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978-1-009-31464-0 — Online Child Sexual Grooming Discourse
Nuria Lorenzo-Dus , Craig Evans , Ruth Mullineux-Morgan
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More Information

Series Preface

The Elements in Forensic Linguistics series from Cambridge University Press publishes across four main topic areas: (1) investigative and forensic text analysis; (2) the study of spoken linguistic practices in legal contexts; (3) the linguistic analysis of written legal texts; (4) explorations of the origins, development and scope of the field in various countries and regions. *Online Child Sexual Grooming Discourse* by Nuria Lorenzo-Dus, Craig Evans and Ruth Mullineux-Morgan is clearly situated in investigative and forensic text analysis and shows the power that a corpus linguistic approach brings to the detailed description of a specific area of criminal activity.

Nuria Lorenzo-Dus, Craig Evans and Ruth Mullineux-Morgan are all intimately part of Project DRAGON-S, funded by the Safe Online Initiative at End Violence against Children, which brings an applied focus to their work through the production of software tools based in the insights from their language analysis. This analysis firmly identifies grooming as goal-driven communication and they demonstrate how the offenders achieve their goals through the operation of a variety of powerful stances and manipulations. They also show how, on some occasions, a child attempts resistance to these coercive practices. They go on to consider the roles the child might play in these interactions and how the representations of the child can reduce their perceived and actual agency.

Overall, this Element provides a thorough and important exploration of this difficult area of research and makes a powerful contribution to tackling a significant social problem. It makes a valuable contribution to the growing linguistic literature on online sexual offending and should be read not only by linguists with interests in the area, but also by psychologists, criminologists and those from other related disciplines.

Tim Grant
Series Editor

1 Introduction: Contextualising Online Grooming

1.1 Aims

Online grooming is a digital practice by which an adult seeks to engage a child in sexually abusive encounters or relationships. As an illegal and immoral activity, it is a social problem, and one that research shows is growing due to offenders becoming more sophisticated in their use of grooming tactics and online interactions increasingly becoming the norm for children, among other factors (see Section 1.2). With this Element, our aim is to add value to existing efforts to tackle this social

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problem by focussing on language use, which is a central component of online grooming and has received scant attention to date (see Section 1.3). Language, broadly understood to include words and other semiotic modes, is the primary means by which groomers manipulate and control children online (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2020). Therefore, to understand the practice of online grooming it is necessary to understand how groomers use language to engage in the practice of manipulating and coercing (thus, grooming) children. Also, given that online grooming is an interactional process (Lorenzo-Dus, 2023), a focus on how children use language in the context of grooming interactions is equally important. The linguistics knowledge that we share in this Element (Sections 3–5 especially) represents only part of how we seek to address the problem of online grooming. In addition, we provide an account of a research project, Project DRAGON-S, through which this knowledge can be applied to support frontline child-safeguarding practitioners (Section 6).

1.2 Rationale

Online grooming represents a major social problem across the world, one that has become more widespread as people increasingly lead their lives online. The boundaries between the so-called online and offline realms are blurred – online and offline spaces are inextricably interconnected and they intersect online and offline experiences (see, e.g., Jones, 2004; Androutsopoulos, 2014; Bolander and Locher, 2020; Lorenzo-Dus, 2023). It is the norm for personal and, increasingly, romantic relationships to be forged and maintained online, especially across a variety of social media platforms and benefiting from myriad digital affordances of smartphone, live streaming and burgeoning metaverse and gaming technologies. This is the social wallpaper against which children and young people are experiencing their formative stage of life – a stage where they are predisposed to seek out and develop meaningful social connections. The need to conduct personal relationships online increased during the global COVID-19 pandemic, with governments imposing restrictions on movement and meetings between people; for example, the lockdown measures introduced by the UK government in 2020 and 2021.[1] With children spending more time online, and often with the goal to develop new relationships, their exposure and vulnerability to adults targeting them for sexual abuse and exploitation has increased.

The scale of the problem of online grooming is suggested by a 2022 report published by Thorn,[2] a technology non-profit organisation dedicated to defending children from online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA).

