Research Paper

Intimidation in Political Rhetoric: Analysing Threats in Joe Biden's Presidential Speeches

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Abstract

This paper examines threats made by American President Joe Biden in his speeches during the first year and a half of his presidency (2021-2022). It systemically analyses the structure of threats by examining features like conditionality, futurity, use of violent verbs, and reference to weapons. The grounds for analysing threatening language in the corpus of 13 speeches by President Biden were based on the threatening strategies developed by Muschalik (2018). It is thus demonstrated that conditionality, futurity, and intentionality markers, such as the use of violent verbs and references to weapons, are typical for Biden's speeches. The discussion further points to a broad scope of understanding threatening language in critical discourse analysis. Significantly, the work adds to the limited literature concerning the speech act of threat, especially in political discourse, in which it shows that language nuances come into play in the conveyance of threats. This investigation enriches the literature on speech acts of threat and contributes significant insights into the complex interplay between language and power, emphasising the strategic use of impoliteness in high-stakes political communication.

Keywords: Political Discourse; Linguistic Analysis; Speech Act of Threatening; American President Biden.

1. Introduction

Based on extensive research in pragmatics and politeness theory, threats are often classified as impolite speech acts, known for their face-threatening qualities (Culpeper, 1996; Rabab'ah & Alali, 2020; Rabab'ah & Rabab'ah, 2021; Olmen et al., 2023). Threats can be seen as acts that undermine the hearer's positive social value or self-esteem. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987), such acts can be understood as inherently invasive, as they conflict with positive and negative face needs. However, this interpretation does not imply that the principles of the theory consciously guide individuals in making threats. Culpeper (1996, 2003) strengthens this perspective by defining threats as intentional strategies of impoliteness aimed at disrupting social balance, often causing the hearer to lose face, particularly their negative face, which relates to autonomy and freedom from imposition.

Threats, as speech acts, are understood to impose the speaker's will on the hearer, often creating feelings of unease or fear (Culpeper et al., 2003; Rabab'ah et al., 2021). These dynamics are particularly relevant in political discourse, where threats can serve as strategic tools to assert dominance and influence outcomes, especially in high-stakes situations involving power relations. Political speeches frequently employ threats as a form of rhetoric, reflecting structured positions that align with political interests and serve to control or manipulate adversaries.

This study focuses on U.S. President Joe Biden's use of threatening language in public speeches during the first half of his presidential term (2021–2022). Employing Muschalik's (2018) model for analysing political threats, the research investigates 13 of Biden's speeches, totalling over nine hours, to examine the structural features of threats in political discourse. The study explores how Biden's use of threats fits within the broader context of impoliteness strategies and political communication.

Linguistic patterns in speech acts, such as compliments (Holmes, 1988, 1995), apologies (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984), and threats, have long been subjects of scholarly interest. Threats, as a form of impolite communication, systematically infringe on individuals' face needs, potentially leading to conflict or tension in interpersonal interactions (Culpeper, 1996). Researchers (e.g., Rudanko, 2012) have outlined how political discourse is employed as a negotiation strategy; it is also used to challenge a target person's dignity.

This study incorporates the analysis of impoliteness in political rhetoric, primarily focusing on threats, to extend our understanding of how political figures employ language to intimidate or control audiences (Rudanko, 2012). While existing literature has extensively analysed the general functions of threats in political discourse, there remains a significant gap in examining their structural forms, particularly in the context of contemporary political figures such as President Joe Biden. By addressing this gap, this research contributes to understanding the distinctive linguistic features of threatening language and their impact on audience perception and political effectiveness. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What distinctive linguistic features does President Joe Biden employ in his use of threatening language?

2. How do these features impact the perception and effectiveness of his political discourse?

2. Literature Review

The study of speech acts, particularly threats, has been a focal point of linguistic research, with frameworks like Speech Act Theory (SAT) offering valuable insights into the nature and function of different speech acts across contexts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). In political discourse, threats are often used as rhetorical devices to influence or manipulate outcomes. For instance, Alkumet (2021) examined the use of threats by a political figure during a presidential election, using SAT to analyse the significance of commissive acts, including threats and warnings, within political oratory. The findings highlighted the importance of intonation and context in conveying the speaker's intentions, with threats often functioning as indirect illocutionary acts.

Fraser (1998) differentiates threats from warnings and promises, emphasising that threats involve an unfavourable outcome directed at the hearer. Unlike warnings, which aim to prompt avoidance, threats are coercive and intended to manipulate the hearer into complying with the speaker's demands. Gingiss (1986) introduced a framework for identifying indirect threats, particularly in legal discourse, where the contextual dimensions of statements often reveal implied threats. Walton (2014) also explored the use of implicatures to uncover implicit threats, demonstrating how indirect speech acts can carry coercive meanings even when not explicitly stated.

