

“We will get you” linguistic ideology, power, and the distortion of meaning in Twitter discourse

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Abstract

This is a single case study on the meaning of a tweet by @KyleHibbee07 in the context of the 2021 Scottish Parliamentary elections. As a consequence of the tweet’s wording, KyleHibbee07 was charged with and convicted in an Edinburgh (Scotland) court of threatening behaviour towards unionist politician @georgegalloway. This study explores how the architecture of Twitter facilitates the distortion of meaning when tweets are decontextualised, the vulnerability of subtle meaning when tweets are recontextualised, and the role that power and linguistic ideologies in conflict play in distorting meaning. Multi-level discourse, context, and pragmatic analysis described how the tweet was hijacked, a new threatening meaning attributed to it, and the threat amplified using hate speech discourse. Narrativity analysis was employed to recover the tweets intended meaning while corpus and dictionary analysis provided a range of alternative non-threatening interpretations to it when interpreted in the context of the thread in which it was originally nested. The article highlights the need for greater awareness by law enforcement and judicial authorities on how discourse is created and consumed culturally and socially when making judgements on disputed meaning.

Keywords: Twitter; threats; context; discourse analysis; narrativity analysis.

Resumo

O presente artigo constitui um estudo de um caso único sobre o significado de uma mensagem (um tweet) publicada por @KyleHibbee07 no contexto das eleições parlamentares escocesas de 2021. Em consequência da formulação dessa mensagem, @KyleHibbee07 foi acusado e condenado, por um tribunal de Edimburgo (Escócia), por comportamento ameaçador dirigido ao político unionista @georgegalloway. O estudo analisa o modo como a arquitetura do Twitter facilita a distorção do sentido quando as mensagens são descontextualizadas, a vulnerabilidade dos sentidos implícitos quando estas são recontextualizadas e o papel desempenhado pelo poder e pelas ideologias linguísticas em conflito nessa mesma distorção. A análise do discurso, do contexto e da dimensão pragmática, conduzida em vários níveis, permitiu descrever de

que forma a mensagem foi indevidamente apropriada e dotada de um novo sentido ameaçador, e a ameaça amplificada através de um discurso de ódio. Recorreu-se à análise da narratividade para recuperar o sentido pretendido da mensagem no contexto da conversação em que originalmente se inseria, ao passo que a análise de corpus e de dicionários permitiu identificar um conjunto de interpretações alternativas não ameaçadoras. O artigo sublinha a necessidade de uma maior consciencialização, por parte das autoridades policiais e judiciais, quanto ao modo como o discurso é cultural e socialmente produzido e consumido, ao formularem juízos sobre significados controvertidos.

Palavras-chave: Twitter; ameaças; contexto; análise do discurso; análise da narratividade.

1. Introduction

In May 2021, during the run-up to the 2021 Scottish Parliamentary election, @Feorlean (henceforth referred to as ‘Feorlean’), then-President of the Scottish National Party, posted a tweet questioning the motives of a unionist account @AllForUnity2, to which unionist politician @georgegalloway (henceforth referred to as ‘GG’) replied. Along with a number of other accounts, a Scottish individual, @KyleHibee07 (henceforth referred to as ‘KH’), responded to GG, including Feorlean and @AllForUnity2 in this response. As a consequence of the wording of KH’s tweet and a complaint by GG, the Scotland Police arrested KH for threatening behaviour.

During his trial at the Edinburgh Sheriff’s court in June 2022, KH denied that he had been threatening, stating that his tweet meant that GG would be defeated in the upcoming Parliamentary elections and he would be gone. However, KH was found guilty of behaving in a threatening or abusive manner by uttering a threat of violence towards GG in sending a tweet that read “*See you Galloway. We will get you. Ye understand??*”.

This article explores that tweet’s journey through its various incarnations using several theoretical approaches to analyse different aspects of language and meaning-making. Although the social media platform is now called ‘X’, I will refer to ‘Twitter’ and ‘tweets’ in this article as these were the terms used at the time of the events discussed.

I will explore how Twitter’s architecture contributes to context collapse and enables the weaponisation of tweets by facilitating the decontextualization, recontextualization, and, consequently, the reframing of a tweet’s message once it is isolated from its original context. I will apply discourse analysis to demonstrate how identity, ideology, and power tap into discourse to aid its weaponisation, in this case, encouraging partisanship and conflict between opposing political factions through *us and them* rhetoric and discourse amplification.

I will then reconstruct the tweet’s actual context to facilitate understanding its original intended meaning using narrativity analysis. This approach proposes that tweets in a thread may be analysed for meaning by viewing individual contributions as advancing a storyline. Finally, I will analyse the contextual factors associated with threatening

behaviour to determine whether the interpretation of KH's tweet as a threat was justified and explore a range of alternative non-threat interpretations consistent with the tweet's original context using corpus linguistics and dictionary definitions.

I begin by establishing the macro-context of the tweet, that being the background to the 2021 Scottish elections, and I will refer to the laws of the United Kingdom and Scotland as it applies to 'threatening behaviour' with reference to another Twitter-related prosecution in 2010, the "Twitter Joke Trial".

2. The Background: The 2021 Scottish Parliamentary Elections

In 2014, a referendum on Scottish independence resulted in 55% of Scots voting to remain within the UK. In this referendum, both pro-independence (*Yes Scotland*) and pro-union (*Better Together*) parties emphasised the importance of Scotland's membership of the European Union. However, *Better Together* argued that an independent Scotland would find itself outside of the EU if it left the UK, while *Yes Scotland* claimed that staying with the UK would result in Scotland finding itself outside of the EU because of Eurosceptic English voters (Henderson et al., 2022).

The importance of EU membership for the Scottish electorate was reflected in the Scottish Brexit vote in 2016 with all 32 council areas and 62% of Scots backing 'Remain' - to stay in the EU. However, this result was trumped by a strong English 'Leave' vote resulting in 52% of the UK electorate voting to leave the EU. A few weeks earlier, the 2016 Scottish elections had returned the pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP) to power for the third time. Following the Brexit vote, the SNP argued that this material change in the circumstances of the UK provided a good reason for a second independence referendum (Henderson et al., 2022).

Thus, the 2021 Scottish parliamentary elections, held on the 6th May 2021, was dominated by the constitutional question of Scottish independence. The SNP and Scottish Green Parties backed holding a second referendum on Scottish independence within the next five years, while Unionist parties, those in favour of Scotland remaining a part of the UK, campaigned to stop an SNP majority and therefore block another referendum (BBC, 2021a). This issue prompted a record high turnout of 63% of the voting population, reflecting the intensity of feeling both for and against Scottish independence, with the polls indicating that Scotland was split down the middle on the issue (Curtice, 2021). The election resulted in the SNP, led by First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, again winning the most seats, one seat short of a majority but one seat more than it had in the previous election in 2016.

This background explains the tensions and the strength of animosity that existed between pro-independence and pro-unionist campaigners in the lead up to the 2021 Scottish elections and the macro-context of the 'get you' tweet.

3. Applicable Law and Precedent

The prosecution in the UK of individuals on the basis that their Twitter posts constitute threatening or menacing messages is not new. An earlier case that invites comparison is that of *Paul Chambers v DPP* (2012), commonly known as the 'Twitter Joke Trial'.

Paul Chambers was hoping to fly to Northern Ireland via Robin Hood Airport on 15th January 2010 to meet another Twitter user with whom he had been corresponding. On 6th January, adverse weather conditions led to the closure of the airport, threatening his trip. Two hours after the closure, Chambers tweeted:

"Crap! Robin Hood Airport is closed. You've got a week and a bit to get your shit together otherwise I am blowing the airport sky high!!"