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[1] www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/data-visualisation/timeline-coronavirus-lockdowns
[2] https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/2022_Online_Grooming_Report.pdf

This report reveals that 40 per cent of children have experienced cold solicitation for nudes online. The same percentage of children (increasing to 47 per cent for female teens) report having been approached online by someone they thought was attempting to befriend and manipulate them. This echoes growing recognition that online grooming represents a form of 'cyber gender-based violence' that manifests wider challenges of marginalisation, violence and oppression, reflecting a cultural landscape characterised by significant gender disparities (Reynold and Ringrose, 2011; Ringrose et al., 2012). As a growing body of literature shows, teenage girls and LGBTQ+ youth are most at risk.[3] The Thorn (2022) report also finds that approximately a quarter of 9–12-year-olds see flirting with or dating adults online as common. In an earlier report in 2020,[4] Thorn noted the increasing trend of groomers to exploit the normalisation of online communication with strangers in children's lives, such as by using a 'scattergun approach' of contacting a high number of children to increase the chances of getting a response and gaining access to at least one child when they accept a chat or friend request.

The cause of the problem of online grooming lies entirely with the individuals who seek to sexually abuse and exploit children. However, online grooming as a social problem is exacerbated by a number of factors that support groomers' purposes while creating barriers to solutions to help improve the safety of children online. For example, definitional confusion in legislation relating to child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) has created an impediment to addressing the problem of online grooming. Ongoing debates have their foundations in the historically shifting parameters of understanding surrounding issues of CSEA. Melrose (2013a, p. 156) describes this situation as discourse in flux, arguing that the 'refashioning' of language from 'abuse through prostitution' to 'sexual exploitation' has created a long shadow of confusion that continues to impact and shape practitioners' responses. A further source of exacerbation is the lack of regulation online. A 2019 report by the UK-based charity National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) highlighted the limitations of self-regulation among big tech companies, noting that 'voluntary codes . . . lack precise rules and standards, usually lack effective monitoring and oversight

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[3] See, for example, www.coe.int/en/web/cyberviolence/cyberviolence-against-women; www.iwf.org.uk/news-media/news/campaign-launches-as-new-report-finds-girls-at-worsening-risk-of-grooming-from-sexual-predators-online/; https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/Responding%20to%20Online%20Threats_2021-Full-Report.pdf; www.iwf.org.uk/about-us/our-campaigns/talk-and-gurls-out-loud-self-generated-child-sexual-abuse-prevention-campaign/; www.nspcc.org.uk/about-us/news-opinion/2022/online-grooming-crimes-rise/; www.nspcc.org.uk/about-us/news-opinion/2021/online-grooming-crimes-girls/; www.weprotect.org/wp-content/uploads/Global-Threat-Assessment-2021.pdf

[4] www.thorn.org/blog/online-grooming-what-it-is-how-it-happens-and-how-to-defend-children/

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mechanisms, have weak (if any) enforcement mechanisms, and consistently do not impose any sanctions on sites that don't comply' (2019, p. 7).[5] Concern has also been expressed in relation to the rapid expansion of end-to-end encryption (E2EE) on instant messaging platforms, which threatens to intensify the harms that children can be exposed to online (NSPCC, 2021).

While the factors that exacerbate the problem of online grooming still persist, there have been changes that create prospects for an improved situation. For example, in the UK in 2017 a new offence of sending a sexual communication to a child came into force.[6] Further, the visibility that this new offence brought to the issue of online grooming through improved recording of cases means that the centre of perceived responsibility of keeping children safe online has started to shift. At the time of writing, the UK Online Safety Bill's[7] proposed regulatory regime and the European Union's (EU's) ambitious planned legislative package[8] represent forthcoming advances attempting to regulate the online space and enhance protections for children. Australia has also made legislative changes to how it regulates the Internet.[9] However, legislating to improve regulation represents one part of the whole system approach required to successfully tackle online grooming. Other parts/aspects will be considered in Section 1.3, where we look at how applied research, including our own, Project DRAGON-S, can support efforts to improve the safety of children online.

1.3 Towards an Applied Research Approach to the Language of Online Grooming

Applied research carried out to address the social problem of OCSEA in general, and online grooming in particular, has tended to have one of two primary objectives: detection or prevention. Detection has often entailed the development and use of methods from computer science research for the purpose of identifying child sexual abuse material (CSAM) (see, e.g., Lee et al., 2020; Project Arachnid[10]) and other manifestations of OCSEA, including online grooming (see, e.g., Pendar, 2007; Kontostahis et al., 2009; Milon-Flores and Cordeiro, 2022). These studies typically integrate some form of language-based analysis, usually deploying natural language processing alongside sentiment, content or topic modelling analysis.

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[5] www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/news/taming-the-wild-west-web-regulate-social-networks.pdf

[6] Following a successful campaign from the NSPCC leading to an amendment of the UK Serious Crime Act 2016: www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/policy/nspcc-flaw-law-campaign-house-of-commons-serious-crime-bill-second-reading.pdf

[7] The UK Online Safety Bill would impose duties on 'regulated services' in relation to three types of content: (1) illegal content; (2) content that is harmful to children; and (3) content that is legal but harmful to adults. All regulated services would be required to protect users from illegal content and there are proposed additional duties for services accessed by children.

