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Threats: Power, family mealtimes and social influence

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Threats: Power, family mealtimes and social influence

Abstract

One of the most basic topics in social psychology is the way one agent influences the behaviour of another. This paper will focus on threats, which are an intensified form of attempted behavioural influence. Despite the centrality to the project of social psychology little attention has been paid to threats. This paper will start to rectify this oversight. It reviews early examples of the way social psychology handles threats and highlights key limitations and presuppositions about the nature and role of threats. By contrast, we subject them to a programme of empirical research. Data comprise video records of a collection of family mealtimes that include pre-school children. Threats are recurrent in this material. A preliminary conceptualization of features of candidate threats from this corpus will be used as an analytic start point. A series of examples are used to explicate basic features and dimensions that build the action of threatening. The basic structure of the threats uses a conditional logic: *if* the recipient continues problem action/does not initiate required action *then* negative consequences will be produced by the speaker. Further analysis clarifies how threats differ from warnings and admonishments. Sequential analysis suggests threats set up basic response options of compliance or defiance. However, recipients of threats can evade these options by, for example, reworking the unpleasant upshot specified in the threat, or producing barely minimal compliance. The implications for broader social psychological concerns are explored in a discussion of power, resistance and asymmetry; the paper ends by reconsidering the way social influence can be studied in social psychology.

Threats: Power, socialization and social influence

This paper considers the interactional organisation of threats. Threats are a prototypical social psychological topic as they are a form of social influence where one individual or collectivity attempts to modify the behaviour of another. Although threats have appeared in the literature of social psychology, such appearances have been fleeting, and in the guise of an independent variable where the nature of threats has been presupposed. They have not received analytic scrutiny as a topic in their own right. That is, no social psychological research has started with foundational questions such as:

What is a threat?

In what ways can threats be built in either everyday or institutional settings?

How are threats responded to?

In what interactional environments do threats appear?

Consider Freedman's (1965) well known study of the way threats of different severity lead to cognitive dissonance, itself a partial replication of Aronson & Carlsmith's (1963) iconic original. Freedman took two groups of second to fourth grade children who had the opportunity of playing with 'an extremely expensive, battery controlled toy robot' (p. 149). One group of children (the 'low threat condition') was told:

While I'm gone (or busy) you can play with the toys if you want. You can play with any of them except the robot.

The other group of boys (the 'high threat condition') was told:

*While I'm gone (or busy) you can play with the toys if you want. You can play with any of them except the robot. If you play with the robot I'll be very angry and will have to do something about it.*¹

The result was that the boys in the low threat condition were significantly more likely to play with the toy in a subsequent session. Freedman interpreted this in terms of the increased cognitive dissonance that is generated when the children comply with the mild threat.

Our interest in these studies is somewhat different. We are particularly focused on what these authors did *not* do.

- They did not perform a conceptual analysis of the notion of threat and what is involved with producing some talk as a threat nor do they say precisely what makes the first condition mild threat and the second high threat.
- They did not look at threats as they arose in either everyday or institutional settings. The threat was pre-scripted; Freedman reported that he 'felt' that an 'ambiguous and vague' threat would be more threatening than something more specific.
- They did not say how the threat was threaded into their ongoing interaction with the children, or what immediate upshot there was from the children. The threat is reported as an isolated group of sentences.
- The reader is not told about the experimenter's prosody, or about any other non-vocal behaviour that accompanied the talk.

These absences are, of course, consistent with the factors and variables focus that has been central to mainstream social psychology in North America for the last 50 years. This is the kind of study that defined that paradigm. However, what is missed by these studies will be essential for developing an understanding of threats as a social psychological phenomenon. Part of the aim of this paper is to start to fill in these gaps.

A lay person would be forgiven for thinking that an understanding of what constitutes a threat in interaction must surely be a central social psychological topic. After

all, they seem to involve a primal situation of social influence where one person makes a powerful attempt to change the behaviour of another. Yet they have received surprisingly little attention since these early dissonance studies. However, there are large numbers of social psychological studies that make reference to some notion of threat. For example, there are studies of social phenomena that are ‘face threatening’, ‘stereotype threatening’ or ‘category threatening’ (e.g. Kaiser, et al., 2006; Spencer et al., 1999). But like Freedman, and Aronson and Carlsmith, they do not take the object of a threat as a topic in its own right; and like those authors they are principally focused on identifying some cognitive structure or process (dissonance, information processing) that is taken to generate and modulate action. Indeed, ‘threat’ is used here in the weak sense of a recipient being aware that bad things might happen, for example they may be evaluated in terms of a stereotype.²

This neglect of threats is continued in literature on power, language and social influence, which again might be expected to be an important environment for studying threats. Reid and Ng (1999), for example, use a threat when they are introducing a series of different ‘sources of social power’:

an armed robber might say, “Look, I have a loaded gun here, give me your money or I’ll shoot.” In terms of French and Raven’s (1959) typology, the loaded gun provides the basis or resource of coercive power, the wielder of which is trying to turn it into social influence by uttering a threat (1999, p. 120).

Reid and Ng do not focus on how this utterance is built *as a* threat. And despite having a research emphasis on language and power their invented example does not encompass features of delivery or sequential upshot. Reid and Ng do, however, claim that ‘depending on how the threat is worded and the tone of voice in which it is delivered, the influence attempt can have varying degrees of success’ (1999, p. 120). Although they cite Raven, Schwarzwald and Kowlowsky (1998) as the support for this, that study is not of *actual* threats but involves participants responding to a *hypothetical scenario* of social influence. Participants rated various reasons for complying with a supervisor’s ‘request’ as definitely a reason for complying or definitely not a reason for complying, imagining what the effect of this reason might have been on their conduct.

We are not claiming that these studies are addressing unimportant issues. Our point is that they do not throw light specifically on the nature of threats. Studies of this kind *presuppose* (a version of) the category ‘threat’ as part of their explanatory and theoretical apparatus. They do not consider the way threats are built in situ as actions in interaction and the way threats work (or fail to work) as a machinery of social influence.

