''*cause ur special*'': Understanding trust and complimenting behaviour in online grooming discourse

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Abstract

Online Grooming is the process whereby an adult gains the trust of a minor in order to exploit him/her, through the use of cyber-technology. Despite a global increase in online sexual exploitation, research into online grooming is scant, especially from a linguistic perspective. Our study examines online groomers' attempts at gaining their targets' trust through compliments. This focus is justified by the fact that, although praise is known to be used regularly in online and offline grooming, its linguistic realisation via the speech act of complimenting has not been analysed to date. We analyse the topics, syntactic realisation patterns and discourse functions of a corpus of 1268 compliments extracted from 68 online grooming interactions. The results point to (1) a prevalence of compliments about physical appearance, of both a sexual and a non-sexual orientation, which increases alongside speed of grooming; (2) high syntactic formulaicity levels regardless of speed of grooming; and (3) use of compliments to frame and support online grooming processes that seek to isolate the targets, provide the online groomers' with sexual gratification and enable them to gauge the targets' compliance levels. Overall, the results both provide new insights into the speech act of complimenting from a hitherto unexamined communicative context and contribute to understanding the communicative process of online grooming.
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1. Introduction

Online Grooming (OG) is broadly understood as the process whereby an adult develops a sexually abusive relationship with a minor through the use of cyber-technology, such as mobile telephones, internet games and chat rooms. The process is characterised by deviance as it relies on groomers' ability to gain the trust of minors in order to exploit them sexually (Olson et al., 2007). The interactions that groomers have with minors online already provide them (the groomers) with sexual gratification. This is why, regardless of whether it is followed by sexual abuse offline, OG constitutes a form of child sexual exploitation and is classified as a specific type of internet offence (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP), 2013). Despite the global increase in online child sexual exploitation, research into OG is comparatively scant, especially in terms of the language used by groomers to lure children. This represents a worrying gap in knowledge

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given calls from researchers working on developing OG detection software to enhance our understanding of the communicative strategies used in OG (see e.g. Gupta et al., 2012; Kontostathis et al., 2009). This study takes up that call. It examines online groomers' attempts at gaining their targets' trust through compliments. This focus is justified by the fact that, although praise is known to be used regularly in online and offline grooming (see, e.g. O'Connell, 2003; Black et al., 2015; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016), its linguistic realisation via compliments has not been analysed to date.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the extant literature on OG, with a focus on groomers' discourse geared towards trust development and the role of praise therein. Section 3 reviews relevant work on compliments. Section 4 describes the study's methodology and, in Section 5, its results are reported and discussed vis-à-vis its research questions. In the concluding section – section 6 – the study results are positioned in the context of the need for discourse analytic approaches to understanding, and helping to prevent, OG.

2. Online grooming discourse

In the most comprehensive theoretical model of *offline* grooming to date, based on an extensive review of multi-discipline literature, Olson et al. (2007) characterise grooming as a process of communicative deviance, the intended outcome of which is the sexual abuse of a minor by an adult. Olson et al. (2007) also identify trust development, which they label ''deceptive trust development'' given its mendaciousness, as the core phase within this process.

The importance for online groomers of being able to establish and maintain high levels of trust conducive to sexual abuse has also been acknowledged (Davidson and Gottschalk, 2011; McAlinden, 2012; Webster et al., 2014). O'Connell (2003) frames such trust development in terms of ''relationship forming,'' whereby online groomers seek to create the illusion of being the child's best friend. Similarly, Williams et al. (2013) state the importance of ''rapport-building'' in OG, by which they mean online groomers' attempts at developing a friendship with a child. Although these studies coincide in characterising OG as being communicatively patterned, including regarding how trust is developed, they do not examine those patterns linguistically.

To our knowledge, there are only two studies to date that have examined OG from a linguistic perspective. In one of them, Black et al. (2015) combined computational linguistics (specifically, Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC)) and content analysis to examine OG interactions published on the *Perverted Justice* website (www.pjfi.org; see section 4 for details). The LIWC analysis identified five ''language types'' in the groomers' discourse, namely: friendship, relationship, risk assessment, exclusivity, and sexual-contact terms. The content analysis, for its part, identified seven ''manipulation techniques'' used by online groomers: flattery, inquiring about the target's parents' schedule, asking the target whether he/she was an undercover police officer or probing about whether the chat log was a sting, remarking the relationship was inappropriate to gauge the target's reaction, mentioning the dangers of communicating with others on the Internet, expressing love and trust, trying to find out about the target's past sexual experience, and assessing the possibility of travel to meet the target (Black et al., 2015:148–9). By correlating the findings of the content and the LIWC analysis the study concluded that, although online and offline grooming make use of the same ''strategies'', they differ regarding the order of timing of these strategies, which ''calls for the development of a revised model for grooming in online environments.'' (2015:140). Importantly for our work, the study also concluded that the friendship and relationship building frequently included flattery, often as ''an opening line to increase the likelihood that the target would respond positively.'' (2015:147). No analysis of the linguistic realisations of flattery (or the other manipulation techniques identified through the content analysis) was conducted.

In the second study, Lorenzo-Dus et al. (2016) combined language-based content analysis (see Herring, 2004), Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962) and relational-work (Locher and Watts, 2005) to examine a corpus of OG interactions also from the *Perverted Justice* website. Their analysis led to the formulation of a model of OG Discourse, which is reproduced in Fig. 1.

In the OG Discourse model, *access* entails groomers making initial online contact with potential victims and therefore marks, as in offline contexts, the onset of grooming. *Approach* refers to groomers' use of verbal lead-ins online as requests to meet with the child offline for sexual purposes. The *entrapment* phase is the most complex. It entails a series of partly overlapping processes and strategies, the ultimate aim of which is to lure victims into different forms of sexual behaviour, including soliciting and/or sharing indecent images of children and/or groomers. Four porous processes are identified within the entrapment phase: *deceptive trust development, sexual gratification, isolation*, and *compliance testing*.

Five strategies are included within the *deceptive trust development* process: praise, sociability, exchange of personal information, activities, and relationships. Praise is primarily realised via compliments; sociability via small talk; and the remaining three strategies through a varied range of speech act and politeness strategies. *Isolation* enables groomers to establish and develop the secrecy of their intended relationship with the child by creating physical and emotional separation from other individuals who may be close to him/her, typically family and friends. *Sexual gratification* entails groomers' use of desensitisation (i.e., use of sexually explicit/implicit language) and reframing (i.e., presenting sexual activity with them as being beneficial to the child) strategies in order to prepare the child to accept not only offline but also