Viveka Adelswärd and Per Linell
Vagueness as an interactional resource:
the genre of threatening phone calls

1. Introduction

Imagine that your telephone lines somehow get crossed and that instead of talking to a friend, you find yourself overhearing the conversation transcribed as (1).

(1) (MC 1:52–78)

M 32: Mr. Cuccia, do me a favour
V 33: yes
M 34: make a few calls around and ask what you can do. (0.5 s) alright?
V 35: yes whom… ah… whom should I ask?
M 36: you know who to ask

* The authors wish to thank Stefania Svenstedt for sharing her knowledge and data with us and Jörg Bergmann for providing many valuable comments.

1 M = caller, member of the mafia,
V = victim-answerer.
MC = reference to corpus of mafia calls; for each call (MC 1–9), turns are numbered consecutively.
V speaks English with a heavy Italian accent, and M also talks non-native English but with a clear American touch.
The following transcription conventions have been used:

* underlinings denote overlapping speech,
italics denote emphasis,
(1 s) denotes a pause of about 1 sec.,
(. ) denotes a micropause,
( ( ) ); items in double parentheses provide characterizations of events not (fully) transcribed,
= ; equal signs indicate the “latching” of utterances or turns without any intervening silence whatsoever.
? denotes questioning/notation,
(M: alright) marks back-channelling items produced by the person not holding the floor (the parentheses are inserted at approximately the location in the floor-holding speaker’s talk, where the back-channelling occurs).
V 37: no I don’t know, you mean Mr. Magnoni?
M 38: you know who to call?
V 39: you (inaudible) Mr. Sindona and his his daughter (inaudible)
M 40: I don’t know who but you find out who, alright?
V 41: look here, I don’t know who, ask you you you eh, mysterious eh, blackmail, you just tell the gentlemen who has to talk to me to try telephone me, and tell me he’s speaking to me on your account and then I will give you an answer
M 42: Okay, Mr. Cuccia, but you do you do what you’re supposed to do because believe me, I I’m desperate and if I’m desperate then I’m gonna suffer and I’m gonna make other people suffer too
V 43: look here eh mysterious Mr. blackmail you have to ask if you want that I get in touch with somebody, please tell somebody to get in touch with me, because I don’t know whom you want to speak to
M 44: alright, bye Mr. Cuccia, take care, you have a nice Easter
V 45: I have ...
M 46: you have a nice Easter
V 47: will you repeat that, I did not understand, I have what?
M 48: = I says you have a nice Easter
V 49: (as) have a nice...
M 50: Easter
V 51: (as) Easter what do you mean?
M 52: good holiday
V 53: will you re-tell me more, I have what?
M 54: have a good holiday
V 55: (as) you have a good...
M 56: you () have a good holiday
V 57: eh, have a nice Easter have a good holiday, oh eh good Easter to you, goodbye
M 58: goodbye ((end of call))

In reading this, you probably soon realized that it is a transcript of a threatening phone call. Someone is trying to get someone else to do something he obviously doesn’t want to, or even cannot, do. But what is it that he wants the other person to do, and who is the caller? One of the characteristics of this phone call is that it is filled with expression of vagueness. This is not a characteristic that is threatening in itself; implicit, indirect or vague references are very frequent in phone calls or other conversations, especially if the participants know each other well. But the participants in this conversation are not on friendly terms.

The caller uses vague expressions and references, such as «make a few calls around and ask what you can do» (no clear indication of whom the other is supposed to call), and «you do what you’re supposed to do» (no clear indication of task and topic). The receiver of the call tries to counteract this vagueness by requesting clarification, but seems to lose his control towards the very end of the call. Here his voice talks on a desperate tone (especially noticeable in 1:V 71); the seemingly innocent phrase «have a nice Easter» obviously makes him extremely nervous. He interprets the expression in a frame of fear, thus suspecting the ordinary phrase to have an underlying meaning of a much more sinister nature. Finally he decides to dismiss the problem and to acknowledge the greeting as nothing but a formal greeting (V 77), at least for the time being.

In this paper, we will discuss some properties of threatening phone calls, and of threats in general. We will argue that implicitness, incompleteness and vagueness are powerful resources in this particular kind of communicative genre, and we will try to determine why this is so.

2. Data and background

The sequence shown in (1) is not fiction; it is a call from someone (M), who appears to be associated with the American branch of the mafia, and an Italian banker, Enrico Cuccia (V, the victim-answerer). The call belongs to a corpus of nine threatening telephone calls, used as evidence in the 1983 trial against the Italian banker Michele Sindona, who was later convicted to 15 years in jail. He died in jail in 1986. The official version is that he committed suicide by taking cyanide and tried to stage his death as murder, but many claim that he was in fact murdered. Four of the phone calls (below: MC 1-4) were in English and between an

2 Access to these calls was first given to Carl-Henrik and Stefania Svenstedt for their research in connection with the film «Portrait of a man of honour» first shown on Swedish television in November 1989. The whole Sindona affair has been reviewed by Tosche (1986) and Stajano (1991). The files are officially registered as Sentenza-Ordinanza no. 531/80, Tribunale Penale di Milano (17 luglio 1984) (Guilliano Turone, giudice istruttore).
American unknown "threatener" and Enrico Cuccia. Sindona is supposed to have held a particularly strong grudge against Cuccia, as he considered him to be the main cause of his bankruptcy. These calls occurred during a two year period and always in connection with important negotiations between Sindona and Cuccia or between Cuccia and different official financial or judicial institutions. Cuccia taped the calls himself and did not present them until the trial. After having seen a serious threat carried out - a bomb was thrown into the entrance hall of his home - Cuccia moved to a secret address. In spite of many efforts by the mafia, it was not revealed and the threatening calls stopped.

