



Conversational Strategies of Cyber blackmail In Criminal Investigations: A Forensic Linguistics Study

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Abstract

This study investigates the conversational strategies employed in cyber blackmail cases from a forensic linguistics perspective. By analyzing authentic data from criminal investigations, the research identifies patterns in the language offenders use to manipulate, threaten, and control their victims in digital environments. The study focuses on various types of blackmail, including financial and sexual extortion (sextortion), examining how linguistic choices such as threats, commands, flattery, and manipulation are strategically used. Gender differences in the use of these strategies are also investigated. A qualitative and quantitative approach combines discourse analysis with statistical tools such as chi-square tests. Findings confirm that Directives/Commands dominate the strategy of cyber blackmail among males and female blackmailers, while compliments is the least employed strategies. Moreover, the analysis indicates statistically significant differences in strategy use between male and female blackmailers.

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1. Introduction

Cyber blackmail has emerged as a significant challenge in the digital age, particularly with the widespread use of social media platforms. As cybercriminals exploit online anonymity to threaten and coerce victims, law enforcement agencies face difficulties in identifying perpetrators and gathering linguistic evidence. In Iraq, the absence of specific cybercrime legislation further complicates legal responses to cyber blackmail, leaving victims vulnerable and hesitant to report incidents due to fear of social and legal consequences.

From a forensic linguistics perspective, cyber blackmail presents unique challenges in identifying linguistic patterns and persuasive strategies used by blackmailers. While studies on forensic linguistics have explored deception, threats, and coercion in legal contexts (Coulthard & Johnson, 2007) ^[3], research focusing on the linguistic features of cyber blackmail remains limited, particularly in the Iraqi context. Given that language plays a crucial role in blackmail threats, a forensic linguistic approach can provide valuable insights into the strategies used by cyber blackmailers and contribute to more effective legal responses (Shuy, 2005). The concept of cyber blackmail includes various strategies that have been studied by different researchers; however, the researchers have not studied the strategies of cyber criminals for both males and females concerning the field of forensic linguistics. Therefore, the present study seeks to bridge this gap by identifying these strategies for both males and females. By examining real cases, the study seeks to provide insights into the strategies employed by cybercriminals and offer valuable forensic evidence to support legal proceedings.

2. Forensic Linguistics

Like many other scientific fields, forensic linguistics cannot be said to have started at a specific moment.

Since the 18th century, researchers and scholars have debated the authorship of famous texts, such as sacred books and Shakespeare's plays (Olsson, 2008) ^[7]. Forensic linguistics was first used in 1986 in England when linguist Jan Svartvik applied it to analyze police statements from 1953. He examined the statements given by Timothy John Evans, who had been executed at Pentonville Prison for the murder of his wife and child but was later pardoned. Svartvik identified differences in writing style, noting that some statements reflected an educated person's formal, structured language while others had a more natural spoken style. Based on this analysis, he argued that certain phrases attributed to Evans were not his own. This led to the emergence of the term forensic linguistics, making Svartvik the first linguist to introduce it. However, despite this early development, progress in the field remained slow over the years (Prodanović & Adamović, 2014). According to Crystal (2008) ^[6], forensic linguistics refers to "the use of linguistic techniques to investigate crimes in which language data form part of the evidence, such as in the use of grammatical or lexical criteria to authenticate police statements" (p.194). The field of forensic linguistics extends to various forensic and legal texts, including contracts, judgments, jury instructions, product warnings, trademarks, wills, and police interviews (PIs) (Coulthard & Johnson, 2010) ^[4].

Forensic linguistics is a specialized subfield that examines professional and institutional interactions within legal contexts, serving as an applied discipline with significant practical implications for legal practice, judicial decision-making, and law enforcement procedures (Coulthard *et al.*, 2017) ^[5]. It is broadly defined as "an area of applied linguistics in which techniques of linguistic analysis are applied to forensic situations and data" (Picornell *et al.*, 2022, p. 1).

