



Discursive pragmatics of justification in terrorist threat texts

Victim-blaming, denying, discrediting, legitimating, manipulating, and retaliation

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Article

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Abstract

This article explores the under-researched area of discursive tactics employed in terrorist threat texts that exploit moral values to constantly justify violence, fostering a ‘discourse of justification’, disaffiliation and conflict. Employing a discursive pragmatic analysis, it delves into the tactics of violent extremists associated with jihadism and far-right ideologies. Utilising the Appraisal framework and the ‘moral disaffiliation’ strategy, the study uncovers verbal practices shaping a dynamic of justification. Findings reveal threateners’ involvement in regulatory discursive functions – manipulation, deontic-retaliation, and boulomaic effect – and practices of ideologically positioning functions – discrediting, blaming, denying and (de)legitimating. The analysis highlights the construction of negative victim individuals and societies while praising the threatener/in-group, anchored predominantly in values of propriety, capacity, valuation and veracity, as the primary dynamic of threatener-victim disalignment. This study contributes insights into threatener profiling, motivations of violence and future research on threat-genre rhetorical structure analysis.

Keywords

Blaming, denying, discrediting, framing, legitimation, manipulation, retaliation, reversal, stance, threatening communication, appraisal signature

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Introduction

Communicated threats operate within the context of threatener-threatened interpersonal relations and attitudes (Etaywe, 2022a; Gales, 2011; Storey, 1995), making threatening communication an intersubjective process par excellence. Forensic discourse analysis of criminal texts, particularly those involving terrorist threats, seeks to unravel these interpersonal elements, including the ideological schemas of violent extremists (Shuy, 2021) and text functions influenced by ideologies and context-dependent factors (Coulthard et al., 2017). Central to this exploration, thus, is the dichotomous portrayal of victims and threateners, revealing the inherent criminality in extremist threat texts (Etaywe, 2022a, 2023a). As Van Dijk (1995) emphasises, such dichotomy stems from language users' ideologies, exposing the contextual embeddedness of discourse. In terrorist discourse, akin to other polarised discourses (e.g. Van Dijk, 1998, 2015), language serves to convey characterisations and evaluations, highlighting positive aspects of 'Us' and negative aspects of 'Them', while downplaying negative details about 'Us' and positive aspects about 'Them' (Etaywe, 2023b, 2023c; Etaywe and Zappavigna, 2021). This positive/negative representation constructs deontic versions of reality, justifying terrorist acts and exerting social impact (Etaywe, 2022b). The extremist evaluative style, termed the 'extremist appraisal signature' (Etaywe, 2022a, 2024; Etaywe and Zappavigna, 2023), emerges as a distinctive feature of terrorist-threatening communication. However, a limited understanding exists regarding how the 'appraisal signature' (Martin and White, 2005: 208) manifests and functions in terrorist threat texts concerning the writer's or threatener's attempt to influence or 'de-bond' with victims and justify violence against them.

This paper investigates two main aspects: (i) discernible patterns of meanings and values construed in discourse as interpersonal bonds in terms of the social relations they enact and moral foundations they establish for threatener-victim disaffiliation (i.e. value misalignment), and (ii) operational mechanisms through which these patterns justify violence and influence victims' behaviour. The study emphasises tactics and associated evaluative language patterns contributing to constructing a justification dynamic, including blaming, denial (D'Errico and Poggi, 2012; Hansson, 2015; Van Dijk, 1989, 1992; Wodak, 2006), discrediting (Poggi et al., 2011) and (de)legitimation (Van Leeuwen, 2007), detailed in the Results and Discussion Section. The research employs a case study approach, examining threat texts from three transnational violent extremists: Osama bin Laden (henceforth OBL, former al-Qaeda leader), Abubaker Shekau (henceforth Shekau, former Boko Haram leader) and the far-right ethnonationalist Australian individual Brenton Tarrant (henceforth Tarrant). The study does not aim to compare and contrast discursive practices used by jihadists versus far-right extremists, as this is beyond the scope of the research. Instead, its focus is on providing a representation of discursive practices employed in the justification process within the context of terrorist threat texts.

Examining terrorist threat texts through Bourdieu's (1991) lens, as products shaped by their socio-historic and socio-political context, underscores the significance of investigating them within a framework that views language as an integral part of a broader

semiotic system of meanings. This system revolves around an author's culturally and morally informed attitudes, values and worldviews. Employing the Appraisal framework (Martin and White, 2005) and the 'moral disaffiliation' principle (Etaywe, 2022a, 2024), rooted in the Appraisal framework (elaborated in Section Three), this study engages in a discursive pragmatic analysis (e.g. Blitvich and Sifianou, 2019; Zienkowski et al., 2011). Given the pragmatic focus of appraisal, the study aims to illustrate how discursive pragmatics facilitates a systematic analysis of attitudinal evaluation and stance in forensic texts. Aligned with Zienkowski (2011: 5) and White (2011: 14), this includes capturing how these elements operate in entire texts and text groupings as an ongoing and intersubjective process, as well as understanding the role of context and form concerning the realisation of these functions. This also involves explaining linguistic phenomena by reference to the functional demands placed upon language by its users.

The paper begins with a critical review of interdisciplinary literature on threatening communications, highlighting the role of linguistic investigative analysis in establishing evidence of real threats. It offers an overview of relevant analytical tools, followed by a description of the dataset and analytical procedure. The results and discussion section explores identified patterns of attitudinal meanings, contested bonds and macro text functions, and elucidates how these semantic patterns dynamically contribute to justifying violence.

Literature review: Interdisciplinary perspectives on threatening communications

Threatening communications in threat assessment practice

The extensive cross-disciplinary literature on threatening communications highlights the interdisciplinary nature of the subject, particularly in the context of terrorist-threatening communications. This literature spans diverse disciplines such as security, psychology, sociology and anthropology (e.g. Atran, 2016; Baumgartner et al., 2001; Meloy, 2001). Despite the diversity, these studies share a common interest in investigating threats as perceived possibilities of harm or potential dangers (Meloy and Hoffmann, 2014: 3). This study contributes to behavioural predictors and criminal profiling by examining acts like discrediting and blaming within threatening communication. These acts offer insights into potential violence and aggressive linguistic personae, enabling threat analysts to anticipate and protect potential victims (e.g. Meloy and Gill, 2016).

In non-linguistic research, violent behaviour predictors delve into the offender's emotions, perceptions, dispositions, motivations, interests, agendas and other elements informing violent behaviour and communication (e.g. Meloy et al., 2008; O'Hair et al., 2011). However, given that terrorism is a multifaceted sociopolitical construct and so is terrorist communication (Bhatia, 2009), it necessitates a more comprehensive exploration of its discursive practices. This linguistic study focuses on the nuances of attitudinally loaded language in terrorist texts, aiming for a fuller understanding of the morality of terrorism (e.g. Seto, 2002) and decoding the author's emotions, perceptions, stances and justifications.

Linguistic study of threat texts in criminal contexts: Real threat and the element of coercion

Within linguistics, the analysis of threatening communications often centres on statements conveying menacing utterances or an intention to cause harm, disturbing victims' peace of mind and impacting their rights (Black, 1995: 1154; Etaywe, 2023c; Kniffka, 2007; Olsson, 2008). This analysis extends to various incriminating threat texts, including robbery, extortion, blackmail, ransom notes, hate mail and terror mail (Olsson, 2008). Understanding the nature of these types of threat texts aids in establishing evidence of criminal intent. For example, in ransom notes, a criminal threatens to return what is in their possession, dead or alive. In extortion, a criminal threatens to expose information unless bribery is paid; and in robbery, a criminal threatens to cause injury unless some belongings are handed over (Kniffka, 2007; Olsson, 2008). This present study delves into the discursive criminal nature of justifications for threatened violence within terrorism, addressing the issue of diversity of threat text types and contributing to efforts to continue categorising threat text types and their characteristic features as stressed by Kniffka (2007: 163–164).

