

Original Paper

Research on False Identity Construction for Telecommunication

Fraudsters in the Perspective of Goal Principle

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Abstract

Telecommunication fraud constitutes a significant threat to public financial security. This study examines the pragmatic identity construction employed by fraudsters within online telecommunication fraud discourse to achieve specific communicative goals. The study found that fraudsters fabricate four pragmatic identities: state personnel, expert, resource owner, and problem solver. By applying the Goal-Driven Principle to analyze these constructed identities, the research not only extends the theoretical framework of pragmatic identity studies, but also offers practical insights for developing anti-fraud countermeasures.

Keywords

Goal Principle, pragmatic identity construction, fraudster discourse

1. Introduction

The proliferation of telecommunication fraud has been fueled by its low criminal costs and high potential returns (Zhao, 2020). These frequent occurrences not only inflict substantial economic losses but also significantly erode public security and threaten the social trust system. As an emergent form of deception, telecommunication fraud amalgamates traditional fraudulent practices with contemporary network technologies. Discourse plays a crucial role in telecommunication to carry on information. The dynamic interplay between discourse and identity facilitates the construction of a distinct pragmatic identity by fraudsters.

2. Literature Review

As a research area with profound philosophical and linguistic foundations, identity construction exhibits distinct interdisciplinary characteristics. Particularly within the field of pragmatics, research on identity construction focuses on institutional discourse, delving into issues such as identity types, discourse patterns, and discourse construction strategies.

Studies in pragmatic identity construction focuses on the selection of discourse forms, the types of identity construction, and interdisciplinary analytical research. In alignment with contemporary trends and societal imperatives, researchers have increasingly directed their attention towards everyday conversations, political discourse, and new media discourse, thereby reflecting current social realities. Yuan Zhounmin and Chen Xinren (2013), utilizing medical consultation conversations as their primary corpus, studied dynamic pragmatic identity adaptation in these interactions. Similarly, Wu Nan and Zhang Jingyuan (2019) conducted a comparative analysis of discourse strategies employed in Chinese and American corporate identity construction, establishing a comparative framework that serves as a foundation for future research.

The proliferation of discourse forms in identity construction provides a fertile ground for the development of diverse identity types. Personal, familial, national, and cultural identities, among others, are perpetually constructed and reconstituted through discourse. With the rise of the new media era, scholarly attention has shifted towards online media, facilitating in-depth investigations into the pragmatic identity construction phenomena manifested in digital discourse. This transition underscores the increasing integration of identity construction research with everyday life and its heightened responsiveness to contemporary societal shifts. Xue Menghan and Jing Xiaoping (2023) examined the multifaceted identities constructed in short videos featuring elderly internet celebrity families on the Douyin, highlighting their intricate relationship with the platform's interactive dynamics, traditional familial roles, and the evolution of new media technologies.

With the trend of globalization, studies show interest in the construction of national cultural identity. Researchers are now engaged in debates on how to effectively cultivate and sustain national cultural identity and foster identity recognition within interwoven multicultural and value systems. Utilizing positioning theory, Tian Weigang and Liu Qian et al. (2023) demonstrated media's role in shaping state image, fostering national sentiment, and reinforcing identity, thus providing a new perspective on media discourse in key political events.

In summary, identity construction research exhibits an increasingly diversified and interdisciplinary trend. Contemporary scholarship is increasingly transcending monodisciplinary constraints by adopting transdisciplinary frameworks that synergize sociological, psychological, and linguistic perspectives with allied disciplines. However, there is a relative scarcity of academic work focusing on telecommunication fraud discourse, largely due to the challenges in obtaining authentic and complete corpora of such discourse. Furthermore, studies that delve into the intentions behind fraudsters' discourse from the perspective of Goal Principle are also limited. This paper conducts a purposive analysis of the fabricated pragmatic identity types constructed by fraudsters, investigating how they achieve specific communicative goals through the construction of false identities.

3. Pragmatic Identity and Goal Principle

Pragmatic identity is the selection of a social identity within a given context, emphasizing a dynamic and evolving process, and it also reflects the dynamic changes in communicative needs (Chen, 2013). Various discourse practice types related to identity construction participate in the communication process, aiding in the construction of the communicator's pragmatic identity. The organic integration of identity and discourse practice types facilitates the study of pragmatic identity. In social discourse interactions, each speech act carries a goal, naturally leading the interacting parties into a goal-oriented interactive relationship (Liao, 2005). Telecommunication fraud, as an illegal activity that abuses language and communication, aims to obtain illicit gains through deceptive means. Unlike daily conversations, fraudulent discourse often mimics or impersonates institutional discourse to enhance its credibility and persuasiveness, exhibiting a strong sense of goal.

