Threats, Warnings, Assertions

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In this paper, I explore warnings and threats through the lens of popular illocutionary taxonomies. John Searle does not count warnings and threats as illocutions at all – though he thinks the verbs, when used in sentences, can serve as illocutions. For instance, he thinks that sentences containing warnings can sometimes be what he calls *assertives* and sometimes *directives*. I argue that if we tap into moral philosophy to help carve out some important distinctions between types of warnings and threats, we find that these more specific concepts do constitute illlocutions. I show that the principles used by Searle, Kent Bach and John Harnish to differentiate the categories of illocutions can be employed to analyze warnings and threats. When unconditional, warnings generally have what Searle calls an *assertive* illocutionary point, and threats a *commissive* (commitment-making) illocutionary point. However, the best way to explain *conditional* threats or warnings is through a combination of illocutions. I end the paper by describing a specific type of threat: non-committal threats. I argue that non-committal threats, unlike all other threats, involve assertions.

My partner grew up in Monterrey, Mexico at a time when drug cartels made the city especially dangerous. To this day, my partner's aunts and uncles in Monterrey do not answer their phones. They fear that if they answer their phones, they will be told something like this, "Give us money, and we will make sure that your house does not burn down." Of course, what the hearer understands, and what the speaker expects the hearer to understand, is, "Give us money, or we will burn down your house." Now, one unfamiliar with the nature of threats might

ask: why not pick up the phone? Surely it is better to have an opportunity to give the drug cartel some amount of money than to have one's home burnt down.

Of course, the answer is: if they do not receive the phone call – do not hear the threat – then they are not in danger of their house being burnt down. The drug cartel has no incentive to burn down their house until the threat is uttered and received (or expected to be received – as in a case where the drug cartel member leaves a message on an answering machine). It is only when the threat is *made* that a reason is generated in the mind of the member of the drug cartel to adopt the conditional intention: we will burn down your house if you do not give us money. For this reason, residents of Monterrey are not in the situation of being under threat until the threat is actually made. Until then, they have the option of keeping their money and their house.[1] In order to handle cases like ones involving answering machines, I should be precise about what I mean by a threat being *made*. It does not need to receive uptake in order for it to have been *made* – since the could generate could give rise to the threat-maker's intention without uptake (or without uptake *yet*). I will stipulate that the threat has been made if it has been uttered (or written, or otherwise communicated) with the expectation that it will be heard/received.

Before I begin my analysis, it is important that I distinguish three different types of action: Offers, Warnings, Threats. All three are illocutions – and are used to *do* something with words. If the drug cartel truly meant – and intended for the hearer to understand – that there was an existing problem whereby houses were getting burned down (perhaps by a third party), the cartel member might say, "Give us money, and we will make sure that your house doesn't burn

[1] Some think that it is this feature of coercion – the elimination of a valuable conjunction of options – that characterizes coercion. On these theories, when the elimination of this conjunction of options is wrongful, then coercion is wrongful. For instance, see Nozick, Robert 1969. Coercion, in Philosophy, Science, and Method: Essays in Honor of Ernest Nagel, ed. Sidney Morgenbesser, Patrick Suppes, and Morton White, New York: St. Martin's Press: 440–72.

down." In this case, the cartel is offering protection against a third party in return for money. This is truly an offer and not a threat. Robert Nozick suggests that the reason why this is an offer and not a threat is because the option provided by the speaker is better than the options previously available to the hearer.[2] David Zimmerman suggests that the reason why this is an offer and not a threat is because the option provided by the speaker is preferred by the hearer to the options previously available to the hearer.[3] Benjamin Sachs suggests that both explanations are problematic since they do not account for very bad offers. For instance, a person whom you do not like might say to you: Give me that job and I will marry you. Now, you do not prefer, nor are you made better off, by the options that she or he is putting on the table. However, you can refuse both to give the speaker the job, and refuse to marry the speaker. Whereas, with a threat, you cannot leave the conversation as you entered it – maintaining your *status quo*. Sachs thinks that what characterizes an offer is that the speaker makes a conditional proposal that is itself conditional: if you accept these terms, *then* if you give me the job, I will marry you.[4] The drug cartel does not say to those on the other end of the phone, "if you accept these terms, *then* if you pay us the money, we will not burn down your house."

Having characterized offers, I will now ignore them. This paper is about warnings and threats. Let us re-examine the phone call from the drug cartel. According to moral philosophers, what makes the words uttered on the phone a threat and not a warning is precisely the fact that, should the resident not pick up the phone, the speaker does not have the conditional intention to

[2] Nozick 447–53. See also Wertheimer, Alan 1987. *Coercion*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. Ch. 12. See also Frankfurt, Harry 1988. *The Importance of What We Care About*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 28.
[3] Zimmerman, David 1981. "Coercive Wage Offers," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10/2: 121–45
[4] Sachs, Benjamin. (2013) Why Coercion is Wrong When It's Wrong, Australasian Journal of Philosophy, 91:1, 63-82: pp. 69-70

burn down the house.[5] Imagine that the drug cartel regularly went around burning down houses – maybe as a form of terror – or maybe because it establishes their power in the community. Imagine that they had already planned to burn down a woman's house – unless they receive some incentive not to do so. So, they call and say: give us money or we will burn down your house. This is a warning and not a threat. (Note that it is no less coercive than a threat.) The cartel – or a member thereof - already intends to burn down the house conditional on the resident not providing money. The phone call simply alerts the resident to her situation.

