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Compelling Promises and Hollow Threats: Why You can Keep Someone to His Promise but Not to His Threat

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the differences in interpretation between promises and threats. We investigated to what extent uttering a conditional promise or threat implies an obligation for the speaker to carry out the reward or punishment mentioned in the consequent. Therefore, we presented the participants of the experiment with four promise contexts and four threat contexts. These were each time followed by six conditional sentences of which the antecedent remained the same and the consequent varied in credibility. The experiment provided us with interesting findings about the difference in interpretation between promises and threats: there appears to be a greater discrepancy between uttering and putting into effect the consequent of a conditional in the case of threats than in the case of promises.

Introduction

While the differences between conditional promises and threats, on the one hand, and conditional tips and warnings, on the other hand, have received ample treatment in the psychological literature (Dieussaert, Schaeken & d'Ydewalle, 2002; Evans & Twyman-Musgrove, 1998; Newstead, Ellis, Evans & Dennis, 1997; Ohm and Thompson 2004), not much attention has been paid to the internal differences of the two groups. This paper will have a closer look at the respects in which promises and threats do differ.

More in particular, we want to question the belief that promises and threats are predominantly interpreted in the same way, the only difference being that promises involve a positive consequent and threats a negative one. Based on evidence from various corners (dictionary definitions, speech act theory, reasoning literature...), we will argue that there is more to this distinction.

When we have a quick look at the definitions of promises and threats in the dictionary (Collins Cobuild), we see that a promise is defined as 'a statement which you make to someone in which you say that you will definitely do something or give them something' while a threat is defined as 'a statement by someone that they will do something unpleasant, especially if you do not do what they want'. Two differences can be observed. Firstly, the modifier 'definitely' hints at the more binding character of a promise. Secondly, a condition ('especially if...') is added to the threat, while this is not the case for the promise, suggesting that threats are mostly conditional upon something while promises might also be unconditional.

The way promises and threats are analyzed in Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1979; Searle, 1998; Searle & Vanderveken, 1985; Traugott & Dasher, 2002, pp. 204-214) gives us more definite clues for their main difference. In Searle's Speech Act Theory a classification is made into different speech acts: commissives, directives, assertives, expressives, declarations. They differ in one or more felicity conditions, these are conditions that are assumed to be fulfilled in order for a speech act to be performed felicitously. Promises and threats are both 'commissives' (i.e., they involve a commitment by the speaker to 'undertake the course of action represented in the propositional content', Searle, 1998, p. 149). However, promises and threats differ in that 'no obligation is involved in threatening' (Searle & Vanderveken, 1985, p. 193). So, it is claimed that promises are naturally more binding than threats. '... promises involve a rather special kind of commitment, namely an obligation. This undertaking of an obligation increases the degree of strength of the commitment.' (Searle & Vanderveken, 1985, p. 192) In threats, there is no such obligation and the strength of the commitment is consequently weaker.

Verbrugge, Dieussaert, Schaeken and Van Belle (2004) provided evidence for this fact by means of a reasoning task. Participants endorsed more inferences derived from conditional promises than from conditional threats. This was the case, even though they chose promise-items that were rated in a pretest as less credible than the threat-items. Uttering a promise was interpreted as a very strong commitment, whereas a threat implied a looser connection between antecedent and consequent. They also analyzed the justifications participants gave for their acceptance or rejection of an inference. In 13% of these justifications, participants explicitly referred to the fact that a 'promise' or a 'threat' was concerned. An analysis of these 13% showed that participants claimed that they endorsed the inference based on a conditional promise because it was a promise and 'promises should be kept'. For threats, however, participants claimed that they did not endorse the inference because 'it was only a threat'. This was a further argument in support of our claim. These data were entirely in accordance with the way threats and promises are analyzed in Speech Act Theory (see above).