On 11th January, five days after Chambers published his tweet, the airport security duty manager found it; he complied with airport procedure and passed it on to the airport police, who passed it on to the South Yorkshire police, who sought the advice of the Crown Prosecution Service, who charged Chambers with sending a "menacing" message under section 127(1)(a) of the Communications Act 2003. The Act states that a person is guilty of an offense if he: "*Sends by means of a public electronic communication network a message or other matter that is **grossly offensive** or of an indecent, obscene or **menacing** character*" (my bold highlights).

In the 'Twitter Joke Trial', interpretations of Chambers' tweet as a 'threat' varied according to the institutional powers and responsibilities of individuals, such as the airport security and police (who did not consider the tweet a threat) and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and judge (who did). Interpretations of the tweet differed according to their goals and interests, which resulted in the creation of biased mental models that influenced the way different readers of the tweet interpreted it (Kelsey & Bennett, 2014) or allowed themselves to be persuaded to interpret it.

Although there is no statutory definition of what constitutes 'grossly offensive' or 'menacing' communication, *DPP v Collins* provides some indication regarding the meaning of 'grossly offensive':

*"it is for the Justices to determine as a question of fact whether a message is grossly offensive, that... the Justices must apply the standards of an open and just multi-racial society, and that the words must be judged taking account of their context and all relevant circumstances... **The test is whether a message is couched in terms liable to cause gross offense to those to whom it relates**"* (my bold highlights). (*DPP v Collins* [2006] UKHL 40)

Sedley LJ defined 'menacing' as "*a message which conveys a threat – in other words, which seeks to create a fear in or through the recipient that something unpleasant is going to happen.*" (*DPP v Collins* [2006] 1 WLR 308).

In the Trial, the CPS persuaded the presiding District Judge that "*in the context of terrorist violence [Chambers'] tweet should be taken as a genuine threat, whether he was joking or not and whether the airport knew about the "threat" or not.*" (Cohen, 2010). Chambers was convicted of the offense at Doncaster Magistrates Court. The conviction was upheld by Doncaster Crown Court on appeal, supported by fresh evidence from the CPS that Chambers had sent direct messages to his friend that reinforced the terrorist theme and strengthened their argument that Chambers intended to cause menace:

*I was thinking that if it does then I had decided to resort to terrorism"
That's the plan! I am sure the pilots will be expecting me to demand a more exotic location than NI.*

However, Crown Court records indicate that the Court was only shown Chambers' messages and not the messages to which he was replying or the response to it (*Chambers v DPP*, 2012), thereby removing the context of the messages.

Chambers appealed twice more before the High Court overturned his conviction in 2012. In their judgment, the Lord Chief Justices stressed the importance of interpreting meaning in context:

*“Before concluding that a message is criminal on the basis that it represents a menace, its precise terms, and any inferences to be drawn from its precise terms, need **to be examined in the context in and the means by which the message was sent.**”* (my bold highlight) (Chambers v DPP [2012] EWHC 2157)

As a consequence of the overturning of Chambers’ conviction, the Director of Public Prosecutions at the time (and later ex-UK prime minister), Sir Keir Starmer, introduced interim guidelines (CPS – Director of Public Prosecutions, 2012) intending to limit the use of section 127 of the Communications Act 2003 for social media prosecutions. His statement also reiterated the importance of context:

*“But the question for the CPS is not whether it was offensive, but whether it was so grossly offensive that criminal charges should be brought. The distinction is an important one and not easily made. **Context and circumstances are highly relevant** and as the European Court of Human Rights observed in the case of Handyside v UK (1976), the right to freedom of expression includes the right to say things or express opinions “...that offend, shock or disturb the state or any sector of the population.”* (my bold highlight) (Society for Computers and Law, 2012)

This was further stressed in a later case *DPP v Bussetti* (2021) where the court held that:

*There can be no yardstick of gross offensiveness otherwise than by the application of reasonably enlightened, but not perfectionist, contemporary standards to the particular message sent **in its particular context.** The test is whether a message is couched in terms liable to cause gross offence to those whom it relates.”* (my bold highlight)

In 2021, the Scottish Prosecution laid alternative charges against KH based on two different statutes: under section 127(1)(a) of the Communications Act 2003 (as in the ‘Twitter Joke Trial’) and an alternative charge under Section 38(1) of the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2010 section, which provides that it is a criminal offence for a person to behave in a “*threatening or abusive manner*” that would be “*likely to cause a reasonable person to suffer fear or alarm*” and the person “*intends by the behaviour to cause fear or alarm or is reckless as to whether the behaviour would cause fear or alarm.*”

4. Twitter and Context Collapse

On average, some 6,000 tweets are posted on Twitter every second¹. In this public, dynamic, and fast-paced environment, tweeters compete to capture their readers’ attention to obtain a following and so build an audience for their messages.

As with other human communication, tweeters design their tweets, stylistically and linguistically, for their most important audience and manage their performance by monitoring how others respond to their messages (Goffman, 1959). Theories of discourse and communication traditionally hold that communicators compose their messages for a specific audience (Bell, 1984). This is necessary so that audiences are able to make assumptions of relevance so that they may understand the message (Grice, 1975; Sperber

¹Twitter Usage Statistics (Internet Live Stats) accessed 10 October 2024.

& Wilson, 1996). In cases where meaning is implied, it is in the interest of the communicator to formulate a message that will restrict potential interpretations so that the message is understood as intended (Grice, 1969).

However, tweets in Twitter's public space may be read, not just by the direct addressee(s) or the tweeter's anticipated audience, but by anyone - millions of people in millions of different contexts, with (or without) a Twitter account. These multiple audiences from diverse and disparate cultures and social groups, with different expectations, motives, and understanding, come together in the same narrow online space, resulting in a phenomenon known as *context collapse* (Marwick & boyd, 2011). This refers to the flattening of multiple audiences into a single context, which makes it impossible for tweeters to manage their identity presentations appropriately for everyone who may see their messages.

The architecture of Twitter also makes it impossible for tweeters to keep control of their messages: who reads them, how the message is shared, and how it is understood. Tweets are highly portable. They may be retweeted or screenshotted and distributed across the network on to a new context where original referents are lost and the meanings of texts shift. In this new discourse space, a tweet may be taken up by an unintended audience who reframe the message with their own evaluative interpretations. In the process, messages are decontextualised and recontextualised, resulting in the message being understood differently (Terkourafi et al., 2018). Where meaning is implied, interpretation becomes vulnerable to miscommunication when the tweet is isolated from its original context and relevant points of reference that assisted in its original interpretation are lost. Meaning then becomes ambiguous, and it becomes easier to hijack and reframe a tweet so that a different more lexically encoded interpretation may be ascribed to it. Where the new context is one of opposing and polarised political views, tweets may be weaponised and projected onto a communal scale with a new interpretation, addressing a new audience whose identities and ideologies support the re-interpretation (Su & Lee, 2022), as what happened with KH's tweet.

5. The Role of Ideology and Power in Meaning-Making

Identity and language ideologies play a vital part in the way meaning is distorted and weaponised in the social world. An individual's *identity* is a socio-linguistic construction that emerges from interactional discourse (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). The speaker's position in a discourse is constructed through linguistic choices in expressing their relationship with, and attitude towards, the matter(s) being discussed and the individual(s) with whom they are interacting (Johnstone, 2009). In other words, a speaker's linguistic choices communicate their viewpoint on a given topic; this viewpoint identifies the holder's ideology.