The study delves into the criminal nature of terrorist threatening communication, acknowledging the harm inflicted on individuals and the public. Linguistic research reveals the multifaceted nature of threats, showcasing diverse reasons for their communication within the broader category of speech acts, contingent on context (Fraser, 1998: 159–160). Threats serve various communicative functions such as expressing anger, humour, intimidation, realising desired outcomes, challenging authorities, drawing attention, saving face, demonstrating seriousness and influencing negotiations. The spectrum of threats extends beyond harm, encompassing legal and worrisome forms. Some threats aim to control or regulate behaviour, seek intervention for child safety, pursue legal action, initiate strikes, or serve as warnings, making them legal but unsettling (Fraser, 1998). Conversely, illegal threats, deemed 'dangerous' by assessors, instil fear or intend harm, necessitating law enforcement involvement (Fraser, 1998; Gales, 2013). In the context of illegal threats, linguists grapple with 'real threats' characterised by a deliberate intent to harm, prior disclosure to the target and coercion by social actors possessing the power to inflict injury for compliance or non-compliance (Martínez, 2013: 194). The study focuses on these 'real', illegal and dangerous threats, particularly those publicly communicated in terrorist contexts. It explores the communicative functions embedded in these threats, with a significant emphasis on coercion as a central theme (Kniffka, 2007: 162). The coercive power of threat texts becomes a pivotal element in the legal consideration of threats, aligning with Martínez's and Kniffka's perspective, which underscores the threatener's willingness and capability to cause harm, viewed as a socially constructed act manifested in the threatener's control over intention and capability (e.g. Bourdieu, 1991: 8). This study exclusively scrutinises texts from 'genuine' violent extremist group members, excluding 'peripheral' or non-violent extremist ideology members.

Key current approaches to examining the functions of threat texts

A productive line of research into communicated threats is the pragmatics-based approach, focusing on the internal properties of single-sentence utterances conceived as

‘the speech act of threatening’ (Berk-Seligson and Seligson, 2016; Culpeper, 2011; Limberg, 2009; Shon, 2005; Storey, 1995). According to this research tradition, the function of the speech act of threatening is of a ‘directive-commissive’ illocutionary point (Salgueiro, 2010: 214); that is, an utterance aims to influence the threatened party to (not) do something and represent a commitment by the threatener to undertake the proposed action (e.g. Searle, 1999). However, the status of a speech act and its function cannot always be determined by examining sentence internal properties (Hasan, 2016). This insight calls for a complementary perspective.

Attention, in response, has been drawn to the co-text of a threatening speech act to account for the wider linguistic context and the threat function (Muschalik, 2018). This Muschalik’s (2018) discourse analysis approach to threat texts has identified two functions of threats: (i) manipulation, as in ‘If you call the police, I will kill you’; and (ii) retaliation, such as ‘You made a mistake. You will die hard’. This categorisation depends on whether a threat utterance is articulated before or after an offence made against the threatener or their in-group, hence anticipatory or retrospective. While some previous research at the sentence level (e.g. Martínez, 2013) only considers the coercive aspect of the manipulative function of threats, Muschalik has extended these functions. Nevertheless, Muschalik recommended further research focus on more fine-grained categorisation of these as well as new influence tactics, which is a contribution of this article.

This study presents a complementary perspective using text-based analysis of the threat text functions. It concerns itself with the attitudinal and moral motivation of communicated threats, along with contested values social bonds therein, to categorise threat functions and justification practices – a dimension receiving limited attention in terrorist threat texts. This study takes a discourse analysis approach, viewing behaviour-regulatory functions like manipulation as inherently discursive dimensions focusing on polarised semantic structures of positive self-presentation and negative other presentation (e.g. De Saussure and Schulz, 2005; Van Dijk, 2006). The study aligns with discourse analysis research testing whether linguistic features in threateners’ stances could serve as evidence of commitment to and justification of communicated threats (e.g. Gales, 2011). Focus on stance indicators and how evaluative language operates to forge moral value-disalignment – that is, ‘moral disaffiliation’ (Etaywe, 2022a, 2024) – can yield insight into the role of negative evaluations of others or alternatively ‘coercive impoliteness’ (e.g. Culpeper, 2011: 233) in achieving disalignment between threateners and their victims.

Appraisal and disaffiliation

The analytical tools employed in this study are grounded in Systemic functional linguistics (SFL), a social semiotic theory of language (Halliday, 1978). The SFL focus on semantics and paradigmatic relations, key language properties, has proven highly effective as a foundation for practical applications in linguistic analysis for forensic purposes, providing evidence of meaning-making and semantic patterning (e.g. Nini and Grant, 2013; Zappavigna et al., 2008). Given the emphasis on interpersonal evaluative meanings in this study, the Appraisal framework (Martin and White,

2005) is used. The framework proves valuable for capturing subtle interpersonal meanings, exploring the rhetorical mechanisms of ideological positioning and value alignment with audiences, and providing a means by which language user aligns or disaligns themselves with individuals holding similar or dissimilar social positions (White, 2011).

The Appraisal framework presents a discourse semantic approach to evaluative language, consisting of three interacting systems of meaning: ATTITUDE, which deals with values for expressing positive/negative stances; GRADUATION, which addresses values of grading evaluation and ENGAGEMENT, considering how the author engages with other voices (Martin and White, 2005: 35–44). This research primarily focuses on the ATTITUDE system, particularly stances towards phenomena, including the entities, happenings or state of affairs being construed by the text. Figure 1 displays the ATTITUDE system. The figure shows a square bracket representing a choice between options (an ‘or’ relation), such as AFFECT, JUDGEMENT or APPRECIATION options within the TYPE system, while a brace represents simultaneous choices (an ‘and’ relation). The ATTITUDE system encompasses three simultaneous systems: TYPE, EXPLICITNESS and POLARITY. In other words, an author’s selection of an attitudinal meaning-making resource involves choosing ATTITUDE types, determining EXPLICITNESS (inscribed or invoked, i.e. explicit or implicit) and selecting an option from within POLARITY (positive ATTITUDE or negative ATTITUDE). In this article, the coding for polarity is based on an extremist-ingroup perspective of socially (un)accepted values.

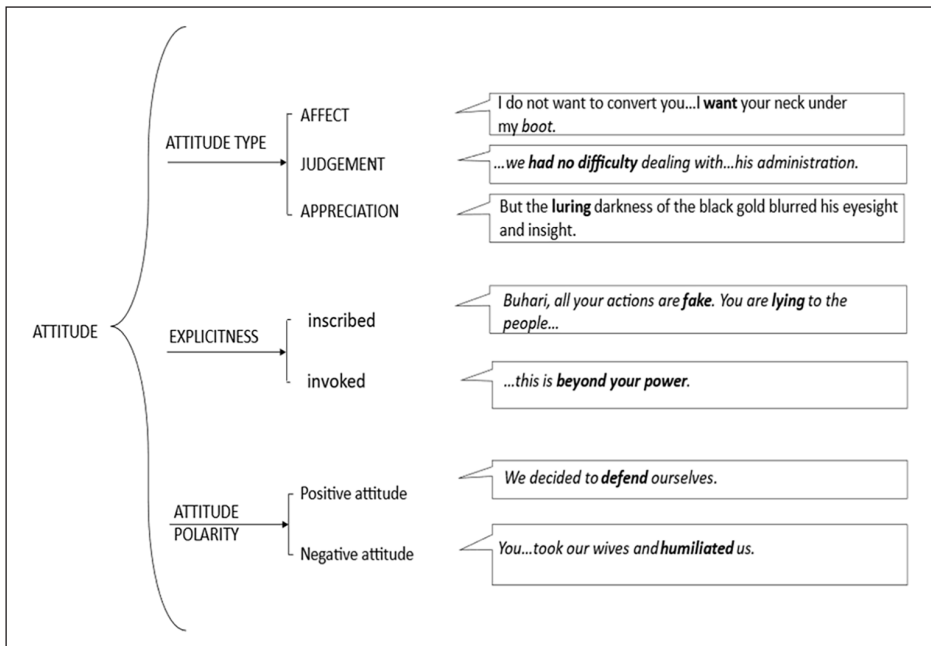


Figure 1. Attitude system (adapted from Martin and White, 2005).

The ATTITUDE system is used to investigate three ‘ways of feeling’ and evaluative values, pertinent to three semantic regions traditionally referred to as emotion (AFFECT), ethics/morality (JUDGEMENT) and aesthetics (APPRECIATION) (Martin and White, 2005). Extracts from the dataset in the boxes in Figure 1 are example realisations of the features in the network:

- AFFECT: resources and features for expressing emotional reactions and states, which can be further subcategorised into (UN)HAPPINESS, (IN)SECURITY, (DIS)SATISFACTION and (DIS)INCLINATION.
- JUDGEMENT: resources and features for construing assessments of behaviour in terms of how we should behave or not, some of which get formalised as rules and regulations set by a society, state or a religious institution. Judgements are divided into those dealing with values of social esteem (subcategorised as NORMALITY, CAPACITY and TENACITY) and those oriented to values of social sanction (i.e. subcategories of VERACITY and PROPRIETY).
- APPRECIATION: resources for estimating the value of things, events, processes and products in terms of aesthetic dimensions, and includes REACTION (resources of impact and quality), COMPOSITION (harmony and order) and VALUATION parameters.