The structural features of threats have been a subject of analysis in linguistic research. Studies by Fraser (1998) and Limberg (2009) highlight the conditional nature of many threats, with speakers often using "if...then" constructions to impose conditions on the hearer. For example, a threat might take the form of "If you do not comply, I will harm you," with the speaker outlining a scenario in which the hearer faces negative consequences if they fail to meet the speaker's demands. This conditionality is a crucial feature of threatening language, as it allows the speaker to create a sense of inevitability about the harm that will occur if the hearer does not comply.

As Benoit (1983) and Fraser (1998) noted, futurity is another essential characteristic of threats. Threats often refer to a future point in time, with the speaker anticipating harm that has not yet occurred. This forward-looking aspect of threats adds to their coercive power, as the speaker creates a sense of impending danger that compels the hearer to act. Pronouns also play a significant role in the structure of threats, with first- and second-person pronouns often used to establish the roles of the threatener and the target (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002).

In addition to conditionality and futurity, threats frequently involve the use of violent verbs and taboo language. Gales (2010) notes that threats often include verbs that convey physical or psychological harm, such as "kill" or "destroy," which heighten the emotional impact of the threat. Taboo language (swear words and insults) can further intensify the threatening nature of the speech act, as it serves to dehumanise the hearer and reinforce the power dynamics between the speaker and the target (Limberg, 2008).

Threats in political discourse are particularly significant because of the high stakes involved. When political leaders seek dominance or control over adversaries, threats can be a powerful tool to influence outcomes. Research by

Rudanko (2012) suggests that threats in political discourse not only function as strategic negotiation tools but also challenge social harmony by undermining the dignity of the hearer. Political figures often use threats to position themselves as authoritative figures, capable of enforcing their will on others, which can have significant implications for domestic and international relations.

Gagarina et al. (2019) focused on adapting the English language within intercultural political speech. They discussed some approaches to examine the characteristics and functions of political discourse. The study shows how political discourse is dynamic and keeps evolving. Results show that this dynamic trait of political discourse emerges from different cultural and social-communicative needs. The work then argued that English, serving as a lingua franca, facilitates the transfer of political terminologies influenced by the constantly changing political climate and its manifestation in language.

Research has also provided valuable insights into how threatening language varies across cultures. For example, Al Shamiri and Abbas (2016) examined the use of threats in both English and Arabic, focusing on the speech act of threatening in the Qur'an. Their findings suggest that threats are often expressed implicitly in both languages, using imperatives, interrogatives, and prohibitive forms. Similarly, Parween (2023) analysed threats in Kurdish and English, finding that while threats are not typically expressed performatively in Kurdish, their structure and vocabulary convey a strong sense of coercion and intimidation.

Emotions are key when performing a speech act, whether praising, apologising, or threatening. Garaeva et al. (2023) examined the features of politicians using English to communicate emotions. Their study explored the impact of emotiveness in political communication as far as the British prime ministers David Cameron, Theresa May, Boris Johnson, and Mary Truss are concerned. The work highlighted the common strategies that impact political discourse by providing several examples of linguistic elements that shape different concepts in political discourse.

Impoliteness research has also contributed to the understanding of threats as speech acts. Culpeper (1996) defines impoliteness as "deliberately offensive face-threatening communication," with threats as a critical strategy for breaking social harmony. Rabab'ah and Alali (2020) explored impoliteness in online comments on news websites, finding that commentators frequently used threats and other impolite strategies to challenge the face of others. In high-stress environments such as healthcare, threats can serve as a means of asserting control over patients or colleagues, as demonstrated by Rabab'ah et al. (2021) in their study of face-threatening acts in Jordanian hospitals.

Van Olmen et al. (2023) explored using intrinsically impolite language across different languages, identifying specific linguistic structures that carry an inherent threatening quality. Their research highlights the importance of understanding the cultural and contextual factors that influence the perception of threats, as what may be considered impolite or threatening in one language or culture may not be perceived the same way in another. This underscores the need for further research into the specific linguistic forms of threats in political discourse, particularly in the context of American political rhetoric.

According to Drygina et al. (2019) and Khramchenko (2024), the American political discourse is abundant with direct power language. This is because American political leaders, namely presidents, use various strategies to show power and control traits at high frequencies. By analogy, Oliveira and Miranda (2022) report using straightforward discourse to show power and public shaming by US President Joe Biden.

The current study builds on the foundational work of scholars like Culpeper (1996), Fraser (1998), and Limberg (2009) to explore the structural features of threats in President Joe Biden's speeches. By focusing on conditionality, futurity, violent verbs, and references to weapons, this research seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of how threats function within political communication. The use of a corpus-based approach, informed by previous frameworks such as Muschalik (2018), allows for a systematic analysis of the linguistic strategies employed by Biden in his use of threatening language. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the broader discourse on political communication strategies and their impact on public perception, offering insights into the role of threats in shaping political outcomes.