The current paper will take a very different approach. Rather than start with a predefined and more or less social scientifically theorized notion of what a threat is, it will start by considering threats as they appear in everyday situations. The analytic approach will thus, at least initially, be descriptive; it will work with naturalistic records (Potter, 2003; Potter & Hepburn, 2005) of threats appearing in video recordings of an ordinary family with young children eating meals together. That is, it will not attempt to experimentally simulate threats; it will not engage participants in imaginary scenarios or vignettes involving threats; nor will it ask participants to talk about threats in open ended interviews, an approach favoured by much contemporary ‘qualitative’ or ‘critical’ social psychology. In pursuing this project we will be developing discursive psychological work that has increasingly drawn upon the powerful methods and findings of conversation analysis (see Hepburn & Wiggins, 2007a, for a recent overview). Most importantly, it will directly study actual threats in actual situations.

While we are not expecting all social psychologists to agree with some of the theoretical claims advanced in discourse research we believe that the direct focus on human action is consistent with the strongly empiricist logic of much social psychological work. Despite this logic, psychologists have overwhelmingly shied away from studying actual performance. There are a number of reasons for this. Two are crucial. The Chomskyan arguments about the intractable complexity of 'performance data' undoubtedly provide one obstacle to doing direct naturalistic study. Also important is the observational tradition of Barker - although he aimed to study 'human behaviour in situ' (1968, p. 1) it did not result in a cumulative body of work, perhaps because of limitations in its conceptualization of human action.

Conversation analysis is one tradition of research that has been resolute in its focus on direct observation, and detailed analysis, of human interaction. In one of his earliest lectures on conversation, Sacks (1992) discussed warnings and threats. He lists threats as an initiating action that is part of an adjacency pair (offer/acceptance, greeting/greeting, etc.). More than 30 years later, while many other adjacency pairs have received sometimes considerable attention, threats have been largely ignored in the conversation analytic literature. It is still not clearly specified, for example, what the preferred and dispreferred next actions are when a threat has been issued. This gap in the conversation analytic literature may be a consequence of the fact that direct threats are extremely rare in the types of mundane interaction that conversation analysts typically work with. For example, we could find no simple, direct threats in the commonly used Holt corpus of more than seventy mundane UK telephone calls. One of the challenges in moving research on threats in natural settings forward is collecting materials where threats are common. It was only when a large corpus of family mealtime data involving pre-school and primary school children was searched that threats were found with enough regularity to start a programme of work with.

Although this study works with a collection of examples, this collection is inevitably guided by the researcher's lay understanding of what a threat is. This, in turn, is guided by conceptual analysis and speech act work (Searle, 1969). In building a collection in order to study an interactional object such as a threat, a mix of conceptual judgement and empirical observation (Coulter, 1983) will be involved. However, typically analysis of the interaction in which that object occurs allows researchers to develop a more nuanced understanding of the action underway. But let us start this analytic project by considering classic speech act work. This will provide a foothold in the topic, although we will quickly see that empirical work highlights its limitations.

Speech acts and threats

The point of starting with speech act work is that it is an attempt to get at basic actions. As Potter and Wetherell (1987) pointed out when laying out the first programme of discourse analysis for social psychology, speech act theory is profoundly social psychological and as such provides a major contrast with purely linguistic analysis. The notion of felicity conditions – the collection of constitutive rules that govern the effective production of actions – connects actions to underlying, socially shared norms. Speech act work has been extremely powerful, although limited by being based on conceptual analysis rather than the full analysis of interaction implied by Austin's famous statement that the 'total speech act in the total speech situation is the only actual phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are

engaged in elucidating' (Austin, 1962, p.148). One way of understanding discursive psychology is as an attempt to satisfy Austin's ambition more fully.

Searle's (1969) influential account of the nature of speech acts developed the act of promising as a contrast to the act of threatening. Although it was not fully developed in his original, it has helped us develop a speech act specification of threats, starting with a list of the conditions that must be satisfied for an action to count as a *felicitous* threat.

- A. A threat is performative; its primary role is to make something happen rather than describe some state of affairs, although it will inevitably make reference to states of affairs to be able to perform the business of threatening effectively (Austin, 1963).
- B. For a threat to be felicitously performed requires the satisfaction of a series of 'felicity conditions'.
 - i. There has to be a sentence used with the 'propositional content' of a threat (*propositional content condition*).
 - ii. The threat must be (a) of some consequence that is detrimental to the recipient and (b) that detrimental consequence would not have happened anyway (*preparatory conditions*).
 - iii. The speaker who issues the threat must have the intention to issue such an action (*sincerity condition*).
 - iv. The speaker who issues the threat must be aware that they are under an obligation (or at least there is an expectation) that they will follow through the threatened action and have the power to effect that action (*essential condition*). Without this the threat will be 'empty'.

Although our collection below will start with this speech act style conceptualization, the analytic focus aims to highlight features of the formulation, sequential placement, delivery and receipt of conversational forms that are (at least initially) recognizable as threats. As is common in conversation analytic work, the way the situated conversational organization operates will provide structure and discipline to the analysis (Schegloff, 1996). It will also allow a degree of bootstrapping as the general understanding of the action of threatening is developed through the local consideration of candidate cases.

The analysis that follows will be used to highlight three somewhat overlapping themes that become relevant in understanding threats in their conversational context, and which will require further development. These are:

- a) the *agency* of the speaker with respect to the delivery of the detrimental consequence;
- b) the *contingency* of the detrimental consequence on the actions of the recipient;
- c) the constitution of new action possibilities for the recipient of the threat in the slot directly after the threat (e.g. compliance/defiance);

The specific analysis will allow us to consider broader questions of power and resistance and to return to the question of how social influence operates.

METHOD

The paper will draw on a broadly discursive psychological approach to materials (Edwards & Potter, 2001; Hepburn & Potter, 2003; Hepburn and Wiggins, 2007). This in turn will draw on the methods of conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 2007). The aim of the analysis is to draw attention to a range of fundamental issues that arise when considering threats, rather than fill in the full empirical patterning of each issue. In this

sense, this is a foundational paper that will enable a series of more specific empirical pieces to be developed from it.

