

Fear as a key element in deceptive and threatening narratives

Miriam Jiménez Bernal *

Abstract. *Deception detection is one of the trending topics in Forensic Linguistics nowadays. Some researchers have already exposed the difficulties of establishing a clear relationship between veracity or deception and linguistic elements (Adams, 2002), while others have attempted to describe to what extent linguists can inform the law enforcement officers on these matters (Eggington, 2008).*

After having collected several Nigerian scam emails and real threat and/or extortion letters, and having analysed the different narratives they contain, we found that fear emerged as a common element, even though its purposes and linguistic materializations are very different. In order to satisfy their ultimate goal – that is, getting money in a fraudulent way –, senders try to persuade the recipients that paying is the best choice, either in a subtle way – appealing to their greed or altruism – or in a violent way – terrorizing the recipient.

The aim of this article is to present briefly how “fear” contributes to the construction of deception and threat through the abovementioned narratives. We will take into account not only the linguistic elements used to cause real fears in their recipients, but also the fake and real fears their senders may have, adding examples to our findings. We will pay specific attention to the influence of gender stereotypes in certain narratives where the senders’ gendered identity was – or could have been – fake.

Keywords: *Deception, threat letters, extortion letters, Nigerian scam emails, fear.*

Introduction

We can no longer doubt that new technologies bring new problems and new opportunities. Maybe we will never receive a threat or extortion letter, especially if we are not wealthy enough to bring the attention of criminals to us, but, if we have an e-mail address, we will probably receive a spam email.

*Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

Spam emails can be used to sell pills or luxury watches, among other things, but we may also be the recipients of messages offering us a wonderful job (or love) opportunity or the chance to be rescuers of an exotic and rich heir, a lady in trouble (Nigerian scam emails). Senders will try to convince us to send back some money or personal data using their persuasion and by means of a narrative.

Senders create a fake identity for these texts, and these gendered identities contribute to the veracity of the story in several ways. In this paper, we are going to explore the relationship between the gendered identities and the expressions of fear.

Aim of the study

The main aim of this paper is to show the relation between two different types of narratives, the ones contained in Nigerian scam emails and the ones contained in threat and extortion letters, applying a gender perspective to try to figure out to what extent gender is related to the ways of persuasion we are studying.

We focus on three related objectives in our current research: 1) connecting persuasion and fraud through the use that senders do of narratives; 2) explaining how deception can be a relevant part of persuasion in certain texts (Nigerian scam emails and threat or extortion letters); and 3) finding out the essential role of fear in these narratives, by means of its linguistic expressions.

Narratives, deception and fear: a theoretical frame

Narratives are stories used to justify a belief or behaviour, to support a specific action on the basis of a previous experience that cannot be contested. They have been studied lately, especially from the Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, and some researchers such as Ochs (2000) point out the fact that we relate them with literary forms.

In this case, narratives are aimed at 1) justifying a personal contact with an unknown person that might be perceived by the recipient as an intromission, and 2) creating an identity and telling an identity-coherent story that will finally contribute to the main objective of the letters or emails, that is, getting money in a fraudulent way. The relevance of these narratives is obvious, since they are meant to evoke the specific feelings and ideas that will lead the recipient to the issuance of money or personal data.

Legitimization is the process that allows these narratives, or any other discourse, to have enough authority to be considered believable. From the three interdependent strategies described by Martín Rojo and van Dijk (1997), the one related to the construction of a narrative that will build a specific interpretation framework is the most useful one for us.

Regarding fraud, it is defined as criminal deception, that is, as involving criminal deception for personal gain (Egginton, 2008). In order to define deception, we will follow the one suggested by The Oxford English Dictionary: deception is the act of deceiving or cheating, and deceiving means to cause to believe what is false, to mislead as to a matter of fact, lead into error, impose upon, delude and so on. From a linguistic perspective, as Egginton (2008) states, it involves the manipulation of language to achieve a desired end, where that end misrepresents the facts.

In the Nigerian scam emails and the threat and extortion letters we have analysed, senders try to persuade the recipients through the use of the abovementioned narratives, either in a subtle way, by telling a story, or in a violent way, threatening the recipient.

In both cases, we observe how identity based and message based deception (Hancock, 2007) limits are not as well defined as we may have thought, complementing each other to make the narrative believable.