Beller (2002; Beller & Bender, 2004; Beller, Bender, & KuhnMünch, in press) claims that the results obtained by means of reasoning tasks alone are too limited to procure a complete understanding of conditional promises and threats. Therefore, he advocates a multidimensional approach integrating motivational, linguistic, deontic, behavioural and emotional aspects in order to grasp a coherent picture of people's reasoning and interpretation of conditional promises and threats. More specifically related to our claim (and at odds with the claims made by Speech Act Theory), Beller states that both when a person uses a promise or a threat, 'there is an obligation to cooperate if the addressee fulfills his goal' (2002, p. 118). For a promise, this means that when the addressee does what has been asked in the antecedent, the speaker has to fulfill his promise. For a threat, however, this means that if the addressee cooperates (complies with the speaker's request to refrain from something), the speaker will not punish him. In our opinion, there is some asymmetry at this point in that, translated into the language of reasoning tasks¹, MP is the most prominent inference for promises, while DA is the most prominent inference for threats². Beller explains this by saying that a threat is interpreted as its complementary promise (e.g., from 'If you do that, I will punish you' to 'If you don't do that, I won't punish you'). This complies with Fillenbaum's claim that the 'fallacy of the negated antecedent is particularly intimately involved in the understanding of conditional threats' (1978, p. 208). In other words, the interpretation of a conditional threat depends on

the hearer making the DA-inference. The hearer realizes that he definitely must not do the antecedent. In this way, he thinks that he will also be able to avoid the bad consequences spelled out in the consequent. For promises, the guideline for action is simply to follow the MP-inference. The hearer merely has to fulfill the antecedent to obtain the reward mentioned in the consequent.

In their investigation into the differences between inducements and advice, Ohm and Thompson (2004) refer to Beller's claim that for a promise the speaker is obliged to ensure the outcome of the consequent once the antecedent has been complied with, while for a threat there is an obligation to withhold the punishment if the antecedent is not fulfilled. Ohm and Thompson (2004), however, modify this finding. They make the interesting observation that someone who utters a promise is more highly perceived to be under the obligation to ensure the outcome of what he has promised than is the case for threats. They asked participants whether they thought that the speaker was obliged to ensure the outcome (i.e., the consequent): 37% of the responses for threats indicated that the speaker was obliged to ensure the outcome, which contrasts with the 90% rate for promises (Ohm & Thompson, 2004). As they note themselves, this is at odds with Beller (2002). Therefore, they prefer speaking in terms of permission for threats (there is a permission to punish if the antecedent has not been fulfilled), whereas obligations do hold for promises (there is an obligation to reward if the antecedent has been fulfilled) (see also above Verbrugge et al., 2004).

In this manuscript, we will combine the analysis of speech acts and the threads Beller (2002; Beller, Bender, & KuhnMünch, in press), Ohm and Thompson (2004), Verbrugge et al. (2004) have spun concerning obligations for promises and threats. More particularly, we will adduce evidence that there appears to be a significant difference in the strength of link between uttering a conditional promise or threat and putting it into effect.

The present research was set up to overcome two difficulties in the previous literature. Firstly, what is innovating about our approach is that we investigate the link between saying something and doing it. Although Speech Act Theory is obviously interested in how saying something involves doing it, it appears that there looms a large gap between uttering words and doing what those words say. This has not been looked at in the literature mentioned above, which is a serious shortcoming in our opinion. This study attempts to fill this gap. Secondly, the claims made in Speech Act Theory have not been directly experimentally tested (apart from Verbrugge et al., 2004). So, in this study we attempt to go beyond the intuitions of a small group of linguists and we try to find more solid grounds for these claims by testing the linguistic claims experimentally.

Experiment

We set up an experiment in which we offered participants four promise contexts and four threat contexts consisting both of high-credibility and low-credibility items. The experiment

¹ In such experiments participants are given a conditional sentence and are asked about the four classical arguments in propositional logic: Modus Ponens, Modus Tollens, Affirming the Consequent, Denying the Antecedent.

² In an MP-inference the conditional rule is given, followed by the antecedent, then the participant is asked about the occurrence of the consequent. In the DA-inference the conditional rule is given, the antecedent is denied, and then the speaker is asked about the occurrence of the consequent.

investigates the strength of link between uttering a particular conditional promise or conditional threat and carrying out the promise or threat. On the basis of the literature discussed above, we hypothesize that the distance between uttering and carrying out will be smaller for a conditional promise than for a conditional threat.

