

# Influence of gender and age in children's use of threats

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Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskoga jezika i  
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Tamara Gavrić

**Utjecaj roda i dobi u uporabi prijetnji u djece**

Završni rad

doc. dr. sc. Goran Milić

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Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Goran Milić, Assistant Professor

Osijek, 2018

J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of English

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Bachelor's Thesis

Scientific area: humanities

Scientific field: philology

Scientific branch: English studies

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## Abstract

*Threats have been categorized as aggressive behaviors due to the nature of the intention expressed in the utterance. Threats constitute one type of aggressive behavior observed in preschoolers. This paper will discuss the nature of threats and their responses as collaborative units in children's discourse. Based on the research, it is found that there are five types of threats and that committing harm is the mostly used one. According to the research, children usually reject the threat that was directed towards them or seeks for an explanation why the threat occurred in the first place. As the title suggests, the main emphasis will be put on the influence of the age and the gender on children's use of threats. Studies have shown that the young children use threats more frequently than older ones and that their nature is usually much more violent due to their newly discovered feeling of power. Child's gender does not influence the frequency of threats, but it mainly has the influence on the choice amongst different types of threats. Male children are significantly more violent in their use of threats and in most cases threaten to cause harm, while female preschoolers usually tend to use the withhold-object/action type of threat.*

*Key words:* threat, preschoolers, types, responses, research, male, female, age.

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## **1. Introduction**

The aim of my paper is to show how the use of threats amongst young children is influenced by their age and their gender. Firstly, I am going to define what threats are generally considered to be and analyze the nature of threats and their responses as collaborative units in children's discourse. Furthermore, particular conditions will be discussed that need to be fulfilled in order for the threat to be issued by the speaker and responded by the hearer. Verbally threatening somebody is an intrinsically highly offensive and impolite social activity, and must therefore be regarded as a potentially very damaging 'face-threatening act'.(Geluykens, Limberg 1) Not many studies have been done concerning this subject, but its aggressive nature prompts further analysis mainly because threats play a huge role in children's discourse as a way of resolving conflict. Five types of threats and their collaborative responses will be listed and their frequency, as well as the factors influencing them will be analyzed. The main emphasis of this paper will be put on the differences caused by the age and the gender of children who participated in many researches considering this subject. Researchers suggest that the frequency is influenced only by the age of the participants and not by the gender, while the gender influences the preference when it comes to choosing the particular type of threat.



## 2. What are threats?

A series of recent studies has indicated that threats have a significant role in children's discourse. This has been discussed by a great number of authors and one of them is J.W Bowers who states that it is generally accepted proposition that small children utilize explicit threats in their interactions with others.(Bowers) In Pamela Benoit's research from 1979 threats account for 1.22% of the structural units in adult-directed discourse and 6.63% in child-directed conversations.(Benoit 305) These numbers are quite interesting and justify the closer examination. Searle states that a speaker issues a threat while a hearer receives and responds to the threat. (Searle 1969) According to his views, threats are viewed as interactional units accomplished collaboratively by speaker and hearer. The first condition he mentions that is crucial for the successful execution of the units states:

1. When the speaker expresses an intention to hurt or punish the hearer with the purpose of altering the hearer's behavior, that utterance may be understood by the hearer as constituting a threat. (Searle 1969)

Taking that into the consideration, a threat would be an aggressive act against the hearer for the purpose of gaining compliance. Yet, utterance taken as a threat only needs to express an intention. The action specified by the intention does not need to be completed but in order to accomplish the purpose of altering the hearer's behavior; the intention must carry sufficient force. Meaning,

2. The hearer must perceive that the speaker has the ability, willingness, and right to complete the intention expressed in the threat, and the hearer must perceive the consequences of such a completion as negative for the threat to produce an alteration in the hearer's behavior. (Searle 1969)

If the threat carries the sufficient amount of force, than the hearer's behavior will be changed, but if it lacks force than it will make the hearer to give a kind of "rebellious" response that is intended to show the speaker the deficient character of his threat. Benoit also mentions similar responses in her research (e.g., Ability- "You can't hurt me"; Willingness- "You wouldn't do it to me"; Right – 'Who do you think you are threatening me?'; Insufficient Negative Consequences- " So what? Go ahead. Who cares?"). (Benoit 306) It is clearly obvious that the threat-response unit is developed by both the speaker and the hearer, meaning that the speaker needs to fulfill certain conditions to carry the force it needs and that the hearer must produce an appropriate response to the threat to complete this unit. Talking about conflict in their paper "In Development of Conflict Resolution Skills in Infancy and Early Childhood" Barbara and James Broadbear state that how

