

Malicious Communications: from Moves to Genres

CFL is in the process of developing a database of malicious communications which consists of threats, abuse and harassment letters. In order to explore genre differences within the corpus a moves analysis (Swales, 1990) was used to compare and contrast different letters. From this analysis we were able to identify four sub-genres which reflect a consistent use of moves within each set of letters.

Threats: Personal

Dear Senator
Jesse Helms
you the hell
you think you
are a fascists
Nazi
well well
kill you and
your Nazi
scum

Further features of this sub-genre seem to be: high levels of emotion, spelling errors, informality and with little expansion of threat

Abuse: Unclear Justification

Helms, you horse's ass, you worthless shit, you fucking hypocrite, we're gonna WASTE you.
You want to know who we are, you lick of dried-up cunts, we'll tell you: The Committee for the Extermination of rank vermin.
Fuck you and all you stand for.

Further features of this sub-genre seem to be: personal or unknown justification and robust narratives.

Moves predominantly used in each sub-genre

- Opening
- Evaluation
- Threat
(conditional/
unconditional)
- Justification

- Greeting -
- Threat -
(conditional/
unconditional)
- Intimidation -
- Threat Expansion -
- Closing -

- Opening
- Narrative
- Closing

- Greeting -
- Evaluation -
- Information -
- Justification -
- Intention -
- Closing -

Threats: Professional

To Frank Sinatra
You will arrange a well publicized press-conference not later than August 15, 1950. You will denounce your good friend Spiro Agnew because he sold himself to the Arabs in order to be their spokesman and official anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic propagandist in the USA.
If you do not comply this demand your life is NOT in danger. Death is not a punishment, it is a sudden end of life without suffering. Your famous Blue Eyes are in jeopardy.
Study the method of African Bushmen's blowing tubes. The prickle can be targeted very exactly from a distance of 100 feet or further. The tube could be a cigarette holder, could be a part of a photo camera, a binocular, a trumpet or a dozen of other objects. It is absolutely undetectable.
No poison will be used but a chemically treated prickle perforates one of your eyes and a sympathetic ophthalmia follows. Consult your doctor, he will convince you.
Think about it which is better: keep the friendship of Agnew or spend the rest of your life in complete darkness.

Further features of this sub-genre seem to be: low levels of emotion, ultimatums, conditional threats and often threaten a third party.

Abuse: Clear Justification

Dear Helms.
"We Italian people are very proud, but we also are very revengeful, last week your husband insulted us Italian people which we can not tolerate, I myself am dedicating the rest of my life to avenge this insult in the name of Garibaldi, I am ready to die before a firing squad anytime in exchange for the privilege of plunging my dagger into the heart of President Roosevelt, this I shall accomplish if it is my last act on this earth."

Further features of this sub-genre seem to be: clear reasoning, for example classism, religion and nationalism.

Exploring Moves

Taking as an example intention— 70% of occurrences of this move were in the abuse sub-genre. However, 75% of those occurrences took place in the clear justification sub-genre.

Identifying and grouping moves

A moves analysis was carried out on a sample of 40 letters from the database, chosen intuitively to reflect a spread of subgenres. Analysts independently identified potential moves which were then discussed within the group to create an agreed set of 20 moves. The agreed set were applied to the letters independently and inter-rater reliability was confirmed by a third party not involved in the coding. This person was also responsible for grouping the results into the four subgenre and also used a statistical cluster analysis in this process.