Persuasion usually involves some kind of manipulation, and manipulation in these narratives is related to Grice's cooperative principle (1975). Senders are giving the recipient some information, and given the veracity maxim ("do not say what you believe to be false"), the recipient will tend to think that the story they are telling is true, and that there is a huge reward for their courage (either if it is related to greed and compassion or to personal safety). As Eggington (2008: 256) states, "their foundation is the potential victim's assumption of truth". In other words, the speech act of persuasion has three elements: the argument must be deductively valid, there must be a commitment on the respondent's side to the premises of the argument, and there is "a special proposition that is designated as the conclusion of the argument" (Walton, 2007: 54).

It has been said that deception is obvious when presented facts do not match the "objective, verifiable reality" (Eggington, 2008: 261), and that is true, but we will have to develop a further analysis to detect deception at a deeper level, since some of these narratives include links to pretended reliable sources, such as the BBC.

In order to study veracity in language, Olsson (2008) establishes different categories in narratives: time, place, sequence, descriptions and superfluity, and tense or aspect. These categories are very relevant for our study, but we will especially focus on linguistic elements related to tense, sequence and descriptions. Coherence among these elements and the identity-related features shown in the narratives, as we will observe, is essential to their veracity.

Coherence is relevant, then, in order to make these narratives as believable as possible, and the gendered identity of the sender is an essential part of it. The story can have no flaws, so the recipient finds it plausible, and the main character in this story has to have the right attributions and characteristics, as we will see in our analysis.

Once we have established the relation between narratives, persuasion and deception, we need to focus on fear and the reason why it is present not only in threat or extortion letters, but also in Nigerian scam emails.

Fear is an emotion, a strong feeling that evokes physiological responses. Parrot (2001) defines fear as two different phenomena: the first one is fear caused by horror provoked by a situation or scene, and it is related to physical answers as alarm, shock or fright. The second one is fear derived from a nervousness process, and it is related to anxiety, uneasiness and worry. We will consider it here as a continuum, from a light fear to terror, bearing in mind the idea of fear as a construction, most of the times to protect against other fears (Glassner, 1999).

Thus, fear can be studied as a phenomenon that starts with the individual interpreting a situation or event as potentially dangerous or threatening, that is, as an anticipation of some kind of damage, either in a physical or psychological aspect of the self. Vulnerability, or self perceived vulnerability, seems to be related to the perception of threats, and, as Parrot (2001: 43) states, "the fearful person describes himself or herself as relatively weak or low in potency" – a fact that is well proven in the studied texts supposedly written by females.

As we have seen, fear is not always motivated by a real cause. Sometimes, fear is just a mere response to our ideas, our mood or a situation that creates an atmosphere that shakes us. We always experience some kind of anxiety when we face a financial transaction on the Internet, not to mention receiving a message from an unknown contact that tries to get money or personal data from us. Thus, creating an atmosphere where trust is promoted is very important.

The narratives contained in threat or extortion letters and Nigerian scam emails try to evoke feelings such as greed or compassion, the altruistic side of people (Whitty and Joinson, 2009), appealing to the most unconscious part of the self of the recipient. But there is also something important we must take into account: the fact that the interpretation frameworks they create are so personal, and so related to fairytales and novels, can make recipients feel ashamed.

We must not forget the relevance of the face: the recipients that pay a huge amount of money because their lives are threatened maintain their faces safe, because nobody would blame them for succumbing when such an important threat was pending over them. Nonetheless, when the recipients that pay a huge amount just because of their greed or for being naïve, they cannot preserve their image, and the shame of being called naïve or greedy can prevent them from reporting their experience to the Police. And shame can be considered another type of manifestation of fear.

Threats use fear to manipulate recipient's thoughts and feelings. Thus, fear was expected in threat and extortion letters, and when we started analyzing the texts using Tropes¹, we found violent expressions and terms related to fear. What we did not expect was to find out that expressions of fear are very common also in Nigerian scam emails, and this tool, Tropes, showed us this relevant finding.

Now, if we want to include the gender perspective in this point, we must talk about style: the variable element in human behaviour (McMenamin, 2002: 125). Style reflects the requirements of the genre (and certainly those of the text's purpose) as well as the unconscious linguistic choices the writer has acquired during his/her lifetime (McMenamin, 2010: 488).

Style then is influenced by several factors, such as the text genre or the sociolinguistic background of the writer. In this case, we do not know the actual sociolinguistic factors that influence the senders, but they create a character with certain identity characteristics: a specific gender, a specific age, a specific ethnicity. All these factors have to be coherent in order to make the narrative believable, as we will see in our results.

Data

Our analysis is based on two corpora. The first one consists of Nigerian scam emails, that is, those mails we found everyday in our electronic inbox, from a sender that is unknown to us, with subjects such as *Business* or *Dear Friend*. This corpus contains 30 emails, extracted from a bigger corpus of around 300 emails received between 2010 and 2012. We decided to include 15 emails with a pretended male sender and 15 emails with a pretended female sender, in order to have the same number of emails from each gendered identity. The languages used are Spanish, English and French.