Considering that interpersonal and ideational social functions of language are always spoused (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014), this study examines multiple functions simultaneously, offering a more comprehensive analysis of a text’s style and meaning potential. This intertwining is also key to arguing for how threat texts forge disalignment with the victims, the concept of ‘moral disaffiliation’ is adopted (Etaywe, 2022a, 2024), shedding light on the ‘direct link’ between social values and evaluative language that is essential for negotiating community and social affiliations (Millar and Hunston, 2015; Thompson and Alba-Jues, 2014: 6). The study takes meanings and values construed in discourse as interpersonal bonds in terms of the social relations they enact. That is, in addition to the positioning and appraising functions of the evaluative acts in terrorist threat texts, they also have a disalignment function.

The main analytical unit used in the disaffiliation analysis is akin to affiliation analysis grounded in SFL, the coupling of ideational and attitudinal meanings (Knight, 2010). That is, the combination of the social function by which language represents the world of experience (the ideational) and the function by which social roles and relationships are constructed (the interpersonal) (White, 2011). The main assumption of affiliation is that social bonds are realised in discourse as ‘couplings’ (Martin, 2010) of ideational and attitudinal meanings through which participants discursively co-identify (Knight, 2010). This is based on Martin’s insight that we do not simply affiliate with feelings but with feelings about phenomena ‘and the activities [people] participate in, however abstract or concrete’ (Martin, 2008: 57–58). In disaffiliation, however, we have an instance of values being rejected and bonds are positioned as unshareable, hence ‘a sense of alienation sets in’ (Martin, 2002: 196).

Acts of disaffiliation create a sense of alienation, detachment and discord through dissonance, conflicting values, emphasising differences and discouraging the formation of shared connections or attitudinal rapport among readers. For example, the

following extract of a clear dichotomous representation ('you' versus 'us') incorporates a coupling of the 'Christians' (bold) with negative JUDGEMENT (underlined) annotated in fusion as [ideation: Christians/attitude: negative JUDGEMENT (PROPRIETY)]. This coupling instantiates the 'Christian Nigerians are bad: cheaters and killers' disaligning bond in the context of Shekau's threat against the president of the Christian Association of Nigerians. Additionally, this evaluative act is an act of accusation of Christian Nigerians which serves to justify Shekau's violence against Christian Nigerians.

You **Christians** cheated and killed us [Muslim Nigerians] to the extent of eating our flesh like cannibals

Akin to affiliation analysis, this perspective on social disaffiliation draws on Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal framework to systematically explain how attitude in these couplings is realised through evaluative language across three semantic regions: AFFECT, JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION.

Method

Dataset

Twelve post-9/11 written terrorist public statements were analysed in this study. Table 1 shows the title and word count of each text. The choice of the texts was based on the need to provide a representation of threat texts (which are made scarcely available due to local regulations on online content) by transnational terrorist organisations from jihadist and far-right violent extremism ideologies. The adherents are considered the most lethal actors worldwide (Global Terrorism Index, 2020). In addition, a forensic linguist usually works with already provided data, regardless of its size, to analyse the language used as evidence (Shuy, 2011). The texts analysed present a span of time following the 9/11 attacks on the USA and from a variety of geographical, socio-cultural and political contexts and ideological backgrounds.

The terrorist public statements are texts made available online by the associated terrorists and are not privately owned data. The texts were produced by three terrorists (See Table 1 for an overview of these texts). The first is Osama bin Laden (OBL) (al-Qaeda) who dedicated himself to a violent global struggle against the United States of America (USA) and his two texts were directed at the people of the United States. The second terrorist is Abubaker Shekau (Boko Haram). Shekau's terrorist narrative was responsible for recruiting violent actors on a massive scale and threatened the stability of Nigeria's federal government and neighbouring countries. Shekau's nine texts were produced between 2012 and 2018, and were made public by Nigerian media outlets, namely the 'Sahara Reporters' and 'Premium Times' websites. The third terrorist is the far-right, white supremacist, ethnonationalist Australian man Brenton Tarrant. His manifesto, 'The Great Replacement', is used in this paper. The manifesto was published before Tarrant attacked two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019. The manifesto communicates messages, including threatening messages against Communists, Antifa, Marxists

Table 1. Overview of the dataset.

Author (group)	Text code	Title/topic	Word count
Osama bin Laden (al-Qaeda)	OBL1	A message to the American People (2004)	2163
	OBL2	A message to the American People (on Aggression on Iraq) (2003)	1154
Abubaker Shekau (Jamatu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-jihad/ Boko Haram)	Shekau 1	Tired of this calamity – a message to the Nigerians, General Rogers, and youth vigilante (2018)	679
	Shekau 2	Chibok girls kidnapped; we are in-laws – a message to President Buhari (2018)	898
	Shekau 3	Victory in Maiduguri attack, and conditions for ceasefire – a message to General Buratai (2017)	898
	Shekau 4	Defying the Nigerian government, Buhari, people of Chibok, people of Kanu, Kaduna, and El-Zakzaky (2016)	624
	Shekau 5	A Message to Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, Emir of Kano (2014)	1072
	Shekau 6	Threat to sell abducted schoolgirls (2014)	2246
	Shekau 7	Attack on the Giwa camp (2014)	2521
	Shekau 8	A message to Goodluck and to the CAN president (2012)	951
	Shekau 9	A message to the people of Kano (2012)	159
Brenton Tarrant (Far Right)	Tarrant	The Great Replacement – namely the following sections: Addresses to various groups: 'To Turks' and 'To Antifa/Marxist/Communists'	10,000

and Turk, and texts inciting Christians and European men against, for example, immigrants, Muslims and democrats.

Analytical procedure

This Subsection outlines the step-by-step procedures employed to investigate the patterning and functions of bond types in a terrorist's threat text, characterising the appraisal signature or evaluative style. It describes how these patterns contribute to the process of disaffiliation between primary social actors, specifically, threateners and their victims and how they operate to justify violence:

- **Identification of coupling patterns and construed bonds:** by using the in-text annotation conventions detailed in Table 2, evaluative couplings were systematically identified as entry points for a threatener's disaffiliation from victims, serving as linguistic evidence for a basis for a threat justification. That is, identification of the co-patterning of evaluation and ideation couplings was used to determine the key social bonds at stake established in discourse. For example,

America permitted the Israelis to invade Lebanon [America/- PROPRIETY] supported by **the American 3rd Fleet** [the American 3rd fleet/- PROPRIETY].

incorporates a coupling of the 'America' with negative JUDGEMENT, annotated as [ideation: America/ attitude: negative JUDGEMENT (PROPRIETY)] and instantiating the 'America is bad: pro-invaders and colonialism' disaligning bond in the context of Osama bin Laden threat against the people of United States and justifying his 9/11 attacks.

Aligned with Hurt and Grant's (2019) analytical value of a focus on victims as the main topic of threat discourse, this study focuses on references to victims as primary participants and as the target of value-disalignment (with threateners). The threateners and their victims were taken as general ideations or attitudinal targets that facilitate disalignment and (re)positioning by acting as loci of attitudinal and moral evaluations – that is, 'category-bound features' (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998: 3–4).

The style of bonding patterning and functioning is thought of as a form of evaluative coupling disposition (Etaywe and Zappavigna, 2021). That is, positive 'we' versus negative 'they' construction serves to present social groups in discourse as opposing networks of bonds that cause interpersonal tension and morally justified violence. By reference to

- the types of ATTITUDE (JUDGEMENT, AFFECT, APPRECIATION), and
- their associated subcategories (e.g. PROPRIETY, CAPACITY)

Table 2. Coding scheme for the text analysis.

Coding scheme	
Attitudinal target	In bold
Types of attitude*	JUDGEMENT underlined APPRECIATION wave underlined AFFECT dashed underlined
Polarity	+ for positive evaluation – for negative evaluation
Coupling	[ideation: << >>/attitude: << >>]

*For attitude subtypes, see the Appraisal and disaffiliation.

the types of bonds and their ideological ground – be it ethical (i.e. JUDGEMENT-based) or value-based (i.e. APPRECIATION-based) – or emotional basis were categorised. For example, the bond in the extract above is a PROPRIETY-based bond.

Identifying the types of bonds allows us to explore which attitudinal bases tend to receive a heightened rate of use and which bases are used frequently to justify disalignment, violence and victimising others. We argue that the moral ground for disalignment departs from a terrorist's alleged 'care' or part of collective responsibility for the ingroup they claim to protect (e.g. Wilkins, 1992); that is, disaffiliation and threatened violence depart from a community-driven vantage point through attempting to influence the actions and positions of the victims and/or the members of their society.