Five of the calls (MC 7-9) were between an unknown Italian-speaking threaten and Giorghi Ambrosoli, the official receiver of the bankruptcy of Banca Privata Italiana, headed by Sindona. These calls took place in a two month period and were taped by the police. Soon after these calls, Ambrosoli was murdered. It later turned out that the assassin was identical with the man making the calls to Cuccia. All excerpts, except one, used in this paper are taken from the first-mentioned English telephone calls. These calls vary in length from two minutes (MC 2) to about eighteen minutes (MC 3).

3. Some basics: Formal and semantic properties of utterances analyzable as threats

Some contributions to certain kinds of discourse are analyzable as threats. One example of such a contribution is (M 62) in (1). This could be considered a rather direct threat. However, for various reasons to be explored in this paper, many of these acts, which are arguably analyzable as threats, do not exhibit the explicit features of direct threats. Indeed, many of them are indirect, vague and unspecific in several respects. However, before investigating the actual staging of threats in our empirical data, let us consider some properties of threats which have been proposed in the literature.

3.1. The following structure is arguably the basic form of threats:

(2) If you (B, the person threaten) don’t do x (alternatively: if you do z), then I (A, the threaten) will do y (alternatively: I will not do w).

With our data in mind, we could fake a prototypical example of a direct threat like this: "If you don’t sign this paper, all the members in your family will die." In the formula (2) just presented, x designates the desired future action (by B) coerced by the threat, while y is the sanction imposed in case of non-compliance. (Alternatively, z is an action that A urges B not to carry out, and w is an action by A that is presumed to be wanted by B.) More in detail, we find the following set of prototypical aspects of (full-blown) threats:

(a) they are conditional: if not (i.e. if you don’t do) x, then (I will do) y;
(b) they are future-oriented: possible future actions (x by B, y by A) are in focus;
(c) A’s future action (y) is (very) bad or negative for B (and hence A believes B not to want y); (if there is an alternative action w by A, which is good or even necessary for B, then not doing w is of course bad for B);
(d) A wants B to do x;
(e) the threat is mutually recognized as an attempt to get B to do x (and to avoid y being inflicted on him).

In Searle’s (1969, 1975) speech-act terms, (b) would probably be the propositional content, (c) a preparatory condition, (d) a sincerity condition, and (e) the essential condition. Though threats do not constitute an action category that has become a favourite candidate for analysis by speech act theorists, we could say that they appear to be mixtures of commissives (cf. A’s future action) and directives (cf. B’s future action) (Verschueren, 1980: 36).

Not all the proposed conditions from above are unanimously accepted by all scholars. For example, the conditional nature (a) is sometimes disputed; Fraser (1975), Gingiss (1986), and Benoit (1983) consider "I will do y as a simple threat", and treat conditional (contingent) threats as a more complex type (to which e.g. blackmailing would belong). Accordingly, scholars differ in their weighting of x and y (cf. (b)); some seem to foreground A’s action y (to be avoided by B) (cf. (c)), others emphasize B’s action x (desired by A) (cf. (d)). One may also propose a further specification to be added to (b), namely that B’s future action is normally (by A) associated with a time limit; B has to do x within a certain period of time, or else y will be elicited. In (1) the threaten is very specific about the time limit.
(3) (MC 1: 81)

M 82: alright listen to me just tell you one thing Mr. Cuccia, I respect you as a gentleman that's why I wanna call you again and I tell you why, if you don't start making these papers up in the next three days an' I don' mean five six seven days, the next three days, start making these papers cause if you =

The reason why M is specifying the time limit after a long sequence of attempts at refraining from making explicit what he wants done is of course to increase the stress on Cuccia.

Finally, one could suggest that an inducement has to be illegitimate in order to count as a threat. A would not according to normal legal or moral standards, be entitled request x from B nor to do y. For example, an invoice reminder, such as «If payment acc. to invoice no. 00c has not been received by (date), we will not continue to send you our journal» would be a legitimate admonition and not a threat. However, we would argue that such reminders, by virtue of their formulation (which is a variant of (2)) are often taken as threats, or as close to threats. Indeed, companies tend to be eager to mitigate them (e.g. «we regret that», or use indirect expressions (such as impersonal formulations), or append excuses («Please ignore this reminder, if you have made your payment recently»).

3. Threats are typically perlocution-centred; what is central in a threat is the perlocutionary intention to achieve the effect of intimidating B. Thus, threats belong to a class of communicative behaviours which have as a primary goal to arouse emotions, and sometimes readiness to act, in the recipient (e.g. frightening, hurting, calming, appeasing, comforting, courting etc.). Such behaviours, which often have counterparts among other animals, need not involve verbal communication (a point made already by Austin, 1962: 117). However, verbal threats are a more sophisticated, mediational form of intimidating, yet, perlocutionary intent of the kinds just mentioned is most often not readily admitted by the agent A (in some cases, he could even be unaware of the possible effects on B). Accordingly, Sperber & Wilson (1986: 245) note that a threat is an act «which does/ not need to be identified as such in order to be successfully performed».

The threatening force is therefore not explicitly expressed (in the present tense) by the threaten A, but B (the recipient) or C (a third party) may still identify it. Accordingly, the verb to threaten is a nonperformative speech act verb (Searle 1975: 6; Verschueren 1980, 1985: 35). (Indeed since threats need not involve verbal acts, it is not a typical speech act at all.) The nonperformativity can be derived from the observation that it is impossible to use threaten in the 1. sg. present (performative use):

(4) I hereby threaten you that if you don't sign the papers I will have your family killed.

Note, however, that it is quite common to find cases like (5):

(5) I am not threatening you. I'm only giving you a fact of life, but if you don't want to save me then I will not save you. (Modified example from MC 4; cf. excerpt (12) below)

In effect, (5) starts with a disclaimer (cf. Stokes & Hewitt, 1976), i.e. an introductory expression that explicitly denies a potential force in, or undermines the validity or propriety of, that which the speaker is just about to say. In (4) we see that the threat is first explicitly denied, and yet there follows, after «but», an utterance fully analyzable as a threat. Also, euphemisms such as «giving you a fact of life» are quite common in connection with threats. Compare also (1) where M wants V to «do him a favour», as if the measures to be taken were just something that a generous person would normally do.