Method

Participants

Thirty-nine secondary school students (fifth and sixth grade) took part in the experiment. None of them had had any training in logic.

Materials

The test consisted of eight items: four promise contexts and four threat contexts. One item comprised of a particular context followed by six conditional sentences. The antecedent of these conditionals remained the same in all six sentences, only the consequent varied in credibility. The consequents were intuitively selected, including both highly credible and less credible items. The participants were asked to indicate by means of a seven-point scale to what extent they deemed the conditional sentence probable in the given context. A distinction was made between the probability of uttering that conditional promise or threat in the given context and the probability of carrying it out. For each of the conditional promises or threats they had to indicate how probable they considered it that someone would say or carry out the conditional promise or threat in the given context. For an example see below (Figure 1, see also Appendix).

Design

Each participant received eight different contexts, each followed by six threats or promises. The experimental design was set up as a within subjects design. The independent variables were type of inducement (promise and threat) and credibility (high and low). For the pretest, the dependent variable was the score on the 'carrying out' question. For the experiment proper, the score on the 'carrying out' question was subtracted from the score on the 'saying' question and was used as the dependent variable.

Procedure

It was a paper-and-pencil task. Each participant received a questionnaire of 5 A4-sheets. The first page included the instructions. The instructions and items were presented to the participants in Dutch, their mother tongue. Every participant received the same questionnaire. It took the average participant 15 minutes to fill in the questionnaire.

<i>Sofie and Lynn are having an argument at a party. They are hurling reproaches at one another. All of a sudden, Sofie exclaims:</i>		
<i>Items</i>	<i>Score A: uttering</i>	<i>Score B: carrying out</i>
E1 <i>If you insult me, my boyfriend will punch you in the face.</i>		
E2 <i>If you insult me, I will punch you in the face.</i>		
E3 <i>If you insult me, I will refuse to talk to you.</i>		
E4 <i>If you insult me, I will kill you.</i>		
E5 <i>If you insult me, I will refuse to help you evermore.</i>		
E6 <i>If you insult me, I will refuse to come to your party tomorrow.</i>		
<i>How probable is it in your opinion that Sofie</i> <i>A. utters the threats above? (score A)</i> <i>B. carries out the threats above? (score B)</i> <i>Can you score each sentence on a seven-point scale according to its probability in the given context, whereby:</i> <i>1 = Impossible</i> <i>2 = Highly unlikely</i> <i>3 = Unlikely</i> <i>4 = Could be true, but could just the same not be true</i> <i>5 = Likely</i> <i>6 = Very likely</i> <i>7 = Certain</i>		

Figure 1: Example item.

Results

On the basis of the results obtained in the test, we selected two conditional sentences per context: the items participants thought most and least credible. In other words, we decided to retain the items with the highest and lowest score per context as high-credibility and low-credibility items respectively. For the selection of these items, only the scores for 'carrying out' were taken into consideration. For the credible items the score was 4 (= could be true, but could just the same not be true) or higher and for the incredible items the score was 3 (= unlikely) or lower. An ANOVA-analysis did not reveal any significant differences between promises and threats. Moreover, planned comparisons revealed no significant differences between the high-credibility promises (4.76) and high-credibility threats (5.08) and the low-credibility promises (1.82) and low-credibility threats (1.67) respectively. However, planned comparisons showed that the high-credibility promises differed significantly from the low-credibility promises ($p < .01$) and the high-credibility threats differed significantly from the low-credibility threats ($p < .01$).

Moreover, an ANOVA-analysis confirmed that the conditional with high probability and the conditional with low probability per context differed significantly in each case (see Table 1). These materials were used as the basis for the analysis that will be discussed below.

Table 1: Results comparison high – low credibility items.