2.2 Conversational Strategies

Conversational strategies refer to the linguistic techniques employed by participants during interactions to exchange information, express emotions, and convey ideas. Such interactions typically involve at least two speakers, who may be of the same gender or different genders. These strategies play a crucial role in shaping the structure and flow of conversation, as well as reflecting underlying social dynamics.

Numerous researchers have argued that men and women differ in their use of conversational strategies. Coates (2013) ^[2], for instance, identifies seven distinct strategies employed in conversation and discusses the ways in which their usage varies according to gender. The following section provides a brief overview of each strategy as outlined by Coates.

2.2.1 Minimal Responses

Minimal responses, referred to as "backchannels", they are brief utterances such as "mhm," "yeah," "right," and "I agree" According to Coates (2013, p. 87) ^[2], this strategy is considered a "women's specialty," as it is frequently used by female speakers to support their interlocutors, and express agreement or encouragement during conversation. for instance:

(1) Mary: "If you use your long-distance service a lot then you'll".

Caller: "Uh-uh". (Yule, 1996, p. 75).

2.2.2 Directive / Commands

According to Coates (2013) ^[2], directive strategies involve the use of speech acts intended to prompt the addressee to perform an action, often marked by expressions such as "let's," "gonna," "can," and "could," among others. Previous studies have shown that this strategy is more frequently employed by male speakers, who tend to use more forceful or aggressive forms of directives. In contrast, female speakers are generally observed to use less direct and more mitigated directives. This gendered difference in directive usage reflects broader patterns in linguistic behavior. Consider the following example:

(2) "Lie down" (Coates,2013, p.96) ^[2]

2.2.3 Swearing and Taboo Languages

Swearing words and taboo language can function as a strategy for expressing anger, deep frustration, or intense emotions and may or may not be directed at a specific individual. According to folk linguistic beliefs, men tend to swear more frequently than women. Moreover, as Coates (2013) ^[2] notes, the swearing words typically used by women are often less offensive in comparison to those used by men. For instance, women may choose euphemistic expressions such as "goodness" or "gosh" rather than more explicit or profane terms.

(3) Harley Quinn: "Down here. Follow me"

Montoya: "Holy shit!" (Syahla & Hartati, 2023, p.109) ^[9]

2.2.4 Compliments

A compliment is a communicative act used to express appreciation, admiration, or positive evaluation, either directly or indirectly. Such as expressions "I like your...", "that's good," or "nice!" While compliments are generally associated with positive politeness serving to enhance social harmony, they may also function as face-threatening acts in certain contexts. This occurs when a compliment implies envy, desire, or competition, potentially threatening the addressee's privacy (Coates, 2013) ^[2].

Compliments may become problematic when they occur in cross-sex interactions, particularly in professional settings. As Coates (2013, p. 100) ^[2] notes, such compliments can be interpreted as inappropriate or intrusive and, in some cases, may constitute sexual harassment "Cross sex". For instance, a man offering a personal compliment to a female colleague in the workplace may cross boundaries of professional conduct, as illustrated in the following example:

(4) Man: "You look so sexy today; Faye I must remember to have a cuddle with you later" (Coates, 2013, p. 100) ^[2].

2.2.5 Questions

According to Coates (2013, p.93) ^[2], questions are "part of the conversational sequencing device known as the Question + Answer." As a conversational strategy, questions are used to engage interlocutors and prompt responses. There are two types of questions: yes/no questions, which elicit short, direct answers, and Wh-questions, which demand longer, more descriptive responses. Both types serve essential roles in supporting dialogue and facilitating the exchange of information. In building interaction, women often use questions as a strategy to invite participation, introduce new topics, hedge statements, check the perspectives of other

participants, and initiate storytelling. (Muthia *et al.*, 2021). For instance,

(5) Meg: What does it say?

Petey: Nothing much (Coates, 2013, p.93) ^[2].