We also found two emails that seemed not to follow the general trend. One of them has some business content and it is signed by a woman, but together with her son. The second one contains a narrative that reminds us very much of the female senders narra-

tives, but in this case, it is signed by a man. Even if we find them interesting for further research, especially regarding their implications for gender issues, we will not use examples from these texts, since they are not representative.

The second corpus consists of 12 threat and extortion letters, from real cases investigated and already solved by the Police. All of them were written by males, even though there is one case in which the author pretends to be “two worried mothers”.

Extortion and threat letters are documents usually sent by an unknown sender and received by companies and some individuals (generally, businessmen). Through these texts, the sender tries to force the recipient to give them some money, usually a huge amount, frightening them with some threats that can involve personal, familiar or economic damages.

We can distinguish between the letters sent to companies and the letters sent to individuals. On the one hand, the ones sent to companies usually mean an economic damage, and are supposed to be sent by groups, although none of our corpus cases pretended to have been sent by a terrorist group.

On the other hand, the ones sent to individuals are either supposedly written by terrorist groups or groups (of at least two people) that know the recipient and have a personal interest in damaging him. The purpose, anyway, is to frighten the recipient so he (since the addressees are always males) gives them a huge amount of money.

In both cases, addressees are to follow some instructions in order to deliver the money in a safe way.

Analysis

Methodology

In order to make an analysis as complete and accurate as possible, we have used an interdisciplinary methodology. We used (Critical) Discourse Analysis, as well as some concepts from Women’s studies and feminist theories, such as that of gender attributions, considered as those characteristics traditionally associated with masculine or feminine behaviours.

Firstly, we divided the letters and emails into several parts, in order to be able to identify the ones in which fear appeared either in an explicit or implicit way. Our first division, based on the CARs model proved not to be very useful, so we decided to follow a more complex model based on episodes (Picornell, 2010) rather than on pre-defined parts.

The new division gave us the chance to distinguish between the different episodes in the narrative, allowing us to compare the right pieces of information in both the threat and extortion letters and the Nigerian scam emails.

Secondly, we tried to identify the expressions of fear in terms of topics and, thirdly, we focused on morphosyntactic features related to 1) expressions of fear or worry in the sender, or 2) threats to the recipient.

As we mentioned before, our analysis takes into account the gender perspective, not only by separating male and female identities, but also by applying concepts such as that of gender attributions². Our study is mainly qualitative, although we hope to be able to produce some quantitative results in a not too distant future.

Results and discussion

First of all, we would like to explain that we will talk about female or male senders, depending on the gendered identity adopted by the sender, although these adjectives will sometimes correspond to an unknown sender (probably a male). Since all the threat and extortion letters were written by males and we cannot know who the real author of these Nigerian scam emails is, although we presume they are also males, we consider Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity³ (1999) a rather interesting concept to be used in further analysis.

In this section, we will present the results in two areas: topics and morphosyntactic features. We will also include some examples to support our findings.

Common topics

Following Parrot's wide definition of fear, the topics we found more frequently that seem to be related to this feeling are the ones detailed in Figure 1. We have only included topics that we considered to be relevant, with approximately 20 appearances in Nigerian scam emails and 8 in threat or extortion letters, either in an explicit or implicit way, even though the examples in Figure 1 are just explicit ones.

Figure 1. Most common topics related to the fear continuum.

Nigerian scam emails		Threat and extortion letters	
Death	>30 hits	Death/physical damage	>8 hits
Cancer	>20	Criminals/terrorist	
Urgent/urgently	>20	groups	>8

These results support the idea of fear, understood as a continuum, being present in these texts for persuading the recipients, even though persuasion is developed in two very different ways: 1) appealing to feelings such as greed or compassion,

(1)

I am constrained to contact you because of the abuse I am receiving from my step mother

(2)

Recently, my Doctor told me that i would not last for the next 5 months due to cancer & stroke illness

and 2) appealing to the survival instinct of the recipient.

(3)

además del daño físico (muerte por cualquier causa)
besides physical damage (death by any cause)

(4)

amenazado de muerte
death threatened

In threat and extortion letters, terms related to fear and threat are not always as obvious and explicit as in Nigerian scam emails stories. Most of the times, we must infer them from what is said – or not said – in the conditional sentences and exhortations. Nonetheless, the use of insults (“puta”, “cabrón”) and references to terrorism and criminal groups are frequent.