Materials and participants

The primary analytic materials are a corpus of recordings of 16 mealtimes recorded by the 'Crouch' family (all names are pseudonyms). The family was given a digital video camera and asked to record around 15 mealtimes. No researcher was present and the family was encouraged to only record when they were happy to do so. Effort was put into explaining the general aim and value of the research to all participants, especially the younger ones, and ethical permission to include anonymised extracts in research meetings and papers was obtained from all participants.

This approach to data generation allows the family to become very used to the presence of the camera and avoids the direct researcher effects when the researcher does the recording. Reactivity has rarely been found to be a problem using naturalistic materials of this kind (particularly compared with the major possibilities for reactivity that arise in experimental studies and open ended interviews). Collaborative conduct is extremely hard to fake at the level of order, timing and complexity considered here. For a recent debate on the use of qualitative materials in this way see Griffin (2007) and the response by Potter and Hepburn (2007). The bottom line here is that threats emerge in real time and naturalistic materials are essential to document this emergence. Reports of threats are likely to be unreliable and guided by a range of normative considerations.

A transcription service was used to generate a first-pass orthographic transcript of each recording. A broad search of materials was used to select a corpus of candidate threats. These were transcribed using Gail Jefferson's conventions that have become standard in conversation analysis as they encode features of talk that have been found to be relevant to interaction (Jefferson, 2004). Further features of distress and upset were taken from Hepburn (2004). A brief summary of these conventions is provided in Appendix A. Although we present transcript, the analysis works with the video at all times and as far as possible incorporates the role of gaze, gestures, and other embodied features (for relevant overview of issues of using video in this way see Heath, Hindmarsh & Luff, 2010).

In this family there are two girls, Anna aged 3 and Katherine aged 5, Dad and Mum. Although Dad is present for some of the meals he is absent in the examples discussed here. The family is middle class (both parents have professional occupations) and white British.

ANALYSIS

In this section we start to unpack some features of how threats are issued and responded to. We will focus particularly on issues of contingency (how the threat builds its outcome as dependent on the action of the recipient) and agency (how the speaker builds their commitment to, and ability to, follow through with the threat). We will then consider the various ways in which threats can be responded. The first question:

What is a threat?

As we noted above in the discussion of speech act theory, one way to collect together things that sound like threats is to look for talk where a speaker is warning of detrimental future events and consequences for the recipient. This provides a useful start point in building a

collection. In the extract that follows, the recording of breakfast has just started and Mum is initially out of camera shot in the kitchen.

1. Crouch 14 0:40

01 Kath: I [[↑]don't want[↑] [<to wat]ch #you>
 02 Mum: [Katherine:, [Katherine:,]
 03 Mum: Katherine if you carry o[:n:,]
 04 Kath: [(at) w]or:k[:h
 05 Mum: [Whingeing
 06 an whining?
 07 (0.3)
 08 Mum: Had enough of i:t,
 09 (0.5)
 10 Mum:→ 'S is your warning now.=if you [↑]carry on[↑]
 11 [↑]whingeing and whining,=[↑]during breakfas'
 12 time I'll send you to the bottom step.
 13 (0.7)
 14 Kath: °.Hihh
 15 Mum: We [don' wanna] s- [listen to it.]
 16 Anna: [Or-] [[↑]O R : : :] (.)
 17 BE:Droo::m:,
 18 (1.5)

We join the recording as Katherine is complaining about the seating arrangements - she wants to sit next to, rather than opposite, Mum. Her complaint on line 1 is delivered with sounds of upset inflected through – elevated pitch, creaky delivery, increased aspiration. It also has hearable elements of pleading – the stretched delivery on line 1 – as well as complaint. This elicits what we are taking as a candidate threat from Mum on line 10. This has an ‘if-then’ structure that formulates both the problem action (whinging and whining) and the negative upshot (being sent to the bottom step). It produces the latter as contingent on the former. The negative upshot is the equivalent of a ‘time out’ or ‘naughty chair’ – somewhere one is sent to as punishment for bad behaviour. As Anna notes on lines 16-17, an alternative punishment for these girls is being sent to their bedroom, which they often seem to prefer.

Schematically, the structure of the threat can be represented as:

If	the recipient continues problem action/does not initiate required action
Then	negative consequences will be effected by the speaker

Let us consider this first in terms of our preliminary speech act scheme for specifying what counts as a felicitous threat. In terms its role as a performative, Mum’s threat seeks to bring a state of affairs into being (specifically Katherine will stop whinging and wining).

The felicity conditions are harder to clearly specify. Let us take them in turn.

Positional content condition: The classic test for the existence of a particular speech act is whether the utterance could be rephrased in a form that is first-person singular present active indicative (Austin, 1962). Such a rewording might take the form: *I hereby threaten that if you do not stop whinging and wining you will be sent to the bottom step.* This sounds somewhat odd – perhaps because the term ‘threat’ tends to be attributional rather than assertive (more on this below).

Preparatory conditions: The detrimental consequence to Anna is certainly specified – she will have to go on the bottom step. Moreover, this is not something that she was likely to do irrespective of the issuing of the threat.

Sincerity condition: The issue of Mum’s intention is a challenging one, and of central discursive psychological interest (Edwards, 2008). From a certain philosophical perspective intention can be a criterion. However, for participants (including Anna, Katherine and even Mum herself) the status of Mum’s intention is something to be assessed practically from the stream of conduct. Even if we accept traditional Fodor-esque cognitive science or Ajzen-esque theory of planned behaviour pictures of intentions as mental objects that precede action, there is, here, for the participants, no independent access to such a thing. Of course, we could take Mum’s acting on the threat and putting Katherine on the naughty step as evidence. But this would be circular reasoning.