3. Methodology

3.1.   Data collection

The researchers gathered 13 speeches delivered by President Biden from The Miller Center (https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches?field_president_target_id[30721]=30721). This online archive contains a vast amount of data related to American Presidents, ranging from interviews to public events and political speeches. A transcribed version of the speeches delivered between 2021 and 2022 was extracted and copied onto a Microsoft Word document. Table (1) highlights the selected speeches and their length,

Table 1. *The Speeches Delivered by President Joe Biden (2021-2022)*

Date	Speech Title	Audience/Occasion	Length (min)
January 20, 2021	Inaugural Address	The general public, international community	21
March 25, 2021	First Press Conference	Media, general public	62
March 31, 2021	Announcing the American Jobs Plan	Business leaders, policymakers, public	30
April 28, 2021	Address to Joint Session of Congress	Members of Congress, public	65
March 31, 2021	Announcing the American Jobs Plan	Public	35
June 1, 2021	Remarks Commemorating the 100th Anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre	The public, civil rights advocates	42
August 26, 2021	Statement on Terror Attacks in Afghanistan	Gouvernement officials, public	29
March 26, 2022	Remarks in Support of the People of Ukraine	Public, international allies	35
September 9, 2021	Remarks on Fighting the COVID-19 Pandemic	Public and media	28
November 15, 2021	Signing the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act	Public	60
March 1, 2022	State of the Union Address	Congress	73
February 24, 2022	Remarks on the Russian Invasion of Ukraine	Government officials, public	25
September 21, 2022	Speech before the 77th Session of the United Nations General Assembly	United Nations, global leaders	36

3.2.   Data analysis

The collected data underwent a thorough examination to extract instances of discourse indicating a "threat," guided by linguistic and pragmatic criteria outlined in the theoretical framework. In this study, a threat is defined as a speech act where the speaker intends to impose a harmful or undesirable consequence unless the addressee complies with certain demands (Searle, 1979; Fraser, 1998). Threats were distinguished from two closely related speech acts, warnings and promises, by focusing on three critical dimensions: intent, conditionality, and the speaker's control over outcomes.

*Intent: A threat is coercive, designed to compel the addressee to act per the speaker's wishes by invoking fear of a negative consequence (Fraser, 1998). A promise, in contrast, offers a positive or beneficial outcome as a reward for compliance (Austin, 1962). Meanwhile, a warning serves as an advisory function without coercion, alerting the addressee to potential harm or risk, often independent of the speaker's volition (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

*Conditionality: Both threats and promises are typically conditional, structured as "if-then" propositions. A threat might state, "If you do not follow this order, I will cause harm," while a promise takes the opposite tone, such as, "If you comply, I will reward you" (Searle, 1979). In contrast, warnings can be conditional or unconditional but lack coercive force and emphasise external risk factors, e.g., "If you go outside, you might get caught in the rain."

*Control over outcomes: A key feature of a threat is that the speaker holds agency over the negative outcome, positioning themselves as its initiator or enforcer. Conversely, warnings typically describe an external hazard beyond the speaker's control (e.g., "Be careful, the floor is wet"), while promises focus on the speaker's commitment to deliver a positive outcome (Culpeper, 2011).

These distinctions were systematically applied during the analysis to ensure clear categorisation. First, a content analysis was performed using AntConc software to identify linguistic markers associated with threats, such as modality ("will," "shall"), explicit conditional statements, and negative polarity. Second, a quantitative analysis was conducted to measure the frequency of threats in the dataset, manually recording each instance and calculating percentages. This dual-

method approach ensured qualitative and quantitative rigour in identifying and differentiating threats, promises, and warnings. The study follows Muschalik's (2018) comprehensive framework for the taxonomy of threats, as highlighted in Table (2) below.

Table 2. *Taxonomy of Threats as Proposed by Muschalik (2018)*

Category	Source	Text Extract
Intentionality & futurity	Benoit (1983: 305; Fraser 1998: 168; Gales 2010: 96, 105; Salgueiro 2010: 217; Yamanaka 1995: 52)	"[...] the speaker expresses intention to perform the unfavourable act, typically signaling this intention by using *will, am going to, have to*, and the like." (Fraser 1998: 168) [...] threats [...] must describe a future action or omission, or a sequence of such actions or omissions, by the speaker." (Salgueiro 2010: 217) *Hand over your money or I will shoot you*. (Yamanaka 1995: 50)
Violent verbs	Gales (2010: 96; Salgueiro 2010: 217)	"[...] a threatened future action is detrimental to the receiver [...]" (Salgueiro 2010: 217) "kill, die, hurt, beat, destroy, slice, murder" (Gales 2010: 96) *Look, I don't want to cancel all my credit cards and I hate waiting in line at the DMV, so give me back the wallet you stole from my car or I'll break your fucking neck.* (Gales 2010: 94)
Agency	Fraser (1998: 167)	"[...] with the speaker as the agent of the unfavourable act." (Fraser 1998: 167) *I will get you later.* (Fraser 1998: 167)
Orientation of threat	Gales (2010: 100)	"[...] it also raises an interesting question about the primary focus of threatening communications – i.e., is the focus of a threat typically on the recipient [...], or on the threatener [...]?(Gales 2010: 100)
Personal pronouns	Gales (2010: 96, 100)	"you, you all" (Gales 2010: 96) "[...] heightened sense of personalisation or focus placed on the victim of the threat through the second person pronoun." (Gales 2010: 100) *If I were ya'll I would be real afraid.* (Gales 2010: 100)
Swear words and profanity	Davis (1997: xiii; Gales 2010: 25, 83, 95–96)	"[...] the use of profanity and other foul and offensive language often goes hand in hand with violent behavior." (Davis 1997: xiii) "shit, fuck, Chink, gook" (Gales 2010: 96)
Mentions of weapons	Turner & Gelles (2003: 18, 73; Gales 2010: 38)	*This gun gives me pornographic power.* (Gales 2010: 38)