In other words, threats are often left implicit, vague or indirect. They are therefore sometimes open to other interpretations as well (as below). Bateson (1973: 144) has noted that threats can be related to play, more specifically malignant play (e.g. the cat playing with the mouse); instead of doing the fatal thing directly, A indulges in a kind of play and gives a hint that he may or will do it later on. This play character is sometimes enhanced by the repetitive tendency in threat sequences.

3.3 Threats belong to a class of communicative actions, inducements, by which B is induced to do something (x). Related action types are promises (especially conditional promises), warnings, forceful advice, admonitions etc. Fillenbaum (1976) cross-classifies utterances of the general type:

«If you (B) do x, then I (A) will do y y will happen (to you)»

on the basis of two dimensions (y positive vs. negative for B, A involved vs. not involved in y):
promise: y positive, A involved
target: y negative, A involved
prediction of future benefits: y positive, A not involved
warning: y negative, A not involved.

In all these cases, the outcome is conditional on B's future action (x). There are also nonconditional promises, and predicting negative actions happening to B which are independent of B's future conduct (e.g. sentencing, ominous prophecies).

3.4. The formal and logical relatedness of threats to other kinds of inducements entails many cases of (illocutionary) indeterminacy in actual practice, especially if some of the prototypical properties of threats remain vague or implicit when they are in fact issued. If A's involvement in y is downplayed or denied, threats come close to warnings. Indeed, this is often exploited in metacommunicative formulations such as "This is not a threat, it is just a warning." Examples from our data will corroborate this claim. Obviously, the fact that to warn, but not to threaten, is a full-blown speech act verb, increases the likelihood that threats occur in the mitigated guise of warnings. By staging it as a warning, A's personal responsibility seems to become backgrounded. But another option is also available; in a recent comment (Sept. 19, 1991, CNN News) on U.S. policies on Iraqi matters, President Bush discussed the possibility of sending U.S. airforce to Iraq again, and phrased what is clearly analyzable as a serious threat as follows:

(6) This is no threat, just determination.

What Bush seems to do in (6) is to deny the openness that can possibly be ascribed to threats; after all, with a threat, B can still hope that A will change his mind, cf. below on vagueness. But Bush does not want to leave the Iraqis in any doubt as to his level of seriousness; the threat is not to be seen as an empty one. At the same time, Bush is making the Iraqis, or rather Sadam himself, responsible for setting the automatism (cf. below) in action, should he not give in. Also, Bush knows that being determined can be taken as morally superior to threatening.

Another category which is logically and (sometimes) formally akin to threats, is promises. If a promise is made conditional on B's future conduct, then it will contain a potentially threatening aspect (i.e. "A promises to do z, if B does x" is close to "A threatens not to z, if B fails to do x").

3.5. The above-mentioned points, largely derived from the literature, are more formal and have typically been developed on the basis of intuitive rather than empirical analyses. Speech act theory is a case in point, which, in addition, views communication more in monological than dialogical terms (Linell & Marková, 1991). Since threats are local communicative projects carried out in communication, rather than as individuals' speech acts, we must therefore add a few assumptions, before we proceed to our data. These points emphasize the necessity to view the matter in terms of dialogism (Marková & Foppa, 1990).

3.5.1. The project of communicating a threat involves reciprocity. Like any other communicative act, a threat cannot be successfully completed by one speaker alone; it is a collaborative communicative project:

- B must signal to A that he recognizes a genuine threat in A's utterance(s); this interpretation may be strongly supported by extratextual conditions, but sometimes there appears to be a need to determine reciprocally interpretations over a sequence (e.g. if B does not understand, or pretends not to understand, the threat);
- A is not the only one who is put under pressure and obligations; A too takes on obligations, e.g. of carrying out sanctions if B fails to comply (cf. Parè & Sofsky, 1987).

Thus, if illocutionary points (the major focus in speech act theory) have to do with the assignment of epistemic and practical responsibilities, rights and obligations, to interactants, then this involves both parties to the interaction (Linell & Marková, 1993). Note that the basic requirements on reciprocity are present, in spite of the fact that the communicative events in which threats are embedded usually involve parties with mutually opposed interests. Moreover, most of the events, including the mafia calls, are highly asymmetrical in terms of both knowledge and participation (Linell & Luckmann, 1991); the roles of the threaten and the person threatened are in many ways diametrically opposed to each other.

3.5.2. It follows from the points just mentioned that threats are normally embedded in sequentially organized discourse. For the project to be accomplished, A must make B understand the content and significance of the threat, and A must know that B has recognized the threat.

This seems to define some kind of minimal (idealized) require-
ments on mutuality, which calls for at least two or three turns. But of course, sequences are in practice often expanded. For example, B may try to start negotiating interpretations and conditions, sometimes attempting a «non-understanding strategy» (Paris & Sofsky, 1987: Strategie der Ignoranz), which may force A to get more precise. To see some variants, we will soon turn to our empirical data.

3.1.3. The points of reciprocity and sequentiality serve to modify the tendency of speech act theory to associate illocutionary points with single (individuals') contributions to discourse. It is true that threats are sometimes crystallized in single utterances, which are clearly analyzable precisely as threats. But the threatening force may also be linked to more global units, e.g. whole »speech events«, such as a threatening phone call, or, if you will, one interactant's major activity during such a comprehensive speech event (or a phase thereof). An analysis of threats must therefore focus upon both local expressions (utterances of the types discussed in the literature) and comprehensive activities.