Essential condition. The issue of Mum’s awareness of her obligation to follow through with the threatened action is similar. We as analysts, Katherine and Anna as participants, and even Mum as the speaker, do not have access to this awareness separately from whether the threat is actually followed through. They cannot work as an independent check on the felicity of the action of threatening.

The difficulty of working with these utterances as if they were cognitive objects (intentions, awareness) is one reason why discursive psychology separates itself from the linguistic philosophy approach to speech acts. Instead, the focus has moved from speculative and putative mental furniture to practices of interaction and how issues of intention and awareness become practically live in interaction. So as we develop the analysis we will focus more on these empirical complexities and how they highlight the complicated design possibilities and response possibilities that arise with threats.

Let us now return to the start of Mum’s turn on line 10. Mum *formulates* what she is about to do before doing it (Heritage & Watson, 1979), and characterising what follows as a warning. Does this mean that we should not consider this to be a threat? Are threats and warnings the same thing? Or could it be that the speech act vocabulary within the utterance does not itself map precisely onto the action analysis of the operation of the utterance? We will explore these questions in the next section.

Threats and warnings: the role of agency

Let us take an example from a corpus of everyday talk between adults - the ‘Holt’ corpus of telephone calls. We will use it to help clarify the distinction between threatening and warning.

2. Holt May 88:2:4.14

```
01 Dee:      =[everything's still going everything's
02           (.) you know:w=
03 Mar:      =I KNO:W YE:[S:::
04 Dee:      [Bu:t uh:m:=
05 Dee:      =[I tell you Mark it does make]=
06 Mar:      =[.h h h h h h ]=
07 Dee:→    =[a hole in your pocket[though I[warn you[:
08 Mar:      [.hhhh [Well I [k-
09           I c'n well imagine we .hhhhh we had a s:mall
10           do: just a local thing here in Cary this (.)
11           the last year about this time last year.
```

In this example Deena has telephoned both Lesley and Mark, a middle aged married couple from England. In this part of the call Deena is talking to Mark, and has been complaining about the cost of her daughter's impending wedding. Mark also has a daughter, and on lines 5 and 7 Deena issues what she terms a warning – that there will be 'a hole in your pocket', (an idiom conveying the idea of money unaccountably disappearing) when his daughter gets married. As with example 1, in which Mum also invoked the term 'warning', this involves an unpleasant upshot (unpredictable loss of money). However, in contrast to extract 1 this upshot is not something that Deena has any control over. In example 1, Mum explicitly says 'I'll send you to the bottom step.' (line 12), showing that the unpleasant upshot is something that she is going to directly cause to happen. In extract 2 Deena is not herself threatening to make a hole in Mark's pocket; she is merely warning him that weddings will do this. This is therefore an aligning action (unlike extract 1); Deena is helpfully preparing Mark for the worst. Note that, also unlike extract 1, there is no account for the delivery of the warning – 'we don't want to listen to it'.

Our proposal, then, is to decouple the participants' own use of speech act formulations such as 'threat' and 'warn' from our own analysis of their actions (which is, in turn, importantly but not exclusively based on how the participants display their understanding of what is going on through the design and positioning of their turns). Put another way, participants use of speech act formulations is *itself* performative and can *itself* be analysed for the business that it is doing. Thus by formulating what she is doing as warning rather than threatening in extract 1, Mum is characterising her action as more aligning, and softening her role in effecting the negative upshot. We will return to this point below.

More broadly, this highlights an endemic issue that arises with the analysis of action. Our available vocabulary as analysts for glossing action is either mechanistic, and therefore reworks what is going on in terms of underlying causes (heuristics, brain states, reinforcements), or voluntaristic and therefore uses many of the same terms that the participants themselves use (threat, admonishment and so on). The problem is that this language is itself a performative language; it is designed to effect actions in the world rather than provide precise technical descriptions of human behaviour. There is no easy solution to these problems. We are merely noting at this point that we need to be cautious about the confusions that can arise when using speech act terms in our analytic vocabulary, even when actions in speech are the very topic of study.

In terms of our analytic approach, we are distinguishing threats from warnings through the test of whether the noxious upshot is directly a product of the agency of the issuer. This is in line with our speech act conceptualization. A threat, therefore, is not an action in which the issuer aligns with the recipient. Indeed, the fundamental point of the threat is to change the current action of the recipient rather than align with it. Threats have a direct project of social influence; warnings may or may not have such a project. Mum is attempting to influence (what she describes as) Katherine's whining; Deena is not attempting to stop Mark's children marrying, although she might be providing information that Mark might use to modify his behaviour (change his budget, consider a cheaper reception, etc.). These are very different with respect to both the alignment between parties and the mechanism of social influence.

Let us develop this consideration of the speaker's agency by taking another example. In extract 1 the noxious upshot was something negative – being sent to the bottom step.

However, more commonly in the corpus the noxious upshot was the withholding of something enjoyable. Consider extract 3 below.

3. Crouch 06 6:40

01 Mum: [An]na?
02 (1.6)
03 Anna: U↑hhuh ((more of a sob than a response))
04 (0.6)
05 Mum: If you don' eat your dinner:, (0.4)
06 there'll be no pudding.

In this extract we are some way into an evening meal. Anna has become increasingly distraught about what she is being told to eat. Immediately prior to this, Mum has fed her a forkful of food (she normally feeds herself) which she complains about while the food is in her mouth. Mum's response is to threaten withdrawal of 'pudding' (lines 5-6). This formulates the required action in the kind of if-then construction we identified as prototypical above:

If you don't eat your dinner
Then there will be no pudding

Mum therefore threatens to withdraw access to something that she knows Anna wants if she does not behave appropriately. In this family it is often 'pudding' (a UK regional word for 'dessert') which is withheld.

Interestingly, this time Mum does not explicitly claim agency over the unpleasant upshot. While in example 1 she said 'I'll send you to the bottom step', here she says 'there'll be no pudding'. There are at least four potentially live and possibly overlapping pragmatic reasons for this.

First, as the person in charge of the food and with the skills to manipulate food, the provision of pudding is Mum's responsibility. Her agency is thus easily visible to all parties.