Discourse being a cultural and social construct (Mayr, 2008), individuals understand meaning via the ideologies they hold and the discourse they produce and consume within the social space they inhabit. Ideologies influence discourse directly and indirectly through a biased representation of a social situation and/or through a biased understanding of discourse (van Dijk, 2009). Linguistic ideologies project speaker identity, which reflects speaker bias, a particular slant, one version (among the many that may exist) of a message or the interpretation of a message (Irvine, 2022), which

hearers interpret and make judgements on based on their own ideologies. These biased interpretations arise from, as well as reflect, the ideology of the social group of which the holders are members (Hall & Bucholtz, 2013).

Social groups, and their leaders, wield enormous power over how its members assume beliefs and interpret social meaning. Where individuals gather in groups on the basis of shared preconceived beliefs, this results in *biased assimilation* – the tendency of individuals to accept without scrutiny interpretations put to them that are consistent with their preexisting beliefs and to downplay or reject interpretations that undermine those beliefs. In turn, biased assimilation leads to the *Prior Belief Effect*, where confirmatory evidence of one's views are more highly rated and perceived as more credible, while non-confirmatory evidence is regarded as being of lower quality and lesser importance and relevance (e.g. Lord et al., 1979; Vallone et al., 1985; Traut-Mattausch et al., 2004; Fischer et al., 2008).

Prior beliefs lead to biased understanding that influence judgements. This extends to attributing meaning, behaviour, or characteristics to other individuals even when no information or disconfirming information is available (Darley & Gross, 1983; Vallone et al., 1985). For group members, the source of information overrides information content as a credibility criterion (Greitmeyer et al., 2009; Maoz et al., 2002; Munro et al., 2002), which individuals in positions of power use to manipulate group behaviour.

Power comes into play when meaning is conveyed through communication that is intended to sustain an unequal balance of power and maintain dominance against perceived *out*-groups (Thompson, 2013). Groups use polarising strategies of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation to attribute positive or negative values to *in*-group and *out*-group behaviours. In this process, negative stereotypical characteristics and behaviours are attributed to members of an *out*-group in contrast to the positive attributes and behaviours of speakers and their *in*-group addressees, supported by arguments as to why the *out*-group should be seen negatively and, therefore, suppressed or ignored (see van Dijk's ideological square 1998).

6. The Tweet's Journey: Decontextualising the Communication

On 3rd May, 2021 9:08am, KH posted a tweet in a twitter thread replying to three accounts:

Replying to @georgegalloway @Feorlean and @AllForUnity2
See you Galloway. We will get you. Ye understand??

GG did not actually see KH's tweet in its original context but only a screenshot of it, which was shared with him by two metaparticipants (individuals who were not directly involved in the original discourse) nearly 5 hours after KH posted his tweet:

@Aaron_UK_Aviv (henceforth referred to as 'AUA') reposted KH's tweet, commenting in it:

*Who is we?
 You have just threatened a man in his sixties with violence.
 If you were trying to make yourself out as a hard man and intimate (sic) others
 then you've failed. Spectacularly.*
 (@Aaron_UK_Aviv 1:41 PM May 3, 2021)

Minutes later, KH deleted his tweet. However, by then, AUA had screenshotted it. Four minutes after his original response to KH, AUA tweeted another response, this time including a screenshot of KH's tweet and copied in GG.

So he's deleted the tweet then @georgegalloway.

So @KyleHibee07,

Who is we?

You have just threatened a man in his sixties with violence.

If you were trying to make yourself out as a hard man an intimate (sic) others then you've failed. Spectacularly.

(@Aaron_UK_Aviv 1:45 PM May 3, 2021)

AUA question *Who is we?* introduces ambiguity into KH's communication, although who "we" is ought to be obvious. KH displays the Scottish banner on his Twitter profile together with the words "England out of Scotland". Yet AUA infers that 'we' is an unknown, and therefore a potentially suspicious, group of people. The next line - *You have just threatened a man in his sixties with violence* - creates the association between KH, this unknown group, and violence. In labelling the tweet as an 'intention to intimidate', AUA's reaction, his *uptake* (Freadman, 2020), of KH's message takes the tweet on a textual travel (Bojsen-Møller, 2022) removing it from whatever meaning KH had originally intended and assigning it to the threat genre.

AUA presupposes that KH had intended to, and had indeed, threatened violence, with whom this unknown group of "we" is linked. AUA's reference to GG's age uses *allusion* to attribute negative connotations to KH's character - a younger man exploiting the vulnerability of an older person. Allusion allows the suggestion of something without accepting responsibility for what is implicitly said, relying on *presupposition*, shared beliefs that people belonging to a particular group accept as true (Wodak, 2007), to fill the gap. AUA ends with a counter-factual presupposition - *If you were trying to make yourself out as a hard man and intimate (sic) others then you've failed. Spectacularly.* Here, the presupposition is that KH was indeed trying to be a "hard man" and intimidate others, which has to be accepted as true by the reader for the tweet to make sense.

No discursive interaction occurs between KH and AUA; KH simply deletes his tweet. We have no challenge by KH correcting AUA's interpretation or an explanation by AUA as to why he interpreted the tweet as a threat. Consequently, AUA's threat genre attribution is the only label attached to KH's tweet as it is circulated and amplified in the Twittersphere.

GG replies to AUA by tagging @policescotland (@georgegalloway 1:53 PM May 3, 2021) without comment. The Police are now primed with AUA's interpretation of KH's tweet and lack the original context to objectively assess the tweet's meaning.

Meanwhile, a second metaparticipant, *SpeakUpScotland* (@Time2_SpeakUp) (henceforth 'SUS'), takes the screenshot of KH's tweet and inserts it into a different thread initiated by GG, copying in @policescotland:

Replying to @georgegalloway and @ElectoralCommUK

Did you catch this one before he deleted it George? @policescotland. Another nationalist head-case to deal with.

(@Time2_SpeakUp 1:52 PM May 3, 2021)

SUS's reference to *Another nationalist head-case* initiates the use of *us and them* discourse. He highlights the ideological differences between himself and the Scottish

Nationalists, marginalising them as the *out*-group using discourse strategies that perpetuate his *in*-group's presupposed beliefs. SUS takes up AUA's threat-genre label of KH's tweet and extends the perceived negative behaviour to all Scottish nationalists. Thus, SUS triggers the presupposition of his *in*-group that KH is a mentally unbalanced individual by virtue of being a "*nationalist*", which makes him dangerous enough for the police to have to "*deal with*", and that KH is the latest in a series of such "*headcases*".

SUS does not need to elaborate as he relies on members of his *in*-group sharing his beliefs and knowledge as to what "*another nationalist head-case*" means. SUS's reference relates to an exchange of tweets with @TimTayl02099058, where SUS informs him of a "*pending legal case*" - *George, & Douglas Ross had a Nat threaten to put a bullet in their heads recently*". It is unclear who "George" is, possibly GG.

The exchange between SUS and @TimTayl02099058 uses linguistic acts to build an identity that stresses the solidarity of the unionist *in*-group while demonising the nationalist *out*-group

Vile nationalism is now completely out in the open in Scotland. The Salmond inquiry showed the SNP are openly corrupt and cheered on by horrible Nats who love the SNP more than Scotland.

Scotland is at a tipping point. Time to vote them out and shout loudly.