4. The staging of threats in a specific communicative genre

Our data belong to a specific speech event type which we may call «threatening phone calls» (as performed by Italian mafias). They must be regarded as organized threats. Such threats are often communicated by mediational means, i.e. letters and, as in our case, phone calls rather than face-to-face. This anonymity, which squares well with the illegitimacy of the activities, increases B's insecurity regarding the identity of A and the nature of his threat: who is A, where is A, what resources does A have? A appears, as it were, from a back-stage (cf. below). In the example in the opening of this article the recipient called the threatening caller «mysterious blackmailer». (See e.g. MC 1: 61-64 in (1))

To illustrate some characteristic sequence types, take first example (7). It consists of a sequence from the earlier stages of the same telephone call as was exemplified in example (1). (Like in that example we use M as an abbreviation for mafia caller, and V for «victim-answerer»; these then correspond to A and B, respectively, of the prior general discussions):

(7) (MC 1: 22-30)

M 22: well listen, I tell you. (is) you get in touch with who you have to get in touch with, you know who to get in touch with, and ask them what you can do =
V 23: = whom with should I get in touch?
M 24: you know where to get in touch =
V 25: = no whom with
M 26: you know whom, I can't tell you whom, you know whom, Mr. Cuccia =
V 27: = why can't you tell me
M 28: listen to me, you wanna listen to me?
V 29: yes, but you have to you have to speak clearly
M 30: I'm gonna speak to you clearly

Here we find the following sequential structure, which is quite recurrent in the data:
- M demands in vague terms that V do something
- B requests clarification (asking what? who? where?)
- M denies need of clarification, etc., usually with several repeats.

When M in 7: M 30 says that he is going to «speak clearly», he seems to mean something else than what V demands in 7; V 29, as this is made explicit in 8: V 31. The call goes on as follows:

(8) (MC 1: 31-41)

V 31: you have to give me the names of the people you ask I should meet
M 32: let me tell you. listen. (is) if I () hurt you, don't you wanna hurt me?
V 33: (is) what?
M 34: If I hurt you, don't you wanna hurt me?
V 35: but I don't I am not hurting you
M 36: oh you are hurting me
V 37: how am I hurting you
M 38: you're hurting me very bad
V 39: how?
M 40: oh indirectly you know where my money is involved
V 41: no I dunno anything

Far from telling V any names, M goes on to motivate his threat in vague terms. Later in MC 1, some names are mentioned by V, but M refuses to confirm them (see (1) above). The parties are clearly talking at cross-purposes, and mutual accusations are typically involved; M accuses V of only pretending not to know what to do
(cf. nonunderstanding strategy, § 3.5.2), while V accuses M of being much too unspecific as shown in the following two excerpts.

(9) (MC 3: 108-119)
M 108: I don't have to explain to you I told you to solve the two problems with what you have over there in Italy and start to solve the problems in (inaudible) the man in America, you know the problems they have, and I don't wanna mention no names and anything but you know the problems what are they =

V 109: = why why don't you mention any name because you are talking to me =

M 110: = let's not play games let's not play games =

V 111: = but I am not playing games eh eh (M. inaudible) I put you first one question (M: right) answer me one question, you are talking about Sindona or not?

M 112: listen to me, I am not talking about anybody, you know what you're supposed to do =

V 113: = but I don't know anything because Mr. Sindona does not want anything from me

M 114: (inaudible) look Mr. Cuccia, let's not play games because I tell you one thing, I know one thing in my life if somebody tells me you know I do anything in my life what I have to do, but when it involves my family I understand a lot of things

V 115: but I don't... look here I can't eh you can't ask me to understand you ask me to guess I am not a good guesser because I don't know anything

M 116: (inaudible) look Mr. Cuccia if you don't know anything then I am sorry I even called you (V: good) if you don't know anything and you don't know what you have to do, then I am sorry I called you =

V 117: = alright III I am sorry you called me because you are putting me in trouble without telling me frankly what have I have to do =

M 118: = Mr. Cuccia I want you to listen what I tell you, now if you don't know anything you don't know what do to and how to do and who get in touch with, fine, I'll take you for that (V: alright) but I tell you one thing, when you go to the mirror and you look at your phonecall what happened to your family then you'll know if you know whether you know =

V 119: = look here when you go to the mirror and look at your face you tell yourself that you had not you had not able to talk sense because you are talking nonsense because you are insisting on something which I don't know anything about

(10) (MC 4: 8-26)
M 8: I asked you that you said you were gonna do you were gonna get those documents for me and you're not doing it; = why aren't you doing it, Mr. Cuccia?

V 9: = because you know quite well that I can not reach this gentleman
M 10: you don't have to reach no gentleman, you know what a gentleman

V 11: = yes, you told me
M 12: Mr. Cuccia, listen to me, listen to me =

V 13: = now loo- loo- hear eh wait wait one moment, you... I am... I don't know if I'm talking about the same thing

M 14: you're talking about the same thing. (.) don't

V 15: = I know please first of all, if I'm talking about the same thing, talk clearly, say names and tell me things, but not to speak with just... with eh eh something which I cannot understand

M 16: listen Mr. Cuccia, you understand very well. =

V 17: = I do not, because you told me, you knew that I had to meet some person and you know quite well that at this moment I can not meet that person. (1 s) you know that quite well

M 18: Mr. Cuccia, you know what you could do over there, = you don't have to meet nobody, you know what documents you have to send

V 19: = no I don't know

M 20: (inaudible) to send the documents

V 21: what documents?

M 22: Mr. Cuccia, let me just explain one thing =

V 23: = no will you repeat what documents?

M 24: to straighten out the matter I told you. (2 s) now, Mr. Cuccia, listen to me for one moment =

V 25: = no I am listening to you too much because you not speak clearly, what documents you are talking about?

M 26: listen listen to me first. (1 s) you know, I know you're not a stubborn man, you know what I told you before. now, don't make tragedy come first and then you'll do what you have to do because after the tragedy we can not bring nothing back anymore. (1 s) now you know I'm serious.