In this way, the difference between threats and warnings does not turn on whether the speaker is referring to a bad outcome that will be imposed by the speaker himself/herself. The difference turns on whether it is the utterance (or the signaling or the delivering) of the speech act that creates the intention and/or supplies the motivation, or reason to do the thing uttered.

Let me say a little more about what it means for the issuance of the threat to have this sort of effect on the speaker – an effect such that we would call the speech act a threat and not a warning. The idea is not that the speaker needs to have had no reason or motivation to do the content of the threat, conditional on non-compliance, before the issuing of the threat. Instead, the issuing of the threat, with the expectation of it being received, supplies the motivational force required for the speaker to form the conditional intention, when she or he previously did not have the conditional intention, and otherwise would not have formed the conditional intention.

It is possible that it is upon the *decision* to make the threat, and not at the moment of the threat itself, that the conditional intention is formed. However, if the conditional intention is formed at this earlier point, it must be conditional on the speaker actually making the threat. That is to say, if the speech act is a threat and not a warning, then the threat getting made is necessary

[5] Sachs, 70-71. See also Greenawalt, Kent 1983–4. Criminal Coercion and Freedom of Speech, Northwestern University Law Review 78: 1081–124.

for the formation of the intention. Imagine the speaker decides to make the following utterance to you, "I'll burn down your house if you do not give me money." However, he also decides that, whether or not he gets a chance to communicate this to you, he will burn down your house if you do not give him money. In this case, by the time the utterance is made, it counts as a warning and not a threat.

This proposed difference between threats and warnings holds true whether they are conditional threats – like the one we have considered – or whether they are unconditional. For instance, if a resident ridicules a member of the drug cartel, the member might shout back to her, "watch out – I'm going to burn down your house." Note that the cartel member is not trying to manipulate the resident into doing anything. He is just announcing that she will be punished for her insult – either as a threat or as a warning. Again, if he already has this plan, and he is alerting her to it (maybe to inspire fear), then it is a warning. If the utterance is what motivates him to act, then it is a threat. Note that we sometimes call utterances that are truly warnings "threats" because of their emotional effects. Sometimes we refer to the emotion of fear as feeling threatened. (For instance, I *feel threatened* by cancer because many people in my family have developed it.)[6]

I have described the four illocutions that I am considering: conditional warnings, unconditional warnings, conditional threats, unconditional threats. I have endorsed some conceptual distinctions between these actions from moral philosophy, which I believe are relevant within the philosophy of language. Let us now examine threats and warnings using three

[6] Bach and Harnish describe this use of the word. See Bach, Kent, & R.M. Harnish, 1979, *Linguistic communication and speech acts*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. p. 266.

famous taxonomies of illocutions, those of: J.L. Austin, John Searle, and Kent Bach and Robert Harnish.

Warnings, Threats, and Austin's Taxonomy of Illocutions

In *How to Do Things With Words*, Austin says very little about threats except that they are illocutions – and illocutions that can share the same locution with other types of illocutions. He does not list threats within any of his six categories: verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives, or expositives. I will not describe all of these categories, since most are not pertinent to my discussion. However, Austin lists warnings within the category of exercitives, alongside illocutions like: advising, nominating, granting, begging. Exercitives are characterized by giving a decision or advocating for a particular course of action.[7] They also can involve the exercise of powers, rights, or influence.[8] It is clear how warnings fit into this category – they are exercises of influence, and advocating a particular course of action. For instance, if I warn you that, given my feelings, I will surely kill you if you ever harm my child – then I am warning you *off* from hurting my child (whether my warning is sincere or not). Surely then, threats fit into this category as well. Threats are exercises of influences – even more so than warnings, since threats are used as part of the manipulative strategy of coercion. Threats certainly are attempts to compel someone into taking a particular course of action. However, unlike warnings, threats might also fall into Austin's category of *commissives*. When I threaten to shoot you if you do not hand over your wallet I express a commitment to this course of action (though, as I have said, probably not

[7]Austin, John Langshaw. 1962, *How to do things with words* (2nd ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 154
[8] Ibid. 150

a moral commitment of any type). This categorization would more fully extend the analogy between threats and promises – the latter of which are illocutions that most clearly fall into the category of *commissives*, and are listed as such by Austin.

Austin might even allow that threats fall into both categories: exercitives and commissives. Alternately, he might say that they are exercitives with a commissive component, or commissives with an exercitive component. Certainly when a threat is unconditional, it is merely commissive, with no exercitive component.

The reason why it is so hard to figure out how Austin would categorize a threat (or how he would categorize any illocution that he does not list explicitly in his taxonomy), is because he does not have any real principles for dividing his categories of illocutions. This is a criticism made by Searle, and part of Searle's motivation for generating his own taxonomy of illocutions.

Warnings, Threats, and Searle's Taxonomy of Illocutions

Here I am going to describe the aspects of Searle's taxonomy of illocutions that are relevant to warnings and threats, but also raise some criticisms that I think can be easily handled by his view. By the end of this section I will have provided what I take to be Searle's best take on warnings and threats, with some friendly ammendments.

Searle's taxonomy highlights the *point* of an illocution (e.g. to get someone to do something; to commit oneself to an action; to express a sentiment, to describe something), the *direction of fit* of an illocution (as described below), and the mental state that determines the fulfillment of the sincerity condition of the illocution (e.g. belief, intention, want). He describes

other features of illocutions that can help distinguish some from others, but it is these first three that do most of the theoretical work in defining the categories of the taxonomy.