Both pragmatic identity and Goal Principle approach the study of identity and goal from a dynamic perspective. Pragmatic identity is constructed by the use of discourse practices in the interaction. Language communication reflects identity, and identity is linked to context, constructing speaker identity types through discourse practices (Zhang & Chen, 2023). Because context changes with the implementation of speech acts, the pursuit of goal remains a dynamic process. Goal permeates discourse practices, guiding the construction of identity types and the selection of discourse practices. This study selects the latest online telecommunication fraud discourse as its research object, aiming to analyze the pragmatic identity construction types and communicative goals behind the discourse from three discourse practices: discourse content, discourse mode, and speech acts. In order to protect the privacy of individuals involved, all personal information in the case studies has been anonymized.

4. Fraudsters' False Identity Construction and Goal Analysis

Research indicates that fraudsters strategically construct various false identities, adapting their discourse strategies to suit specific goals. These false identities can be broadly categorized into four types: state personnel, experts, resource owners, and problem solvers.

4.1 State Personnel

Case 1: (Background: victim unexpectedly received a package with a scratch-off lottery card. After winning award, she was invited to a group chat for "making money by completing online tasks." Initially, she received small rebates, but gradually started investing larger sums for higher rebates.)

F: Congrats, congrats! Miss, you've just snagged a 500-yuan task! The commission is 30% of the principal, just like when you leveled up to intermediate agent. I'll get you the merchant's payment channel now.

V: Thank you for your help!

F: (Sends a detailed instruction image to Ms. Li) Let's make some money together!

V: (Completes the task according to the instructions and sends a screenshot)

F: Congrats, you're one step closer to becoming a senior agent after completing this task!

V: Thanks to your help, really appreciate it.

F: Oh, by the way, Qin, did your mentor tell you? Today's tasks count as two towards your senior agent upgrade.

V: Yes, they did.

In Case 1, the fraudster established a false pragmatic identity as an online task customer service. The utilization of “Qin”, a colloquial term of endearment, as a prototypical customer service address, served to solidify the fabrication of the fraudster's false identity construction. The combined use of “Qin” and “Miss” fostered a sense of relational proximity. Within the discourse, the fraudster emphasized a reciprocal financial arrangement. He stated “Let's make some money together!” pushing the shift from a mentorship to a collaborative partnership and strengthening the foundation of trust.

By repeatedly offering praise, like saying “Congrats, you're one step closer to becoming a senior agent after completing this task!”, the fraudster gave the victim a false sense of progress. This manipulation, along with the fake identity of an official service agent, impaired the victim's ability to think clearly.

This type of fraud start with an initial engagement phase. Fraudsters use minor incentives and exaggerated claims of financial gain to capture the victim's attention, adopting a friendly and approachable communication style to build rapport. Subsequently, within the fraudulent platform, the constructed customer service persona mainly uses directives (giving instructions) and commendations (offering praise). This approach serves to control the conversation and transactions, helping the fraudulent operation move forward.

4.2 Professional

Case 2: (Background: victim listed her property on a platform. A potential renter contacted her via the platform to inquire about the property.)

F: Are you open to long-term rentals for this property?

V: Yes, I am.

F: That's great! I'm planning to be in Beijing for three to five years this time. My company is actually paying for my housing, and they prefer to sign a three-year lease directly. We can pay a year's rent upfront, but they'd like the rate to stay the same for the entire three years. Would that work for you?

V: Yes, that's acceptable. (They proceeded to discuss the specific details of the rental agreement.)

F: I'm with [Company Name]. Let me send you our company profile first. (Sends the company profile). Just so you know, I'm currently busy with handover work, so I can't come see the apartment in person right now. Are you available for in-person viewings generally?

V: Yes, that's fine. Oh, so you work around here? That's not far from the apartment.

F: Yes, that's right. I'm in IT-network technology, technical stuff.

V: I see. Okay.

F: By the way, do you happen to use Weibo? The reason I ask is that I've been on duty in the server room quite a bit recently, and we have to keep our personal phones locked in a safe there. However, I can access

the web version of Weibo through the internal network. If we followed each other, it might be a convenient way to communicate about the apartment.

In Case Study 2, the pragmatic identity of the fraudster undergoes a noticeable shift. Initially, the fraudster employs standard questions typical of a genuine rental inquiry, presenting a persona nearly identical to that of an ordinary prospective tenant. The conversation's content is strictly focused on rental specifics, while simultaneously offering personal details intended to allay any doubts the landlord might harbor. Regarding communication style, the fraudster frequently uses questions to seek agreement, actively striving to maintain a positive impression and gain the landlord's favor.

In the later stages, however, the fraudster constructs the pragmatic identity of an IT professional. This identity is directly asserted through statements such as, "I'm in IT – network technology, technical stuff," and "I'm with [Company Name]." This strategy appears to serve two purposes. Firstly, it may be an attempt to appeal to the landlord, potentially assuming that concise, clear language will be perceived as more sincere and trustworthy, thus facilitating the acquisition of the landlord's confidence. Secondly, it projects a specific character and a level of professional competence.