4. Results

This section presents the study's results. First, we explore the overall use of the different types of threats in President Biden's speeches. Then, we move to an in-depth analysis, handling each subcategory separately.

Table 3. *The Overall Use of Threat in President Biden's Speeches*

Taxonomy of Threat	President Joe Biden	
	Frequency (№)	Percentage (%)
Conditionality	15	11
Futurity and intentionality	80	61
Violent verbs	33	25
Weapons	3	2
Total	131	100

Table (3) shows the overall frequencies and percentages of threats in the speeches of President Joe Biden. The results indicate that the most frequently used primary threat strategy was 'futurity and intentionality' with 80 instances of occurrence, accounting for (61%) of all threats used. The second most used type of threat was 'violent verb' with a total of (33) occurrences, accounting (25%) of Joe Biden's threats. The analysis also revealed that 'weapons' is the least used type of threat, with only (3) occurrences, accounting for just (2%). The subsequent part of the research explores each type separately with more details.

4.1. Conditional language

The dataset identified 15 (14.6%) conditionals. Seven (6.7%) were categorised as explicit conditionals, and eight (7.7%) were classified as implicit conditionals. We observed the absence of (if …, then) structures. Instead, President Biden consistently dropped the use of "then" in all nine explicit threats, as illustrated in the examples below:

1. **"If** necessary, we will do the same in Afghanistan." (*January 20, 2021: Inaugural Address*)

2. "We're consulting with our allies and partners. And there will be responses — if they choose to escalate, we will respond accordingly. (*August 26, 2021: Statement on Terror Attacks in Afghanistan*)

3. "Today—tonight, I'm announcing that the Transportation Safety Administration—the TSA—will double the fines on travellers that refuse to mask. **If** you break the rules, be prepared to pay." (*June 1, 2021*)

In Example (1), the president directs a threat toward Taliban leaders, asserting that the U.S. is prepared to prolong its presence in the country should it fail to uphold its commitment to international regulations and peace treaties. Similarly, in Example (2), President Biden acknowledges the Taliban's aggression toward U.S. assets; subsequently, he issues a threat, stating that if the Taliban Militants persist in their assault, there will be retaliation from the U.S. and its allies. Once again, a direct approach is evident in expressing the threat, as seen in Example (3), where the target is the American people -specifically those who disregard COVID-19 safety regulations - is a threat rather than a warning because it is coercive and aims to manipulate compliance with mask-wearing rules by invoking fear of a controlled consequence—doubled fines. Unlike warnings, which advise about external risks beyond the speaker's control, this statement emphasises punitive measures directly enforced by the TSA, demonstrating the speaker's authority and intent to compel behaviour. A warning would instead highlight potential harms, such as health risks, rather than enforcement actions. Implicit conditional threats were also observed, as highlighted below:

4. "But make no mistake: Our military and intelligence leaders are confident they have the capabilities to protect the homeland and our interests from any resurgent terrorist challenge emerging or emanating from Afghanistan." (*March 31, 2021*)

5. "There is no doubt—no doubt that the United States and every NATO Ally will meet our Article 5 commitments, which says that an attack on one is an attack on all." (*August 26, 2021*)

6. "Any nation that countenances Russia's naked aggression against Ukraine will be stained by association." (*August 26, 2021*)

Example (4) illustrates an implicit conditional where President Biden emphasises the readiness of the U.S. Army to address any threat. This signals the strength of the U.S. military and intelligence, implying an indirect threat to any parties contemplating or intending to attack the United States. In Example (5), an implicit threat is observed wherein all allied forces would retaliate in the event of an attack on a NATO member country. Similarly, in Example (6), President Biden indirectly addresses the international community, issuing a threat to countries that fail to condemn Russian aggression in Ukrainian territory.