When an illocution has a words-to-world direction of fit, the speaker chooses words that match up with the world – that accurately describe what is or will be the case. When an illocution has a world-to-words direction of fit, the speaker does something with words that changes the world to match them. [9] For instance, when I make a promise, I take on an obligation to behave in a certain way to honor or *make* true the words that I have spoken. Promises have a world-to-words direction of fit. When I make a prediction, I choose words that match what will come to be the case in the future.

The three categories presented by Searle that are relevant to this paper are: *assertives, directives,* and *commissives*. Assertives are characterized in the following way: Their point is to describe; Their direction of fit is words-to-world; The mental state that determines their sincerity condition is: belief.[10] Predictions, assertions, conjectures all fall into this category. However, the various components can be stronger or weaker. A conjecture about the future does not involve the same assertive force (it does not present the illocutionary point as strongly) as a prediction.[11]

Directives are characterized in the following way: their point is to get the hearer to do something; their direction of fit is world-to-words; the mental state that determines their sincerity condition is: want (or desire).[12] Requests, commands, suggestions (when it is a suggestion to do something, rather than a suggestion that a certain state-of-affairs is the case) all fall into this

[9] Searle, John. (1985) *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge. pp. 3-4

[10] Ibid. 12-13
[11] Ibid. 27-28
[12] Ibid. 13-14

category. Though, among other differences, a command might have more directive force (it might present the illocutionary point more strongly) than a suggestion or a request.[13]

Commissives are characterized in the following way: their point is to commit the speaker to do something; their direction of fit is world-to-words; the mental state that determines their sincerity condition is: intention.[14] Promises fall into this category – perhaps also agreements and vows – he does not include a list.

How would Searle categorize warnings and threats? He does not specify. However, he does say a few things about these illocutions. For instance, he points out that a warning might produce two very different illocutions in two different contexts. For instance, he says, "I warn you to stay away from my wife!" is a directive, whereas, "I warn you that the bull is about to charge" is an assertive.[15] What does Searle want us to think about warnings? He says that the verb "warn" can take on either of these illocutions. This suggests that warnings are not illocutions at all, but verbs used in locutions (perhaps implicitly or explicitly) that can involve different illocutions.

However, the fact that a verb, to warn, can take on multiple illocutions does not mean that warning is not an illocution on its own. Searle suggests that warnings can be read as different *points* that hep characterize other illocutionary acts. Consider instead that there may just be two different types of warnings and these two types of warnings might be different illocutions, but illocutions that are distinctly *warnings*. It seems to me that to say, "I warn you that the bull is about to charge" is an unconditional warning – an assertive without any directive component, exactly as Searle suggests. (Though, note that the point of uttering this is probably to

[13] Ibid. 27-28
[14] Ibid. 14-15
[15] Ibid. 28

get the hearer to beware, or to run! Perhaps a better example of a warning that is an assertive and not a directive is: "I warn you that your feet are only going to swell bigger and bigger throughout your pregnancy" – said to a woman who is already pregnant. This is a warning that truly is an assertive and not a directive.) Now, "I warn you to stay away from my wife!" is a conditional warning. The speaker definitely implies that *something* bad will befall the hearer if the hearer does not do as directed – otherwise, what is the point of the "I warn you."[16] While unconditional warnings are assertives, conditional warnings are directives.

The illocutionary point of a conditional warning is to get the hearer to do (or not do) something. Even if a speaker does not have an all-things-considered desire for the speaker to do (or not do) the action in question, when the speaker makes a conditional warning, he is at least presenting one reason for the speaker to do (or not do) the action in question. For instance, I might warn my teenager, "if you run against your friend for class president, it might hurt your friendship." All told, I don't want my teenager to refrain from running for class president for this reason. However, I do want him to do something. I want him to consider whether to run for class president with this possible outcome in mind. If I were to give him advice, then I would help him weigh his reasons. However, when I issue a conditional warning, I am only giving him one reason to be weighed – and directing him to weigh that reason into his deliberations. Of course, sometimes I might give a reason that is so overwhelming that I do not expect there to be further deliberations. Imagine that I tell my teenager, "There is a good chance that you'll die if you take heroin." In this case, what I desire is that he take this reason as sufficient for refraining from taking heroin – and choose not to take heroin. However, either way, my conditional warning is a

[16] Of course, if the speaker only forms the conditional intention to do something bad to the hearer upon making the utterance, and due to making the utterance, then it is the threat. However, I don't think that this is obvious from Searle's example. In fact, the speaker might be saying this because his wife is dangerous or very annoying, and the speaker genuinely cares for the hearer's interests!

directive. It either attempts to get my hearer to refrain from doing the thing I warn against, or it attempts to get my hearer to deliberate with a particular bad outcome in mind.

Searle also says the following: “Many verbs mark illocutionary point plus some other feature, e.g. "boast", "lament", "threaten", "criticize", "accuse", and "warn" all add the feature of goodness or badness to their primary illocutionary point.” Presumably, he does not mean that a warning just equals: ‘directive plus badness’ or ‘assertive plus badness’. Perhaps he means that there is some specific illocution that has a directive illocutionary point or some specific illocution that has an assertive illocutionary point to which “warning” adds badness. Perhaps: ‘predict plus badness’ (if the illocutionary point of the warning is assertive) or ‘advise plus badness” (if the illocutionary point of the warning is directive).