- **Examining the regulatory functions of threat texts:** Taking 'care' as an underpinning meta-value (Etaywe, 2024), three discursive functions of threat texts are explored and exemplified in the next Section (Etaywe, 2023a):
 - **Deontic retaliation:** which refers to a threat text that positions a threatened violence as being in retribution or response to disruption of the in-group's moral order or to a danger against the in-group's status and physical ideological territories. That is, by reference to particular 'deontic powers' – 'rights, duties, obligations, requirements, permissions, authorisations, entitlements, and so on' – (Searle, 2009: 8–9) a threatener's response action may be justified.
 - **Manipulation:** which refers to a threat text that operates to position a threatened violence as being in service of in-group's physical and ideological interests. This is carried out to coerce the victims into (in)action though: (i) deterring them from performing an action or taking a position that is unfavourable to the threatener or his in-group; or (ii) compelling them to stop an action or a position that is disadvantageous to the threatener's in-group.
 - **Boulomaic function:** which involves symbolic identity damage, aiming to instil fear in victims and disrupt their peace of mind. In other words, evaluative couplings target victims solely based on their membership in a different social category – achieved through the use of lexicogrammatical elements such as verbs like 'want', 'wish' and 'hope', along with descriptions of desires and fantasies (Kushneruk, 2017). The boulomaic function is rooted in master 'identity attacks' (Culpeper et al., 2017; Etaywe, forthcoming, 2004), violent fantasies that express a commitment to cause harm (Hurt and Grant, 2019), and the threat aim of frightening (Storey, 1995).
- **Examining the justification practices:** To obtain a fine-grained categorisation of the regulatory functions and how the threat texts function to position victims and justify violence, a complementary form of analysis was carried out, examining how the following tactics were used and made use of the evaluative couplings (explained in the next Section):
 - Discrediting.
 - Blaming.
 - Denying.
 - De/Legitimizing.

Results and discussion: Contested bonds and discursive practices in threat texts

The analysis reveals a prevalent strategy of positive self-presentation and negative victim portrayal. This approach articulates beliefs advantageous to threateners while discrediting, delegitimising and blaming victims. Evaluative couplings and bond types strategically align with three discursive macro-functions: ethical manipulation, retaliation and boulomaic effect (elaborated in subsequent subsections). These findings accord with Hermann's (2003) assertion that threateners engage in regulating others' behaviour and persuading social groups. Regulatory discursive macro-functions are evident in attempts to shape behaviour. The second activity involves threateners persuading and ideologically positioning individuals and groups through tactics such as discrediting, blaming, denying and (de)legitimising, which all operate to justify forceful actions. Evaluative couplings forming contested, disaligning bonds (e.g. victims' impropriety) manifest in distinct patterns summarised in Table 3, offering a synoptic view of attitudinal bases fostering disaffiliation and morally justifying violence against victims (Note: Most frequent attitudinal bases are in bold).

Table 3 reveals an elevated utilisation of JUDGEMENT-based bonds. This accords with prior research on threatening communications (e.g. Gales, 2011; Hurt and Grant, 2019) that texts addressing ethically charged topics like killing and murder tend to employ more JUDGEMENT than other ATTITUDE types. In Martin and White's (2005: 52) terms, this heightened use of JUDGEMENT informs a threatener's attitudes to people and the way threateners behave and perceive others' actions. The increased prevalence of JUDGEMENT influences the discursive functions, discussed in subsequent sections, with an ethical dimension. APPRECIATION-based bonds follow as the second most used, indicating the critical role of appreciation of entities and aspects of personal identities. These APPRECIATION-based bonds signify an ideological reshaping of feelings towards victims based on their perceived value, determining their worthiness of humane or inhumane treatment. Despite PROPRIETY, CAPACITY and VALUATION-based bonds being predominant, with Figure 2 providing a visual representation, less frequently used attitude-based bonds like VERACITY, TENACITY and INCLINATION also serve similar discursive functions.

The subsequent sections present an analysis and discussion of the discursive functions within threat texts and the corresponding justification practices employed to achieve these functions. Table 4 offers a summary of the threat texts, identifying instances of discursive functions in distinct textual segments, accompanied by manual counts. The

Table 3. Summary of the bases of bonds tabled as bases for disalignment.

JUDGEMENT-based bonds	Frequency	APPRECIATION-based bonds	Frequency	AFFECT-based bonds	Frequency	
Social esteem-related bonds	Capacity	204	Valuation	102	Security	26
	Tenacity	23	Reaction	7	Happiness	15
	Normality	11	Composition	2	Satisfaction	6
Social sanction-related bonds	Propriety	267	–	–	Inclination	13
	Veracity	55	–	–	–	–

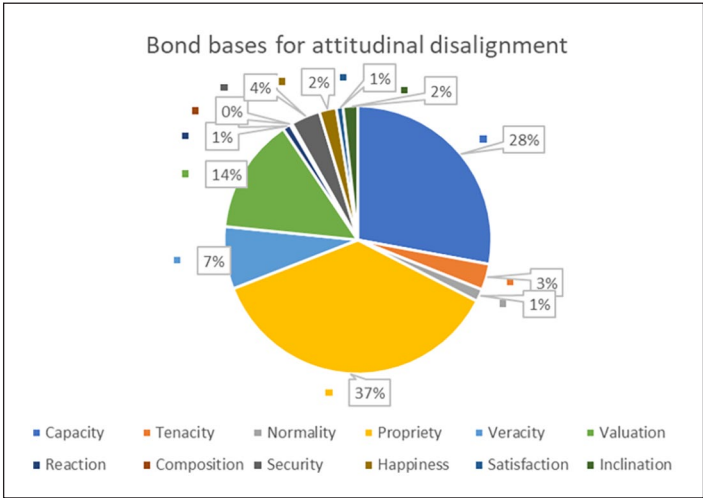


Figure 2. Frequency of attitude type-based bonds used in the threat texts.

Table 4. Summary of the discursive functions in the threat texts.

Threat text	Discursive functions		
	Ethical manipulation	Retaliation	Boulomaic threat
OBL1	17	7*	—
OBL2	—	10	—
Tarrant1	—	—	1
Tarrant2	2	1	1
Shekau1	2	2	3
Shekau2	2	1	1
Shekau3	5	1	—
Shekau4	5	—	—
Shekau5	8	—	1
Shekau6	18	—	1
Shekau7	13	1	1
Shekau8	3	5	—
Shekau9	2	—	—
Total	77	28	9

*Reported retaliation events that serve manipulation.

analysis reveals manipulation as the predominant function, followed by retaliation and the boulomaic effect. Notably, seven instances of reported retaliatory acts are strategically used in manipulation (explained in the next Subsection). The overall percentages for each function are as follows: manipulation (73.68%), retaliation (18.42%)

and boulomaic threat (7.89%). Further elaboration on these functions is provided in the subsequent subsections.

Ethical manipulation and unveiling the dynamics of threatener-victim disalignment

Ethical manipulation (defined in the Method Section) characterises a terrorist threat text's function, aiming to influence the threatened party's behaviour for the benefit of the threatener's ingroup. For instance, OBL1 exemplifies manipulative content, explicitly articulating its deterrence function and the avoidance of war costs in Iraq (Example 1 in bold). This aligns with Muschalik's (2018) and Martínez's (2013) coercive, manipulative threat functions, characterised by deterrence and/or compulsion in Sachs' (2012) terms.

(1) *People of America, this talk of mine, for you, concerns the ideal way **to prevent another Manhattan**. . .*

Ethical manipulation relates to actions or inactions by threatened audiences, utilising evaluative language to instantiate bonds justifying ethical avoidance of non-compliance. Achieving this manipulation involves threateners strategically utilising key bonds through discrediting, blaming, denying (including responsibility-shifting, framing, denial of intention and reversal) and (de)legitimising tactics, detailed and exemplified in subsequent subsections.

Discrediting. Discrediting, a primary tactic employed by threateners, is pivotal in creating disalignment between the threatener and the victim by tarnishing the image of the targeted audience, such as American citizens or specific entities like the Bush administration. This is achieved through critical, accusatory or insulting descriptions that challenge their credibility and capabilities. Grounded in Poggi et al.'s (2011) concept of discrediting in political discourse, this practice involves casting doubt on opponents by negatively evaluating their characteristics, vilifying dissidents and victims as opportunistic and untrustworthy, and simultaneously enhancing the threatener's moral superiority. Discrediting is notably prominent in the texts of OBL and Shekau.