Second, it may be that in using a grammatical construction that deletes agency she is softening the appearance of autocratic control. This would be the kind of account of the manipulation of agency in newspaper reporting of police attacks on demonstrators that are favoured by critical linguists (Trew, 1979).

Third, by removing or downplaying her own agency Mum makes the issue more subject to general rules about what typically happens. Mum is thereby presents herself as merely following mealtime conventions. We can see here the way threats become built as part of a broader project of socialization; rather than just a one off piece of behavioural modification they can be built to present a generic pattern of required behaviour. Building the threat in this way may also usefully diminish the possibility of 'special pleading' to the one who wields the power over access to the pudding, thereby reducing the prospect for unfolding conflict.

Fourth, and finally, the softening or heightening of agency may reflect the severity of the 'bad behaviour'. Thus not eating dinner may be a less severe transgression than Katherine's loud and continuous complaining in Extract 1 that threatens to disrupt the smooth accomplishment of breakfast. Put another way, not eating her dinner may be treated as more appropriately her business, and thus less subject to immediate sanction, than 'whining' that has an immediate effect on other family members.

At this point we are not attempting to decide between these options or rank their importance. Such a task will require considerable further work. We will return to the issue

of rules and socialization below. Now, however, we will turn our attention to the way the contingency of the threat is interactionally managed.

Threats and admonishments: The role of contingency

In the previous section we discussed the way threats and warnings can be distinguished by considering whether or not the speaker is positioned as an agent effecting the noxious upshot. We also noted that agency can itself be conversationally heightened or obscured. We have also described examples where the threat is built through the withholding of a desired thing (e.g. pudding) or the delivery of a noxious thing (e.g. going to the bottom step). In each case, the upshot is made dependant on some change in conduct on the part of the recipient. Threats are surely a prime example of the attempt at social influence.

In this section we will explore the distinction between threats and admonishments or scolds. A key element of this distinction is the role of contingency. The threat is directed at behavioural change; the admonishment highlights current problem behaviour (from the perspective of the admonisher) but does not make punishment contingent on behavioural change. Let us consider this with an example. Extract 3a shows how extract 3 develops after the threat in lines 5-6.

3a Crouch 06 6:40

01 Mum: [An]na?
02 (1.6)
03 Anna: U^hhuh ((more of a sob than a response))
04 (0.6)
05 Mum: If you don' eat your dinner:, (0.4)
06 there'll be no pudding.
07 [(1.2)]
08 Anna: [((spits mouthful onto her plate))]
09 Mum: That's horrible.
10 [(2.8)]
11 Anna: [((continues with more spitting))]
12 Mum: <STOP IT.!!>
13 (0.4)
14 Mum: <THAT'S HORRIBLE.!!> ((grabs kitchen roll))
15 [(1.2)]
16 Mum: [((wipes Anna's mouth))]
17 Mum: Th't <disGUSTing.>

As we have noted, Mum issues a threat on 5-6 – eating dinner is the required conduct; not getting pudding is the negative upshot. In the slot immediately following the threat, and in direct defiance of the threat, Anna spits out the food that she had in her mouth. We will discuss the way threats set up sequential possibilities like this below. For the moment let us concentrate on how Mum responds. In line 9 she issues a negative assessment of Anna's action that describes it as 'horrible'. When Anna continues to spit on her plate, she issues a directive to Anna to stop. She also upgrades (with elevated volume and emphasis) her assessment of Anna's action as 'horrible' and 'disgusting'. The category 'admonishment' (or related notions such as 'telling off', 'chastising' and so on) is far from clear. However, we can note a distinction between what is happening here and the organization of the earlier threat. In particular, Mum does not build a *further* negative upshot contingent on Anna continuing her 'bad' behaviour.

Note that this admonishment is distinct from the noxious upshot of the threat (no pudding); at this point in the interaction it is still not clear to Anna whether pudding will now not arrive or not (in fact it does not arrive). However, the admonishment may be

are followed directly by a question from Mum – ‘Do I have to ↑fee:d you,=like a baby?’. This marks an unpleasant upshot for Anna, over which Mum is claiming some limited control – note the construction ‘do I have to’, which presents Anna’s lack of spoon as something that inevitably forces Mum into feeding her like a baby. Note that although this does not use the more standard if-then structure, it does make detrimental consequences (for Anna) contingent on her behaviour (not using a spoon). It can easily be rephrased in standard form:

If you do not use your spoon
Then I will feed you like a baby

There are a range of interesting questions as to why this standard form is not used. For example, during the delivery of the directive (Anna use your ↑SPOON!) it is clear that Anna is not starting to move toward the spoon. This might be the reason that the directive is upgraded to a threat. This interpretation is supported by the delivery of Mum’s turn. The ‘left caret’ marks Mum as ‘jump starting’ with the ‘Do I have to feed you’, building quickly on the directive without allowing other actions to be initiated. This reflects the more general point that actions are built sequentially, in real time, out of their unfolding context, and reflect the affordances and constraints of that context.

Nevertheless, our interest with this example is less with the non-standard threat design (although as a Yes/No interrogative (Raymond 2003) this does allow for Anna’s form of response) as with the negative upshot and how Anna treats it. Anna’s response to Mum’s threat is an enthusiastic uptake; she agrees that Mum will have to feed her like a baby. This reworks the upshot (that Mum has designed to be noxious) as desirable, effectively undermining Mum’s bid to change Anna’s behaviour. It turns the threat into an empty threat; the noxious upshot becomes more of a reward. This leaves Mum with the task of showing how the upshot – being fed like a baby, actually *is* noxious. Her first go at this is ‘I thought you were a big girl.’ on line 13. This does not have the effect Mum is pursuing as Anna starts to make baby noises! Anna (who is only 3 remember) seems to be playfully undermining Mum’s whole project. Mum therefore has to do further work on the possibly noxious consequences of being treated like a baby. We will continue this extract to see what happens next.