4.2. Futurity and Intentionality

In this study, the category of futurity is defined to include various forms, specifically: the modal "will" (which covers all occurrences of "will" and "shall"), the expression "be going to" (encompassing all instances and variations of "be going to" and "be to"), and the "present futurate" (the use of present tense combined with a temporal adverb). Within the corpus of threats analysed, it was found that a total of 60 threats (representing 58.2% of the sample) utilised the modal "will," 15 threats (14.5% of the sample) employed "going," and 5 threats (4.8% of the sample) were characterised by the "present futurate," as depicted in Figure 1. This distribution underscores the prevalence and diversity of linguistic strategies used to convey futurity in expressing threats.
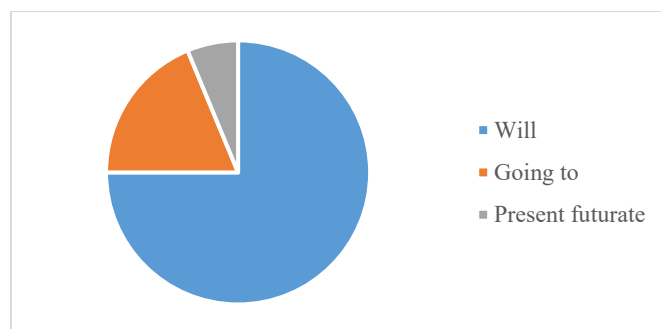
Figure 1. Distribution of Futurity and Intentionality

From a structural perspective, examples (7 to 12) utilise various techniques to signal that the scenarios they describe are projected to occur in the future. Specifically, Examples (7) and (8) make use of the modal verb "will." In such cases, the employment of "will" serves to situate the actions within a future context, showcasing that the constructions of these examples are remarkably similar. This analysis sheds light on the linguistic strategies employed to navigate temporal contexts, highlighting the role of modal verbs in indicating future events.

7. "We **will** respond with force and precision at our time, at the place we choose, and the moment of our choosing." *(April 28, 2021)*

8. "Putin is the aggressor. Putin chose this war. And now he and his country **will** bear the consequences." *(August 26, 2021)*

Examples (9) and (10) both contain a construction with *be going to*,

9. "Under my administration, the watchdogs are back, and we are **going to** go after the criminals who stole billions of relief money meant for small businesses and millions of Americans." *(November 15, 2021)*

10. "And as long as you and your country continue to violate human rights so blatantly, we're **going to** continue, in an unrelenting way, to call to the attention of the world and make it clear — make it clear what's happening." *(March 25, 2021)*

In Examples (11-12), conversely, the speaker utilises the present tense, accompanied by the specification of a future timeframe, by including a temporal location expression. This method is employed to characterise the future event as one "that [has] already been arranged, scheduled by a human agency" (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 132). The prevalence of present tense usage in these instances is notable and aligns with the linguistic construct known as the present futurate (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). This construct highlights how the present tense (coupled with contextual markers of futurity) articulates events firmly situated in the future yet are understood to be definitively planned or scheduled.

11. "As promised, we're also adding names to the list of Russian elites and their family members that are sanctioning—that we're sanctioning as well." *(August 26, 2021)*

12. "Folks, Wall Street firms taking control over nursing homes providing low quality services for huge sums of money, that ends on my watch." *(November 15, 2021)*

Examples (11-12) can be interpreted as threats rather than promises or statements of intent. In the first example, while the speaker frames the action as fulfilling a promise, the act of imposing sanctions is inherently coercive, aimed at deterring specific behaviours (in this case, the actions of Russian elites and their families) through the threat of negative consequences. The emphasis on enforcement and punitive action, rather than a mutually beneficial outcome, makes it a threat. Similarly, in the second statement, the speaker's declaration to end Wall Street firms' control over nursing homes signals an authoritative intervention, again framed not as a mere promise to improve conditions but as a direct, coercive action to change the status quo. The phrase "that ends on my watch" reinforces the speaker's control over the outcome, highlighting the threat of corrective measures to force compliance with their vision. Both statements involve direct actions that aim to manipulate behaviour through the imposition of negative consequences, which align them more with the characteristics of threats than promises or general statements of intent.

Many of the threats within the analysed corpus explicitly reference a future timeframe. Remarkably, "will" emerges as the predominant choice for articulating such future references, with alternative expressions of futurity being less commonly employed. This dominance of "will" may initially seem expected, as it is frequently identified as a primary option for indicating future events (see Gotti, 2003: 280; Haegeman, 1983: 15). Moreover, "will" is often associated with a "neutral or colourless future" (Leech, 2004: 87), showcasing its adaptability across a broad spectrum of contexts (Leech, 2004: 89). This flexibility allows speakers to express intentions and predictions, navigating the modal verb's capacity for both 'volitional' and 'predictive' interpretations, especially in speech acts like threats or warnings, where the speaker seeks to influence the behaviour of the addressee. In these contexts, the use of "will" may signal an impending event that the speaker asserts will take place, often invoking a sense of inevitability and authority, which is crucial in threatening situations.