OBL strategically employs discrediting in his threat texts to sway the American people's trust in their political leadership, particularly the Bush administration, and to influence anti-war sentiment. This serves as a precursor to urging Americans to protest the Iraq war and avoid a recurrence of the 9/11 attacks. In OBL1, Bush and his administration are portrayed negatively, being held responsible for the 9/11 attacks, benefiting corruptly from wars, and failing to protect Americans from al-Qaeda. OBL attacks Bush's features of PROPRIETY, CAPACITY, TENACITY and VERACITY. For instance, while al-Qaeda is positively coupled with CAPACITY as a deterrence feature, OBL discredits Bush and his administration by questioning their ethicality through negative PROPRIETY, aligning them with Arab regimes and accusing them of tyranny (Examples 2–3). Additionally, OBL challenges Bush's VERACITY, accusing him of waging war under false pretences for personal gain. Accusations also target Bush's IMPROPRIETY, greed in

Iraq's oil, and lack of TENACITY, prioritising private interests over the public's, despite rising casualties and economic drain (Example 4). This analysis illuminates the intricate use of discrediting by OBL, attempting to influence American trust and anti-war sentiment through a systematic dismantling of the perceived moral standing and competence of the Bush administration.

(2) *The most important [results of the 9/11 war] are: that **we had no difficulty** [we/+ CAPACITY] dealing with **Bush and his administration** given the similarities between them and the regimes in our countries [...] Both types [of administration] are replete with those characterized by prejudiced lordliness, arrogance, and misappropriation of wealth [Bush...administration/- PROPRIETY].*

(3) *So, **he transferred tyranny and suppression of freedoms** to his country [he/- PROPRIETY], and they named it the Patriot Act and used it as a pretext [[he/- VERACITY] to fight terrorism.*

(4) *But the luring **darkness of the black gold blurred his eyesight and insight** [Bush being lured by black gold (oil)/- VALUATION (invoking – PROPRIETY)], and **he put his private interests first and prioritized over the public interests of America** [he/- TENACITY].*

In response to perceived ethical shortcomings in the US political leadership, al-Qaeda is portrayed not only as capable of confronting the US leadership and troops but also as possessing superior morality (fighting against oppression) (Example 5). This self-moral empowerment contrasts with US Army Generals' INCAPACITY ('losses'), lack of TENACITY and unethical use of power for personal gains (Example 6). In addition to underlining 'America's human, economic, and political losses' and Bush's 'resort to emergency funds to continue the fight in Afghanistan and Iraq', al-Qaeda emphasises their CAPACITY in guerrilla and attrition warfare, positioning themselves as a force capable of inflicting more losses on the oppressor-superpowers.

(5) *In addition, **we gained experience in guerrilla warfare and attrition warfare** [we/+ CAPACITY], while **we struggled** with the oppressor-superpowers [we/+ CAPACITY].*

(6) *It is enough to send two Mujahidin...to make **Generals** run there quickly to incur America human, economic, and political losses [(the US Generals)/- CAPACITY], without achieving for America anything of note other than some profits to **their private companies** [(the US General)/- TENACITY].*

Discrediting is strategically employed to instil doubt about key aspects of the threatened audience, particularly the Bush administration. This aims to shape Americans' perception of and relationship with their leadership, influencing their stance and actions towards ending the Iraq war. OBL employs discrediting to depict the American leadership as

untrustworthy and incapable of securing citizens, emphasising the real losers as the Americans, not president-associated corporations like 'Halliburton'. In terms of Poggi et al.'s (2011) and D'Errico and Poggi's (2012) framework, discrediting enables OBL to challenge Bush's benevolence, presenting him as a politician engaged in malevolent actions, aligning with the manipulative function of OBL's threat texts. This construction serves to prompt the threatened audience to reconsider their ties with corrupt entities and position them as being with CAPACITY and responsible for their own security (Example 7).

(7) *In conclusion, I say to **you** [people of America] nothing but the truth, that your security is not in the hands of Kerry, Bush, or al-Qaeda. Your security is in your own hands [(the American people)/- CAPACITY]. And every state that does not play with our security has automatically guaranteed its own security.*

Regarding Shekau's act of discrediting, it serves to undermine governance and power image in Nigeria. Shekau discrediting tactics aims to establish his caliphate as an alternative to what he perceives as weak, dishonest and illegitimate governance. Shekau enhances his own CAPACITY while casting doubt on the victims' CAPACITY, manipulating their perception of his power and his opponents' incapability. He achieves this through announcing commitment to future violent actions and claiming responsibility for past deeds, strengthening the image of Boko Haram's power. Shekau also manipulates the victims' perception of Nigerian officials and troops as weak, presenting conversion to Islam as the sole choice for security. For instance, in a clear threat to Nigerian security forces, Shekau challenges President Jonathan's CAPACITY, implying incompetence to stabilise the country. Similar doubts are cast on the CAPACITY of the Nigerian President Jonathan about his capability to extract the so-called Boko Haram 'cancer' from Nigeria (Example 8) and the capacity of the Civilian Joint Task Force, (CJTF) and the vigilant youths who work to extirpate Boko Haram fighters, and the Chief of Nigerian Army Staff General Buratai (Example 9), building a negative image to influence their actions and choices.

(8) *...this is beyond your power. It is not our doing but that of God. It is beyond you [you (Jonathan)/ - CAPACITY]. (Shekau 8)*

(9) ***You** need to know that there is no way you could end this war by killing us as **you** usually claimed [you (General Buratai) / - CAPACITY] ... The only way out for you [you / - CAPACITY] is to accept Islam in the proper way and repent your sins...*

Shekau also strategically discredits opponents by linking them to negative VERACITY. This serves to portray figures like President Buhari as deceitful (e.g. 'lying') (Example 10). This manipulates perceptions, compelling threatened Buhari to follow Shekau's religious path for stabilisation. Shekau, in contrast, associates himself with positive VERACITY, intensifying fear to discourage support for government troops (Example 11). Negative VALUATION and PROPRIETY are also used to portray victims, respectively, as

inhuman (e.g. ‘sheep’) and wrong-doers (practicing ‘paganism’ (Example 12)), cheaters, killers and humiliators of Muslim Nigerians, urging conversion to Islam for salvation (Example 13). Shekau’s two-camps worldview, depicting ‘bad’ Christianity and ‘good’ Islam, operates to compel victims to choose sides for salvation (Example 13). In summary, Shekau strategically employs discrediting to, in Poggi et al.’s (2011) terms, attribute lack of power, veracity, impropriety and negative valuation to opponents, presenting them as inferior to his attributes.

(10) **Buhari**, all your actions are fake [Buhari/ - VERACITY]. **You are lying** to the people [Buhari/ - VERACITY], collecting their money and saying you will free their children and you know **you are lying** [Buhari/ - VERACITY] ... I am talking to you **Buhari**...continue and see... But if you repent, then you are a brother. Repent and follow the Quran. (Shekau4)

(11) Wait and see. I had promised to put an end to your [oil] refinery. Oh well, you will soon see, the refinery will be destroyed in the coming days... **We do everything we say** we will do [we/ + VERACITY] ...**We always do what we say** [we/ - VERACITY]. (Shekau8)

(12) **Any infidel** is a sheep to be sold [any infidel/ - VALUATION], **Jonathan**, if I catch you, I will sell you...for peanut [Jonathan/ - VALUATION]. **Infidels do not have value**... [infidels/ - VALUATION] (Shekau6)

(13) ...you **Christians cheated** [Christians/ - PROPRIETY] and killed us to the extent of eating our flesh like cannibals [Christians/ - PROPRIETY]! **You did all you wanted to us... you slaughtered us** [Christians/ - PROPRIETY] and took our wives [Christians/ - PROPRIETY] and humiliated us [Christians/ - PROPRIETY]! ... This is why as leader of this sect I tell you to repent... and **we do not harm anybody, but anybody that looks for our trouble**... [we/ + PROPRIETY]! (Shekau8)

Blaming and denying: Responsibility and blame shifting. The tactic of blaming and denying is employed by OBL and Shekau to disalign threateners from responsibility and shift blame onto the victims. This manipulative strategy, rooted in Hansson’s (2015) blame-avoidance and Van Dijk’s (2006) blaming as a discursive manipulation, shapes audience perceptions of harm and agency. OBL, in OBL1, attributes the 9/11 attacks to Americans’ historical actions in Lebanon, casting them with IMPROPRIETY (Example 14). This reattribution serves to generate fear, compelling Americans to reconsider responsibility and avoid Bush’s disinformation campaign (Example 15), to avoid future threats. To manipulate perceptions of agency and potential losses by al-Qaeda, OBL contends that the inflicted harm is a proportional punishment and relatively less damaging, (Example 16) as implicated (Grice, 1975) in: firstly, the use of the phrase ‘*in kind*’, that is, ‘We’ target towers in America for towers ‘You’ the Americans targeted in Lebanon; and secondly, the losses presented as creating relatively less harm, as implicated by the partitive article ‘*some*’, as in: ‘. . .so that [the Americans] taste **some** of what we tasted’. This serves manipulating the perception of the threatener’s actions as being loaded with PROPRIETY, unlike those of the Americans.