4. Crouch 04a

15 Anna: ((shrieking, imitating baby)) A:[a : : a]↑wa::.
 16 Mum: [I thought-]
 17 Mum: No::,
 18 (.)
 19 Anna: M(hh) [uhm!]
 20 Mum: [You’re] going to balle:t.
 21 (0.8)
 22 Anna: .HH[H H H]
 23 Mum: [Babies do]n’t go to ballet,
 24 (0.4)
 25 Anna: Uh!
 26 (.)
 27 Mum: So [you need t]o show me you’re a big girl.=
 28 Anna: [A H : !]
 29 Mum: =An eat like [ballet girls [do.
 30 Anna: [U : m a : [ma <.hh ↑I DIDnu
 31 (.) d- do at ballet (hac tober,)
 32 Mum: Yeah, sit dow:n,
 33 Anna: .hh Ah! .hh wiv ths (gwan) °I ↓a:m:°
 34 mu:m[my:,]

35 Mum: [°Ann]°a:!
 36 (0.8)
 37 Mum: th' SPOO:n! (.) Ea:t!

Mum first does a rejection of Anna's bid to be a baby – 'No: : , ' on line 17. She then supplies Anna with information which can be assumed to flesh this out – 'You're going to ballet:t' here Mum formulates a future event of some importance to Anna, as her agitated reactions on 25, 28 and 30-34 indicate. Mum then formulates a rule – 'Babies do]n't go to ballet..' This usefully deletes Mum's agency in formulating the embedded noxious upshot, e.g. she doesn't say 'I won't allow you to go to ballet'. However in spelling out the behavioural implications of this: 'So you need to show me you're a big girl.= An eat like ballet girls do.' Mum claims some control over the unpleasant upshot – 'you need to show me' – but only insofar as she is following, and so constrained by, a pre-existing rule (babies don't go to ballet), a device she used in the previous example. And of course 'eat like ballet girls' is code for using one's spoon. After a rather anxious and slightly incoherent turn from Anna, which elicits more sternly delivered directives, Anna finally picks up her spoon.

What we see here is Mum managing Anna's rejection of the noxious nature of being fed like a baby by building a further threat with a further noxious upshot – being a baby will mean she will not be able to go to ballet. Although the felicity conditions specify the threat must have detrimental consequences, these consequences and their nature may themselves be subject to dispute. In actual interaction, different elements of the threat are open to rhetorical reconstruction. This highlights the importance of moving beyond abstract conceptualizations to considering actual empirical material. If undercutting the negative upshot of the threat is one form of disruptive resistance, another involves softening the compliance.

Threats and responses 2: Softening compliance

In his early work Sacks (1992) suggests that a threat is an initiating action. That is, in sequential terms a threat is the first part of an adjacency pair. This means that once a threat is issued it generates a slot for new actions. This is a basic feature of interaction. For example, once an invitation has been issued what comes next is very likely to be heard as one of a very limited list of actions, most likely as either an acceptance or a refusal. Conversely, it is not easy to produce an invitation refusal without an invitation having been issued. Social action is organized in these normative terms.

Thus it is with threats. Once a threat has been issued, particular next actions become relevant. Most relevantly there is the possibility of compliance (as in 1 or, eventually, in 4a above) or defiance (as with Anna's food spitting in 3a). However, we have also noted responsive actions which are neither outright defiance nor straightforward compliance. One example was Anna's happy reworking of the noxious upshot in extract 3. Let us take another rather different example which illustrates the way compliance can be softened..

In the following extract, Mum and Anna are having lunch together.

Extract 5 Crouch 08 9:15

01 Anna: Now (all funnish:.) ((with mouth full))
 02 (0.5)
 03 Mum: Mm:.
 04 (0.7)
 05 Mum: Finish your mouthful.

06 [(8.1)]
 07 Anna: [((Gradually pushes back from table))]
 08 Mum: Anna::,!
 09 (1.1)
 10 Mum: If y'want some pudding you sit still
 11 on your chai:r don't you.
 12 (2.6)
 13 Anna: [((leans forward to get drink, gulps noisily))]
 14 [(9.6)]
 15 Anna: .hh Ha:ve [you: finsd mu:m,]
 16 Anna: [((cup over mouth))]
 17 Mum: Nearly:

Anna announces that she has finished in line 1, and begins pushing her chair away from the table in line 6/7. She gradually pushes further and further away, looking to the side in a way that avoids eye contact with Mum. Mum issues a summons on line 8, with what is plainly hearable as 'warning intonation'. More specifically, the intonation in the name slides upward and is emphasised and stretched – it suggests displeasure and projects more to come, without immediately adding anything. As we will see in the following extract, this family have a rule that before leaving the table permission must be asked. In line 9 Anna responds to the warning by looking at Mum, and stops moving back.

Mum's next move is a candidate threat: 'If y'want some pudding you sit still on your chai:r don't you.'. It has the same basic conditional structure we have highlighted in previous examples, but the tag question format produces it as more of a reminder than a threat. This is because the tag question produces Anna as already knowing (Hepburn and Potter, forthcoming) this particular rule. This does two things - it produces Anna's bid to leave the table as simply not 'sitting still', and also produces Anna as merely having forgotten something she already knew. The sense of it as a reminder also suggests that Anna has a choice not to have dessert, while producing the pudding as a desired thing that Mum is assuming Anna wants. Despite all these possibly mitigating features this still has a basic threat form and the warning intonation of the preceding summons constitutes Anna as possibly going to resist doing something rather than simply needing to be reminded. Mum turns something good that would normally appear, and that Anna is generally keen to have, into something that will not appear if Anna continues with her current course of action.

Now let us consider Anna's response. Following the earlier summons, she has already stopped moving back and is sitting still looking at Mum. As a yes/no interrogative, Mum's tag question makes relevant a yes/no answer (Raymond, 2003), but Anna does not provide either, nor does she return her chair to the table, displaying compliance, nor does she continue pushing back, displaying defiance. Instead, her response is to reach forward to the table to take her drink while closely watching Mum, who in turn closely watches Anna. One thing Anna does by this is produce herself as still sitting at the table, while actually being quite far away. It seems likely that the careful monitoring of Mum allows her to assess whether her action is sufficient to hold off scolding or complaint – each is calibrating the actions of the other. And indeed Anna has done just enough.