2.2.6 Tag Questions

According to Lakoff (1975), tag questions are a type of conversational strategy that reflect tentativeness and serve to reduce the force of an assertion. Tag questions typically consist of an auxiliary verb (operator) and a pronoun, with or without a negative particle, for example, “isn’t she?” or “did she?” (Coates, 2013) ^[2] argues that women tend to use tag questions more frequently than men. However, this claim lacks empirical support. as in the following example:

(6) “He doesn’t like his job, does he?” (Quirk *et al.*, 1985, p. 811)

2.2.7 Hedges

Hedges are linguistic forms that convey vagueness or imprecision in communication. Lakoff (1973, p. 471) defines them as “words whose meaning implicitly involves fuzziness, words whose job it is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy,” including expressions such as “I think,” “I believe,” “you know,” “sort of,” “like,” “maybe,” and “perhaps.” Hyland (1998, p. 1) further explains that hedges are “any linguistic means used to indicate either a lack of a complete commitment to the truth of a proposition or a desire not to express that commitment categorically.” Additionally, Gunnarsson (2009) suggests that hedges may function as euphemisms, used either to deceive the listener or to convey a message indirectly, thereby creating a degree of distraction or ambiguity in discourse.

(7) ʔiḏa ʕala ʕarīqi yaret twaslni means “If you are on my

way, I wish you can give me a lift” (Al-Ahmad & Al-Rssam, 2021)

3. Methodology and Data Analysis

The present study utilizes a mixed approach, including qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative part of this study is represented by forensic linguistics, examining the concept of cyber blackmail cases. Meanwhile, the quantitative part involves utilizing the Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS) as a statistical tool to enhance the study's findings, support the researcher's interpretation, and avoid bias or subjectivity. The data were collected by analyzing real cyber blackmail cases obtained from various institutions, including police reports and court documents. Involving male and female Iraqi offenders. The cases were chosen based on their relevance to financial, sexual, and beneficial blackmail. All of the cases collected and analyzed in this study occurred in 2024. Each case was carefully examined to identify the threatening strategies used, and the findings were systematically recorded for further analysis. Accordingly, this selection is justified by the use of specific criteria.

- All texts are forensic texts that deal with cyber criminals accused of blackmailing, rather than other types of crimes such as defamation, insult, fraud offenses, and bribery.
- The data include three types of cyber blackmail: Financial, Sextortion, and beneficial blackmail involving male and female blackmailers, and other types were excluded.
- Since the current study involves both English and Arabic, the selected cases are in Iraqi dialect but translated into English, ensuring that they meet the researcher's language and cultural requirements.

Table 1: The frequency and percentage of occurrence of conversational strategies

No.	Utterances	Strategy	Analysis
1.	Victim: I'm gonna delete your number Blackmailer: Yeah, good one Victim: And don't message me again, got it!!! Blackmailer: Yeah. Swear down, I'm waiting for you	Minimal Responses	Blackmailers often avoid direct threats to maintain denial. Rather than saying, “If you don’t comply, I’ll expose you”, they employ slight, psychological, and manipulative language to exert pressure while avoiding direct incrimination. In this forensic text, the blackmailer uses the “Minimal Responses” strategy as a part of his manipulation tactics and to keep the victim engaged and unstable. The blackmailer uses short, vague, or noncommittal responses such as “ay” and “xowf” which means “Yeah” and “Yeah, good one” he creates uncertainty and forces the victim to keep talking or justifying himself, which gives the blackmailer more control over the conversation.
2.	Blackmailer: Money, asking for money, give us money, want money, right? And if you don't give it, I'm sharing the link	Directives /Commands	The blackmailer has the power to demand his victim act quickly without asking. He uses the “Directive and Commands” strategy to coerce the victim, as in “aṭīynī fulū” which means “give us money, want money.” By using this strategy, the blackmailer serves as a clear assertion of control, demanding immediate actions from the victim without giving her a chance for refusal or negotiation. He reinforces his dominance and power over the victim.
3.	Yeah, I'm scum and low-life and you're scum and thick	Swearing / Taboo Languages	In the utterances “naḏil” which means “scum” “ḥaqīr”, which means “low-life” “naḏila” which means “scum” and “gabīya” which means “thick” or “idiot” the blackmailer uses an abusive swearing word strategy to attack his victim verbally. The Iraqi slang words “naḏil” and “ḥaqīr” are extremely strong words that carry adverse connotations and have the tendency to be used to offend one's character or behavior. Its meaning can vary based on the situation, but it generally describes someone who is shameless, treacherous, or dishonorable. In Iraqi culture, they are sometimes used to describe someone disloyal or betraying others. they can refer to a person who betrays their friends, family, or trust as in “ḥaḏā naḏil, mā yiatamad alayh ” which means “That guy is a scum, you can’t rely on him” Or describe someone who lacks morals, acts without shame, and has no regard for honor or dignity as in “ḥaḏā wāḥid naḏil, mā ‘inda ḥayā!” which means “That guy is scum, he has no decency” but If someone is unnecessarily cruel or enjoys hurting others, they might be called “naḏil” or “ḥaqīr” .they can be used jokingly among friends, but in serious contexts, it’s a harsh insult implying that someone is heartless and takes advantage of others. These words are rarely used for women directly, but if they are, they imply extreme