one interprets conflict leads to either constructive or destructive outcomes which also shows that the conflict (threat) is not a one way thing and is not dictated by a single interactant. Grimshaw argues that attention to the hearer has been insufficient in previous speech-act analyses and this discussion seeks to correct that error by specifying the following condition: An utterance understood by the hearer as a threat obligates the hearer to respond. (Grimshaw 1980) A threat-response unit thus forms an adjacency pair in the discourse. There are number of different outcomes when the speaker utters the threat. The hearer can both accept the threat and alter the behavior that provoked the threat, reject the threat as deficient, or engage the speaker in competitive escalation by producing reciprocal threats. This is all connected with the amount of force the speaker puts in his threat which I mentioned earlier. Threats are categorized as aggressive behaviors because of the nature of the intention expressed in the utterance. Smith and Green say that threats constitute one type of aggressive behavior observed in preschoolers. They talk about it being more successful if an adult does not intervene. O'Keefe and Benoit describe the function of threats within children's arguments and state that threats are typically embedded within arguments and elaborate conflict rather than terminate the dispute. (Benoit 308)

### **2.1.Types of threats and responses**

In her work *The use of threats in children's discourse* Benoit does a study that answers the following questions:

1. What provokes a speaker to issue a threat?
2. What is the form of first-pair parts counted as threats?
3. What is the form of second-pair parts as responses to threats?
4. Does the sex of the interactant influences threats?
5. Does the age of the interactant influences threats?
6. Does an adult- vs. child-directed environment influence threats?

In this paper I am mostly going to examine the questions and results concerning the gender and the age of children involved in the research and corroborate it with the research I did myself. As an introduction to the main subject of this paper it is important to discuss types of threats mentioned. Benoit's research was based on children's interactions obtained from the University Child Development Center. Two groups of children enrolled the research: pre-kindergarten (2-4 years) and kindergarten (5 years), 18 female and 13 male children, 31 in total. Amongst four types of threats Benoit lists in her paper

1. **Telling authority** (The interactant threatens to seek adult intervention that would overtly punish the conversational partner and/or obtain the action being sought by the interactant.)  
A: My seat. I'm tellin'. He won't get outa my seat.  
B: Well I can.  
A: No. I'm tellin'.  
B: Oh, I got me a seat. Woo.
2. **Committing Harm** (The interactant threatens to physically hurt the conversational partner or complete an action that the interactant perceives as undesirable.)  
A: I beat you up. You better say yes ok?  
B: Yes. Ok.
3. **Withhold object/action** (The interactant may threaten to isolate the conversational partner by refusing to continue a desired action.)  
A: I don't wanta talk to you. You ain't my friend.  
B: Chrissie come here. Come here.  
A: No.  
B: I not gonna play with Ebily.  
A: I not speakin' you. Not now.
4. **Unspecified** (This category includes those threats where the specific intent of the interactant is not clearly specified.)  
A: You'll be in big trouble.  
B: Unhuh.

committing harm is the mostly used one and occurs 1.4 times as often as expected.(Benoit 310)  
Benoit also mentions five responses to the threats:

1. **Threat** (A threat is followed by another threat which escalates the conflict in the interaction.)  
A: I'm going to fight you up.  
B: I'll bust you up.
2. **Rejects Threat** (The interactant treats the threat as deficient by implicitly or explicitly indicating the defect in the threat as produced.)  
A: You do it and I'll knock you in the side.  
B: You think you are stronger boy than me? (approaches A)  
A: You won't do it to me.

B: I'll knock you up there. (points to the ceiling)

A: Do it.

3. **Topic Shift** (The hearer of the threat does not provide uptake for the threat. Instead of responding directly to the threat, the interactant changes the topic and hence the focus of attention away from the threat)

A: I'm tellin'.

B: Oh. I found me a penny on the floor.

4. **Explain** (The speaker explains the behavior/statement that provoked the threat.)

A: You hit. I'm tellin'.

B: You hit me first.

5. **Accept** (The hearer acquiesces to the threat and alters the behavior that provoked the threat.)

A: I beat you up. You better say yes? Ok?

B: Yes. Ok.

