening and coercive communication in Arabic correspondence. The procedures involve translating the data from Arabic into English, removing irrelevant details, such as personal names, and highlighting threats using symbolic notation, such as asterisks (*) or quotation marks (“”), (round brackets), or [square brackets], and dots as pauses. Then there must be extracting relevant data, labeling (i.e. Body: Extract), and analyzing the language used in the threats pragmatically to understand how it is used to manipulate, coerce, or intimidate victims. The analysis indicates an in-depth examination of four authentic Arabic cases, extracted from real-life conversations, court documents, and police reports.

Case No.1

بتاريخ ٥ / ٩ / ٢٠٢٣ وكان الوقت صباحا كنت في مبنى محكمة بذاء الموصل واثناء خروجي من المحاكمه قامت المشكو منها خصمي في الدعوه وهي بسببي وشتمي بالقول (الله ينتقم منك تاخذ فلوس حرام والله يطلعها ابوילادك و الله يسود وجهك اكثر ما هو اسود) وكان هذا بحضور الشاهد واني اطلب الشكوى ضد المشكو منها اعلاه وهذه افادتي.

On 5/9/2023, in the morning, I was in the courthouse in Mosul, and while leaving the trial, the defendant in the case, who is, insulted me by saying “God will take revenge on you, you'll take money that is forbidden, and God will make your kids suffer for it, and may God darken your face even more than it already is.” This was in the presence of the witness and I am requesting to file a complaint against the above-mentioned defendant, and this is my statement.

(Body: Extract 1)

“God will take revenge on you, you'll take money that is haram (forbidden), and God will make your

kids suffer for it, and may God darken your face even more than it already is”.

Speech Acts

The speech act performed by the speaker, the defendant, in case No.1 involves only one speech act (12). All the speech acts involved are expressives, with a direction of fit that is empty, as the speaker expresses a negative emotion (anger, frustration, powerlessness) (13). The speaker's statements "God will take revenge on you" and “and God will make your kids suffer for it,” are expressive speech acts of blaming, aiming to degrade the victim by using religious language to convey a sense of moral condemnation. In "you'll take money that is forbidden", the speaker uses an expressive speech act of accusation, implying that the victim's actions are not only wrong but also prohibited by a higher authority (God). The statement "and may God darken your face even more than it already is" is an expressive speech act of insult, specifically a form of moral insult, where the defendant is not targeting the victim's physical appearance, but rather his evil deeds.

Politeness Strategies

The defendant's speech in this case study is a complex and multifaceted impolite expression that violates several politeness maxims (15). "God will take revenge on you" violates the approbation maxim, as it expresses a strong negative evaluation of the victim, implying that he deserves punishment. The agreement maxim is also violated in, "you'll take money that is forbidden", as it disagrees with the victim's actions. This kind of language is typically used to challenge or contradict, rather than to agree or cooperate. The defendant's statement "and may God darken your face even more than it already is" is a violation of the sympathy maxim, as it expresses a wish for the victim's harm or suffering.

Interactional Features

A lack of clear turn-taking rules characterizes the interactional features of this case study, as the defendant's speech act is a response to a previous event (the victim's presence in the courtroom) rather than a direct response to a question or invitation (Sacks et al., 1974) (14). The defendant's use of pause and intonation is not a clear turn-taking signal, but rather a way to emphasize the severity of the insult. The victim's response is not presented, as the case is a written report documented by police, and continues with the defendant's uninterrupted speech act.

Case No.2

محضر استماع تنفيذاً لقرار السيد قاضي التحقيق المؤرخ في ١٢/١٢/٢٠٢٣ تم تفرغ محتوى قرص (CD) لتسجيل صوتي ومدته دقيقه و ٥٢ ثانية والمتضمن مايلي :-

- ١- راح اکتلک فهمتني راح اکتلک يعني اکتلک.
- ١- حلي نطلع من هين اکتلک الا اکتلک
- ٢- اصبر بس ...

The speech acts in case study No.3 involve a range of acts that convey the speaker's intentions and attitudes. The speaker's first utterance, "Even if you're a lawyer, so what? The tea attendant in the office is a law and legal graduate, and if you don't like it, don't come to the office," (Extract 1) involves three parts. The first part, "Even if you're a lawyer, so what?" is an example of an expressive speech act of belittling, where the speaker mocks the listener's profession. The second part "The tea attendant in the office is a law and legal graduate," is also an example of an expressive speech act of belittling, with an empty direction of fit (including the first part). The third part, "if you don't like it, don't come to the office," is a directive speech act with a world-mind direction of fit. This message is an order, exerting control over the listener. Extract 2, "Go ahead and file a complaint, and we'll see," is also a directive speech act with a world-mind direction of fit.