Contrastingly, the construction "be going to" exhibits less structure and semantic range variation. This difference between using "will" and "be going to" can be attributed to their inherent semantic properties. While both constructions refer to future events, "be going to" is more closely tied to intention or prior planning, making it less flexible than "will." In the context of threats, this may suggest a speaker with more deliberate control over the future event they are forecasting, positioning the threat as more of a warning than a simple prediction. As previously discussed, the predictive capacity of various future expressions operates on a continuum, with "will" positioned as the most flexible, albeit semantically less definitive, option in specific instances. This flexibility and semantic subtlety of "will" contrast with the more constrained application and meaning of "be going to," highlighting how speakers strategically select linguistic forms to convey different degrees of futurity and commitment, particularly in speech acts that aim to influence or threaten the addressee's actions.

The "present futurate" variant is the least utilised within the corpus, comprising only about 10% of the expressions analysed. The simple present or present progressive use to denote future events is governed by "strict pragmatic conditions," according to Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 189). The "present futurate" is deemed appropriate for events that are either scheduled, part of natural cycles, or contingent upon specific circumstances (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 132). While the simple present and present progressive fall under the umbrella of "present futurate," they diverge in their predictive potency. The present progressive, for example, is often noted for its strong predictive capacity and inherent element of planning (Bergs, 2010: 218). In the context of threats or warnings, the "present futurate" could suggest an imminent and certain event, creating a sense of urgency or inevitability. Its limited use in this corpus may reflect the nuanced nature of threats, where speakers choose forms that better reflect the degree of commitment or immediacy involved in their threat.

These observations, while tentative due to the limited data set, suggest that native speakers predominantly rely on "will" and "be going to" to express future intentions in the context of threats or warnings. The scarcity of "present futurate" expressions may be linked to their stronger predictive force, as they convey a more definitive commitment on the speaker's part, potentially emphasising the immediacy or certainty of the forecasted event. Although the conclusions drawn are based on a relatively small corpus, they point to the strategic selection of future expressions in conveying various degrees of futurity, immediacy, and commitment in threatening or warning speech acts. Further research involving a larger corpus would provide a more robust understanding of the relationship between future expressions and the speech act of threat, offering insights into how speakers select specific forms to achieve different communicative goals in these contexts.

4.3. Violent Verbs

A systematic classification framework was developed to categorise the diverse verbs identified within the threats. This framework distinguishes between verbs indicative of violence and those that are either ambiguous or non-violent. Drawing inspiration from Levin's (1993) categorisation of verbs, we created three distinct categories: violent, ambiguous, and non-violent. To determine whether a verb is 'violent', we relied on definitions from standard dictionaries. Violent verbs, such as "kill", were identified as such based on their explicit violent meanings, which are unambiguous in common usage. However, the classification depended on a detailed analysis of the verb's meaning within its context for ambiguous and non-violent verbs. Ambiguity was determined by the verb's capacity to convey violent and non-violent actions depending on the surrounding text (co-text) and situational context. For example, the verb "strike" could be interpreted as violent in the context of a physical assault but non-violent in the context of "strike a deal." Non-violent verbs were

those whose meanings consistently indicated actions not associated with harm or aggression. An example of a non-violent verb is "help", which implies assistance without any connection to violence. These distinctions were carefully derived based on dictionary definitions, context analysis, and co-textual features that provided further clarity. The dataset revealed the following distribution of verb categories: violent verbs constituted 19.4%, ambiguous verbs 10.6%, and non-violent verbs 1.9%, as depicted in Figure (2). This methodology highlights the nuanced approach needed to assess the potential for violence in the language of threats, emphasising the importance of contextual and co-textual factors in determining meaning.
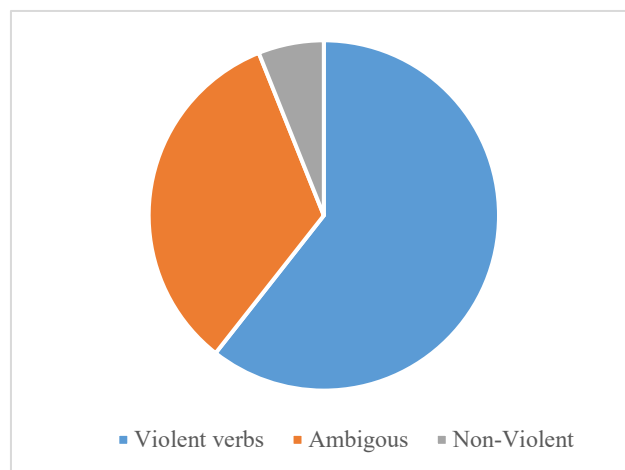

Figure 2. Distribution of violent verbs

*Violent

13. "To those who carried out this attack, as well as anyone who wishes America harm, know this: We will not forgive. We will not forget. We will **hunt** you down and **make you pay**. I will defend our interests and our people with every measure at my command." *(April 28, 2021)*

14. "I've also ordered my commanders to develop operational plans to **strike** ISIS-K assets, leadership, and facilities." *(April 28, 2021)*

In Examples (13-14), the speakers articulate an imminent action characterised by an agency—involving an initiator of the action—and a reference to the recipient of the action. Most of these verbs are categorised under the umbrella term "force verbs," a synthesis of several of Levin's categories into a singular, cohesive group. Levin originally defined this class as "the exerting of force on an entity" (Levin, 1993, p. 137). The category has been expanded to include what Levin described as 'verbs of contact by impact.' This refinement specifically incorporates verbs that imply hitting, cutting, and other forms of physical impact affecting the state of an object (Levin, 1993, p. 10), thereby broadening the scope to encapsulate a more diverse range of actions implying force or impact.