(@Time2_SpeakUp 10:28 AM May 3, 2021)

Here, nationalists and their supporters are labelled "*vile*" and "*corrupt*", while unionists are the only ones who can save Scotland by voting out the SNP.

Other tweets by SUS continue the *out*-group derogation, designed to denigrate the status of the *out*-group and thereby elevate the status of his *in*-group. The tweets demonstrate a negative ideologically-based approach towards nationalism generally, and the Scottish groups and individuals associated with it, as can be seen in the tweets that follow:

Are the SNP worse than the "Up to yer neck in Fenian blood! Loyalists? Serious question.

(@TimTayl02099058 May 3, 2021)

SNP are ruining Scotland and have brought hatred so yes. They are.

(@Time2_SpeakUp May 3, 2021)

Brought hatred? Was there no hatred before?

(@TimTayl02099058 May 3, 2021)

Not like now. Nationalism never brings peace. SNP are horrible.

(@Time2_SpeakUp May 3, 2021)

The implication is that these *out*-group organisations and individuals do not put Scotland's interest first unlike SUS's *in*-group, who do, and who should replace the SNP.

SUS then follows this tweet with another containing the screenshot of KH's tweet with the comment "*Another example. It's ok though eh? He's not a "loyalist" is he?*". Again, it is unclear what "*Another example*" refers to; however, the inference is that KH's tweet is "*another example*" of a death threat (given the immediate previous reference to "*a bullet in their heads*"). This inference also ties into SUS's reference to "*another nationalist head-case*" in the earlier response to GG.

Ideologies not only influence lexical selection, such as the selection of adjectives or nouns describing the characteristics of *out*-groups and their members, but also extend to negative associations with objects, places, or behaviours (van Dijk, 1996), for example with a tendency towards criminality, violence, or mental instability. These constructions form the foundations of prejudiced discourse and can be a powerful means of persuasion to be used whenever it is politically expedient to do so, such as when campaigning for votes during elections (Wodak, 2007).

Identity and group belonging also influence how individuals perceive the behaviour of *others* (Vallone et al., 1985) and this extends to interpreting the *others*' discourse. Mental context models may be ideologically biased, and this will influence how recipients evaluate what is relevant and consistent with their aims (van Dijk, 2009). Thus, the view of KH as someone who threatens old people and is mentally unstable and, therefore, dangerous is initiated and spread by two metaparticipants who interpret KH's tweet outside of its original context. Negative associations, implicit and explicit, are attributed to KH and the organisations and causes with whom he is associated, which readers must accept as true in order for the tweets to make sense.

At 2:01 pm on 3rd May, @ElaineW60 posts "*He's locked his account the pussy*" (referring to KH and his Twitter account). Around 10:44 pm later that day, KH deletes his account.

7. Discursive Amplification

An important aspect of linguistic ideology is its role in the negotiation of power. While language is not powerful by itself, it becomes powerful in the way powerful individuals use it (Wodak, 2007). Power is linguistically engaged when one narrative is chosen, one interpretation out of the competing possible alternatives, which is elevated above all others (Wodak, 2002). This has ramifications for the interpretation of meaning by powerful people.

Given that the perception of threatening language is subjective and recipient-oriented, the interactants' identities and ideologies are an important consideration as to why a threat may be perceived as such. When parties are in conflict, perceptual biases create the potential for conflict amplification through miscommunication and misperception. Group leaders play an important role in how those perceptions are managed. The way information is framed by them may be (mis)interpreted by their followers as being fact and contribute towards the amplification of the conflict.

We see an example of this in the way that the interpretation of KH's tweet is amplified: from AUA's "*threatened ... with violence*" to GG's "*clear threat of violence*" in his response to SUS's tweet:

Replying to @georgegalloway and @ElectoralCommUK
Did you catch this one before he deleted it George? @policescotland. Another nationalist head-case to deal with.
 (@Time2_SpeakUp 1:52 PM May 3, 2021)

Replying to @Time2_SpeakUp @ElectoralCommUK and @PoliceScotland
*Yes. I am sure @policescotland will act on **this clear threat of violence**.*
 (@georgegalloway 1:54 PM May 3, 2021)

The use of “*clear*” is intended to pre-empt any discussion as to the interpretation of KH’s tweet. Together with the preceding “*I am sure*” and “*will act*”, these phrases incorporate a communicative strategy of pre-empting the future, where powerful people project their current opinions and visions of the future as “*universal*” and “*grounded in common sense*” in order to influence contemporary behaviour (Dunmire, 2005, p. 483).

The nominalisation of the verb “*threatened*” into “*threat*” establishes the proposition “*I am sure @policescotland will act on this clear threat of violence*” as presupposed background information. GG’s labelling of KH’s tweet as a “*threat*” is not open for discussion; it does not need to be substantiated or defended (Dunmire, 2005). This presupposition is reinforced when GG retweets SUS’s tweet with KH’s screenshotted tweet attached:

*This may be the last straw. I am discontinuing my street campaign work until I can secure assurances from @policescotland that **this threat** has been dealt with @Alliance4Unity @ScotGovFM*
(@georgegalloway 2:47 PM May 3, 2021)

In further tweets, the “*threat*” is further amplified into a potential death threat. However, the amplification into “*perhaps death*” requires that the reader to accept the presupposition that KH indeed threatened GG with violence in the first place:

*This man **threatened me with violence, perhaps death**. In public, on Twitter. What is going to be done about it? @policescotland ? @ScotGovFM @TwitterSafety @Alliance4Unity*

A supporter tweets a 2018 photograph of KH with First Minister Nicola Sturgeon stating *George, please see some of my tweets on his identity. DM me for details.* (@FrankLeeBrian May 3, 2021). GG retweets this, now amplifying the source of the ‘threat’ from “*This man*” in the earlier tweet to “*the SNP supporter*” and repeating the “*perhaps death*” claim:

*Dear @ScotGovFM If this picture is genuine you need to know that **the SNP supporter** next to you **threatened me with violence, perhaps death**, on Twitter this afternoon @policescotland*

Again, the message presupposes that KH did threaten GG with violence. This time, the reference to KH as an “*SNP supporter*” triggers negative presuppositions held by GG’s *in-group* relating to SNP supporters. At 4:10 pm, 3rd May, GG tweets a screenshot of KH’s Facebook account containing a profile banner of the Scottish National Party’s yellow flag and emblem set against the flag of Scotland. This triggers further ideologically-held prejudices on Twitter against the SNP and Scottish Nationalists. Comments generalise negative behaviour to all members of that *out-group*: “*Nationalist normal*”, “*VERY normal in @NicolaSturgeon’s Scotland*”, “*the Ulsterisation, of Scotland*” and refer to members of group as “*reptiles*”, “*mentally unbalanced*”, “*fascist*”, and “*criminal*” among other negative labels.