(14) *The events that directly affected my soul go back to 1982 and the ensuing events when **America** permitted the Israelis to invade Lebanon [America/- PROPRIETY] supported by the American 3rd Fleet [the American 3rd fleet/- PROPRIETY], the bombardment began [American-Israeli coalition/- PROPRIETY], many were killed and injured [American-Israeli coalition/- PROPRIETY], and many others were terrorized and displaced [American-Israeli coalition/- PROPRIETY].*

(15) *But I am amazed at you. Though we are approaching the fourth year after the events of 9/11, **Bush** is still practicing distortion, misinformation and hiding (from you) the real cause [Bush/- VERACITY]. And thus, the reasons are still there to repeat what happened.*

(16) *While I was looking at those demolished towers in Lebanon, it triggered in my mind that **we should punish** the oppressor **in kind** [we/+ PROPRIETY], and should destroy towers in America [(we)/+ PROPRIETY] so that **they taste some of what we tasted** and **they refrain from killing our women and children** [they/- PROPRIETY].*

Shekau strategically employs responsibility shifting to deflect blame, attributing harmful actions to a divine source, specifically God, in order to enhance positive PROPRIETY. In Example 17, Shekau shifts responsibility for arrests to God's instruction, coupling his actions with positive PROPRIETY. Similarly, Example 18 attributes violent acts to Allah's command, utilising the topos of divine law (e.g. Reisigl and Wodak, 2001: 79) to justify and legitimise his positions. Shekau, following Bandura's (2016) framework of sacred justification, avoids personal accountability by invoking divine authority, aiming to manipulate audience perceptions and reconcile with his violence by constructing his actions as fulfilling God's will (Example 18). This manoeuvre also operates to exempt him from blame and placing responsibility on victims for violating religious norms through choosing Western education and democracy, hence coupled with negative PROPRIETY.

(17) ***God** has instructed **us** to catch whoever that is not following our path and detain such persons in our prisons [us/ + PROPRIETY] ... Whatever we see in the holy book is what we do [we/ + PROPRIETY]. *We do not look elsewhere.* (Shekau2)*

(18) *If **we** meet infidels, if we meet those that become infidels, according to Allah, there is no any talk except hitting of the neck...This is from Allah on the need for us to break down infidels, practitioners of democracy, and constitutionalism, voodoo and those that are doing Western education, in which **they** are practicing paganism [they/ - PROPRIETY]. (Shekau6)*

Blaming and denying: Framing. Framing, a tactic employed in OBL's and Tarrant's texts, plays a crucial role in shaping threatener-victim disalignment by structuring experiences to establish situational definitions (e.g. Goffman, 1974). Rooted in Hansson's (2015) blame avoidance concept and Gordon's (2015) framing role in positioning and (dis)alignment, this tactic is utilised to manipulate perception and realign participants. OBL uses the 'Bad Apple' frame (Lakoff, 2008: 163–167), illustrated in Example 19, employing a

proverb – ‘An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure’ – to convey a moral imperative for the American people to save their country. Positioned positively with CAPACITY, Americans are morally compelled to curb the ‘White House-liar’ (Bush) as an act of PROPRIETY to safeguard security, wealth, and children. This framing influences impressions, guiding Americans to perceive OBL as not blameworthy and directing blame towards their society, thus shaping their understanding of the path to preserving security. Positioning the American people relative to their security experiences within the Bad Apple frame simultaneously presents OBL as a protector against a perceived immoral authority. This framing, in a sense, offers evidence of what Culpeper (2011: 233) referred to as acts of ‘realignment of values between the [threat] producer and the target such that the producer benefits or has their current benefits reinforced or protected’.

(19) *As has been said: ‘An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure.’ And know that **returning to the right** is better than persisting in wrong [returning to the right/+ PROPRIETY]; and that the sane person does not squander his security, wealth and children [(those who do not squander...)/+ CAPACITY] for the sake of the White House-liar [(Bush) /- VERACITY].*

OBL also employs the ‘Rescue narrative’ frame (Lakoff, 2008: 24) to assign blame to the American people and manipulate their stance. Within this frame, OBL constructs a social reality where the Bush administration (Villain) harms Americans (Victim), and the wise or inherently good social actor (Hero) must defeat and punish the Villain to rescue the Victim for security and wellbeing. In Example 20, OBL positions Americans as potential Heroes, wise enough to take actions against those causing harm. Failure to punish the Villain, responsible for ‘killing over 1000 of their sons for money’ in Iraq and Palestine, renders Americans blameworthy. The entire nation is framed (Example 21) as having the CAPACITY to punish or let the Villain escape, determining whether they will be heroes securing wellbeing or allowing the improper acts of terrorising, killing, and imprisoning to persist. In an act of attempting realignment, OBL strategically manipulates perception, emphasising his role as an actor against improper actions rather than a Villain deserving blame, urging Americans to secure their own safety as in Example 22.

(20) *The wise people, instead, when disasters strike, make it one of their most important actions to find and avoid disasters’ causes [(those who find and avoid disasters’ causes)/+ CAPACITY].*

(21) *Be aware that it is **the nation** that punishes the weak when he causes the killing of one of its sons for the sake of money [nation/+ CAPACITY] and that lets the noble escape [nation/+ CAPACITY] when he causes the killing of over 1000 of its sons for money too. And the same applies to your allies in Palestine. **They** terrorize the women and children, and kill and take captive the men [they (the US allies in Palestine)/- PROPRIETY].*

(22) *I say to you nothing but the truth [I (OBL)/+ VERACITY], that your security is not in the hands of Kerry, Bush, or al-Qaeda. Your security is in your own hands [(the American people)/+ CAPACITY].*

Tarrant employs framing in his threat against Turks (in Tarrant2), shifting responsibility onto them for their security or any potential violence against them. Through Examples 23–24, he manipulates Turks' perception, compelling them to reconsider their stay in Europe and opt for living in Turkey 'On the east side of the Bosphorus', coupled with positive SECURITY (Example 23). Using the 'Bad Apple' frame, Tarrant dehumanises Turks, labelling them 'roaches' and justifying their expulsion from European lands as dirt and sickness (Example 24). Additionally, this dehumanising act morally disengages (Bandura, 2016) and disaligns the threatener from victims by erasing a sense of shared humanity, allowing Tarrant to contemplate violence while maintaining internal peace.

(23) You can live in peace in your own lands [You / + SECURITY], and may no harm come to you.
On the east side of the Bosphorus.

(24) *But if you attempt to live in European lands, anywhere west of the Bosphorus. **We will kill you and drive you roaches from our lands*** [we / + JUDGEMENT].

Blaming and denying: Denying and reversal. The denying and reversal mechanism serves as a social defence strategy for threatener-victim disalignment. This strategy involves defending against accusations and negative impressions about oneself or the ingroup (denying) and accusing victims of the same acts or portraying them as aggressors while reversing roles. This tactic is based on Van Dijk's (1989, 1992, 1998: 92) reversal tactic (by blaming the victim) and his typology of denying which includes, *inter alia*, intention-denial and goal-denial. OBL, in Example 25, denies any prior intention to target the Twin Towers ('it had never come to our mind. . .') but attributes the situation change to America's IMPROPRIETY ('injustice and tyranny') and its Israeli allies. This reversal implicates a shift in the narrative, emphasising the negative properties of outgroups and the positive properties of the ingroup. By accusing the 'American-Israeli coalition' of targeting towers in Palestine and Lebanon, OBL 'turns the tables' (Wodak, 1991: 77), attributing blame for later consequences in America to them.

(25) *Allah knows that **it had never come to our mind to strike the towers.** But after enough was enough [(American-Israeli coalition)/- SATISFACTION] and we witnessed the injustice and tyranny of the American-Israeli coalition against our people in Palestine and Lebanon [(American-Israeli coalition)/- PROPRIETY], *the idea came to my mind.**

Reversal is also employed by OBL to accuse America of acts of IMPROPRIETY, such as intentional killing and injustice (see Example 26), laying a moral foundation for OBL's own intentional killings. This tactic creates a moral engagement when the victims are from the ingroup and moral disengagement when the victims are among the accused. In Example 26, OBL portrays America as viewing 'resistance' with negative VALUATION ('terrorism and backward') and 'intimidation' against Muslim countries with positive

VALUATION ('freedom and democracy'). OBL argues for the legitimacy of resistance, even if labelled as terrorism, and rejects US democracy associated with intimidation. Through denying and reversal, OBL seeks to depict his actions as ethically grounded, framing them as acts of 'self-defence' and 'a must' against American aggressors – acts of PROPRIETY, regardless of being labelled 'vilified terrorism' hence disaligned in American eyes.