Politeness Strategies

The speaker's first utterance, "Even if you're a lawyer, so what? The tea attendant in the office is a law and legal graduate, and if you don't like it, don't come to the office," (Extract 1) involves three parts. The first part "Even if you're a lawyer, so what?" is a boastful remark that violates the modesty maxim, as it belittles the listener's profession and status, implying that his expertise is of little value. "The tea attendant in the office is a law and legal graduate" violates the same maxim, as it highlights the speaker's accomplishments and status by pointing out the qualifications of someone in the same workplace, who has low status, and comparing him to the recipient. In "if you don't like it, don't come to the office", the speaker uses direct language that violates the tact maxim, as it maximizes the expression of cost to the listener. The speaker's statement in extract 2, "Go ahead and file a complaint, and we'll see" is also an example of a violation of the tact maxim.

Interactional Features

The conversation in this report is marked by the speaker dominating the conversation, with two turns (one turn initiates and the other ends) to him and only one for the recipient. Rule 1, Speaker-change recurs, or at least occurs, is violated as the speaker initiates the conversation with a directive speech, without allowing for a response or counter-argument from the lawyer, indicating a lack of adjacency pairs. The speaker's dominance is further emphasized by his use of backchanneling in his last utterance "Go ahead and file a complaint, and we'll see". However, the lawyer's response, though limited, provides a direct declaration of intent to take legal action, which does not engage in a conversation or address the speaker's claims.

Case No.4

محضر استماع

تنفيذا لقرار السيد قاضي محكمة تحقيق الموصل الايسر المؤرخ في ٢٠٢٣/١٠/٤ فقرة ٦ منه تم تفريغ المحتوى الصوتي مدة دقيقتان وثمانية عشر ثانية بين كل من و وجاء فيها ما تم تفريغه ادناه:
١. بول بس الله يورطو خل بس الكطو خل بس الكطو بلغو بلغو كلو علوا تنطينيا هسه.
٢. هسه اول ول كول خل يطلع مسود الوجه
١. اول بس انطيني اياا اذا ما ...* اني عيب عليه.
٢. الحجى مو صحيح اني دا اكلك وخلي يسمع.
١. اني اني دحك اكد بعقلك وصير ادمي احسلك انت همين.
٢. اني مالي دخل من السالفة ولا لو دخل والله اني دحك لا فزاع ل ولا ل وكلها كاعدة.
١. دحك اكد بعقلك وصير ادمي ترا دحك اني كاف عنك ما جاي انت يمي بالقرآن اذا اسمع منك احجاية اشوف ما شفقتو بحياتك .
٢. حبيبي انت ما جاي يمي اني مالي دخل .
١. خل الكط اني هسه اني بس الكط وبلغ ترا اذا طب الحاوي بالقرآن بالقرآن لا و ولا اي بشر اذا ما خليت كل شك براسو بكد ...* اني عيب عليه زين اذا يمك خلي يسمك الحجى وفي امان الله .
٢. هلو؟

Hearing Report

In implementation of the decision of the honorable judge of the Left Mosul Investigative Court dated 10/4/2023, paragraph 6 of which pertains to the audio content lasting two minutes and eighteen seconds between both and, the following has been transcribed:

1. Wow,! may God put him in trouble; Just let me catch him, Just let me catch him, tell him, tell him... hope you give him the phone now.

2. Ow now, say, let him come out that who with a black face.

1. Just hand the phone to him; if I don't ...*, it's shameful for me.

2. The talk is nonsense; I'm telling you, and let him hear.

1. I'm telling you, look, be reasonable and a decent person; better for you, too.

2. I have nothing to do with the matter, nor did; I swear to God, I'm not defending nor; they are all sitting here.

1. look, think it over and be a decent person; look, I have nothing to do with you; I swear on the Qur'an, if I hear anything from you, you will see things you've never seen in your life.

2. My dear, you're not coming to me; I have nothing to do with it.

1. Just let me catch him, and tell, if he comes to Al-Hawi , by the Qur'an, by the Qur'an, by the Qur'an, neither..... nor.....nor any human, if I didn't injure his head like ...*; it's shameful for me, ok? If you're with him, let him hear the talk, and may God protect you.