GG’s *in-group* now extend the threat to GG’s family:

*someone has threatened @georgegalloway **and his family**, can @policescotland investigate this please as this is totally unacceptable [cursing emoji] please retweet*
(@mandy2672 5:48 PM May 3, 2021)

Followers also amplify GG’s suggestion “*perhaps death*” into an actual death threat, escalating the conflict discourse with presuppositions that the SNP do not care:

*Omg George I really feel for you and your we family . This is getting way out of hand . Common @AnasSarwar @williw_rennie @RuthDavidsonMSP @scotgov Are you going to show some solidarity with George Galloway over **his death threats** no point in tagging **the snp thay don't care***
(@PaulaDocherty5 May 4, 2021)

On the 4th May, GG posts another tweet foregrounding his family with a screenshot of KH's tweet:

*How much of **this are my family expected to take** @ScotGovFM @policescotland ?*

The use of "*this*" is ambiguous. It may refer to the stress of the situation generally or the 'threat' specifically. In any case, the threat is now explicitly associated with his family. Further escalation follows:

*As well as the resolution of **the threat to violently attack me**, made by a Scottish Nationalist, I have made a complaint against two former SNP MSPs under the Representation of the People Act 1983 under the section dealing with the making of knowingly false statements.*
(@georgegalloway 8:03 AM May 4, 2021)

Thus, we see a discursive strategy which amplifies the conflict through dynamics of escalation. GG and multiple other accounts retweet screenshots of KH's original tweet as well as screenshots of KH's other Twitter and Facebook accounts and share KH's photo and details of where he works and his personal background. GG and multiple other accounts call for police action and tag @policescotland in their posts. Every time KH's tweet or profile photo is retweeted, it is recontextualised and negatively reinterpreted in terms of the semiotics that surround it for every new reader.

Interpretations of KH's tweet are amplified into 'threatened with violence', then to 'a threat', then to a 'death threat', and then to a threat which extends to the entire family. KH's behaviour is described in the discourse as being typical of nationalists generally and Scottish nationalists and the institutions that represent them and Scottish independence specifically using criminal, mental, and dehumanising terminology characteristic of *out-group* derogation.

8. Narrativity and Pragmatic Analysis

Correctly interpreting the meaning of KH's tweet requires that we examine it in its original context. This is important to understand the more subtle and implied meanings which may be corrupted or lost in social media when context collapse occurs. Another important approach to understanding sense-making on Twitter is the *narrativity* of multi-authored tweet threads. Here, narrativity refers to the way that sequences of individually-authored tweets construct changing mental contexts that readers use to meaningfully interpret in a pseudo-narrative manner.

Although much of Twitter is not a narrative, the fragmentation of tweets imposed by a 280-character limitation requires that responders adopt a narrative-style interpretation to create a mental model of the context, thereby making sense of the thread and ensuring their response is within that context. Given the disjointed nature of multi-author responses in a sequence, a responder is required to construct causal links between tweets where none explicitly are stated, much like in a narrative (Barthes & Duisit, 1975).

Thus, understanding meaning in Twitter comes not from within just one tweet but from intertextual relationships between potentially many tweets, which individual responders interpret. Additionally, interpretation is a dynamic process. By its nature, context - the mental model that individuals construct when participating in a communicative event (van Dijk, 2009) - is an abstract and subjective construction. Participants in a discourse integrate points of reference, relevant information from the context in which the communication occurs, into the mental context model they construct for a particular situation based on what they know and what others have said before them in that discourse.

Tweeters may respond to parts of one or more tweets in the thread as more responses are added and opinions and positions change (Sadler, 2018). Consequently, when tweets are removed from the threads in which they have been located, the intertextuality aspect assisting sense-making disappears and meaning may be distorted.

9. Understanding the Original Narrative

The main players in the original tweet thread were Feorlean, at that time president of the Scottish National Party, and GG, founder of *All for Unity*, a new pro-unionist party who vowed to “tackle the scourge of separatism and save our Scotland” (BBC, 2021b).

On the 2nd May, 2021, Feorlean posted a screenshotted tweet showing an image of British soldiers in armed conflict against a group of Scottish Highlanders. The text within the image read “*In 1746 we fought together to save the United Kingdom. Keep the Highlands British. 2nd Vote All for Unity*”.

Feorlean’s accompanying text to the tweet read:

*I thought this must be a distasteful parody as it depicts the bayoneting of Highlanders at Culloden. But no it is a real @AllForUnity2 online poster from **their** Twitter feed. Distasteful & bizarre – are **they** suggesting this as a way to resolve the constitutional question?*

(@Feorlean 8:40 PM May 2, 2021)

GG responded:

*This account has nothing whatsoever to do with **us**. It has been reported. A dirty trick by Scottish Nationalists I’d guess*

(@georgegalloway 10:48 PM May 2, 2021)

Both Feorlean and GG resort to *us and them* rhetoric. Feorlean addresses his *in-group* audience referring to *AllForUnity2* in the *out-group* third person “**their** Twitter feed” and “are **they** suggesting”. GG responds denying the association stating, “nothing whatsoever to do with **us**”, framing *AllForUnity2*’s post as a “*dirty trick*” by the “*Scottish Nationalists*”.

However, Feorlean’s tweet is not only about the image posted on Twitter but also about the ideologically inspired mental model of the conflict between *us* (nationalists) and *them* (unionists). The image of an 18th century event is expanded to include an allusion to unionists using violence as an option to resolve the issue of Scottish independence, in the process dynamically altering the context model for responders.

This exchange receives nine comments criticising GG’s response, all tagging Feorlean and GG (and *AllForUnity2* tagged in Feorlean’s original post). In this exchange,

the *in-group/out-group* identities are now reversed. Nationalists and their supporters are now the *in-group* while GG and his supporters are the *out-group*. What follows is a complex chain of responses with each responder having their own uptake of Feorlean and GG's posts, commenting on them while taking into account what earlier posters in the thread have said. Thus, each response is a "*complex dialogic, intertextual relationship with previous utterances*" (Bojsen-Møller, 2023, p. 33).

Context aids understanding through the provision of contextualisation cues, which the hearer analyses at different levels. This is particularly important when meaning is inferred and is strongly situated in the discourse in which it is made. Consequently, such discourse cannot be interpreted outside of this context. Wodak (2007) identifies four contextual levels at which discourse should be analysed to infer meaning. The first is the *co-text*, at the level of word collocations and the clauses and tweets that immediately precede and follow the relevant clause. Second is the *con-text*, referring to the macro-text level, the genre in which the tweet is located, in this case, a politically charged exchange over responsibility for a tweet between two politicians from opposing political parties. This con-text is further understood within the third context, the *socio-political level*, this being the electioneering going on prior to the 2021 Scottish elections. Finally, at the *intertextual* and *interdiscursive* level, referring to relationships between texts, specifically the shaping of the meaning of a text by another text as well as meaning in a text that carries institutional and social meaning from other discourse.

Responders create mental models of their understanding of the tweet by Feorlean and respond to different points raised by Feorlean and/or GG in this exchange:

I thought this must be a distasteful parody as it depicts the bayoneting of Highlanders at Culloden. But no it is a real @AllForUnity2 online poster from their Twitter feed. Distasteful & bizarre – are they suggesting this as a way to resolve the constitutional question?