*Ambiguous

15. "And with regard to finding, tracking down the ISIS leaders who ordered this, we have some reason to believe we know who they are—not certain—and we will **find ways of our choosing**, without large military operations**, to get them**." *(April 28, 2021)*

16. "It's **never, ever been a good bet to bet against** the American people. Never, never, never." *(April 28, 2021)*

17. "And **we're preparing to do more**." *(April 28, 2021)*

In Example (15), President Biden is threatening the ISIS terror group and its affiliates with retaliation. The expression "ways of our choosing" does not determine the type of action the U.S. Army intends to use. It could be anything from using drones to using ballistic missiles and airstrikes. This way, the American government uses the element of surprise to its advantage since the enemy will not know what to prepare. Similarly, the verb 'get them' does not specify the violent action, whether it is neutralising (killing) the enemy, injuring them, or even kidnapping/arresting them. In

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Example (16), President Biden expresses a warning message highlighting that the American people have survived tough times. The statement subtly suggests that any country with ill intentions toward America should not be too quick to act. It stresses the unyielding spirit of Americans historically exhibited over time in conquering obstacles, including threats against their unity and singleness of purpose. As for Example (17), the verb 'to do' is ambiguous since it does not specify the action.

*Non-violent

18. "These international sanctions are sapping Russian strength, its ability to replenish its military, and its ability—its ability to project power. And it is Putin—it is Vladimir Putin who is to blame, period." *(March 26, 2022)*

19. "We will make sure of that. Putin will be a pariah on the international stage." *(March 26, 2022)*

Collectively, these findings suggest two interconnected trends in the data. First, speakers predominantly articulate their actions using violent verbs that explicitly convey the specifics of who does what to whom in a given scenario. While this trend is observed, it is essential to note that the selection of violent verbs may vary across individuals or contexts. Additionally, when opting for a violent verb, they tend to select the most unequivocal variant, such as a "kill" verb, where applicable.

4.4. Weapons

In general, references to weapons are relatively rare in the dataset. Only about 3% of the utterances fall into this subset, incorporating instances of the previously described nature. Consequently, this feature ranks as the least frequent among all the features investigated in the current study. This finding suggests that, based on the data, mentions of weapons may not be considered particularly relevant to speakers in the corpus when conveying threats (2.9%).

20. "We're confident that these devastating sanctions are going to be as devastating as Russian missiles and bullets and tanks *(August 26, 2021)*

21. "In the years before the invasion, we, America, had sent over $650 million, before they crossed the border, in weapons to Ukraine, including anti-air and anti-armour equipment." *(March 26, 2022)*

22. "Since the invasion, America has committed another $1.35 billion in weapons and ammunition." *(March 26, 2022)*

The term "weapon" is employed here in the sense of "something (such as a gun, knife, club, or bomb) that is used for fighting or attacking someone." It is an umbrella term encompassing all references to firearms, knives, explosives, and related lexical field elements (cf. Löbner 2013: 215). Notably, President Biden emphasises the concept of weapons as a tool to signal a threat to President Putin and assert the USA's support for Ukraine. Based on this observation, weapons may not be considered particularly relevant to speakers in the corpus when expressing threats. The pie chart below provides a visual summary of all the strategies.

5. Discussion

This study explored President Joe Biden's use of threatening rhetoric during the early years of his presidency (2021-2022), focusing on the nuanced linguistic structures that define his discourse. Using Muschalik's (2018) holistic framework, the study identified distinct linguistic features Biden employed to shape his threats and how these features contributed to the perception of his rhetoric on a global scale. The research offers new insights into Biden's political language, engaging with the existing literature on speech acts, specifically the concept of threats, and highlighting their broader implications for global political interactions.

Unlike conventional, overt threats that are clear and direct, Biden's use of threatening rhetoric is subtler and more strategic. His language incorporates conditionality, futurity, and occasional references to violent acts or weapons, creating an ambiguous and indirect form of threat. This strategic ambiguity allows Biden to imply harm without explicitly outlining its consequences, leaving much of the interpretation to the audience. This rhetorical style grants the audience agency, enabling them to imagine potential outcomes and amplifying the threat's psychological impact. This approach

contrasts with more direct, aggressive, and threatening language, positioning Biden's rhetoric as deliberative and carefully calibrated.