To summarise, so far we have identified three response options to threats – compliance, defiance and undermining the noxiousness of the threat. Here we have identified a fourth option. This involves producing minimal compliance (perhaps compliance with a flavour of defiance). We can perhaps compare it to the UK military offence of 'dumb insolence' which involves an attitude of defiance without open disagreement.

DISCUSSION: ACTION, ASYMMETRY AND SOCIAL INFLUENCE

This paper has not attempted to provide a full analytic study of threats, or even a study of threats in one social setting (family mealtimes), or even one element of threats in that setting (forms of resistance that avoid direct defiance, say). These are big questions which will involve considerable (comparative and systematic) work with further materials. What we have attempted is the necessary groundwork to such studies by explicating some of the basic elements that constitute a threat as an interactional object. We have attempted to secure some foundations on which further work can be built.

Let us summarise what we are currently able to conclude. The basic form of a threat delivered in talk has an 'if-then' grammar that makes negative consequences of some kind contingent on the recipient of the threat's actions. Most basically this will take the form:

If	recipient continues problem action/does not initiate required action
Then	negative consequences will be effected by the speaker

Constructions of this kind do not use explicit speech act verbs; there are no examples of participants using threats as explicit avowals in this way. There are instead examples where participants downgrade the severity of the action by glossing it as a 'warning' (e.g. Extract 1). Initial inspection suggests even these are relatively uncommon in our corpus. Most commonly the threats are built without using a speech act verb of any kind. For analytic purposes, we suggest that we should not start with the speech act term threat.

One of the features of threats highlighted by our preliminary conceptualization is that the speaker has the power to, and is willing to, effect the negative upshot. In actual examples, such power or agency could be built up or downgraded. Downgrading a threat by using the term 'warning' is one practice for softening the agency of the speaker as, although a warning has a negative upshot contingent on the recipient's behaviour, it does not involve the speaker in effecting that upshot (see e.g. Extract 2 above). Another way of managing the speaker's agency is to use constructions that either expose or embed that agency grammatically. Compare:

Extract 1: I'll send you to the bottom step.

Extract 3: there'll be no pudding.

In Extract 1 the agency is exposed by the first person grammatical structure. In Extract 3, in contrast, the agency is embedded rather explicitly identified. That is, the relevant agent is not explicitly formulated, although it is, pragmatically clear who it is. Agency can be embedded even further by using constructions that script formulate (Edwards, 2007) the required conduct, such as:

Extract 5: you sit still on your chai:r

The iterative present tense builds this not as an individual instance of conduct but something that the recipient does do or ought to do on a regular or standard basis. It is in this sense that it is script formulated. Producing the appropriate conduct as a script that the recipient is violating treats the issuer as orienting to a rule rather than issuing the threat.

The analysis illustrated the role of contingency in separating threats from scolds or admonishments. When negative assessments are offered of the recipient's behaviour this may be hearable as admonishing. However, the threat is constructed to hold off a negative upshot such as an admonishment to allow the recipient to modify their behaviour. The contingency is crucial. This is a complex topic, however, deserving of more study. For example, it may be that a negative assessment of the recipient's behaviour is precisely part

of discouraging future examples of that behaviour. Nevertheless, this is not grammatically linked to future punishment or negative upshot.

So far we have summarized features of the turn design of threats. What elements enable the threat to do the business that it does? A central feature of the sorts of conversation analytic informed discursive psychology that we have been working with is that it uses the real time, sequential unfolding of talk as a major resource for getting analytic traction on what is going on. Although speech act theory emphasised both the importance of the speech act, the 'illocutionary action', and the response or 'perlocutionary' action, it famously failed to fully address the nature and role of perlocutions (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In this case, we have considered the different actions that the recipient can produce in response to the threat.

As an initiating action a threat sets up a restricted and ordered set of response possibilities. In our materials many of the threats related to conduct of some kind: 'whining', not eating something, getting down from the table. A first observation is that the issuing of a threat seems to offer two clear response possibilities: compliance or defiance. The recipient can *comply* with the threat by ceasing the identified negative behaviour or by initiating the required positive behaviour (e.g. in example 4a, eventually). Or they can defy the threat by continuing, or even exaggerating, the negative behaviour, or not starting the required positive behaviour. Thus in Example 3a, after Mum has issued the threat about Anna not eating, spitting out the mouthful she has already taken exaggerates the negative behaviour. Let us end by returning to our broader concerns with power and resistance, and the closely connected topic of social influence.

Power and resistance

As an initial gross observation, threats are prevalent in our family meal corpus. For example, preliminary analysis was able to identify 15 clear candidates in the Crouch corpus – so on average there is a threat in every meal. Yet a search through the Holt corpus of mundane calls between adults failed to identify a single clear case. In some ways this is surprising, as the parent-child relationship is associated with nurture and care. However, in other ways it is not surprising. As our initial speech act characterization suggested, to issue a felicitous threat, the speaker has to be in a position where they possess the power to engender positive or negative consequences. Such asymmetries appear to be a generic feature of families, particularly with young children. In this family it is typically Mum who assumes control of the delivery or withholding of the pudding or ballet, for example. There is also an important physical difference between parent and child. For example, because of her size and coordination Mum is physically able to feed Anna and wipe her face. This can require some cooperation from Anna but is nevertheless highly asymmetric; there are no examples in the material of Anna feeding Mum or wiping her face.