(@Feorlean 8:40 PM May 2, 2021)

This account has nothing whatsoever to do with us. It has been reported. A dirty trick by Scottish Nationalists I'd guess

(@georgegalloway 10:48 PM May 2, 2021)

- i. *You blame the SNP for every nationalist nutjob, here is one of your own.*
(@GRLangford 11:39 PM May 2, 2021)
- ii. *What like the fake Jane Godley tweets you reported? Own this – these are YOUR people!"*
(@DBC_of_PBC 11:56 PM May 2, 2021)
- iii. *BS*
(@shirvani_rose 11:59 May 2, 2021)
- iv. *Whilst you're here George. Why, given the slogan "SAVE OUR SCOTLAND" on your leaflets, are they printed in SOUTHEND-ON-SEA which is in ENGLAND. Hardly helping to save Scottish printing business, is it? You're a hypocrite.*
(@j1874t 1:53 AM May 3, 2021)
- v. *Most of you so called unionists heads are still stuck in 1746, the world is changing and Scotland must change with it and leave the corruption, cronyism and outdated institutions of Westminster and Whitehall behind*
(@grs68 7:49 AM May 3, 2021)

- vi. *A dirty trick by you to blame as a dirty trick by Nationalists!!!*
(@Headshr42391696 8:55 AM May 3, 2021)
- vii. *See you Galloway. We will get you. Ye understand??*
(@KyleHibee07 9:08 May 3, 2021)
- viii. *But it wasn't a false flag account last week?* [attached to retweet of @georgegalloway tweet of April 24, 2021]
(@almightybobps 9:12 AM May 3, 2021)
- ix. *Why don't you just take responsibility? The account is full of other tweets endorsing your policies. Was this a dirty trick too?*
(@ChanterRanter 9:21 AM May 3, 2021)

We see how these different context levels interact in aiding understanding of the tweets that responded to GG, Feorlean, and AllForUnity2, of which KH's is the seventh (vii):

- Responder **i** responds to GG challenging his claim, saying “*You blame the SNP for every nationalist nutjob, here is one of your own*”.
- Responder **ii** picks up the point made by GG that “*It has been reported*”. The responder also reinforces Responder **i**'s point that @AllForUnity2 is part of GG's *out-group* with “*Own this – these are YOUR people!*”
- Responder **iii** labels GG's response as “BS” (‘bullshit’).
- Responder **iv** expands on the mental models constructed by the previous responders. There is no need to repeat the previous comments but, instead, GG is labelled “a hypocrite” and a reason for the label is provided.
- Responder **v**'s tweet is an example of intertextuality and interdiscursive meaning, picking up the “1746” reference from Feorlean's tweet and the “ENGLAND” reference from Responder **iv**. Responder **v** builds on the mental model created by earlier responders by implying that GG is associated with the “*institutions of Westminster and Whitehall*” by virtue of being a “*so called unionist*”. “*Leave the corruption, cronyism and outdated institutions of Westminster and Whitehall*” can only be understood in the context of the Scottish Nationalists winning the forthcoming elections and taking Scotland out of the Union and, hence, Westminster and Whitehall.
- Responder **vi** chooses to pick up on GG's “*dirty trick*” description and turns it on GG and his *out-group*.
- Responder **vii** builds on Responder **v**'s tweet about leaving “*the corruption, cronyism and outdated institutions of Westminster and Whitehall behind*” by bidding goodbye to GG with “*See you Galloway*”. Responder **vii** continues the theme of his previous clause by prophesying “*We will get you*”, meaning that the SNP will beat GG (and the rest of his *out-group*) in the electoral process.
- Responder **viii** chooses to respond only to the first sentence of GG's reply “*This account has nothing whatsoever to do with us*” by pointing out that GG contradicts his previous position about the @AllForUnity2 account.
- Responder **ix** picks up on the “*dirty trick*” phrase made by GG and builds on responses by Responders **i** and **vi**.

Although the sequence of tweets does not constitute a narrative, it is best understood through a narrative intertextual interpretation. Thus, we see how tweets by individual members of the thread's *in-group* cohere with each other politically and pragmatically, creating a dynamic multi-authored narrative of GG's perceived behaviour, the

role he plays in the *out*-group associated with the "*outdated institutions of Westminster and Whitehall*", and what they expect to happen in the elections.

10. The Perception of Threat

From a linguistic perspective, four components define a threat. The speaker uses language to communicate that the speaker will commit or cause to commit an act (the *locutionary* component) that the speaker believes will be unfavourable for the addressee (the *illocutionary* component); and the addressee recognises the speaker's intention to intimidate (the *perlocutionary* component) (Fraser, 1998). Finally, the *context* of the communication has to be conducive to a threat (Gales, 2019).

Although all the above must be present to define a threat, it is impossible to determine whether a threat has actually been made, especially if it is indirect and its meaning veiled. The acts of threatening someone, as well as interpreting threatening language, are social actions. This means that perceived threats must be interpreted within the socio-historic contexts in which they occur (Gales, 2010). Without context, it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine whether a communication is a threat on the basis of the language alone (Kaplan, 2016; Nini, 2017; Solan & Tiersma, 2005).

There was no recording or transcript of KH's trial to rely on, therefore, the only available information sources about what was said are from newspaper reports. Although it is not possible to say whether the quoted extracts are indeed verbatim, they provide insight into GG's uptake of the tweet, as he stated in court. According to the Edinburgh News (Lawrie, 2022), GG said "*There is only one possible explanation and that is we will physically assault you. For me this is as clear a threat of violence that is possible to construct. I am a working class man who grew up on a council estate so I know what 'we will get you' means*" (Lawrie, 2022).

Additionally, the Daily Record (McEwen, 2022) reported, "*Galloway likened 'See you Galloway' to the phrase 'See you Jimmy'². He said anyone using 'See you Jimmy' was not advancing to give you a slice of banoffee pie, adding: 'It's threatening language.'*"

In court, GG explained that he attributed a threatening meaning to the phrase "*we will get you*" because of his experience growing up on a council estate. He also attributed a similar threatening meaning to "*See you Galloway*" because it was similar to "*See you Jimmy*". GG also cited as background information that another individual had previously been convicted for "*thrice threatening to shoot me in the head on Twitter*". Thus, GG stated that he identified KH's tweet as a "*clear threat of violence*" and "*perhaps death*" on the basis of his personal schema. This is consistent with Milburn's (1977) threat model, which makes the hearer the key individual, given their situational and personal circumstances, who interprets and labels what is said as 'a threat'.

However, there is a difference between a threat being made (speaker-oriented) and a threat being communicated (recipient-oriented). For a threat to be made, the speaker must intend the utterance to be a threat. For a threat to be communicated, the hearer

²"See you Jimmy" is a stereotypical catchphrase usually associated with Glasgow (Crofton, 2012), a combination of 'see you' to attract someone's attention ('listen here' or 'look at me') and 'Jimmy' a generic placeholder name to address an unknown man. The line was invented in the 1980s by the comedian Russ Abbot, who created a stereotypical aggressive Scottish character called C. U. Jimmy <https://nostalgiacentral.com/television/tv-by-decade/tv-shows-1980s/russ-abbot-show-the/>.

must interpret the utterance as one and, presumably, suffer the negative psychological effect of it. If the sender did not intend to communicate a threat but the recipient's uptake labels it as one, then the speaker has not made a threat although a threat has been communicated (Shuy, 1993; Tompkinson, 2023).

People's belief about what constitutes threatening language is not always accurate (Gales, 2010). Every supposed threat has a non-threat interpretation (Kaplan, 2016) and the same phrase in different contexts may mean completely different things (Gales, 2019). Therefore, it is important that perceived threats are linguistically interpreted within the context of the speech event (Gales, 2019) and with recourse to how it is socially understood. This can be done through interrogating dictionaries and corpus analysis.

11. Dictionaries and Corpus Analysis

I consulted English and Scottish dictionaries (Oxford English Dictionary, Green's Dictionary of Slang, A Dictionary of Scottish Phrase and Fable, Urban Dictionary) and corpora (the British National Corpus XML Edition; Corpus of British English 2006; Spoken British National Corpus 2014; Scottish Corpus of Text and Speech) to identify the range of potential meaning that could be applied to the phrases "See you Galloway" and "We will get you".