			shamelessness or lack of morality, making it a serious insult. Calling a man “naðil” suggests that he is a traitor, dishonorable, or shameless, which can damage his reputation, especially in traditional or tribal settings.
4.	Blackmailer: Love, love, just let me tell you two words and I'm off. I'm looking out for you, trust me I want what's best for you, proper honest	Compliments	In an attempt to manipulate the victim and make her trust him, the blackmailer exploits the strategy of “Compliment” to deceive her, or tries to make her talk or answer him. So, he uses complimenting expressions to lure her, which is clearly in the utterances “habybty” “habybty bas kalimtayān ?glicħ wa ?rouħ ?la mwdiħ θqī aryd mšlħtiħ, řadgyny”, which means “Love, love, just let me tell you two words and I'm off. I'm looking out for you, trust me I want what's best for you, proper honest.” It is not deceptive by nature, but the blackmailer uses it strategically to manipulate, gain trust, or soften a threat; it can function as part of a deceptive linguistic strategy. By employing positive language, the blackmailer may attempt to lower the victim's defenses, create a false sense of goodwill, and distract from the underlying coercion. In such cases, this politeness strategy is not real but an intentional attempt to influence and control the victim's responses.
5.	What happened to you yesterday? Saw what happened?	Questions	Another strategy the blackmailer uses is “Questions” whereby two question forms are used: a Wh-free narrative question, “řřār bryħ ?mř?” means “What happened to you yesterday?” he demands a prolonged answer to figure out what happened to his victim. he wants to make the victim feel uncertain and pressured to talk. Besides, he maintains his control via the yes-no direct question, “řiftī řřār?” which means “Saw what happened?” wherein the blackmailer wants specific information to elicit specific, clear, and brief answers that he knows recently. The blackmailer wants to create doubt, fear, and control over the victim. It's a psychological trick to make the victim feel helpless before the real threat is delivered.
6.	Seen them, have you? You'll send money now, won't you?	Tag questions	Two tag questions are utilized in this forensic text. The blackmailer utilizes the “Tag Question” strategy as in “mařaf mw?” which means “You're not scared of me, are you?” and “mař'arfiny mw?” which means “You know who I am, don't you?” These tag questions serve to confirm the blackmailer's assumptions while pressuring the victim to acknowledge fear or recognition. By using this strategy, the blackmailer subtly manipulates the victim into a position of psychological weakness, making her more susceptible to coercion.
7.	Reckon you get me.	Hedges	The blackmailer employs the hedging phrase “ařin řřmīnī” which translates to “Reckon you get me.” This makes the statement less direct, softening its force while still suggesting a demand. The victim is left uncertain, creating discomfort and confusion about the blackmailer's true intent. The blackmailer's goal is to coerce the victim into complying with his instructions. By using the model lexical verb “reckon,” he effectively hedges his statement, making it less forceful but still implying pressure.