(26) *On that day, I was assured that injustice [(America)/- PROPRIETY] and intentional killing [(America)/- PROPRIETY] of innocent women and children [(Lebanese and Palestinian women and children)/+ NORMALITY] is an approved American law [(American law of violence)/- VALUATION (invoking – PROPRIETY)], and that intimidation is freedom and democracy [(America's intimidation)/- VALUATION (invoking – PROPRIETY)], while resistance is terrorism and backward [(al-Qaeda's resistance)/- VALUATION (invoking + PROPRIETY)].*

Retaliation and disaffiliation tactics: Deontic retaliation

Deontic retaliation (defined in the Method Section) involves constructing a threat text where a threatened act is presented as a justified response or retaliation for a perceived past event or offence. Inspired by Searle's concept of 'deontic powers', this function morally motivates a threatener's behaviour to protect ingroup interests. In the terrorist context, achieving deontic retaliation involves deploying couplings that portray the threatener as a value-serving agent obligated to retaliate. This discursive function employs tactics such as legitimating, discrediting, blaming and denying (specifically framing), detailed and exemplified in the subsequent subsections.

Legitimizing: Establishing a 'proairetic' code. Legitimizing, employed by OBL and Tarrant to frame retaliation, forges disalignment by emphasising victims as wrongdoers and portraying threateners as morally and legally obliged to retaliate to immoral or illegal values, positioning threateners and victims on opposing moral poles. This tactic draws from Van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimization techniques: authorisation, moralisation and rationalisation. OBL frames retaliation in his texts as a 'proairetic' code (Barthes, 1974), a legitimate action responding to previous events and aligned with a governing 'semic' code of moral values (e.g. justice, security and freedom). In Example 29, 'to retaliate' against an oppressor is portrayed as loaded with positive PROPRIETY ('permitted'), grounded in authority references (e.g. 'Allah') as a shortcut to scriptural warrant (e.g. Brookes and McEnergy, 2020) that 'permitted the oppressed to retaliate'. Additionally, restoring 'Our' freedom and security through violence becomes a morally justified, in-kind response (Example 30), rationalising OBL's violence which aims 'to restore freedom'.

(29) *Praise is due to Allah who...permitted the oppressed **to retaliate** against the oppressor in kind* [[the oppressed to retaliate/ + PROPRIETY]]. (OBL1)

(30) ***We** want to restore freedom to our Ummah [we/ + PROPRIETY]; just as you squander our security [you/ - PROPRIETY], so shall **we squander yours**.*

OBL utilises legitimation in OBL1 to bolster the credibility of his manipulative threat by employing anecdotal retaliation. While OBL1 primarily serves a manipulative function, he cites the 9/11 attacks as instances of past retaliation to substantiate his serious intentions. This anecdotal evidence aims to prompt the American people to take his threats seriously and reconsider their stance on the US war in Iraq, suggesting potential further retaliatory actions. In OBL2, retaliation is the central discursive function, presented as an imminent moral response.

Evaluative couplings operate to legitimise retaliation by appealing to a moral value system of justice and legality. In Example 31, OBL positions retaliation as ‘legal’, framing it as a justified response to the bloodshed for which the US and Israeli allies are held responsible. Similarly, OBL (Example 32) portrays the mujahidin’s fight in Iraq as a ‘just reward’ for US ‘injustice’, aligning positive PROPRIETY with the retaliation. Throughout the OBL2 text, OBL underscores the immorality of Americans and their allies, strategically disaffiliating himself from his victims. This moral disengagement serves to license his violence and portray it as a reaction to the perceived immorality of the victims.

(31) *You should know that we count our deaths...particularly those killed in Palestine at the hands of **your allies, the Jews** [your allies, the Jews/ - PROPRIETY]. And **we will have the legal retaliation** from your own blood [we/ + PROPRIETY]...*

(32) *What you are facing in Iraq at the hands of the heroes of Islam [(mujahidin)/ + CAPACITY] is **your just reward** [(mujahidin’s acts)/ + PROPRIETY]; it has once been said: ‘To death injustice chases its people, and the end thereof is grave.’ [you (US soldiers’ presence in Iraq)/ - PROPRIETY]*

Tarrant employs the legitimating tactic in by leveraging the moral value of freedom and the legal right to rectify what he deems ‘rightful’. In Example 33, Tarrant frames his threat as an endeavour to ‘free’ the Hagia Sophia mosque in Istanbul, an iconic structure with historical significance reflecting religious transitions in the region. By invoking the mosque’s past as a Christian church, Tarrant positions his threat as a retaliatory effort to restore it to Christianity. This appeal to legal and moral considerations serves as a topos – a shortcut warrant – legitimising the threatener’s retaliatory intentions and positions against the targeted Turks.

(33) *The Hagia Sophia will be free of minarets and Constantinople will be rightfully Christian owned once more [we / - (+) JUDGEMENT].*

Discrediting. Discrediting, in retaliation, plays a crucial role in forging threatener-victim disalignment, particularly in OBL2, where moral foundations for retaliation are established by casting discredit on the victims. OBL strategically discredits the US leadership by attacking their perceived lack of PROPRIETY, TENACITY, VERACITY and CAPACITY. In Example 34, Americans are coupled with negative CAPACITY, portrayed as followers of Jewish plans in the Middle East, serving Israelis at the expense of Muslim nations – justifying retaliation. Example 35 extends this discrediting through negative TENACITY,

depicting US democracy as a deceptive tool to change regimes and serve Jewish interests. Bush is accused of indifference to American blood and economy, aligning with the Zionist lobby's negative PROPRIETY. Example 36 discredits Bush further, alleging lack of VERACITY and PROPRIETY as a leader of a 'gang' involved in 'war, theft, and robbery' of Muslim countries' resources. These discrediting strategies lay the groundwork for justifying retaliatory actions.

(34) ...*the Jews, who are dragging you behind them [(Americans) / - CAPACITY] under the trick of democracy [(Americans' democracy) / - TENACITY] in order to support the Israelis and their plans, with hostility [(the Jews) / - HAPPINESS] to our religion and at the expense of our blood and land...*

(35) ...*he [Bush] is fulfilling the demand of the Zionist lobby [he (Bush)/ - TENACITY] which helped him reach the White House, that is, to destroy the military power of Iraq which neighbours the Jews in occupied Palestine [the Jews / - PROPRIETY]. In so doing, he shows indifference to the repercussions on your blood and economy [he (Bush)/ - TENACITY].*

(36) This gang and their leader find lying [US administration / - VERACITY], war, theft, and robbery palatable... [US administration / - PROPRIETY].

The strategic discrediting of American audiences or segments thereof serves to legitimise retaliation as a form of 'honour violence', as defined by Thrasher and Handfield (2018: 371). In this context, the threatened acts aim to uphold norms within Muslim societies that lack effective governance. Two specific norms come into play in inter-group relationships (see, e.g. Sommers, 2009): firstly, the norm of preserving honour as a rational response to perceived wrongdoing, and secondly, the norm of moral responsibility imposed on the threatened audience. By framing retaliation within these norms, threateners seek to justify their actions as morally and honourably motivated responses, shaping the discourse around perceived offences and the moral duties of the threatened audience.

Blaming and denying: Framing. Framing, particularly through the 'Bad Apple' and 'Rescue narrative' frames, is a prevalent tactic in Shekau's threat communications to create a disconnection with victims and justify a retaliatory response. In Shekau1, he declares war against 'any Nigerian' in Cameroon, Chad and Benin Republic (Example 37), presenting it as a reaction to the joint efforts of Nigerian and Cameroonian forces against Boko Haram. This framing thus extends to victims in neighbouring African countries, and Nigerian Vigilant troops and the combined joint task force (CJTF) (Example 38), positioning them as the undesirable element. Within this context, Shekau portrays his impending war as a response to the government's perceived IMPROPRIETY, as signalled by the use of the wave-underlined phrases: 'just as', 'just like', 'so, we too' and 'so shall we too', as in claiming, 'just like you [Minister of Defence and his troops] are searching for

us in the bushes [you/ - PROPRIETY], we shall bring the war to the cities. . . [we/ + PROPRIETY]'. This construction not only denies the true purpose behind Shekau's violent acts but also places blame on the victims for the impending violence.