A review of English and Scottish dictionaries returned meanings for 'see you', all of which were variations of 'goodbye' or 'see you later'. The Oxford English Dictionary (colloquial and slang) defined "see you" as indicating 'goodbye' as did the entry for Scottish English in Green's Dictionary of Slang (Green, 2010). A Dictionary of Scottish Phrase and Fable (Crofton, 2012) contained a reference to the phrase 'See you?' as an interrogative to mean *A Glaswegian construction intended to engage the attention of the addressee primarily to delivering some kind of, usually adverse, character assessment*. However, the tweet is not an interrogative.

I also undertook a search for 'we see you'. It is not possible from the context to determine whether the subject pronoun omission in 'see you' is a *diary drop* or KH intended to use that phrase specifically. *Diary drop* refers to the omission of the subject pronoun in informal written English in registers such as diaries (hence the name), texts messages, emails, note-taking etc, including Twitter. Where this happens, the reader infers the author's meaning from the linguistic properties of the rest of the text. The logical assumption is that the null subject (when the subject of a sentence is omitted) in the first sentence is identical to the subject pronoun in the second sentence – "we". Consequently, there are two reasonable alternatives to reading the first sentence: *See you Galloway* or *[We] see you Galloway* (diary drop).

The Urban Dictionary contained a definition of 'We see you' associated with social media as "When someone is being called out (usually on twitter) for not doing the right thing... The implication is that the person should be ashamed of their actions (or lack of) and that it has been noted so that at some point in the future they will get their comeuppance. It is essentially a thinly veiled threat that revenge will come...one day". Interestingly, the example provided in the Dictionary is in the context of an election (Urban Dictionary, 2025).

In the Urban Dictionary, the variation '*I see you*' is defined as intending to call someone out for doing "*something funny, ridiculous, retarded or filthy*", although it is largely used in a positive context with the speaker expressing admiration for the way someone looks or behaves.

A review of English and Scottish corpora to identify the range of potential meanings for 'see you _NP0' (where _NP0 is a proper noun) found almost all matches to be in the context of perceiving with the senses e.g. *It's great to **see you, girl*** or to say 'goodbye' temporarily e.g. ***See you** ere long* or permanently e.g. *but nowadays with a war it would just be one nuclear bomb **see you England***. One match used the phrase as a noun, referring to a "*See you, Jimmy wig*." No corpus used the phrase 'see you' as a threat.

Most matches for 'we will get you' or 'we'll get you' involved obtaining something for someone, getting something done for someone, or taking them somewhere. Four matches from the BNC XML were in the context of reported threatening behaviour in news reports and journals e.g. "*They jeered police, gave banned Hitler salutes and chanted: 'Foreign pigs – **we'll get you all**'*" (The Daily Mirror); "*the appellant said '**We'll get you when you come out**'*" (Law Report).

I also created a Twitter corpus covering two years prior to the 15th April 2022 (the day of the collection of tweets) which included the phrases 'see you' + 'we will get you' within individual tweets. I also chose the two-year period (31 December 2019 to 15 April 2022) to best capture the meaning of the phrases within the context of an election as this period covered both the 2020 USA and 2021 Scottish elections.

Four tweets referred specifically to GG, all of which were negative:

Replying to @georgegalloway

We ALL see you Galloway. We see YOU! [Link to a video of Jimmy Saville]

(Jan 28, 2021)

Replying to @GeorgeGalloway and MoatsTV

We see you Galloway. Even those that haven't always agreed but admired your oratory and passion. Reduced to a disgusting conspiracy theory spreading traitor. Shameful.

(April 4, 2022)

Replying to @georgegalloway and @TwitterSupport

We see you Galloway. Compromised through and through. Sorry, spelling error. Kompromat...

(April 6, 2022)

On the 3rd May, the same day at KH's tweet, another tweeter responding to another GG tweet mirrored KH's stated meaning:

"So: last night a fake account produced a horrific meme of "Redcoats slaughtering Highlanders in "1746" and purporting to be from us. It was retweeted with commentary by Mike Russell (who has now blocked me the President of SNP (ditto). A criminal offence @ElectoralCommUK"

(@georgalloway 9:09 AM May 3, 2021)

Replying to @georgegalloway and @ElectoralCommUK

"We see you Galloway.....we see you!

Oh and **we'll be seeing you** (followed by winking emoji + 3 waving hands + 3 Scottish flags)

(May 3, 2021)

In this tweet, the repetition of ‘we see you’ carries at least two different meanings: (1) we know what you are up to, and (2) goodbye (you will lose the election). We understand that the tweeter is playing with words and, conveniently, in this tweet the waiving hands and Scottish flag emojis assist with the interpretation of the message.

There were only 32 tweets with the phrases ‘see you [noun]’ + ‘[pronoun] will get you’ from Twitter within the collection period. Interestingly, all 15 tweets which used ‘I will get you’ carried positive meaning or was intended as a joke. The nearest to a threat of violence was addressed to a squirrel:

To the squirrel who keeps coming to my balcony every morning and fucking up my crops and plants... I see you... and I will get you... little bastard.

Examples from the Twitter corpus using ‘see you’ and ‘we will get you’ reflected the meaning described in the Urban Dictionary – ‘we know what you are up to’ – plus a suggestion of comeuppance facilitated by collective action of some sort:

Replying to @realDonaldTrump
Fascists, **we see you**, and **we will get you**
(Jun 1, 2020)

Replying to @realDonaldTrump and @POTUS
That’s right dickhead. **We see you**. And **we will get you**. There is a tree with you (sic) name on it.
(Jun 10, 2020)

Replying to @LindseyGrahamSC
You Lady Graham are most certainly breaking the law...bank on that...**democrats see you and we will get you out of office** you weasel
(Nov 20, 2020)

Retweeting @andycorneys tweet
500 deaths everyday because Cummings Gove Boris & Hancock failed to follow science, failed to react quickly and failed to protect the people. 80,000+ dead-it’s time these four and their enablers, were jailed. **We see you** and **we will get you**
(Dec 16, 2020)

At times, the phrases conveyed positive messages of support:

Retweeting a @KamalaHarris Tweet
We see you! [heart emoji] Thank you for all you, very (sic) done and will do in behalf of Our Country and its citizens! We have your back and **we will get you** and Joe All the way into the White House! We need your leadership!
(Aug 25, 2020)

As we see, dictionary definitions and Twitter and other corpora provided a range of meaning that could be applied to “see you” plus “we will get you” ranging from conveying positive feelings to communicating high levels of anger. The most reasonable interpretation of “*See you Galloway. We will get you. Ye understand??*” consistent with dictionary definitions and the use of ‘see you’ in the corpora is one of ‘goodbye’ or ‘we know what you are up to’, in this case calling out GG for attributing the AllForUnity2 tweet to the SNP.

In the election context, "we will get you" is consistent with predicting a defeat in the polls and is in keeping with the idea of 'goodbye' or 'we know what you are up to' as called out by other responders in the tweet thread. Therefore, within the range of meaning and consistent with the micro and macro context of the thread in which it appears, interpretations of KH's tweet as: 'Goodbye Galloway. We [SNP/nationalists] will beat you in the election. Do you understand?' or 'We see what you are up to Galloway. We [SNP/nationalists] will beat you in the election. Do you understand?' are reasonable alternative interpretations to a threat of violence or death.

12. Discussion and Conclusion

As demonstrated in this article, discourse is characterised by instability in meaning. Meaning is not fixed but animated through social interaction, circumstances, and relationships, and it is often a matter of implicit understanding (Bazerman, 1999). On Twitter, the portability of tweets is particularly problematic for the interpretation of meaning. Tweets that are retweeted or quoted are decontextualised, taken from their original context and imported into a new context where the text is recontextualised and 'translated', skewing its interpretation (Chilton & Schaffner, 2002).