		Minimal Responses		Directive / Commands		Swearing /Taboo Languages		Compliments		Questions		Tag questions		Hedges	
		Fr.	Pr.	Fr.	Pr.	Fr.	Pr.	Fr.	Pr.	Fr.	Pr.	Fr.	Pr.	Fr.	Pr.
Conversational Strategies	Males	7	4.7%	38	25.3%	19	12.7%	4	2.7%	16	10.7%	8	5.3%	5	3.3%
	Females	2	2.0%	20	19.8%	14	13.9%	1	1.0%	6	5.9%	1	1.0%	3	3.0%
	Total	9	100%	58	100%	23	100%	5	100%	22	100%	9	100%	8	100%

3. Results and Discussions

The frequency and percentage of occurrence of conversational strategies in all cases of cyber blackmail are displayed in Table (1). The overall results show that the directive/commands strategy outnumbers other strategies. It is the most prevalent strategy in data recording, 38 times (25.3%) for males and 20 times (19.8%) for female blackmailers. Compliments strategy, in contrast, is the least used strategy as it only records 4 times (2.7%) for male blackmailers, while both the compliments and tag questions strategies are the least used strategies as they only recorded 1 time (1.0%) for female blackmailers.

To determine whether the differences in the use of conversational strategies between male and female blackmailers are statistically significant, the Chi-Square test was employed. It serves to test whether gender has a significant difference in the specific linguistic strategies. The chi-Square Analysis of the conversational strategies for all types of cyber blackmail is displayed in Table (2). Minimal Responses were used more by males (7 times) compared to females (2 times), but this difference was not statistically significant. Minimal responses involve short, uninterested replies that can create psychological pressure by making the victim feel ignored or worthless. Male blackmailers might

use this strategy to maintain control by making the victim worried or uncertain about their next move.

Table 2: Chi-square Analysis of the Conversational Strategies for All Types of Cyber Blackmail

No	CS	Males	Females	Chai-Square
1.	MR	7	2	5.59
2.	D/C	38	20	5.59
3.	STL	19	14	0.76
4.	Com	4	1	1.8
5.	Q	16	6	4.55
6.	TQ	8	1	5.44
7.	H	5	3	0.5

Directives or Commands showed a significant difference between males (38 times) and females (20 times), indicating that male blackmailers tend to be more assertive and direct in their threats. This strategy helps assert dominance and ensures compliance over the victim. Commands such as “Send the money now” or “Do what I say, or I'll expose you” create immediate coercion, leaving the victim with little time to think or resist.

Swearing and Taboo Language were used by both males (19 times) and females (14 times), though not at a statistically

significant level. Swearing can serve as an intimidation strategy, making the threat seem more aggressive and serious. The use of harsh language may also reflect frustration or an attempt to break down the victim's emotional defenses.

Compliments were rare in blackmail interactions, with males using them (4 times) and females (1 time). Though not statistically significant, compliments might be used to emotionally manipulate the victim, either by gaining their trust before making a demand or as a way to soften the threat after it is made. This could create confusion in the victim, making them more susceptible to coercion.

Questions were significantly more common among males (16 times) than females (6 times). Question strategy allows blackmailers to extract more information from their victims, which can be used for further manipulation. By asking questions, male blackmailers may assess the victim's emotional state, test their willingness to comply, or gather additional information for future threats.

Tag Questions also showed a significant difference, with males using them more frequently (8 times) than females (1 time). Tag questions, such as "You don't want this to get out, do you?" or "You understand what I mean, right?" create psychological pressure by subtly leading the victim to agree with the blackmailer's demands. This strategy manipulates the victim into compliance without an overt threat.

Hedges, which involve uncertain language like "maybe" or "I think," were used slightly by both genders, with males (5 times) and females (3 times) showing no significant difference. Because blackmail includes explicit threats and demands, hedging might be less effective in these situations.

4. Conclusion

In light of the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the selected data, the study has arrived at the following conclusions:

- The study has shown that "Directive /Commands" consistently emerges as the most frequently used strategy across all types of cyber blackmail and among both genders; in contrast, "Compliments" has been used the least frequently across all types of cyber blackmail.
- The results show that, contrary to expectations, male and female blackmailers employ conversational strategies differently across all forms of cyber blackmail, with statistically significant variations.

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