2. Hello?

(Body: Extract 1)

"Wow,! may God put him in trouble; Just let me catch him, Just let me catch him, tell him"

(Body: Extract 2)

“Just hand the phone to him; if I don't ...*, it's shameful for me”.

(Body: Extract 3)

“be reasonable and a decent person”

(Body: Extract 4)

“I swear on the Qur'an, if I hear anything from you, you will see things you've never seen in your life”.

(Body: Extract 5)

“if he comes to Al-Hawi, by the Qur'an, neither..... nor.....nor any human, if I didn't injure his head like ...*; it's shameful for me, ok”?

Speech Acts

In the spoken conversation of case No.4, commissives are evident. In extracts 1 and 3, "Wow,! may God put him in trouble; Just let me catch him, Just let me catch him", "be reasonable and a decent person " the speech acts are also commissive speech acts (from within) with a world-mind direction of fit, but in the form of imperative, as the speaker is expressing a desire to catch the person (Searle, 1969). The speaker also issues commissive as threats in extract 2, "Just hand the phone to him; if I don't ...*, it's shameful for me" and, with a world-mind direction of fit, as he is expressing an intention to take action. However, in extracts 4 and 5, the speaker engages in commissive speech acts, specifically threats, where he makes solemn promises to take action if certain conditions are met. The use of the Qur'an as an oath underscores the speaker's sincerity and commitment to the threats, emphasizing the gravity of the consequences if the recipient fails to comply.

Politeness Strategies

In this conversation, several politeness strategies are evident. The speaker violates the generosity maxim by minimizing the expression of benefit to self in extract 1, "Just let me catch him, Just let me catch him, tell him, tell him..." which can be seen as self-centered and aggressive. The speaker also violates the approbation maxim by maximizing the expression of disapproval in extract 3, the speaker says "be reasonable and a decent person " which can be seen as a criticism and disapproval of the other person's behavior. In extract 4, the speaker violates the tact maxim by using a threatening tone, making a statement that implies the listener will be subjected to something unpleasant if they speak out of anything, and the use of the Qur'an repeatedly as an oath serves to emphasize the gravity of the threat. In extract 5, the speaker violates the tact maxim by making a statement that implies the use of physical violence against the recipient if he come to Al-Hawi, which is a clear example of maximizing the expression of cost to others. The use of the phrase "if I didn't injure his head like ...*" is particularly impolite and immoral, as it implies a violent and dehumanizing treatment of the recipient.

Interactional Features

In this spoken conversation, several interactional features are evident, including speaker-change recurs (rule 1), as the conversation is a back-and-forth exchange between two speakers. The conversation is characterized by a lack of adjacency pairs (rule 4), as there is an interruption. The speaker uses various turn-taking signals, such as pause, intonation, and overlap (rule 12), to indicate his intention to take the turn. The recipient's response is limited, and he often responds with brief statements, which suggests that he is not actively engaging with the speaker's claims or arguments. In the conversation, the speaker's use of "Wow" in the third turn, accompanied by a pause (...), indicates his increasing anger and frustration, as he takes the turn and responds to the recipient's previous statement.

10. Findings

The findings of the analysis reveal a range of pragmatic mechanisms that speakers employed to convey threatening messages. These mechanisms include:

1. Speech acts: Threats were often conveyed through commissive speech acts, which expressed the speaker's intention to harm or coerce the recipient. Directives were also used, which expressed a desire to see the recipient suffer consequences.

2. Politeness strategies: Speakers often employed impolite language and violated politeness maxims, such as the tact maxim, which maximizes the expression of cost to others. This was evident in the use of threatening and aggressive language, which was often used to intimidate or coerce the recipient.

3. Interactional features: The conversation was often characterized by a lack of adjacency pairs, with speakers interrupting each other and not allowing for a complete turn before responding. This was evident in the use of overlapping speech and the failure to use turn-taking signals.

11. Conclusions

The study aims to explore the pragmatics of threatening language in Arabic, with a focus on examining the role of speech acts, politeness strategies, and interactional features in shaping threatening interactions. The findings suggest that speech acts, such as directives and commissives, are more frequent than other categories of speech acts. Threateners also use impoliteness tactics to their advantage, violating tactfulness and generosity maxims to amplify their dominance. Furthermore, interactions between threateners and victims reveal a clear power imbalance, with threateners controlling the turn-taking structure of interactions and messages escalating over multiple turns to intensify threats. Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to mitigate threatening behavior in Arabic

communication. Training programs are needed for law enforcement and other professionals. Furthermore, institutions should implement policies for addressing threatening incidents, including protocols for reporting and responding to incidents.

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