(37) *Just like one of the leaders of unbelievers...was recently boasting that **they have formed a joint force with Cameroonian forces to fight us** [they/ - PROPRIETY], [and] that **they would not only chase us from Sambisa forest but also in all parts of Nigeria** [they/ - PROPRIETY]. So, we too have declared that we do not want to see any Nigerian in Cameroon, in Chad, in Nigeria and even Benin Republic...*

(38) *Just as you said you [vigilante troops and CJTF] do not want us on the face of Nigeria, so shall we too declare you persona non grata [you/ - VALUATION] in Sambisa...*

In Example 39 from Shekau8, Shekau constructs his threat as a reactive response to perceived acts of IMPROPRIETY by the Nigerian government and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). This reaction is triggered by the labelling of Boko Haram members as a 'cancer' in Nigeria, framing them as the 'Bad Apple', against which Shekau portrays his threat as self-defence – stating, 'We decided to defend ourselves' – and a reactive defence in response to factual information about perceived acts of IMPROPRIETY. These include killings, wickedness and betrayals against Muslims and Boko Haram members by security forces and Christians as in Example 40 where Shekau uses the 'factive' presupposition (Yule, 1996) phrase 'everyone knows' (wave underlined) to present this information as factual, justifying revenge on the victims' lives based on these alleged facts.

(39) *Our members are being killed [President Jonathan and CAN's president/ - PROPRIETY]!... we say enough is enough [we/ - HAPPINESS]!*

(40) *We hardly touch anybody except **security personnel and Christians and those who have betrayed us** [security.../ - PROPRIETY]. Everyone knows what Christians did to Muslims, not once or twice [Christians/ - PROPRIETY] ... Everyone knows what happened to our leader. Everyone knows what wickedness was meted out to our members and fellow Muslims in Nigeria...*

Shekau's tactic of blaming and denying, akin to a 'blame game' (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012: 172), strategically shifts blame by justifying his actions as a retaliatory response. He attributes blame to government officials and 'infidel' troops, alleging they tend to target Muslims and Boko Haram members first. This framing creates opposing social groups, allowing Shekau to avoid the Villain role in officials' narratives, presenting himself as a Rescuer of Muslims. Negative evaluative couplings within the Rescue narrative frame aid Shekau in escaping the Villain label in his discursively constructed act of retaliation.

Boulomaic function

The boulomaic function, rooted in master identity attacks and violent fantasy wants and pledge to harm, employs lexicogrammatical elements like verbs (want, wish, hope) and descriptions of wishes and fantasies to symbolically damage the identity of threatened audiences without coercing specific actions. The boulomaic function, involving expressions of desire (AFFECT) and identity attacks, is evident in Tarrant's and Shekau's texts. Tarrant, in Example 41, expresses a strong desire/INCLINATION to harm 'Antifa, Marxists, and Communists' based on the affect-based bond – 'the Antifa, Marxists and Communists are undesired part of national identity'. Although the threatener cannot entirely eliminate these groups, the language conveys a pledge and intense desire for harm. The bursty repetition of the verb 'want' in the context of direct threats emphasises this strong inclination.

(41) *I do not want to convert you [I / - INCLINATION (desire)], I do not want to come to an understanding [I / - INCLINATION (desire)]. *Egalitarians and those that believe in hierarchy will never come to terms [I / - COMPOSITION]. I don't want you by my side [I / - INCLINATION (desire)] or I don't want share power [I / - INCLINATION (desire)]. I want you in my sights [I / + INCLINATION (desire)]. I want your neck under my boot [I / + INCLINATION (desire)].**

The boulomaic function appears not only as an independent, primary function (as in Tarrant-Example 41 above) but also as an ancillary to the manipulation or retaliation functions in Tarrant and in Shekau's texts (namely, Shekau 1, 2, 5, 6 and 7). In both observed forms of the boulomaic function, as independent and as an ancillary, the text serves to inflict harm by generating fear and disrupting the peace of mind of threatened audiences. In Example 42 (from Tarrant), the boulomaic effect complements manipulation of Turks' stay in Europe, operating as an intensifier of the desire to come to Istanbul and destroy 'every mosque and minaret'. Unlike Example 41, where there is no explicit behavioural demand, Example 42 issues a warning, predicting a violent movement signalled by the use of 'we are coming'. This dual function aims to evoke a negative impact, emphasising the threatener's commitment to causing harm and instilling fear in the targeted groups.

(42) *We are coming for Constantinople and we will destroy every mosque and minaret in the city.*

The ancillary boulomaic effect is also manifested in Shekau's threat texts to colour the manipulation or retaliation function with increased fear that is generated to target and – in Chilwa's (2017) terms – chill the spine of Shekau's victims. Example 43 illustrates Shekau expressing a strong desire to expel Nigerians from various regions, even though it exceeds his capability. This psychological warfare, combined with constructed retaliation against the Nigerian military's actions, aims to generate fear. Example 44 emphasises Shekau's wishful pursuit of death, presented as morally justified in the context of a global conflict between 'Us' and 'the rest' (infidels). The frightening effect of threat

(Storey, 1995), as well as the divisive narrative, is heightened by the boulomaic effect, evident in Shekau's desire for harm against, for example, the State Security Service (SSS) in Example 45.

(43) *So, we too have declared that we do not want [we / - INCLINATION (desire)], to see any Nigerian in Cameroon, in Chad, in Nigeria and even Benin Republic. (Shekau1)*

(44) *Sultan of Kano... We want to fight [we / - INCLINATION (desire)]; we want to be wounded [we / - INCLINATION (desire)]. We want our blood to flow [we / - INCLINATION (desire)]. We wish for death... [we / - INCLINATION (desire)]. (Shekau5)*

(45) *Whether you are SSS or even SSSS if you want, know that for me there are two categories of people in the world: those that are with us, and the rest. I will be happy to [I / - INCLINATION (desire)] kill those against us every time I encounter them... I will not be content until I have cut your throats [I / - INCLINATION (desire)]. (Shekau7)*

Conclusion and further research

Grounded in the Appraisal framework and the moral disaffiliation strategy, this research article has presented an exploration into discursive pragmatics in terrorist threat texts by jihadists and far-right violent extremists. The study has revealed terrorist threat texts as ideological-struggle discourse where meanings and social values are contested (e.g. Verschueren, 2012). Discourse pragmatic analysis has proved crucial for understanding forensic texts with underlying ideologies and recognising the variability in authors' texts, emphasising language's context-dependence (e.g. Coulthard et al., 2017). In Coulthard's (1994: 4) terms, the examination of 'attitude-ideation' couplings highlights terrorists' strategic decisions in textualising messages within specific ideational limits. Focusing on evaluative couplings' patterning and functioning unveils the stakes involved in choosing one stance over another in a threat text (e.g. Martin and White, 2005). The increased use of JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION-bases for social-disalignment indicates the critical role of social sanction, esteem values and human valuation of victims in legitimising threatened actions.

The analysis reveals that by attending to the extremist appraisal signature and understanding its ideological operation in positioning victims and threateners while disaligning with victims' values, analysts of forensic texts can foreground the ongoing process of evaluation. Viewing style as a polarised coupling disposition (Etaywe and Zappavigna, 2021), similarities in attitude system network choices in terrorist threat texts can be ascribed to functional and ideological needs of text producers and the norms of the socially appropriate terrorist threatening genre, a topic for further future research. Focusing on attitudinal meanings coupled with victims, in Butler's terms (1988: 87), has proven useful for forensic analysts to 'specify explicitly which options at a particular level of the language can be combined in the 'selection expression' describing a given stretch of language'. The language of appraisal highlights how a criminal's appraisal signature represents characteristic reconfigurations of attitudinal meaning-making primarily

influenced by an ideological view of victims' behaviours and processes, offering insight to criminal interrogators on why some texts are polarising and mind-unsettling.

The study has uncovered verbal practices that underpin value disalignment and ideological positioning, along with a dynamic of justification or 'justification discourses' collapse (Wodak, 2006). That is, threat texts include a mix of acts of blaming, denying, discrediting and (de)legitimation. These practices of influence and justification use predominantly judgemental and appreciation-based values as an ideological launching pad for disaffiliation. This linguistic similarity could be 'the product of adaptability' (Butler, 1988: 97) meeting communicative purposes in a speech event (e.g. Grant, 2010; Olsson, 2008). The article demonstrates the regulatory functions of appraisal in threat texts – manipulation, retaliation and boulomaic effect. These functions offer linguistic evidence supporting psychological research findings on violence and coercive actions (e.g. Tedeschi and Felson, 1994), showing how a threat can force behavioural compliance (as in manipulation and deontic retaliation in the dataset) and aim to cause 'damage to the social identity of target persons and a lowering of their power or status' (Tedeschi and Felson, 1994: 171) as in the boulomaic effect in this study.

The research contributes to future studies into Shuy's (1993) notion of threatener profiling, revealing argumentative tactics typical of terrorist threatening communication. Future research can extend the examination of evaluative structure, patterns of bonds and practices of justifications in threat texts communicated by threateners from different ideologies and in different sociopolitical contexts to highlight any commonalities and differences with the findings of this study. We hope that by focusing on interpersonal meaning-making resources, this study has contributed to a fuller understanding of the nuances of the discursive pragmatics of appraisal and its pre-occupation with pragmatic concerns in violent extremist discourse.

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