[8] The EU regulation would set out the responsibilities of relevant online service providers, requiring them to detect and report child sexual abuse online and to report it to public authorities. The EU Commission also proposes a European Centre to prevent and counter child sexual abuse. https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12726-Fighting-child-sexual-abuse-detection-removal-and-reporting-of-illegal-content-online_en

[9] www.abc.net.au/news/science/2022-09-21/internet-online-safety-act-industry-codes/101456902

As for (O)CSEA prevention-oriented research, multiple foci have been pursued, ranging from awareness raising through to developing both holistic frameworks for protecting children, such as the WePROTECT Global Alliance's Model National Response (MNR) framework,[11] and educational programmes. Unlike in other areas relating to the prevention of violence against children, a comprehensive 2022 report by the World Health Organization (WHO) highlights an important gap in the evaluation of programmes aimed at preventing OCSEA.[12] This is significant, the WHO report further argues, given that the evaluation-based evidence in those other areas generally shows that such programmes are successful. In terms of OCSEA educational programmes that have been subject to evaluation (e.g., Chibnall et al., 2006; Davidson et al., 2009; Mikton and Butchart, 2009; Topping and Barron, 2009; Mishna et al., 2011; Walsh et al., 2018), the focus tends to be on the impacts on and improvements of children's knowledge of online safety strategies, digital dangers and high-risk online behaviour (UNICEF, 2020). The impact of such programmes on children's disclosures and the ensuing incidence of OCSEA has been rarely evaluated or examined (Lalor and McElvaney, 2010).

A notable limitation of much research into OCSEA, whether driven by a detection and/or prevention focus, is the failure to recognise some manifestations thereof, notably online grooming, as a communication-based practice. By not providing knowledge and understanding about the interpersonal dynamics at play in online grooming, for example, previous education programmes have lacked key information about how children can put e-safety advice into practice. This is not to say that a communication focus has been entirely absent from applied research in this area. For example, forensic linguistics methods were used in Pilgrim, a course run from 2010 to 2017 to train specialist police officers in the UK on how to convincingly simulate children's use of language during interactions with suspected groomers (see Grant and Macleod, 2016, 2020). Using a robust evaluation methodology, Grant and McLeod (2020, pp. 112–13) were able to demonstrate that 'linguistic identity assumption is challenging but can be trained'. However, this training served a specific operational purpose of law enforcement, while in training

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[10] www.projectarachnid.ca/en/ [11] www.weprotect.org/model-national-response/
[12] www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240062061

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aimed at practitioners, caregivers and children more generally, very little attention has been given to the role communication plays in online grooming.

The ongoing work of Project DRAGON-S (of which all three authors are members) seeks to address the gap in linguistics research being applied more broadly to support practitioners in tackling the social problem of online grooming. Project DRAGON-S is an applied research project based at Swansea University, in collaboration with researchers at University of Toulon, that in 2021–2 developed two tools to be used by child-safeguarding practitioners. These are DRAGON-Spotter, a tool for detecting online grooming content that has been designed for use by law enforcement, and DRAGON-Shield, a training portal for child-safeguarding practitioners that focusses on online grooming as a manipulative communication practice. Project DRAGON-S mainstreams linguistics, synergising linguistic analysis and deep learning models in artificial intelligence in the development of DRAGON-Spotter, and linguistics and criminology, psychology and public policy research-based evidence, in the development of DRAGON-Shield. These tools have been developed in partnership (through consultation and testing) with practitioners, internationally and across agencies. In 2023 both tools are undergoing rigorous evaluation across the UK, Australia and New Zealand. The linguistics findings presented in this Element underpin the development of the Project DRAGON-S tools, in particular DRAGON-Shield. More discussion of Project DRAGON-S (its tools and applied research ethos) is provided in Section 6.

1.4 Note on Terms

In our work, we use the term ‘groomer’ to refer to an adult in the datasets being examined who is known to have committed the offence of sexual communication with a child in an online context. In some cases, the adult may have been convicted of other CSEA offences, which is why we sometimes use the broader terms ‘offender’ and ‘perpetrator’. We use the term ‘child’, often as part of the compound ‘child-target’, to refer to an individual aged 0–18. The WHO (2023) defines childhood as a period between the ages of nought and nine and adolescence as the period between the ages of ten and nineteen. Yet, under UK legislation (the Serious Crime Act 2016), the offence of sexual communication with a child applies to children under sixteen, unless the contact is from a known adult in a position of trust – in these instances the age range is extended to anyone under the age of eighteen. We recognise that in child-safeguarding practice the term ‘children and young people’ is often preferred to differentiate between younger and older children. However, in the analysis presented here we use ‘child’ (and ‘child-target’) as an umbrella term.