The analysis suggests that traditional cultural values may foster a certain deference towards individuals perceived to hold high institutional status. The scammer exploits this potential deference through a process described as 'negative accommodation', constructing a false authoritative identity to facilitate the fraudulent scheme (Liu, 2020).

4.3 Resources Owner

Case 3: (Background: Ms. Wang wants to buy a concert ticket and finds a ticket seller on a platform.)

F: Submitting the order for you now. Please double-check and provide me with the payer's name. After payment, you can check in the app's ticket wallet.

V: Payer is Wang.

F: Okay, please wait a moment. (Sends a QR code for payment to Wang.)

V: Placing the order now. Please send a screenshot after you've made the payment to avoid the order timing out. Once your payment is successful, the system will automatically issue your ticket within one to three minutes. You can check your order details in the official app!

(Wang hesitated for a moment, but finally made the payment successfully.)

F: Haven't you finished paying? Has the order timed out? Click on the bill and send me a detailed screenshot.

V: (Sends order details) Is this okay?

F: Okay, submitting your order now. Please refresh the app in one to three minutes to check.

V: Why can't I find my order?

F: Before purchasing, did you not enter the remark amount according to the amount above? If you did not enter the remark amount according to the amount above, the order is invalid.

In such cases, there is a significant difference in the victim's mindset. Attracted by concert tickets at low or original prices, and pressured by the urgent atmosphere created by the fraudster, they proactively seek

the transaction. This very situation pushes the victims into an irrational decision-making state, making them insufficiently vigilant about potential risks and ultimately causing them to fall into the fraudsters' trap.

Regarding identity construction, the fraudster crafts a persona as a legitimate ticket vendor, positioned as a resource owner. Their discourse centers on the ticket purchase process, offering detailed explanations of procedures like payment and ticket issuance. This extensive detail conveys an air of professionalism, and the issuance of instructions aligns with the expected speech acts of a vendor. The fraudster issues multiple directives to the victim, propelling the transaction forward. This direct communication style reinforces the his assumed identity and establishes an unequal power dynamic. By leading the conversation and guiding the victim through the transaction, the fraudster fosters such strong belief in their identity that the victim loses their ability to discern.

4.4 Problem Solver

(Background: Mr. Wu received a FaceTime call in his office. It was a video call, and the interface displayed '110'. The person on the other end claimed to be a police officer.)

F: Hello, may I ask if you are Mr. Wu Someone? The last four digits of your ID card are xx.

V: Yes.

F: If so, please bring your ID card and come to the Public Security Bureau, okay? If it's not convenient for you to come today, please come before twelve o'clock tomorrow morning, alright?

V: What is it about?

F: We have received an official assistance request document from Nanjing over here, and we need you to come in person to verify the relevant content on the document. When you arrive, look for me. My surname is xx, my name is xx, and my police ID number is xx.

V: What exactly is it about?

F: Have you been to Nanjing, Jiangsu recently?

V: I've been there recently for a business trip.

F: ICBC shows that there is a female named xx, aged around xx, height around xx, short hair and slightly overweight, who previously worked as a business manager in major banks in Changsha. Do you know her?

V: I don't recall.

Within Case Study 3, the fraudster initiates contact by intimidating the victim with accusations of illegal conduct, subsequently guiding them step-by-step. Essentially, the fraudster capitalizes on the victim's lack of anti-scam knowledge and emotional vulnerability, rapidly forging an image as a credible authority who can resolve the issue. They solidify this persona by overwhelming the victim with information.

In constructing their identity, the fraudster establishes themselves as a police officer, posing himself as a problem-solver. Regarding the content of their discourse, they exploit the victim's unfamiliarity with the operational procedures of public security, procuratorate, and court organs, leveraging pre-obtained victim information and fabricated police details to build this persona. The fraudster employs language

characterized by clarity and rigor, maintaining a relatively formal register that aligns with the speaking style and professional demands of such personnel. Their mode of expression, simple and direct, effectively creates a deliberate sense of distance. Crucially, notification serves as the fraudster's most prominent speech act, delivered with a calculated tone designed to pressure the victim and generate urgency.

5. Conclusion

This study found that fraudsters construct four pragmatic identities: official service provider, professional, resource owner, and problem solver. Through creating a sense of shared interest and trust with the victim, and by generating a tense atmosphere, fraudsters engage in diverse identity construction activities to achieve their fraudulent goals. Although the specific goals behind each identity construction may differ, they all invariably point towards the general goal of cheating money. Therefore, in daily life, we must be vigilant about financial transactions and not easily trust others. When encountering important matters, it is crucial to verify information through official channels and not readily believe information from unknown sources.

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