In these strips of discourse, the speakers talk very fast with many latching turns. The speakers often use floor-claiming phrases ("listen", "Mr. Cuccia", "look", "look", "wait a moment", etc.) they seem to reflect each speaker's consistent attempts to realign the talk so as to have his own perspective prevail. As a consequence, in these rapid exchanges, parties appear to be talking at cross-purposes. M tries to make V «listen to» his
claims that V must do «what he knows he could do», V repeatedly responds that he cannot listen or understand because he does not know what to do, whereupon M reasserts that V knows quite well what to do. Occasionally, M’s refusing to name anybody leads to his contradicting himself (10: M 10), and to accusing M of «playing games» (9: M 110, M 114). In these repetitive sequences, M exhibits a very narrow agenda, and he stays on topic without developing it. Often, such sequences occur in cycles, in which each cycle is closed by some specification or upgrading by M. Thus, in 9: M 118, we find M being forced to (try to) bring the sequence to a closing by becoming more explicit on the possible negative outcomes for V, and in 10: M 26 he again alludes to the «tragedy». Indeed, in an episode occurring prior to these allusions, M has been even more outspoken:

(11) (MC: 3: 86-96)

M 86: you know what you gotta do
V 87: but don’t know
M 88: this is to straighten out the men in America that’s all I gonna tell you
V 89: what?
M 90: (very fast) cause if you don’t, one of these days you go to work you get a phonecall you find out your wife was burned in the apartment or you may get a phonecall you find out your daughter’s car blew up when she went into it or you get a phonecall and you find your son fell out the window in your chemistry company. and that’s all I got to tell you. (slowing down) because right now I’m choked, I have no ways to go and my time is limited and if you make my time run out when my time runs out, your time =
V 91: = look here look here eh eh now you listen to me =
M 92: = no more, listen to me now =
V 93: = no no you too you too you listen to me =
M 94: = listen =
V 95: = you listen to me =
M 96: = (inaudible) gotta do what I gotta do, I am sorry I took you like a gentleman I feel =

Obviously, in 11: M 90, M makes his threat more concrete. The turn is staged in two parts, first the very rapid specifications of the fatal consequences for V, then a slowed-down passage where M emphasizes his determination. This is then followed by a very rapid exchange at cross-purposes (11: 91-95), whereupon M makes an attempt to close the conversation (M 96), an attempt which turns out to be unsuccessful, since the dialogue goes on for about 90 more turns. One should note that while M becomes concrete on the possible tragic events, he remains entirely vague with regard, on the one hand, to the when, where and how of these events and, on the other hand, to what V must do in order to avoid them. No wonder that V becomes extremely scared and agitated.

In many normal cooperative conversations, when problems of mutual understanding appear in dialogue, parties work on reducing ambiguities and vagueness. In our threatening sequences, we get a retention of the vagueness level instead. Recursive sequences, in which V’s requests for clarification are ignored, lead the argumentation into an impasse. Such sequences, in which the parties repeat and reiterate mutual charges and thus refrain from getting involved in a true dialogue, have been found in other genres as well. Goodwin (1996) has identified this feature in children’s and adolescents’ arguments, and one may also mention persistent nagging, disputing (Aronsson, 1987), and perhaps some kinds of bargaining. Disregarding some features (especially 12: M 32), just reading the sequence in (12), which immediately follows (10) in MC 4, one might think that this is taken from children’s quarrels.

(12) (MC: 4: 27-32)

V 27: = look here you’re always threatening me oh, you are always threatening but you are not speaking clearly.
M 28: I am not threatening Mr. Cuccia =
V 29: = you’re threatening me
M 30: Mr. Cuccia, I am not threatening you =
V 31: = you’re threatening me =
M 32: = I’m only giving you — listen to me, I am only giving you a fact of life. (13) I told you, I don’t intend to get hurt by myself, because you’re hurting me, now if you don’t wanna save me then I will not save you

The anonymous mafia calls have of course a socio-historical tradition. For the callers, threats are (sometimes?) part of a job. Consider, e.g., (13):

3 It might be suggested that the argumentative standstills of the mafia calls are to some extent dependent on an embeddedness in a Mediterranean culture of bargaining.
(13) (MC 3: 180-182)

M 180: you know I could be mean and do other things. I don't want it because I love my family like you love your family. I feel business is business but when someone wants to be stubborn then I got to take my other pose I don't want =

V 182: = ah look here look here, I repeat =
M 182: = listen, I want you to understand one thing, believe me when I tell you, I will do what I have to do an' I don' care if it takes me a year or two years, I will do what I have to do, because if I'm destroyed then I feel then I'm only in my right to destroy other people, now you call up the man you say you wanna call and work something out with him but don't play games, Mr. Cuccia. believe me, you

In these calls, we are probably faced with routines, a more or less well-established genre for the callers. Some of the victims may be familiar with it too. The genre utilizes certain typical cultural features, such as rhetorical figures and argumentation patterns. For instance, in these four calls the phrase "I don't care if it takes me..." (excerpts 13, 15, 16) comes back again and again, with the same prosodic features. Another ingredient is the habit, on the part of mafia callers, to invoke notions of 'honour and shame':

We could see this in (13) (=If I am destroyed I'm only in my right to destroy other people=) and (8) (=If I hurt you, don't you wanna hurt me=), and (14) is one notch more explicit:

(14) (MC 3: 22-26)

M 22: I said you know you are destroyin' me =
V 23: = I am destroying you how?
M 24: I asked you to do something in America for me (V: you...) you said you were gonna do it but you didn't do it. Now listen to me, listen to me careful now. you know you're destroying me I am going to destroy you, you know this

V 25: yes, I, you told me
M 26: I know that you know, I don't care if it takes six months, = it takes a week, = it takes a year to do it, but I will destroy you and your family because I have no alternative because you have no respect for me, = you don't you're looking to destroy me, now you know you can do what you're supposed to do, it does not have (?) no harm to you but it saves me

M argues that his threats are justified: = if you hurt me, I can hurt you and = I am destroying you, you know you're destroying me =

M and V are portrayed (by M) as representatives of opposing groups which could do "business" (13). By the same token, this amounts to an attempt at legitimating the threat by alluding to, and in a way also establishing, co-membership (Erickson & Shulz, 1982).