According to the research threat is rejected 1.77 times more than expected while an explanation of the behavior which provoked the threat occurs 0.32 times as often as expected. (Benoit 310) What provokes all those threats in child discourse are another threats, insults, assertions, refusal and interactants behavior. (Benoit 311)

### 3. Influence of age on children's use of threats

Examining peer conflict affords an opportunity to see how children of similar ages manage to persuade or attempt to manipulate others of essentially equal status and same stage of language development. To this end, the skill and complexity of young children's talk is uncovered, moving away from the idea of preschool as pre-competent. (Churh 2) Frequency of conflict is associated with the age of the disputants. Although longitudinal studies are not common in research on

preschool children's interactions, uncontroversial findings point to fewer disputes among older children.(Church 13) In one of the earliest studies in this area, Dawe recognized a tendency for fewer quarrels amongst the older children in her observation sessions, suggesting a decrease with age. Insistence in disputes declines with age and that instances of resolution increase as children get older. Children's age influences the choice of threat children use, what provokes them to use threats and which responses they give to them. Not only do young children use more threats than the older ones, but they also tend to use more aggressive threats. They threaten to harm their partner more frequently than expected in order to intimidate them and show power that they have just discovered. In an internet research I did, based on parents' stories and questions they asked on some of the popular parenting sites, I confirmed this theory. On the site parenting.com, mother of the four- year old boy wrote:

“Today at school we were called because he told two separate children that he wanted them to be dead. After the first time I sat down and talked with him in the quiet area and did believe that he understood how important it was not to say things like that. After I left he said it again to a different child.” (parenting.com)

What this licensed therapist answered confirmed the studies that have been done:

“Your little guy is experimenting. He's just discovered an amazing tool to make himself feel powerful: Just tell another kid he wants them dead. (I realize this is not a direct threat, but that is splitting hairs. It's a short distance from *"I want you dead"* to *"I will make you dead."*) Does this mean he'll grow up to be a school shooter? Unlikely. It means he's four. This is not so different from the preschooler who says *"I hate you. I'm not inviting you to my birthday party."* Any preschool teacher can tell you that this is standard behavior for a four year old. By five, kids are usually starting to be able to handle conflict without resorting to such strong language. “ (parenting.com)

Young children employ threats as controlling devices and they rely more on arguments characterized by insults and threats, while older children begin to develop reasoned positions. Benoit says that young children are more likely to violate the norms associated with refusal and to engage in a series of successive threats that do not resolve the control issue. When they feel lack of power they seek help from an adult through tell-authority threat which causes hearer to threaten back.(Benoit 327) Haslett found that younger children are frequently involved in a series of escalating threats. On the other side, older children are more likely to refuse the threat as

deficient.(Haslett) On Berkley Parents Network site, mother of a six year old talks about him using much violent language when he was only three years old:

“My son began his "violent" play and language at about age 3, and it totally freaked out my partner and me, because it was so incredibly intense. It was horrifying. It took us a long time to come to the conclusion that he [who feels everything intensely, including his own lack of power in the world] was letting us know in no uncertain terms exactly how truly powerful he was. His words and play were never going to really hurt us. In fact I think that in using that method to exert his power and control, he was [and still is, *to a much lesser extent, at age 6*] figuring out how to conquer all of the anxiety and fears in his sensitive little self.” (Berkley Parents Network)

What has not been mentioned in Benoit’s research is that children these days, no matter of their age, are strongly influenced by TV, computer games, and other children as well. Young children’s use of threats might not be something that they fully understand, but something they hear on TV, video games or from their older siblings. In most cases their violent threats mean nothing and should not be a matter of huge concern. Older children are much more capable of understanding the meaning of what they hear and probably will not repeat it like parrots or they will use it more reasonably and in the suitable situations.

#### **4. Influence of gender on children's use of threats**

Generally speaking, there are not any major differences between male and female language, as in one gender being more dominant than the other. Basic cortical organization for language does not appear to differ fundamentally across male and female brains; although some sex differences have been noted in electrophysiological tests of language processing.(Lust 89) Macaulay 1977 challenged the “myth of female superiority in language” on the basis of a review of the literature, concluding that “the evidence of consistent sex differences in language development is too tenuous and self-contradictory to justify any claims that one sex is superior to the other”.(Lust 89) When infants between eight and twenty months were tested for their comprehension of words in a visual preference task, there was “no total difference in comprehension for boys and girls”. (Lust 89) But research has shown that male children produced significantly more aggressive actions and use more violent language than female children. Data show that the sex of the interactant does not influence the frequency of threat but does affect form of threat. Amelia Church says that some researchers such as Green and Dawe made the statements that there was some positive correlations suggested between gender and frequency of quarrelling: boys are involved in more disputes with their peers than girl.(Church 15) Contemporary research, however, does not point to discrepancies in frequency. Harm-threats, which are the most actively hostile form of threats, represent 43.33% of the threats issued by male children and 30% for females.(Benoit 327) The difference is that females choose withhold -action/object threats, while males do not opt for this form of threat.(Benoit 328) As already mentioned, in my research where I visited different parenting sites, I also found parent's stories that confirm Benoit's statements made in the gender part of the research. Parents of male children usually complain about them being violent and threatening harming other children, while their female peers are usually heard saying something like “I don't want to talk to you”, or “You are not my friend anymore.” On Berkley Parents Network one parent said:

“My 3.5-yr-old started preschool last fall, and I have noticed increasing violent language from him. He has always been very sweet and obedient--to a degree that other parents comment on how well behaved he is. Now he comes home from school, talking about superheroes and bad guys, and saying *"I will shoot you"* or *"I will cut you"*. He calls me and others "stupid", says "I hate you".” (Berkley Parents Network)

Another parent of male twins wrote:

“ I am the mother of identical twin boys, age 5 but soon to be 6. My boys are in the Early Intervention Kindergarten Program. Today I got a letter sent home stating that one of the twins was threatening the teacher. What triggered this may sound silly, however the teacher asked him to change a Capital letter to a lower case letter. He became angry and told the teacher “*I’m going to bring a weapon to school tomorrow*”. The teacher spoke to him about what a threat was and told him he would go to the principal if he made any other threat. He then held his pencil in his fist, aimed it at the teacher, and said “*I’m going to stab you*”. On Tuesday there was an incident that two substitute teachers were in, and he told the classroom assistant he was going to bring his stapler to school to get her.” (Raising Small Souls)

Female children are not devoid of aggressive actions and this can be confirmed by this little girl’s behavior:

”When my daughter was about 3-4 she would say similar things to my husband. Among the things she wished on him were that he drinks salt water and die, that she would kill him, put him in a garbage can and dance on his grave. I think she may have said once that she would chop him into pieces.” (Berkley Parent Network)

Female children simply have other strategies of control as well. The socialization process also teaches the female in our culture the value of withholding desired actions/objects, and these results suggest that even young child is aware of the effectiveness of this strategy. We find that girls are not only just as skilled in argumentation as boys but have types of arguments that are both more extended and more complex in their participation structure than those among boys. (Church 21) Ms Barbagallo said to Daily Telegraph she was shocked to see some girls aged five recently target her three-year-old daughter, Lucia.

“It already starts then – the girl said ‘*you can’t sit here*’ and Lucia looked at me and said ‘Mummy they don’t want to be my friend’, and the teacher heard and reprimanded the girls, saying not to do that again and it was mean,” she said. (Daily Telegraph)

Research shows that relational aggression is seen in preschoolers, that preschool girls are significantly more relationally aggressive and less overtly physically aggressive than preschool boys, and that relational aggression is significantly related to social-psychological



maladjustment.(Psychology Today) Although males do engage in conflict mitigation, their predominant mode of dealing with conflict is initially more direct.(Church 21) Similarly, females do engage in heavy-handed persuasion, but their predominant mode of dealing with conflict is more indirect.(Church 21) In addition, there is no indication that boys and girls are not equally manipulative, they merely use different means to attain their respective. Geluykens and Limberg discuss about gender differences in threat responses, stating that female children are usually more polite when responding to threats. Gender (of the addressee) has a major influence on the response type chosen, in that the female data revealed more compliant responses than the male data.(Geluykens, Limberg 3) Tentatively expressed, female speakers are more likely to comply with a threat than their male counterparts. Thirdly, apart from the general response strategy, we had a look at different supportive moves and their use in threat responses.(Geluykens, Limberg 3) Mitigating moves, such as apologies, are employed more by women, while aggravating moves, such as counter threats or insults, are used more by men. These findings contribute to our conclusion that female threat responses are less aggravating and more polite than male ones.

## **5. Conclusion**

Threats have been categorized as aggressive behavior because of the nature of the intention expressed in the utterance (i.e., to hurt or punish). As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, certain conditions need to be fulfilled for a threat to be issued. If the right amount of force is put into it, the speaker can issue the threat and the hearer has multiple ways to respond to those threats. My research has confirmed that male children are much more aggressive when threatening as well as responding to the same, while female children are much more rational, usually opting for those threats that have much stronger psychological effect on the hearer. When it comes to the age of the interactants, as the children get older they use of threat decreases and their threats are not so strong. In conclusion, children's usage of threats deserves to have their own place in the world of research, not only due to its quiet aggressive nature, but they show us some great differences between children of different age and gender which contribute to further researches done in the field of child discourse.

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