Despite these important asymmetries, the situation is complicated. On the one hand, Mum can combine her control of the food and so on, which satisfies some of the important felicity conditions for issuing a credible threat, with the issuing of the threat itself which builds rewards and punishments contingent on behavioural change. Complying with a threat displays *subservience*; by performing the required next action the agent has no space to display this action as a product of their own autonomy. However, issuing a threat also sets up *defiance* as a potential next action. That is, when Anna spits out her food in Extract 3a it is not just spitting, it is a highly visible counter to the strong push for compliance embodied in the threat. Precisely because there is so much interactional

pressure on generating the particular outcome, not going along with the pressure can be rendered a 'strong' thing to do. It is a sociological truism that the power and resistance go together. What we see here is an analytic explication of precisely that. Moreover, after a threat has been defied the problem for Mum is what to do next.

An escalation of conflict may display either powerlessness, as the defiance stands, or lead to increased threat with heightened sanctions in an attempt to regain control. It is notable that these kinds of sequences seem to involve 'emotional' escalation with increased volume, strong assessments, and 'sharp' intonation. The close interconnection between sequences of talk, activity types and emotional display will be an important topic of future study.

Although compliance and defiance are primary response possibilities in the slot that follows a threat, we have also considered two other possibilities. First, the recipient can resist the construction of the world on which the threat is based. For example, in Extract 4 we saw how Anna resisted the construction that being fed like a baby would be negative. She responds to the threat with an enthusiastic and perhaps 'cheeky sounding' support of that upshot. And we tracked through a range of work that Mum did subsequently to rebuild being fed like a baby as something negative (by linking it in to broader consequences for favoured activities such as ballet).

Second, the recipient can blur the compliance/defiance optionality in the slot following threats. For example, we saw the way that Anna responded to the threat in Extract 5 by performing an action that was neither obviously and directly compliant, but nor was it clearly defiant. As we start to specify the way actions are made relevant by interactional slots such as these we can start to make headway in identifying these more subtle options. Looked another way, the analysis highlights the way resistance to a strong action such as a threat is itself normatively organized and can work in a range of different ways.

Social influence

At the start of this paper we noted that threats are a prototypical form of social influence. They are (social) actions through which one party (attempts) to effect change on another. As such threats ought to be at the heart of social psychology; *yet they have received no direct study by social psychologists*. In this paper we have tried to rectify this by highlighting some of the basic features of threats that will offer a framework for threats in new situations – pub fights, say, or relationship disputes.

Let us end by returning to some of the differences between this style of analysis and more traditional social cognitive work on social influence. Much of the experimental work on social influence conducted up to now has focused on the relationship between variables. The aim has been to isolate the effects of different variables (credibility, status, information and so on) on the receivers of messages. In common with the perceptual cognitivism of much psychological work (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Hepburn and Jackson, 2009) the focus is on the way the recipient of a message of some kind perceives that message and the putative information processing that may go on. The aim is to identify trans-situational relationships.

Our approach is very different. Rather than start by looking for relationships between variables and modelling underlying processes, the focus is on actual practices in everyday and institutional settings. Influence is treated as something that can be attempted and built over a set of turns and a range of different practices, of which issuing a threat is just one. It considers not only the building of threats but also the optionality that a threat

sets up for the recipient (e.g. compliance, defiance) and how that optionality can be followed or resisted. The relationships identified here are in the first instance conversational rather than statistical. Instead of considering the effect of one variable on another, we are considering the way the issuing of an action, a threat, sets up an ordered set of response options for compliance, defiance or resistance. There may be broader statistical generalities at work, but initially the focus is on the action contingencies of interaction.

Let us consider one example where the current study has potential implications for thinking in one tradition of social influence. French and Raven (1959) identify a number of sources of 'social power' – coercive power involving a threat of punishment, reward power involving the promise of reward and so on. The analysis above suggests the importance of understanding how any such 'social power' is built within the contingencies of interaction. Rather than seeing it as having an abstract relation to the behaviour of recipients we have considered the way resistance or compliance is embedded within, and unfolds within, the normative organizations of interaction. In addition, as we noted above, recipient options such as undermining the basic assumptions of the threat or blurring the compliance/defiance response optionals can undermine the operation of the threat without directly fighting it. One way of understanding this is as highlighting limitations with the idea of power as an isolated and essential element residing within an individual or a collectivity. This is not to say that power is unimportant; rather it is something that is relationally unfolding and inseparable from the settings in which it is exercised or resisted. Hepburn (2003) develops this notion of power in some detail.

The approach we have taken is strongly empirical. It starts from careful and systematic records of people living their lives, and uses now well supported theories of interaction and its normative organization to explicate those records. In doing this it has required a level of empirical care in documenting basic phenomena of human conduct such as prosody, overlap, gesture and gaze that has generally been ignored by both experimental work and more recent qualitative psychology. Contrast this approach to threats with that used in the study by Raven, Schwarzwald and Kowlofsky (1998) we cited above. They are dealing with the operation of threats by asking participants to *imagine* how they *might* operate in a situation sketched in a 12 line vignette. We believe there is a striking contrast between such an 'empirical' approach and an approach that studies actual threats in actual settings. Having highlighted how important these elements of interaction are in the domain of threats, this paper throws down a challenge to traditional social cognition researchers: how should they continue to study social influence without incorporating these key features?

At the same time this paper is focused on the institutional specificity of the phenomena that are its focus of study. There are major questions to be addressed about the difference between the kinds of threats, and the kinds of sequences they occurs in, during family mealtimes that include pre-school children and family mealtimes with adolescents, and the difference in turn from threats in school playgrounds between peers, between young adults in pubs, between police and suspects and between teachers and pupils. Part of the aim of this initial documentation of some of the dimensions of threats as interactional objects is to provide the ground work for this comparative research.

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¹ Freedman notes that the 'severe threat condition depends primarily on an ambiguous, vague threat to "do something about it." It was felt that this would probably be more threatening and less susceptible to disbelief than any specific threat.' (p. 149).

² Spencer et al note: 'people who are the targets of these stereotypes are likely to know them too. And *herein lies the threat*. In situations where the stereotype applies, they face the implication that anything they do or any feature they have that fits the stereotype makes it more plausible that they will be evaluated based on the stereotype (1999, pp. 5-6, emphasis added).