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More Information

Further information about our terminological choices is provided in Section 5. In that section, we discuss the implications of word choice with respect to victim-blaming language, and our rationale for using certain words to represent child communicative behaviour.

1.5 Structure

This Element is divided into three parts. The first part (this section and Section 2) sets the scene. It explains our understanding of online grooming as communicative manipulation and explains the novel and necessary contribution that such an understanding can make to crime prevention and detection efforts. Data and analytic methods are also described in this part, as well as ethical and researcher well-being aspects of direct relevance to the study of OCSEA. The second part consists of three sections (Sections 3, 4 and 5), each of which is themed on a feature of online grooming discourse, namely groomer tactics and performativity, groomer power abuse and child communication. The analyses in these sections deploy different analytic methods, which are introduced in those sections for reader convenience, including how they support the particular research questions being addressed in each section. The third part comprises one section (Section 6) – a conclusion section that also reflects on the ways that the linguistics research presented in this Element can be applied to practice to help address the social problem of online grooming. This is in part illustrated via Project DRAGON-S.

2 Online Grooming As Manipulation Discourse: Concept and Method

2.1 Introduction

> The power to manipulate beliefs is the only thing that counts.
>
> Michael Ende (1979), *The Neverending Story*

The quote above, from Ende’s novel, corresponds to advice that a dying werewolf, named Gmork, gives a boy warrior, named Atreyu, who has been charged with saving the magical kingdom of Fantastica. He must do this by finding a human, a boy named Bastian, who must give the kingdom’s empress, a female child, a new name. Time is of the essence and Atreyu must find a way to ‘manipulate’ a child (Bastian) to achieve the goal of saving Fantastica quickly.

There is something compelling about the power of manipulation attested by the literary and media success of Ende’s (1979) novel – Gmork’s continuing advice shows deep fascination with the control that can be achieved by manipulating others: ‘Who knows what use they’ll make of you? Maybe you’ll help them to persuade people to buy things they don't need, or hate things they know nothing about, or hold beliefs that make them easy to handle, or doubt the truths that might save them.'

In this Element we define online grooming as a practice of communicative manipulation, specifically as an adult's use of technology-mediated communication comprising multiple modes to get a child to partake in sexual activities online and at times also offline (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016, 2020). Although the examples of the ends of manipulation given by Gmork pre-date the Internet, they resonate. We see how technology not only mediates but also facilitates manipulation: groomers' manipulation may result in children turning away from – possibly hating – others in their support networks. The manipulation may also lead children to believe that having sex with an adult is normal, which may increase their likelihood of acceptance to perform sexual acts online with and/or for their groomer. It may lead to their wrongly believing, once they are sexually involved with their groomer and realise that they are being abused, that it is their fault. This can trigger feelings of shame and self-blame, creating a barrier to disclose the abuse to others who may be able to help them.

Each of these scenarios – and others examined in this Element – are the by-product of sophisticated manipulative communication in online grooming. This section provides the theoretical and methodological underpinnings to enable such examination. Section 2.2 offers a brief overview of the concept of manipulation, calling for linguistic approaches to move away from traditional analyses that seek to identify 'manipulative language features' (e.g., specific deictic forms, use of negation, etc.) and towards analysis of manipulation discourse in context. This enables characterisation of online grooming as a *sui generis* practice of communicative manipulation (see Lorenzo-Dus, 2023). Section 2.3 shifts attention to the empirical analysis of online grooming as manipulation, specifically to our methodology. Herein, we subvert academic genre conventions of firstly introducing one's dataset and, next, the procedure and analytic frameworks deployed, including research ethics and integrity considerations. Instead, given the relatively unexplored issue of research on distressing data, we foreground the latter, with a focus on researcher well-being (Section 2.3.1). Sections 2.3.2 to 2.3.5 describe our data and methods.