Pragmatic type	Compared items	Statistics
Promises	A2 - A3	F(1,38)=235.59 p<.0001
	B3 - B4	F(1,38)=124.63 p<.0001
	C1 - C3	F(1,38)=112.61 p<.0001
	D6 - D2	F(1,38)=51.58 p<.0001
Threats	E6 - E4	F(1,38)=247.93 p<.0001
	F3 - F2	F(1,38)=216.63 p<.0001
	G1 - G4	F(1,38)=209.26 p<.0001
	H4 - H5	F(1,38)=144.99 p<.0001

A comparison was made between the promises and threats we selected (most and least credible items) with regard to the difference in score between uttering and carrying out the consequent of a conditional. For every conditional, the score of carrying out was subtracted from the score of uttering. This was done because we are primarily interested in the link between saying something and doing something, and this cannot be attained by means of the other analyses. We could also have had a look at the scores for saying something and carrying it out separately, but we thought they could only throw a partial light on the link between both. Nevertheless, we will present the results here in brief, in order not to obscure potential differences that might not be observable when only considering the difference score. As said above, items were chosen on the basis of the scores for ‘carrying out’ so that no differences were observed between promises and threats³. An ANOVA-analysis for the results of ‘uttering’ showed that promises and threats differed ($F(1,38)=17.59$, $p<.001$). Planned comparisons revealed that the high-credibility threats scored higher than the high-credibility promises ($p<.01$) and that the low-credibility threats scored higher than the low-credibility promises ($p<.001$).

As for our main point of interest (i.e. the difference score-results), a MANOVA-analysis was conducted with pragmatic type (promise - threat) and credibility (high – low) as repeated measures. It revealed a main effect of pragmatic type (Wilks’

Lambda (4,35)= .55 $p<.0005$) with the difference for threats (0.84) being greater than for promises (0.34), a main effect of credibility (Wilks’ Lambda (4,35)= .45 $p<.0001$), and an interaction effect between pragmatic type and credibility (Wilks’ Lambda (4,35)= .61 $p<.005$).

For ease of interpretation, Figure 2 represents the results of the interaction effect in a graph.

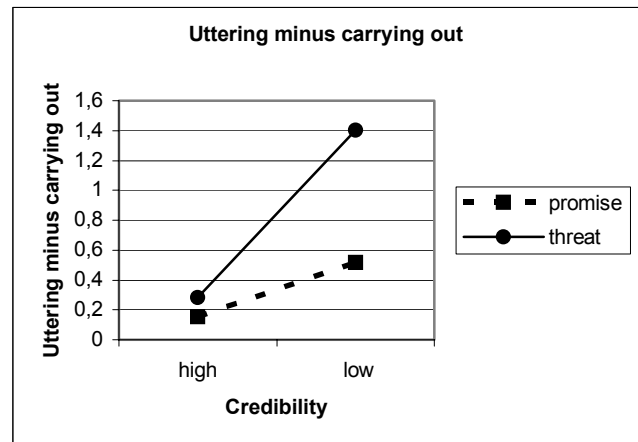


Figure 2: Difference uttering – carrying out.

Scores for uttering – carrying out: high credibility promises = 0.15; high credibility threats = 0.28; low credibility promises = 0.52; low credibility threats = 1.40.

As for the difference between promises and threats, a planned comparison revealed a significant difference between low-credibility promises and low-credibility threats ($p<.0001$) and no significant difference between high-credibility promises and high-credibility threats. We can conclude that the main effect of pragmatic type is due to the low-credibility items.

As for the difference between the high-credibility and the low-credibility condition, a planned comparison revealed a significant difference between high-credibility threats and low-credibility threats ($p<.0005$) and no significant difference between high-credibility promises and low-credibility promises. We can conclude that the effect of credibility is mainly due to the threat items.

Discussion

There is clearly a bigger difference between uttering the consequent of a conditional and putting it into effect for threats than for promises. In the case of a threat, there appears to be a greater discrepancy between saying and doing: it is not because someone utters a threat, that this will be interpreted as an obligation to ensure the outcome (cf. Ohm & Thompson, 2004). For promises we observe a stronger link between uttering a conditional promise and carrying it out.

The main effect of credibility was what we expected. It goes without saying that there will be a larger gap between uttering something and putting it into effect for low-credibility promises and threats than for highly credible promises and threats.