These sums of illocutions and value do not seem to me to aptly account for warnings. For instance, ‘predict plus badness’ could describe any number of actions: pessimistic prediction, maligning prediction, immoral prediction, predicting a bad outcome – though not one that is bad for the hearer. Similarly, ‘advise plus badness’ could describe any number of thing: advising someone to do wrong, advising someone to do something that is bad for him or her, giving advice in a mean way, or in an otherwise bad way.

What about threats? What illocutionary point do they have, according to Searle? To what do they add badness? It seems to me that there are two very good candidates for the illocutionary point of the threat from the member of the drug cartel. First, the illocutionary point might be directive. After all, the point of the speaker’s utterance is to get the hearer to give him money. Second, the illocutionary point might be commissive. After all, in virtue of being a threat, and not a warning, the utterance commits the speaker to a conditional course of action – to burning down the house if the hearer does not supply money. (Note that this commitment isn’t a moral

commitment!) It is hard to think of any type of directive or commissive that *become* threats just by "adding badness." For instance, a threat certainly isn't a demand or request, plus badness. I can demand that you do something bad. I can demand or make a request in a bad way. I can offer to do something bad (that you want me to do) if you do what I request. These are all ways in which disvalue can be added to a directive, and none of them amount threats.

A threat is also not a promise, plus badness. One can make a true promise to do something bad and not be making a threat. For instance, I can promise my child a sugary soft drink that is bad for her. When the content of an apparent promise *just is* a conditional threat (e.g. I promise to kill you if you ever do that again), then the utterance isn't a promise at all.

I believe that this shows that threats (conditional and unconditional) are illocutions of their own. However, as with warnings, conditional threats might well be one type of illocution, and unconditional threats another. I will not yet speculate as to what type of illocution each one is – since making such a case goes beyond the scope of this section.

Warnings, Threats, and Bach and Harnish's Taxonomy of Illocutions

Bach and Harnish's taxonomy of illocutions differs from Searle's in a variety of ways. However, I am simply going to explain the differences that matter for this paper. Bach and Hamish differentiate their categories according to the expressed attitudes of the speaker. Of course, Searle also cared about the speaker's attitude – he differentiated types of illocution according to the emotion that grounded the sincerity condition for each. However, Searle thinks that illocutionary *point* is a separate metric from emotion of the speaker. For instance, the illocutionary point of a commissive is: to obligate oneself, whereas the attitude that grounds the

sincerity condition is: intention. Bach and Harnish take intentions to be (partially) defining features of all illocutions. Constatives involve a combination of a belief and an intention. Directives involve a combination of a desire and an intention. Commissives involve a combination of two intentions. I will list some examples of these – ones that will also be useful in examining warnings and threats a little bit later. It is important for me to note here that when Bach and Harnish use the word "express" they do not mean that the expression be the revelation of some actual and sincere sentiment or belief. Expression is compatible with insincerity; one can express a false belief or a sentiment not held.

Constatives are expressions of beliefs combined with expressions of intentions that a hearer adopt a like belief.[17] Here are some examples:

Assertives (simple): (affirm, allege, assert, aver, avow, claim, declare, deny (assert ... not), indicate, maintain, propound, say, state, submit) In uttering e, S asserts that P if S expresses:

i. the belief that P, and
ii. the intention that H believe that P.[18]

Predictives: (forecast, predict, prophesy) In uttering e, S predicts that P if S expresses:

i. the belief that it will be the case that P, and
ii. the intention that H believe that it will be the case that P.[19]

Informatives: (advise, announce, apprise, disclose, inform, insist, notify, point out, report, reveal, tell, testify) In uttering e, S informs H that P if S expresses:

i. the belief that P, and
ii. the intention that H form the belief that P.[20]

Suggestives: (conjecture, guess, hypothesize, speculate, suggest) In uttering e, S suggests that P if S expresses:

i. the belief that there is reason, but not sufficient reason, to believe that P, and
ii. ii. the intention that H believe that there is reason, but not sufficient reason, to believe that P. [21]

[17] Bach and Harnish, 42
[18] Ibid. 42
[19] Ibid. 42
[20] Ibid. 42
[21] Ibid. 43

Directives are the expression of an attitude about someone else's actions. Bach and Harnish also say, "If this were all they expressed, they would be merely constatives with a restriction on propositional content (namely, that a prospective action be ascribed to the hearer). However, they also express the speaker's intention (desire, wish) that his utterance or the attitude it expresses be taken as (a) reason for the hearer to act."[22] However, note that unlike Searle, Bach and Harnish do not take the speaker *getting* the hearer to do a particular thing to be defining of directives. Here are some examples:

Requestives: (ask, beg, beseech, implore, insist, invite, petition, plead, pray, request, solicit, summon, supplicate, tell, urge) In uttering e, S requests H to A if S expresses:

i. the desire that H do A, and
ii. the intention that H do A because (at least partly) of S's desire.[23]

Requirements: (bid, charge, command, demand, dictate, direct, enjoin, instruct, order, prescribe, require) In uttering e, S requires H to A if S expresses:

i. the belief that his utterance, in virtue of his authority over H, constitutes sufficient reason for H to A, and
ii. the intention that H do A because of S's utterance.[24]

Advisories: (admonish, advise, caution, counsel, propose, recommend, suggest, urge, warn) In uttering e, S advises H to A if S expresses:

i. the belief that there is (sufficient) reason for H to A, and
ii. the intention that H take S's belief as (sufficient) reason for him to A.[25]