2.2 Conceptualising Online Grooming As Communicative Manipulation

Manipulation has been extensively examined across several disciplines, ranging from philosophy and rhetoric studies through to politics and linguistics. Much of this work has also sought to define manipulation vis-à-vis related concepts such as influence, argumentation and, most frequently, persuasion. The main difference between persuasion and manipulation – most scholars agree – lies in the notion of consent, which the former has and the latter lacks (O’Keefe, 2006; Nettel and Roque, 2012). Yet, as Pardo (2001) explains, the ability to consent is linked to power relations between persuader/manipulator and their target(s), which may in turn depend on factors such as the institutional space in which their discourse happens, their respective authority roles and so forth.

Van Dijk (2017, p. 206) argues that (social) manipulation is ‘a form of domination or power abuse [that] involves organizations or institutions as manipulating agents making use of power resources, such as access to or control over knowledge or public discourse’. Van Dijk (2017) further argues that those being targeted for manipulation tend to have fewer resources, for example knowledge, which makes it particularly hard for them to resist such domination. As Section 4 will show, this is the case in online grooming, in which the adult–child relationship is set within wider patriarchal power structures that necessarily entail a marked knowledge differential and hence power imbalance, both skewed in favour of the grooming adult.

Another difference between manipulation and persuasion concerns their respective spheres of impact. Here there is no academic consensus, however. For example, Sorlin (2017) argues that, unlike persuasion, manipulation goes beyond changing mental states and into the actional level. Yet for Van Dijk (2017, p. 206), ‘mind control’ is the primary aim of manipulation, ‘action control’ being an indirect, secondary aim.

A further oft-cited difference relates to morality. Persuasion, Partington and Taylor (2018, p. 3), for instance, note, ‘is of itself neither good nor bad, neither beneficial nor harmful’. This is not the case for manipulation, the philosophical study of which has been largely predicated on the premise that manipulation is harmful (see, e.g., Bakir et al., 2019 for an overview). As noted earlier, linguistic approaches highlight the potential, indeed likely, negative effects of textual manipulation, be that in terms of cognitive (Van Dijk, 2006, 2017) or actional (Sorlin, 2017) control. However, the focus of the linguistic analysis remains anchored in its discursive features.

Numerous discursive features have been identified as being regularly deployed in manipulation discourse. For example, Van Dijk (2017, pp. 207–8) provides the following examples of manipulation structures and strategies:

- grammatical sentence structures
- biased (e.g., derogatory) lexical items: implications/implicatures, generalisations
- forms of actor descriptions

- granularity and other modes of situation or event description: more or less precise or complete, detailed or vague, close versus distant and so on
- storytelling
- argumentation
- superstructural (schematic) categories, such as headlines in news reports
- general ideological polarisation between in-groups (Us) and out-groups (Them).

Similarly, considerable work has been devoted to identifying the linguistic markers of deception, which is itself seen to be a common manifestation of manipulation. This research has tended to use natural language processing and/or psycholinguistic profiling software, such as Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker et al., 2015). The LIWC list of linguistic markers of deception includes the use of vague language and negative textual forms (Bachenko et al., 2008; Addawood et al., 2019); the use of 'words that can be used to exaggerate – subjectives, superlatives, and modal adverbs'; and larger percentages of interrogative words (how, what, when), third-person plural pronouns, question marks and terms such as 'true' and 'truth' than in non-deception contexts (Davis and Sinnreich, 2020).

However, as Lorenzo-Dus (2023, p. 47) argues, 'reliance on largely decontextualised, computational approaches presents some limitations – not least because of the lack of one-to-one mapping between form and function in language use'. These features 'are neither manipulative/deceptive per se nor manipulation/deception signalling across communicative contexts. They provide a valuable repository of knowledge, in as much as the strategies are seen to work in specific research-evidenced contexts' (2023, p. 47). Lorenzo-Dus (2023) thus calls for a context-rich, identity-foregrounded approach to the study of manipulation overall and online grooming as a *sui generis* manifestation thereof.

Regarding context, it is paramount to see online grooming as digitally mediated manipulation. Its digitalness, as it were, reflects and shapes its features, and it relates to three key areas: sharing, trust and engagement/influence (Lorenzo-Dus, 2023). Online grooming 'exploits the digital sharing era in which we are said to live, specifically the positive cultural rhetoric about sharing concrete (e.g., pictures, files) and abstract (e.g., advice, opinions, personal experiences) objects online' (2023, p. 195). Groomers regularly engage in self-disclosing talk via which they share feelings of vulnerability, such as loneliness and fear, thus contributing to building trust (Lorenzo-Dus, 2023). Online grooming requires the grooming adult to be able to gain access to and then continuously engage – or seek further contact with – the child being targeted online, with that engagement possibly extending to the offline realm too (see Section 3). Such engagement varies in part depending on different