Vocabulary and morphosyntactic features

Let us focus now on morphosyntactic features related to either expressions of fear or expressions used to provoke fear in the recipient. Expressions of fear or worry on the sender’s side are more common in texts with a female sender. They use adjectives and singular pronouns. Female senders pretend to be worried or frightened.

(5)

Recently, my Doctor told me that i would not last for the next 5 months due to cancer & stroke illness. [...] Having known my condition i decided to seek for a competent and reliable God fearing person or church to entrust this fund to utilize this fund the way i narrated above as my late husband desired. [...] I don’t want a situation where this money will be used in an ungodly way. This is why I am taking this decision. I am not afraid of death hence i know where i am going. I don’t need any telephone communication in this regard because of my health hence the presence of my husband’s relatives are around me always. i don’t want them to know about this development.

In this extract, we can see that death is mentioned (one of the most common fears, even though it is seeking for compassion, since the sender declares that she is not afraid, due to her Christian beliefs). The fear here seems to be the one of the relatives finding out that they are not getting the money when she is dead, since she believes them to be unworthy.

(6)

My father was killed by government of Charles Taylor, he accuse my father of coup attempt. [...] I am constrained to contact you because of the abuse I am receiving from my step mother. She planned to take away all my late father’s treasury and properties from me since the unexpected death of my beloved Father.

Here, we can observe how the fear atmosphere is created: there is a previous death, there is wicked stepmother abusing our heroine, and, in the ending lines, urgency is mentioned several times.

(7)

Somos dos madres quienes escribimos esta carta, muy preocupadas por dos hijos nuestros - uno de ellos amenazado de muerte - [...]Dos madres amenazadas. Dos hijos en peligro de muerte. ¡Toda una familia unida contra el terror!

We are two mothers writing this letter, very worried about two sons of ours - one of them death threatened - [...]Two threatened mothers. Two sons at risk of death. A whole family united against terror!

In these lines, we find words like “worry”, “death threat” or “terror”, trying to support the story of two worried mothers that want to cooperate with the company, instead of willing to commit some fraud or extortion.

Sometimes, e-mail senders try to avoid the possible anxiety caused by their narratives through the use of formulaic expressions such as

(8)

God will grant you the willingness and interest to diggest this humble narrations though it might be so surprise and strange to believe my story but i knew by the reason of the almighty you will humbly understood and accept to proceed with my proposal though we have not met or seen eachother before.

This use is equally valid for male and for female senders, as we have found it in both kinds of emails. However, these expressions are not used in threatening letters, because their purpose is, precisely, to cause fear in the recipient.

Expressions to provoke fear in the recipient are more common in male texts. Threats are usually expressed in the conditional form:

(9)

if you didn't come up with the certificate we shall confiscate the funds into World Bank account then charge you for money laundry.

(10)

De no realizar el deposito o no ponerse en contacto con nosotros en las proximas 48 horas , su X , usted y su familia. Se convertiran en un objetivo potencial del grupo.

If you do not make the deposit or contact us during the next 48 hours, your X, you and your family will become a potential target for the group.

Also, we would like to remark that instructions appear in all these texts, so we might think it is related to the commission of a crime or offence, and not to a particular feature of these genres.

If we focus on male senders, we observe that they usually try to frighten the recipient by using a group as a shield, and the group has a certain authority, because groups seem to be much more threatening than individuals. Plurals are used throughout the text below, as well as some imperatives and exhortations, together with a threat of charging the recipient for “money laundry”, in the conditional form. So, if being smart enough to get some quick and easy money is not enough, maybe a threat of being charged works.

(11)

We, office of the international police association (IPA) [...]Now, the diplomat is under detention in the office of (IPA) security, and we cannot release her until we carry out our proper investigation on how this huge amount of money managed to be yours before we will release her with the box. So, in this regards you are to reassure and prove to us that the money you are about to receive is legal by sending us the Award Ownership Certificate showing that the money is not illegal. [...]You are advised to forward immediately the Award Ownership Certificate [...]Furthermore, we are giving you only but 5 working business days to forward the requested Award Ownership Certificate. Please note that we shall get back to you after the 3 working business days, that if you didn't come up with the certificate we shall confiscate the funds into World Bank account then charge you for money laundry[...].

The implicit fears found in the narratives, either in threat and extortion letters or Nigerian scam emails, have been inferred and extracted from instructions and excuses made by the senders. One of the main fears, as we already mentioned, is the one of not being taken seriously:

(12)

(solo este aviso, no se lo tomen a broma o sino muerte [...]los ultimos a los que le enviamos una carta parecida y nos tomaron de broma ¡que pena!, ya no lo pueden contar (sic)

Just this advice, don't take it as a joke or death [...]The last ones we sent a similar letter to and took it as a joke what a pity!, cannot talk anymore.