Commissives, for Bach and Harnish, involve the intention that one will do what one says that one will do, and the belief that, in virtue of saying so, that one is committed to doing as one has said one will do. Only promises and offers fall into this category, according to Bach and Harnish. For example:

[22] Ibid. 47
[23] Ibid. 47
[24] Ibid. 47
[25] Ibid. 48

Promises: (promise, swear, vow) In uttering e, S promises H to A if S expresses:

i. the belief that his utterance obligates him to A,
ii. ii. the intention to A, and
iii. iii. the intention that H believe that S's utterance obligates S to A and that S intends to A.[26]

How can warnings and threats be handled within this taxonomy? Bach and Harnish list warnings as a type of advisory, which in its turn is a type of directive. However, the defining conditions of an advisory or, indeed, the more general terms defining the category of directives, really only apply to conditional warnings.

Conditional warnings are certainly a form of advisory. However, unconditional warnings are not directives at all, let alone advisories. For instance, consider my earlier example of a truly unconditional warning. I say to the pregnant woman, "Just to warn you – your feet are only going to swell bigger and bigger throughout the course of the pregnancy." I do not intend for her to consider any course of action in response to my warning. We might ask: what *do* I intend by issuing such a warning? Perhaps I mean to offer a prediction, so that the pregnant woman has information about what will happen to her body. My real reason for doing so might be the perlocutionary effect that I expect it to have on her emotions. For instance, I might be trying to scare her. However, the illocutionary act is a type of prediction, given Bach and Harnish's schema. So, conditional warnings are advisories; unconditional warnings are predictions.

What kind of illocution, if any, are threats and warnings?

[26] Ibid. 50

What about threats? All of Austin, Searle, Bach and Harnish refer to threats as types of illocutions.[27] However, they do not list threats in any of their categories. As I mentioned earlier, because Austin does not give us principled means of separating his categories of illocutions, we cannot use his apparatus to discover how he would categorize a new item – since he does not himself include threats on any list. So, the project of this section will be to discover what we can say of threats based on the principled taxonomies of Bach and Harnish (first) and Searle (second). I choose to consider their taxonomies with respect to threats in reverse order because some metrics introduced by Searle are useful for handling some gaps left by Bach and Harnish.

Bach and Harnish's care about the expressed intent of the speaker in an illocution. The intent of someone who makes a conditional threat is somewhat like that of someone who makes a conditional warning. Consider again the defining features of an advisory, which is the category wherein we locate warnings:

Advisories: (admonish, advise, caution, counsel, propose, recommend, suggest, urge, warn) In uttering e, S advises H to A if S expresses:

i. the belief that there is (sufficient) reason for H to A, and
ii. the intention that H take S's belief as (sufficient) reason for him to A.[28]

Recall, with a threat, the speaker does not develop the conditional intention until he makes the threat. For instance, the member of the drug cartel does not develop the conditional intention 'I will burn down your house unless you pay me money' until he tells the Monterrey resident that this is the case. So, while the speaker of a threat might believe that, given his threat, there is reason for the hearer to act, it does not seem that the expression of this belief is a defining feature – or even a partially defining feature – of the threat. The speaker certainly does not intend that

[27] For instance, see Bach and Harnish, p. 3.
[28] Ibid. 48

the hearer take's any belief of the speaker's as a reason for action. The speaker intends that the hearer take an *intention* of the speaker as a reason for action.

For these reasons, a conditional threat is not an advisory as Bach and Harnish have described it. It cannot be categorized in the same way we categorize a conditional warning. By contrast, an unconditional threat can be described as a predictive.

Predictives: (forecast, predict, prophesy) In uttering e, S predicts that P if S expresses:

i. the belief that it will be the case that P, and
ii. the intention that H believe that it will be the case that P.[29]

Imagine I threaten you by saying, "Someday I will get revenge for what you have done to me!" I certainly express both this belief and intention. However, it seems that I express a belief that I will get revenge upon you only in virtue of expressing that I intend to get revenge on you. So, while i. and ii. are satisfied by an unconditional threat, they do not seem to get at the heart of what I express when I make a threat.

What would be helpful in distinguishing a threat from a warning is the metric provided by Searle: direction of fit. When the drug cartel member makes the threat, he indicates to the hearer that he is going to make the world match his words. His words mean: either you will give me money or I will burn down your house. He can make these words bear out by following through on his threat, if the resident does not give him money.

Recall my imaginary drug cartel member from the beginning of this paper – the one who makes the *warning*. He already intends to burn down the house for other reasons, unless he has some incentive not to do so. When he issues this warning about his intended behavior, he communicates that he is matching his words to the way that the world already is – including his

[29] Ibid. 42

own pre-existing intentions. Of course, any bully might try to pass off a threat as a warning – because it might come across as less villainous, or perhaps more credible – since it implies that one has independent reasons for doing what is threatened/warned. However, whether the hearer believes it to be a threat or a warning does not affect the type of illocution made. What matters is whether the intention or plan formed on the part of the speaker already exists, and is being described by the utterance, or whether the utterance is producing the intention, or providing the motivation for adopting the plan – a plan adopted to match the uttered words.

Despite this useful tool, it is not clear that Searle's taxonomy provides us with a better way of explaining the illocution of a threat – whether conditional or unconditional. Let us first consider a conditional threat, and investigate how we might locate it within Searle's taxonomy.