In these negotiations, M clearly tries to stick to his agenda and to avoid being dragged into concretizations or personalizations. By responding to V's questions and objections, he would run the risk of legitimating V's perspective. In the end, he can legitimate only one perspective: that the threat is justified in the individual case (14).

Another point alludes to issues of morality. Apart from the special kind of mafia (Mediterranea) moral conceptions, there are some more obvious points pertaining to the high moral lauding of threats in general; they are strongly negatively assessed, morally dispreferred and often legally sanctioned. This explains why they cannot be performed as any mundane communicative action. Often they are back-stage events (Paris & Sofsky, 1987: 21), thus possibly shielded from interventions by third parties. Often they are given a vague formulation, which provides M (or A) with some space for denying them (or for other mitigating manoeuvers). We will pursue this point further in a moment.

A common threatening strategy seems to be to construe the negative outcome for B as determined by forces over which A has no control. Paris & Sofsky (1987) describe it in terms of an "Ereignisautomatismus", i.e. events are predicted as if they were automatic.

At the same time, by formulating the threat as a warning, M also tries to shift the blame; V alone is made responsible for a possible tragic outcome (=blaming the victim strategy):

(15) (MC 3: M 70)

M 70: now listen to me, Mr. Cuccia, listen to me. if you wanna act stupid like you don't know what I am talking about and you want me to say something I shouldn't say I will not say it. I am only telling you one thing. your time is getting short, my time is getting short, if I am destroyed I don't care whether it takes me a week it takes me a year or two years, and the day you look when you feel that some tragedy, don't feel sorry just go to the mirror and look at the mirror and say that you were the cause of this tragedy =
The mafiosos of southern Italy are deeply integrated into their culture and society; although they appear invisible in the official society, they work forcefully for their private «clients» (Graziano, 1984). One of their communicative means appears to be the threatening phone call. Here, and in similar contexts, this activity type seems to be, if not fully congealed, on its way of becoming a communicative genre. By definition, a genre provides routinized solutions to recurrent communicative problems (Luckmann, 1992), in this case: the problem, on the part of the threaten, to get other persons to do certain things they might not want to do on their own will. That threatening phone calls are in some ways a fairly established genre is evident on several accounts; the activity is legally sanctioned in many countries (which presupposes ways of defining it), and the genre is quite alive in fiction, e.g. in criminal films and detective stories.

5. Vagueness

5.1. We argue that there are special reasons for the use of vague, unspecific and indirect expressions in communicative projects of threatening. At the same time, vagueness is arguably a property of all language use (e.g. Russell, 1923). In the following section, we shall start to explore the relation between these two levels, i.e. activity-specific vs. general motivations for vagueness.

First, we must point out, however, that we sometimes take the concept of «vagueness» in a fairly broad sense; an utterance is «vague» for a person (actor or observer), if it is not possible for him or her to determine to what set of entities (objects, properties, relations, circumstances etc.) the utterance refers to (or tries to describe) in the given situation. Usually (cf. Rolf, 1981), vagueness (the use of imprecise terms) is distinguished from incompleteness (lack of specificity, i.e. the utterance includes no expressions specifying relevant entities) and equivocality (ambiguity, when two (or more) distinct interpretations are possible, none of which can be eliminated). While we think these (and other) distinctions should be honoured, we will, for our present purposes, deal with both lack of precision and lack of specificity under the heading of vagueness in discourse. In our case, both methods are mixed in the ways threats are expressed. For example, the future fatal consequences for V are usually referred to by the relatively vague term «tragedy», though this sometimes gets described in more concrete and precise terms of what could happen to V's family. However, some relevant circumstances, notably when and how the future actions will be carried out, are left unspecified (unexpressed). The strategies involved could also be characterized in terms of indirectness or implicitness.

5.2. Vagueness is always present at some level in communication. Indeed, language has to be partly allusive and incomplete (Spurling, 1977), since we could not possibly devise one unique linguistic expression for each possible situated understanding. Garfinkel (1967), among many others, has emphasized that we can, and must, manage with incomplete expressions in understanding actions and utterances for all-practical-purposes. Thus, we live on vagueness to some extent, we trust that the other knows (well enough for current purposes) what he talks about and that we understand what he means. However, there are situations when we begin to suspect that there is a lack of mutual understanding, when we see that something is not (yet) understood for current purposes, or when we cannot go on to live just on trust. In such situations, when e.g. speakers' references or descriptions are saliently obscure, and the unclarity, incompleteness or vagueness thus become communicatively relevant, i.e. when we get uncertain about fundamental aspects of interpretation, we usually, but not always, try to remedy the situation. A common strategy is then to ask for clarifications and accounts. It is these situations of disturbing or sometimes even exposed uncertainty and vagueness which will interest us here.

5.3. Berger & Bradac (1982) propose to describe almost any kind of communication in terms of uncertainty reduction. In view of the considerations just reviewed, this appears to be too strong a statement. The same is true of Elstermann (1987), who claims that in most cooperative communicative endeavours, parties strive to reduce vagueness. We should at least confine ourselves to salient

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4 Apart from communicative genres, one may of course invoke related notions such as types of situated activities (Goffman 1961) or speech events (as in the ethnography of speaking, cf. Gumperz, 1982). Regarding speech events related to our mafia calls, see also the work of Jacquemet (1991).
or exposed incompleteness and vagueness. Threats clearly belong to this category; vagueness is characteristic of many threatening sequences. Already in § 3.2 we pointed to a certain ambiguity of expression; A denies that he is threatening at all, yet in effect he issues an utterance that is more or less clearly analyzable as a threat (e.g. (5)). Often A, i.e. in our data: M, is vague about the content as well as the illocutionary force of the threat; for example, he may be reluctant to specify his own role, and he may describe B's or V's fate as dependent on forces over which he has no control (§ 3.3).