The most relevant fear, though, is the one of being caught:

(13)

sirvanse de esta carta para envolver la plata, no una copia sino esta misma hoja (sic)

Use this letter to wrap the money, not a copy but this very letter.

Apparently, in extortion and threat letters, the sender tries to fake a multiple identity, since groups seem to be more frightening than individuals, either when they are males or when they are females. As we explained before, fear was expected to be present in threat, since threat is used to create fear in the recipient.

In Nigerian scam emails, senders are almost always individuals, but there is a difference between male and female senders. While male senders seem to be supported by a group (their company or organization, or the status of the group of workers they belong to, as in the case of lawyers), female senders are just individuals. Presumably, individuals are more fragile and vulnerable than groups and we could assume that this loneliness is intentionally remarked by senders to provoke compassion.

Gender has a crucial role in all those narratives, since the characters (most of them made up for the occasion) have a gender (or gendered) identity: they are all male or female and have attributes that are traditionally associated with males or females.

The female characters in the narratives are either vulnerable young ladies, victims of terrible relatives (reminding us of the fairytales heroines), or mothers, including the old women that are not mothers but would have wanted to. When they are young ladies, they are usually orphans and the implicit promise in their narratives is not only about getting a lot of money (this is most of the time pretty explicit), but also about the possibility of having a relationship with an exotic and wealthy young lady. It is easy to seem frightened when one is alone, and frightening when one is in a group.

When they are “almost” mothers, they usually impersonate the virtuous woman, respectful of God’s law, suffering from a terrible illness but strong enough to seek for a good destiny to her inheritance (because they are always widows). And if we talk about actual mothers, they also impersonate moral purity and worry about their descendants, as shown in the corresponding extortion letter.

Fear (of God, of losing freedom. . .) is an essential part of these characters: it positions them in a situation in which the assistance and help from the recipient is absolutely needed, most of the times in the shape of money. The only example we found about a woman writing with a business purpose, was the one of a lady supported by her title . . . and her son.

The male characters, on the contrary, are supported by their own expertise and knowledge. They are experts (lawyers, accountants, managers or policemen) and they are courageous and clever. They offer money through not very legal transactions and businesses, and give the recipient an opportunity to be as courageous and clever as them.

Conclusions

To cause real fears, male senders use threats in both kinds of texts. Fear arises from a situation such as a personal threat (“te vamos a matar” – we will kill you – ; “we will charge you for money laundry”) or an economic threat, for companies (“vamos a publicar información sobre vuestros clientes” – we will make public some information about your clients). In order to create the perfect atmosphere for frightening the recipient, senders pretend to be a group (or at least a couple), since a group seems to be more effective to intimidate the reader, especially if it is a terrorist group or a group related with the law.

Fears that are evoked in recipients are the fear of losing one’s freedom, the fear of losing the most beloved ones, the fear of losing the status of the company and the trust of the clients, the fear of losing one’s own life.

To appeal to altruism and compassion, female senders fake fears and express them explicitly in both types of texts. Fears that are expressed by senders here are the fear of losing one’s own life and the fear of leaving one’s money in inappropriate hands, mainly. Both of them are easily understood – especially the first one, since fear of death is one of the most common fears.

Maybe the most relevant finding is that, unknowingly and unwillingly, senders also express their real fears in an implicit way in both texts, by using the same kind of linguistic strategies and features.

Fear helps senders in the creation of fake identities and fake narratives. When these narratives and identities are consistent and coherent, they influence the interpretation framework of the recipients, sometimes causing the desired response.

Future research

Given the fact that compiling spam emails is easy and quick, and since we believe that the study of their narratives and the comparison with other narratives from texts related to the forensic area is very interesting, we will continue working with these texts. Our intention is, firstly, to include other feelings and topics, such as death, illness, or business, and secondly, to support our qualitative analysis with a quantitative analysis.

Notes

¹Tropes is a tool designed for Semantic Classification, among other uses. It is free and available at <http://www.semantic-knowledge.com/download.htm>

²The notion of gender attributions involves, among other issues, those characteristics and activities that are traditionally and commonly associated to either women or men according to their sex, i.e., tenderness applied to women or strength applied to men, for instance (Beltrán *et al.*, 2001).

³According to Judith Butler (1999), gender, as a social construction, cannot be considered as an intrinsic characteristic of individuals but rather as a performance and, so, it can be subverted.

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