The illocutionary point of a conditional threat is to get the hearer to do something. This makes the threat a directive. A directive, according to Searle, also has a worlds-to-words direction of fit. Well, that sounds good. I have already explained why a conditional threat has a worlds-to-words direction of fit. However, it seems that the reason for why a directive has a worlds-to-words direction of fit under-explains the situation involved in a conditional threat. With most directives, the way in which the illocution *fits* the world to the words is by prompting the hearer to behave in a way that matches the speaker's words.[30] However, when a speaker issues a conditional threat, the world *fits* the words in one of two possible ways. Take the threat, "If you don't give me the money, then I'll shoot you." The illocution either prompts the hearer to behave in a way that matches the speaker's words (by rendering the antecedent false – by handing over the money), or the illocution prompts the speaker to make the world match the words (by following through on the consequent).

[30] Searle, 13-14

For Searle, the only illocutionary category that involves a world-to-words direction of fit wherein the speaker acts to match the world to the words is: commissives. Is a conditional threat a commissive? Does it involve a commissive? There is a sense in which the drug cartel member commits to burning down the resident's house, conditional on the resident refusing to give him money. For practical reasons, the speaker and hearer both know that the speaker's future threats will not be as credible if he does not carry out this one. However, even if a threat is made within a one-time context, it might carry a commitment – not a moral commitment, nor even what some philosophers call an assertive commitment (something that might be defined as a commitment to the defensibility of what one has said).[31] In the movie, *No Country for Old Men*, the sociopath, Anton, makes a threat to the fellow who has stolen his money: if you bring back the money, I will only kill you. If I have to hunt you down, then I will kill you and then go kill your wife.

Interestingly, Anton *feels* committed to his word. When the robber's wife later says to Anton "You have no cause to kill me," he responds, "No, but I gave my word." He is not pretending to be motivated by vengeance. He is moved to make the world match his words. When issuing a conditional threat, a speaker *must* successfully express that he will be so moved – that his threat generates some kind of commitment to action (whether this commitment to action is a self-directed or other-directed commitment).[32]

These reasons are sufficient to categorize *unconditional* threats as a type of commissive, since they have no directive component. However, recall that the illocutionary point of the *conditional* threat is not to put oneself under obligation or commitment. The illocutionary *point*

[31] For instance, see Peirce, Charles Sanders, 1934, "Judgment and assertion", in *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Boston: Harvard University Press, Vol. V, pp. 385–7. See also Watson, Gary, 2004, "Asserting and promising", *Philosophical Studies*, 117: 57–77.
[32] I will not investigate these separate possibilities here.

of a conditional threat is directive, to get the hearer to do something. However, the illocution has worlds-to-words direction of fit has a commissive component. The other commissive component of a conditional threat is the attitude that grounds its sincerity condition. The conditional threat's sincerity (or appropriateness) depends on the speaker's intentions, not the speaker's wants and desires.

Perhaps there are two illocutions involved in a conditional threat. Searle allows for double illocutions – suggesting that there are assertive declaratives. Since I have not permitted an explanation of declaratives within the scope of this short paper, I won't explain this particular double illocution. However, the idea is that there are some types of illocution that involve all of the features of each of two broad categories.

Maybe a conditional threat is both a directive and a commissive. It is a commitment to make the world fit the words of the conditional threat. It is also a directive, prompting the hearer to make the world fit the words of the conditional threat. It is insincere without the commissive intention, and inappropriate without the want or desire motivating the directive. The illocutionary point is both directive and commissive – though the commissive point is in service of the directive point. Due to this last point, we might call this illocution a commissive-directive (rather than a directive-commissive).

Searle also allows for the possibility of indirect illocutions. "Can you pass me the salt?" is a question, but indirectly a request.[33] So, instead of calling a conditional threat a commisive-directive, we could instead say that it is directly a directive, with an indirect commsive component. For instance, if a mugger puts a gun to his victim's head and says, "give me your money" it is directly a directive, and maybe only indirectly a commissive to follow through on

[33] Thanks to Sandy Goldberg for this suggestion.

the threat that is being demonstrated with the gun. Of course, we can imagine a threat wherein the commissive is direct and the directive indirect. For instance, if a school child is behaving badly, his stern teacher might say, "believe me, I *will* call your parents if I have to." The commissive is direct. Whatever directive the teacher is giving with respect to the child's behavior is, perhaps, indirect.

I prefer the analysis of conditional threats as a double illocution to a combination of a direct and indirect illocution – because it is not clear to me what makes an illocution indirect as opposed to unstated, implied, or signaled without words. Indeed, this confusion arises for me even in the case of "Can you pass me the salt?" However, I am happy to accept either analysis.

Isn't a conditional warning something more than just a directive? After all, a conditional threat is a directive in the same general way that a conditional warning is a directive. It presents someone with a conditional utterance that prompts the hearer to action, or else something X. However, while in a conditional threat, X represents something that the speaker commits to do, in a conditional warning, X represents something that the speaker believes will happen.[34] Perhaps it is both a directive and an assertive. It is a prediction (recall, a type of assertive for Searle) that involves words chosen to fit the world – or how the world will be in the future. However, it is also a directive, prompting the hearer to make the world fit the words. Consider, I warn you to employ a body guard or you will be shot. My directive prompts you to match the world to my words: by hiring a body guard, your actions match my words. My assertion attempts to describe the world. If I am sincere, then I believe that I am describing your future without a body guard. You will be shot. The assertive illocutionary point is in the service of the directive illocutionary point. So, we can call this illocution an assertive-directive. As with threats, there is

[34]This is true even if the speaker believes it will happen because he believes that he himself will make it happen.

an alternative analysis open to Searle: the conditional warning might involve an direct assertive and an indirect directive – though I have the same concerns with this approach here as I did with threats.