³ In further research it would be interesting to start from an equation of the scores for ‘saying’ for promises and threats and to see whether low-credibility threats would be scored much lower than low-credibility promises on the ‘carrying out’ question. Based on our previous research, we confidently hypothesize that this will be the case.

The interaction effect offers the most interesting results. The main effects of pragmatic type (threat > promise) and of credibility (high > low) are apparently for the largest part due to the big increase for low-credibility threats. There is an increase between uttering and carrying out both in the case of promises and of threats. However, the increase is far more remarkable for the threat-items. While the planned comparison revealed no significant difference between high-credibility promises and low-credibility promises, it did reveal a significant difference between high-credibility threats and low-credibility threats.

These results indicate that the connection between saying and doing is much stronger for promises than for threats. This suggests that promises maintain the implicature that promise is debt (cf. Verbrugge et al., 2004), even in the low-credibility condition. The strength of the connection between saying and doing, on the other hand, decreases considerably in the low-credibility condition for threats. That may well be the reason why threats will be uttered more easily, because no belief will be attached to their potential realization anyhow.

Conclusion

The experiment discussed in this paper has shown that there is indeed an important difference in the interpretation of conditional promises and threats. While promise is and remains debt, threat is quite another matter. Uttering a promise is interpreted as a real commitment, whereas threats imply a looser connection between antecedent and consequent (cf. Verbrugge et al., 2004).

The experiment provided us with the observation that there is a greater discrepancy between uttering and carrying out a conditional threat than a conditional promise. While both were attached as much belief to in the high-credibility condition, there was a large divergence in the low-credibility condition. We can conclude that there are important differences to be observed between conditional promises and threats, that have often been overlooked. While promises should be kept, threats are easier said than done. That is also the reason why you can keep someone to his promise, but not to his threat.

In terms of speech act theory, we could claim that promises will probably have a greater perlocutionary effect (i.e., the bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence, cf. Levinson, 2003, p. 236) on the hearer than threats. Because participants know the consequent of a promise (i.e., the reward) should be given, it is a greater incentive to comply with the antecedent. For threats, however, there is a bigger chance that the consequent (i.e., the punishment) will not be carried out and therefore it is a less compelling argument. Threats can be uttered gratuitously, without sincere intentions, because no obligations arise for carrying out these threats.

This is also in accordance with the general idea in learning psychology and education that rewards are better at inducing a change in behavior than punishments. Our study suggests that using promises instead of threats might also be more effective in changing behavior.

When one utters a promise, one enters into an obligation and therefore promises are more compelling, while threats often remain hollow words. Or, as the seventeenth century philosopher Hobbes (*Leviathan*, 1651, pt.3 chapter 38, p. 456, as cited in Traugott & Dasher, 2002, p. 205) put it: 'Even amongst men, though the promise of good, bind the promiser; yet threats, that is to say, promises of evil, bind them not.'

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Appendix

Promises: high credibility

A2 If you are a good boy this afternoon, you will get an ice cream after dinner.

B3 If you help me with my maths exercises, I will treat you to a drink tonight.

C1 If you obtain 60% for this test, chapter 5 will be omitted from the exam.

D6 If you get married in church, we will buy you a wide screen television set.

Promises: low credibility

A3 If you are a good boy this afternoon, you will be allowed to stay at home tomorrow instead of going to school.

B4 If you help me with my maths exercises, I will do your homework for the rest of the year.

C3 If you obtain 60% for this test, you will be excused for the exam.

D2 If you get married in church, we will pay your living costs for a year.

Threats: high credibility

E6 If you insult me, I will refuse to come to your party tomorrow.

F3 If you keep on making nasty remarks, we will have to return home immediately.

G1 If you chatter during lessons, you will be sent out into the corridor.

H4 If you tell your little brother that Santa Claus does not exist, you will have to stand in the corner.

Threats: low credibility

E4 If you insult me, I will kill you.

F2 If you keep on making nasty remarks, I will ignore every traffic light.

G4 If you chatter during lessons, you will be expelled from school.

H5 If you tell your little brother that Santa Claus does not exist, we will refuse to look after you any longer.