Berger & Braddock (1982) argue that «uncertainty lowers our ability to exercise control in the situation and decreases the probabilities that we will obtain our goals in the interaction, whatever these goals may be» (p. 14). It is quite obvious that this is not true of all genres and goals. In the context for threats, there is instead a tension between explicitness and vagueness. Some factors speak for explicitness on A's (M's) part:

- it increases A's credibility; if A specifies y, he might convince B (V) of his resources, while vagueness might encourage dangerous testing maneuvers on B's part.
- explicitness will also diminish B's possibilities of using the non-understanding strategy.

On the other hand, vagueness is useful for A because:

- it may increase B's uncertainty and hence his worries,
- it may impeach B from taking measures to counteract the possible future sanctions; preciseness, on the other hand, would increase B's possibilities to avoid y without doing x;
- at the same time, it also increases A's chances of saving his face without necessarily carrying out the sanctions, e.g. if B fails to obey, and
- it makes certain negotiations and redefinitions possible, e.g. construing the action as a warning rather than a threat (claiming that A was never involved in x, cf. § 3.3).

Furthermore, vagueness in itself may sound threatening. Whenever someone suggests in vague terms and with open-ended allusions that he knows something about your own future, even if nothing negative is involved, you may feel uneasy.

In other words, preciseness and specificity might attenuate a threat and diminish its desired effects. Conversely, it is in B's interest to find out not only what he is supposed to do (as witnessed in our examples, e.g. 10: V 15), but also what A's resources and options are. This tension between the interests of the opposed parties might result in long sequences of negotiations and mutual accusations; for example, V accuses M of «not speaking clearly», and M responds by claiming that V is «playing games».

The threatener is, according to the analysis just alluded to, faced with a communicative dilemma; he needs to be explicit on some points, and at the same time he must not lose the advantages associated with vagueness. We noted above that standstill sequences are often resolved with an escalated, more explicit threat (e.g. 11: M 90). It can be argued that the way this increased explicitness is actually worked out serves the goal of frightening the victim even more. M is explicit about what concrete measures he may take, thus demonstrating knowledge of V's personal life and alluding to his own capabilities of action. Yet, he provides the details without specifying some crucial aspects: when more exactly is it going to happen, and what means are at his (M's) disposal? And, perhaps even more importantly, he remains obscure as to what actions V could take to avoid the disaster. It appears that M's selective specification is carefully designed so as to constitute an effective threat.

§ 4. Vagueness is used as an interactional resource in many communicative contexts. In an interesting overview, Brenneis (1986) discusses a host of phenomena, mainly from the anthropological literature, under the rubric of «indirection». We will also briefly discuss some findings and explanations from other sources which may generalize to the present communicative genre as well.

First, vagueness may be a preferred strategy in many kinds of negotiations between parties with opposed interests. Here, parties have an interest in not being open about their strengths, let alone their weaknesses. In our case, we are indeed faced with a very serious negotiation! In a broader set of contexts, speakers may want to remain vague or ambiguous, until they get to know more about addressees' reactions. Some kinds of politician's statements would belong here, as do the strategically chosen vaguenesses of the guarded understatement of diplomatic language. In general, vagueness is often used in some discourse types, simply because it leaves more opportunities open.

Secondly, threats are morally loaded actions; the communicative actions as such are taboo, they implicate very «sensitive» topics
and the whole communicative projects are strongly face-threatening. This calls for face-preserving techniques; Brown & Levinson (1987) have shown that face-threatening acts are often performed either off record or with redressive action. Since threats are not morally accountable in a straightforward way, instigators are inclined to deny them while still (seemingly) performing them. The threatener tends to be vague both as regards the illocutionary force of his utterances and as regards the projected future events he predicts. As we have seen, his own active role is sometimes downplayed, in that he portrays the future happenings as «Ereignisautomatismus», elicited by the victim himself. The threats are thus redressed as warnings. That vagueness, and the use of other mitigating devices, is often associated with a face-preserving (politeness) strategy, is known from other situations in which sensitive topics are treated. Marková (1989) analyzes incompleteness of speech in dialogues between patients and therapists as strategies for handling emotionally sensitive topics. She claims that semantic indeterminacy, or vagueness, as well as unfinished sentences are not only used to reduce redundancy, but also to cope with situations when the point of view is not shared, thus to reduce tension. This type of vagueness is thus a sign of mutual face-saving, as well as a strategy to decrease accountability:

«if one is uncertain about the other's views or attitudes the use of incomplete speech is a way out of the difficulty. The use of incomplete speech under ego-threatening and relationship-threatening situations is characterized, not by shared knowledge but by uncertainty of each other's knowledge, views and opinions.» (Marková, 1989: 14)

So, the borderline between vagueness in order to ease the conversation on the one hand and to leave a way out on the other is not that clear. Sometimes we do not want the person we are talking to knowing what we mean. Indeed, we might not always really know ourselves what we mean until we have got the other's response, or we might want to fool our partner or at least make sure that he doesn't get the whole picture. Deliberate ambiguity is a strategy than can be used both when one wants to gain time and when one wants to deceive someone. Similarly, there are cases when speakers have reasons not to reveal how much relevant knowledge they have of matters talked about (cf. Luckmann & Keppler, forthc., on «secrets in dialogue»).