Using Searle's taxonomic resources, it appears that we can say: Unconditional threats are commissives; Conditional threats are commissive-directives; Unconditional warnings are assertives; conditional warnings are assertive-directives. However, this analysis of threats is not quite complete. We have been assuming a particular feature of threats all along that is not always the case.

Non-committal Threats

Non-committal threats: the speaker threatens the hearer, not with an announced intention to do some harm to the hearer, but by alerting him to the possibility that he might do some harm to the hearer, or that he has the power to do some harm to the speaker. The speaker has no reason or motivation (or insufficient reason or motivation) for doing the said harm to the hearer until making the utterance/communication, with the expectation of it being heard/received (which is why it is a threat and not a warning).

An employee might ask his employee to have sex with him, and remind her that – though he has no intention of doing so – he has the power to fire her at any time. He was not planning on using this power – and might not have even believed that he would fire her for rejected his sexual advances. However, upon reminding her of this power in the context of his sexual advances, he links the two things in both of their minds. He would now take her sexual refusal to be a reason to fire her, given what he said.

The drug cartel member who speaks to the Monterrey resident on the phone might tell her, "we won't necessarily burn down your house if you don't give us the money, but it's

important that you know that it's a possibility, and only your money will guarantee your safety." The cartel had no reason to burn down the resident's house prior to the threat. They are also not committed to doing so after the fact – even if the resident does not pay them. However, the threat linked the two things – the payment and house burning. Now the cartel member has a reason he didn't have before to burn down this house – conditional on receiving no payment from the resident. Non-committal conditional threats are common and effective. Just because a threat is non- commitment does not mean that it is not credible.

What about non-committal unconditional threats? What if an employer regularly reminds his employees that he can fire them at any time. What if a big brother tells his little siblings that he could beat up any of them handily? It is hard for me to be sure that there truly are non-committal *unconditional* threats. It sounds like there is some implicit condition like, "if you don't make me very happy" or "if you don't do what I say." Here are some possibilities: a big brother might remind his siblings that he can beat them up handily, just for the sake of intimidation. However, it is not clear that his utterance gives rise to any new motivation to beat them up. The only effect (and perhaps the only intended effect) of the utterance is probably just the perlocution of intimidation felt by his siblings. Next, consider someone saying, "I might just come after you some day." You can imagine someone saying this in a vengeful spirit. Following the utterance, he feels in no way committed to carrying through on the threat. However, even if the speaker has not considered revenge before making the utterance, it is not clear to me that he is really generating any new motivation or reason for coming after the person – surely his vengeful spirit existed before the utterance. For this reason, the apparent threat is probably a warning (even if its perlocution is to scare). I will not deny that non-committal threats can be unconditional. However, since I cannot come up with any that seem plausible, I will not theorize about them

here. From here on out when I say, "non-committal threat" I will mean, "non-committal unconditional threat."

I will now point out the ways in which a non-committal threat is different from a committal threat. First, a committal threat does not depend upon the intention of the speaker to meet its sincerity condition. If the speaker has not formed an intention to do the named harm to the hearer, he is not bluffing. It seems that some other mental state – perhaps the absence of a feeling of constraint against doing the harm – is what grounds the sincerity condition. The mental state that grounds the sincerity condition might just be belief: Consider the employer's attempt at sexual coercion, described just above. For the employer to be making a sincere but non-committal threat, he must believe it is true that he might fire the employee – even if he had not considered doing so, or had any motivation for doing so, before making his conditional threat. For the member of the drug cartel to be making a sincere but non-committal threat, he must believe it is true that he might opt to burn down the house – even if he and the cartel had nothing against the resident before the phone call was made.

So, perhaps non-committal threats are assertives rather than commissives? Not so fast. The non-committal threats still have the direction-of-fit of other threats.[35] They are world-to-words. The employer *makes* it the case that he might fire the employee by uttering the threat. His words do not describe the way the world already is situated. They create a new situation, one in which there is a link between a sexual choice and keeping a job. The words create this link even if the employer does not commit himself to firing the employee, in the event that she refuses sex.

Of course, conditional threats that are non-committal still have their directive illocutionary point. These illocutions are still uttered to get the hearer to do something. Perhaps

[35] If they had a words-to-world direction of fit, and the speaker was truly just speculating about what he might do, then these would be warnings and not threats.

they are just directives, with no committal sub-component? This cannot be the case. After all, the appropriateness, or sincerity, of a non-committal threat seems to rely on something more than just the speaker's desire. For instance, if the employer knew that he *could not* fire the employee at any time (if, for instance, the Human Resources division had taken firing decisions out of his hands), then the threat would be insincere. He could not actually believe that he would ever be firing her.