The linguistic analysis presented tells the story of how meaning may be hijacked when power, politics, and ideology collide. Power is an important agent in the production, consumption, and comprehension of language. Although social conventions produce language, power regulates this language through social and institutional practices (Kelsey & Bennett, 2014). Research identifies strong links between ideology and the way individuals see the world and process information. This view is built upon bodies of shared knowledge presupposing the truth of certain beliefs, known and interpreted to varying degrees by member of a community. This group knowledge is typically created by underlying ideologies propagated by powerful individuals who direct social practices and behaviour and influence the mental models that belief-holders tap into to produce and interpret their discourse and that of their *in*-group.

Biased assimilation results in group members viewing their *in*-group ideologies more positively and subscribing to them with minimal critical assessment. This uncritical embracement of beliefs and attitudes creates the Prior Belief Effect, with *in*-group members presupposing the truth of the ideologies they subscribe to and accepting the interpretations of their leaders also with minimal critical reflection.

The Prior Belief Effect lends itself to biased interpretation of discourse, particularly where the discourse context involves ideological opponents. Presuppositions based solely on an individual's *in*-group membership results in biased interpretations of *out*-group speakers' communication. When ideologies are in conflict, inferences are made about the individual's intentions in a discourse based on the hearer's prejudices and drawing on past personal experiences, irrespective of the absence of evidence to support the interpretation (van Dijk, 2006). This is then coded into *us and them* discourse, where members, attitudes and events the *out*-group are presented negatively, thereby contributing towards the polarisation of views held by *in*-group and *out*-group adversaries.

There are fundamental differences between the 'Twitter Joke Trial' and the 'get you' tweet case: the tweet in the former was intended as a joke borne out of frustration with

the weather and the tweet in the latter was a politically charged prediction regarding the election outcome. However, what links the two cases was the uptake of the tweets by individuals who labelled them as threatening and menacing. In the Chambers' case, the airport security and police did not consider the tweet a threat, but they reported it to higher authorities because their obligations required them to do so.

The CPS argued before that judge that "*in the context of terrorist violence [Chambers'] tweet should be taken as a genuine threat, whether he was joking or not*". The concern for terrorist violence in 2010 was very real, with dissident republican groups stepping up their campaign of terrorism (United States Department of State, 2011). It appears the CPS felt that, given the security situation, Chambers' tweet had to be considered a threat irrespective of his actual intention. To them, the macro-context was a more important consideration than the context of the discourse. The Magistrate Count and Crown Court judges agreed, although the High Court appeal judges did not and overturned the earlier conviction.

In KH's case, his tweet was public for five hours with no comment on it until AUA discovered it and decided it constituted threatening behaviour. AUA focused on the potentially ambiguous 'we' to construct the danger. "*Who is we?*" AUA asked, in spite of KH displaying the Scotland banner and the words "England out of Scotland" on his Twitter profile identifying his allegiances.

In both cases, we may understand the uptake of these tweets as threats as operating within a system of "*the construction of 'differences', which serve ideological, political and/or practical discrimination on all levels of society*" (Wodak, 2007, p. 205). We observed how cognitively and emotionally effective the pragmatic devices and discourse strategies of presupposition and allusion employed by AUA are.

Bojsen-Møller (2023) makes an interesting observation that, in addition to reflecting the perlocutionary effect on the reader, uptakes also reflect the social actions that recipients themselves wish to accomplish. A scenario of danger and fear is constructed that is repeated and expanded. The repeated labelling of KH's tweet as a 'threat to violence, perhaps death' results in GG's *in-group* accepting the tweet as a death threat and extending it to GG's family. The repeated tagging of *@policescotland* and other in position of power in retweets and comments pressures a response from them, which results in KH's arrest. KH's explanation to the Police and the court, that he had intended to say that GG would soon be gone as he would be defeated in the election, has no supporting evidence. His Twitter account is gone and the original context that might have provided frames of reference to support his interpretation, is not available. The layers of subtle meaning from KH's *in-group* thread are lost and replaced with a new more literal threatening meaning attributed to it by members of an ideologically opposed political group, where its new interpretation is amplified into a death threat.

Narrativity analysis of the thread in which KH's tweet was originally nested demonstrates that he was building on and supporting previous tweets, including one that referred to the removal of Scotland from the Westminster Parliament. It is therefore reasonable to infer that "*we will get you*" referred to the same electoral process as the earlier tweet. Corpus and dictionary analyses demonstrated that "*see you*" also means 'goodbye' in a non-threat manner, and we see similar examples of that meaning in other tweets addressed to GG in similar contexts.

This article is a single case study reporting on the textual travel of a single tweet and the analytical approaches – discourse, pragmatic, narrativity, and corpus linguistic – that were combined to address it. The conclusions described are therefore unique to it. However, this case highlights the importance of context in understanding how meaning is created when interpreting social media posts, why different uptakes may occur, and the role identity, ideology, and power play in both.

The police and prosecution service’s uptakes were that *See you Galloway. We will get you. Ye understand??* was a threat; KH’s uptake was that it was a prediction that the politician would lose the election, and he would be gone. The court only saw a screenshot of the tweet, possibly only the wording of the tweet (because, at the time the expert report was commissioned and, by the time, it had been completed, the police had still not provided the defendant with a copy of the screenshot) and the tweet’s original context had been lost. In court, GG stated that “*There is only one possible explanation and that is we will physically assault you.*” The research on discourse and the language of threats demonstrates this is not so. The linguistic analysis described here also demonstrates that there are alternative non-threatening meanings to the tweet.

Repeated legal judgements and the CPS own guidance (CPS – Director of Public Prosecutions, 2026) stress the importance of context in interpreting disputed meanings. As Gales (2019) argues, claimed threatening communication needs to be examined in the context in which they are produced; the same phrase in different contexts may mean something completely different, and the same words that may be used to threaten always has a non-threatening meaning (Kaplan, 2016). Dangers of simple misunderstanding or worse, prosecution and conviction, arise “*when those tasked with assessing linguistic aspects of threats rely on personal or stereotypical assumptions rather than evidence-based approaches.*” (Tompkinson, 2023, p. 6). This is magnified when speakers and hearers are in conflict as individuals’ experiences and the ideologies they hold would influence how threatening a message might sound (Tompkinson, 2023).

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author was instructed in 2022 by @KyleHibee07’s defence solicitor to produce an expert report on the range of interpretations that could be applied to the tweet written by him. All the tweets referred to in this article, including the @KyleHibee07 tweet, were collected by the author herself and were publicly available at the time of collection in 2022. The author received no remuneration in any form for the analysis and expert report, and neither the author nor the report was admitted as expert evidence at @KyleHibee07’s trial. No other connection exists between @KyleHibee07 and anyone else associated with him or the trial, and the author.

Ethical Considerations

The quoting of posts in this article is in accordance with current X Rules on privacy and authenticity, which are available online on these link <https://help.x.com/en/rules-and-policies/x-rules> and <https://x.com/en/privacy>. Rules on privacy then and now state that posters cannot expect privacy if they publish posts publicly. Rules on authenticity then and now prohibit the sharing of inauthentic and manipulated content. Therefore, posts in this article and their authors' handles have not been anonymised, and posts retain their original 2022 handles. Posts quoted have been limited to those that are essential to understanding context and the linguistic analysis. I have avoided quoting the more hateful and abusive posts and any posts that contain private information.

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