One key feature of Biden's rhetoric is the deliberate omission of the "then" in "if...then" structures, a linguistic choice that adds vagueness and suspense. This subtlety reflects Fraser's (1998) concept of indirectness, leaving the consequences of non-compliance open to interpretation. The lack of explicit detail engages the audience's imagination, encouraging them to ponder the potential risks of defiance. This vagueness serves not only as a tool for psychological manipulation but also as a means of heightening the perceived severity of the threat, making it more potent without needing to resort to explicit aggression.

Biden's occasional use of violent verbs and references to weaponry further deepens the corporeality of his threats, aligning with Gales' (2010) perspective on the role of harm in threatening communication. This inclusion of violence serves as a powerful, albeit restrained, tool to convey potential physical consequences. The restrained yet sharp juxtaposition of violent language highlights Biden's strategic use of impoliteness, a concept explored by Culpeper (1996), where rude or confrontational speech acts are employed to achieve specific political outcomes. Rather than purely aggressive rhetoric, Biden's language can be seen as a calibrated exercise in power and control, emphasising the consequences of non-compliance while maintaining the possibility of negotiation.

The study contributes to understanding how threatening speech acts function in political discourse, particularly through the lens of impoliteness theory. Culpeper's (1996) work underscores that threats are inherently impolite, as they exert power over the target. However, in political discourse, the audience's role shifts from the direct recipient of the threat to a witness of its potential impact. Biden's rhetoric is thus not solely directed at the immediate audience but at an absent third party, whose vulnerability is highlighted through implied consequences. This strategic ambiguity and use of violent imagery provoke the audience's emotions and shape their perception of global power dynamics.

Biden's use of ambiguous and impolite threats can be understood as part of a broader " smart power strategy, " as Nye described (1990). This strategy blends coercion with diplomatic influence, using rhetorical subtlety to assert dominance while signalling a potential for negotiation. Biden's rhetorical choices align with Kahneman and Tversky's (1979) psychological theory of loss aversion, where the audience is more motivated by fear of loss than potential gains. By leaving the consequences open-ended, Biden increases the perceived risks of non-compliance, amplifying the psychological impact of his threats. In this way, Biden's rhetoric exemplifies how psychological and strategic language can shape domestic and international political landscapes, demonstrating the effectiveness of subtle, performative speech acts in high-stakes political environments.

6. Conclusions

Exploring the threatening rhetoric of President Joe Biden in a selection of his speeches during 2021-2022 provides an enriching base for understanding how politicians apply language strategically in political discourses, mainly in the domain of international relations. While dissecting the linguistic structure of the threats by using the framework by Muschalik (2018), a subsequent analysis allows for the examination of the explicit and implicit use of conditionals, futurity, violent verbs, and references to weaponry in sending messages of power, deterrence, and potential action. Therefore, the findings explain a more subtle mix of direct and indirect threats, which feature the management of Biden's rhetorical subtlety with the multi-faceted nuances of international diplomatic discourse. This nuanced approach would seemingly indicate very deliberate efforts to maintain a balance between demonstrating resolve and giving room for diplomatic engagement, thereby underscoring, in the process, the performative power of language in such a setting. Not having the word "then" in conditional sentences also contributes to the added ambiguity and greater psychological force of the threats and shows a sophisticated way to assert power, with the potential to make the perceived severity and credibility of the threats more.

Integrating the concept of impoliteness, mainly through face-threatening acts as outlined in politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Culpeper, 1996), further illuminates how Biden's strategic use of threatening language functions as a powerful tool of political discourse. By their nature, these threats challenge both the addressee's positive and negative face wants, employing impoliteness as a deliberate strategy to influence, intimidate, and control. This dual function of threatening language—a direct challenge to the hearer's social value and a strategic manoeuvre within political

negotiation—illustrates the complex interplay between language, power, and interpersonal dynamics in high-stakes settings.

The implications of these linguistic strategies go far beyond academic interests to touch on some practical areas like diplomacy, international relations, and policy formulation. The research shows language's critical role in shaping perceptions of leadership and power on the global stage. The findings point to the fact that Biden's language is not only a policy issue vehicle but also a strategic tool in a much broader picture of international negotiations and relations where the critical variable is power. The threats were very explicit and violent in parts, underscored by strategic use of futurity and conditional language that seems to suggest a complex interplay between conveying determination and leaving open the possibility for diplomacy and negotiation. This duality speaks of a mind with the highest understanding of language's role in international relations. In addition, the sparing nature of the use of references to weapons seems to reflect a rhetorical strategy that would place psychological effect over explicit enumeration of military capabilities—usually, generally—in line with broader strategies of deterrence calling for the importance of ambiguity and strategic uncertainty. The study's contribution to Biden's rhetorical approach unravels valuable perspectives for policymakers, diplomats, and analysts engaged in international relations. This work should be of interest to persons who take an interest in learning how linguistic choices may reflect and, at the same time, shape strategic priorities, in this case, of the United States, alongside perceptions of power and intentions on the international stage.
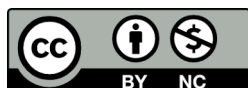
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