Here is a proposal for handling non-conditional threats that makes use of an illocutionary category introduced by Bach and Harnish: requirements. Requirements are a type of directive. Here is the description:

Requirements: (bid, charge, command, demand, dictate, direct, enjoin, instruct, order, prescribe, require) In uttering e, S requires H to A if S expresses:

i. the belief that his utterance, in virtue of his authority over H, constitutes sufficient reason for H to A, and
ii. the intention that H do A because of S's utterance.[36]

Non-committal threats are not only requirements. Non-committal conditional threats are a conjunction of two illocutions:

1. The speaker *asserts* that: the speaker and the hearer stand in a certain power relation to one another in virtue of which the speaker can do the hearer some harm (perhaps in virtue of the speaker's institutional powers, strength, or psychological willingness to do what most people are unwilling to do to another).
2. The speaker *requires* that the hearer: do something

The speaker is in a position of authority to make the requirement because of the assertion in 1. I am happy to adopt any of the leading theories of assertion – including that of Bach and Harnish

[36] Bach and Harnish, 47

(described above). His assertion, that he and the speaker stand in a certain relation, needs to be credible in order for the hearer to receive the utterance as a requirement. The speaker must convincingly assert that he has authority stemming from position, strength, ability, expertise over the hearer – some means by which he could do her harm. Notice that there is no specific role for intention here. The speaker does not need to intend to do the hearer harm conditional on the hearer's refusal of the requirement.

Now, if there are indeed cases on truly *unconditional* non-committal threats (for instance, ones uttered for the sake of intimidation, but not for the sake of changing the behavior of the audience), then it would follow from my theory that these are assertions, and nothing else. I will admit that it sounds strange – that a threat could be only an assertion. However, I do think that this is the best analysis of this very strange type of threat – one I am not sure ever is made.

Now, I have argued that threats involve a world-to-words direction of fit. However, the *assertion* involved in this conjunction of illocutions involves a words-to-world direction of fit. The assertion describes the state of affairs as the speaker believes it to be. At least, this is what the speaker expresses to the hearer. The *requirement*, like all directives, involves a world-to-words direction of fit, because it prompts the hearer to act. The way that the uttered requirement itself prompts the hearer to act is in virtue of the authority – in this case, simply having the ability and willingness – though not intention – to do some harm to the hearer. I think that Bach and Harnish envisioned *requirements* operating in situations wherein the speakers had some recognized, legal authority (perhaps parental authority, or political authority). However, it seems to me that brute strength, arms, or social power (like that held by the drug cartel) are types of power sufficient to satisfy the conditions of making a requirement. If I hold a gun to your head and make a demand of you, I am satisfying the conditions for issuing a requirement.

Here are some potential challenges to my proposal:

i. The reason why threats are world-to-words is not just in virtue of the directive, but because they place the hearer into a particular situation that she or he was not in before. This is what makes certain utterances threats and not warnings. What is the new situation imposed by the non-committal threat, as I have described it? The new situation is not the power relationship; in non-committal threats, whatever it is that gives authority to the speaker already is the case, which is why it can be asserted. The new situation is that the hearer now is under the speaker's requirement, and is made to understand that the existing power relationship is that which gives authority to the requirement. The assertion and the requirement coming together is what allows the hearer to understand that she is under threat.

Consider the non-committal version of the drug cartel member's threat (dressed up a little here). "Give us money. After all, we are capable of burning down your house at any time. Not to say that we will. But, you want to stay on our good side." The assertion is: we are capable of burning down your house at any time. The requirement: give us money. This threat does not work in the way that moral philosophers typically spell out the manipulative strategy of coercion. The hearer does not have a valuable option – to keep her money and her house – taken from her, necessarily. The speaker does not form a new, conditional intention upon uttering the threat. However, now the hearer receives the assertion that the cartel might burn down her house (something she might have already known), and she receives it in a package that makes it clear that it is this possibility, and the authority it confers to the speaker, that makes the accompanying directive a requirement (more specifically, a demand).

ii. Usually power hierarchies are obvious to everyone. Wouldn't it be infelicitous to assert what is known to be known to speaker and hearer alike? Of course, if the employer made

an assertion about the power relationship (that he could fire his employee) every time he gave her a directive, most of these assertions would be infelicitous. If he told her to make photocopies, then it would be inappropriate for him to assert that he could fire her at any time. When the speaker and hearer both understand that the power relationship in question is what gives the speaker's demands authority, then there is no place for an accompanying assertion. I think that it is precisely in cases in which the speaker has reason to doubt that the hearer understands his authority that the assertion is appropriate (from the perspective of discourse). For instance:

A. The hearer might not know that the speaker would actually be willing to harm the hearer (e.g. A mother says to her unruly child: You know, mothers really do spank their children sometimes);
B. The hearer might not realize that a power relationship gives a speaker authority – or that the speaker could possibly wield his authority – in some unexpected realm (e.g. Employer says to employee, alongside sexual advance: you know that I can fire you at any time.)

In these cases the existing power relationship is known to all parties, and known by the speaker to be known to the hearer/s. However, in each of these cases the speaker's assertion is felicitous. Of course, in many cases an assertion of power is unnecessary and not performed. Coercion can operate with only a requirement, if the speaker's ability to harm the hearer is evident and salient. These forms of coercion can involve committal or non-commital threats, and can involve warnings instead of threats. I do not take there to be a package of illocutions that defines coercion.

iii. Don't all conditional threats involve a requirement, as Bach and Harnish describe it?

Until we considered non-committal threats, I had no theoretical need for the specific

illocutionary category: requirement. I have argued that all conditional threats involve a directive, more generally. Perhaps the directive involved in a conditional threat always is a requirement, since the coercive relationship, and the brute authority this yields the speaker, is always what both the speaker and the hearer take to be the reason for the hearer to comply. However, I am not going to argue for this more ambitious proposal here. I will only say, in the case of non-committal threats, the speaker makes a requirement of the hearer, and communicates the power relationship involved in that requirement with an assertion.