Labov & Fanshel (1977), in their well-known study of the psychotherapeutic interview, have provided ample evidence that speakers use «masking and mitigating devices» and various forms of indirect expression in talk about sensitive topics. Similarly, Bergmann (1989) describes a discursive practice that is typical of psychiatric conversations; «euphemistic descriptors» are used by the psychiatrist to describe events with discretion. Furthermore, «presenting his knowledge as fragmentary and uncertain may be seen as a speaker's method for inviting or inducing the recipient to deliver an authentic version, should he know better» (1992: 149). One example is when the doctor in the intake interview described a woman who had been running around completely naked in town as «you were running across the street not so completely dressed or something like that» (1992: 149). In this way the speaker attains two goals. He finds out more what has happened by describing it in an indirect and vague way, and he makes the event «embarrassing, delicate, morally dubious» (1992: 154) by speaking about it in this indirect way. He «charges» the event by talking about it with discretion and vagueness, just as a threatener «charges» his utterances with vagueness. Bergmann (1992) talks about «veiled morality» in psychiatric intake interviews. In our data, we see that threats appear in mitigated guise, as veiled and only selectively made explicit.

Yet another complex of factors concern relations to third parties. On the one hand, one would perhaps not want to commit oneself to such morally loaded actions as threats, if there is a risk of being overheard. In this case, the phone calls could be bugged, (and indeed they were!). It might therefore be a good strategy to remain vague, if you want to minimize the risk of third parties' accusing you of having threatened the victim. In addition, there may be a third party behind the threatener, and he may not want V to know who is ultimately responsible (the principal behind M). In fact, it is often claimed, perhaps especially by those who have a factual or potential association with mafia representatives, that the mafia, if conceived of as an organization, is simply non-existent. We know that the callers in our data (and routinely with the mafia?) are go-betweeners. Sometimes, they are not too well informed about the background, and this forces them to remain vague. The fact that a threatener can, in Goffman's (1981: 144) terms, lie somewhere between the animator and the author, with a
strong principal pulling the strings, is obvious in one sequence from the other (Italian) set of phone calls. Thus, in (16), A reveals that his call is based on a written note he has got (16; M 13), which also tells what other people were supposed to do (M 13), and that he has other commissioners (M 16):

(16) (MC 7: 1-17, translation from Italian original)
M 1: hello, avvocato?
V 2: yes, good morning
M 3: good morning, it's me. so?
V 4: well ....... avvocato Guzzi is here but he can't tell me what I have to do

5 The transcriptions and the translations of the Italian phone calls were made by Jan Carl Adelswärd. The Italian original goes like this:
M 1: Pronto, l'avvocato?
A 2: Si, buongiorno.
M 3: Buongiorno, sono io. E allora?
A 4: E allora ...... ho avvocato Guzzi qui ma non mi sa dire cosa dovrei fare io.
M 5: Come? Non ci hanno detto?
A 6: No.
M 7: Non gliel' hanno detto?
A 8: No.
M 9: Ma è impossibile! Guardi l'avvocato, mi è stato ...... detto che sto qua ...... oggi lei ...... è di andare a New York, entro due giorni, lei deve telefonare a chissà e si faccia dare i documenti. E se anche, anche durante il weekend o quando lei vuole.
A 10: Questo?
M 11: Quando lei vuole! Ma non è il problema pero il fattore è ... capisci? Perché entro due giorni a lui ci fanno l'estradizione, no? Deve rilistare le cause di Nuova York. Ci sono due causa a Nuova York?
A 12: Le cause di che tipo?
M 13: Eeh ...... Non lo so. Questo è un biglietto che è stato detto di dicergli gli avvocati. Gli avvocati, a lei non ci hanno detto niente?
A 14: Di andare a New York, no.
A 15: Non gliel' hanno detto?
A 16: No.

M 5: what? they didn't tell you?
V 6: no
M 7: they didn't tell you?
V 8: no
M 9: but that's impossible! look avvocato, I was ...... as I'm here ... today ...... you have to go to New York within two days. you have to call you know who, and make sure to get hold of the documents, and even, even during the weekend or whenever you want
V 10: what?
M 11: whenever you want? but that's not the problem, the issue here is ...... d'you understand? because within two days they're gonna extradite him, right? you have to withdraw the cases in Nuova York. there are two cases in Nuova York?
V 12: what kind of cases?
M 13: eeh ...... I don't know. on my note here it says what the lawyers were supposed to have told you. the lawyers didn't tell you anything?
V 14: to go to New York, no
M 15: they didn't tell you?
V 16: no
V 17: the motherfuckers! I should start with them, they tell me to start with you. instead i'll start with them, that bunch of fucking morons! anyway ...... to withdraw the cases in Nuova York. the person who will come at eleven o clock......

In other words, threats, like other messages (Aronsson, 1991), can have significant pasts and futures which put restrictions on explicitness.

6. Conclusion

Vagueness reduction has been treated as a constitutive property of dialogue (Berger & Bradac, 1972; Elstermann, 1987). But we have seen that there are also reasons to treat vagueness itself, and vagueness maintenance, as a resource in talk. Empirical studies show that the use of vagueness is activity-dependent and that vagueness retention, in situations where at least one interactant calls for specification, may serve significant and strategic functions. We have argued that threateners have special reasons to exploit it. There are a host of background factors which seem to converge in favouring the use of vague, unspecific and indirect expressions within a frame of threat: the logic of negotiation and blackmailing, the
treatment of morally sensitive topics, and the concern for third
parties.
Threateners seem to employ context-specific modifications of the
methods by which vagueness is ordinarily produced and managed
in dialogue. But vagueness retention is not the single principle for
communication in mafia calls. Some factors would favour specific-
ity, especially perhaps the victim's interest, and the threatener
cannot remain entirely indifferent to this. But, on the other hand,
the latter is the one who sets most of the agenda. So, if the situa-
tion is a asymmetric one with a powerful threatener (note that this
is not always the case with threats, cf. Paris & Sofsky, 1987), his
efforts to maintain vagueness will characterize the staging of the
entire communicative project.

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