

Original Paper

Analysis of Fraudsters' Discourse Strategies from a Goal-adaptational Perspective

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Received: October 22, 2025 Accepted: November 24, 2025 Online Published: December 4, 2025

doi:10.22158/selt.v13n4p142

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/selt.v13n4p142>

Abstract

Telecommunications fraud is a pervasive global crime, often carried out by criminal organizations using pre-designed scripts. This research focuses on the discourse strategies used by scammers in telecommunications fraud, specifically examining how they use language to achieve their fraudulent goals. It explores how these strategies adapt to the communicative context across physical, social, and mental dimensions. The study identifies three primary discourse strategies: impersonation, emotional manipulation, and default. These strategies are driven by the central goal of the scam and adapt to specific communicative situations, ultimately leading to the victim being deceived. Analyzing the discourse strategies in telecommunications fraud is highly relevant in practice. This research can help raise public awareness and improve people's ability to identify scams, thereby enhancing society's overall resilience against fraud.

Keywords

Goal adaptation, fraudster discourse, discourse strategy

1. Introduction

The information age has fueled an alarming surge in telecommunication fraud, now widely condemned as the world's most prevalent, rapidly proliferating, and geographically pervasive crime. Telecommunication fraud, commonly known as the “Taiwanese-style scam,” originated in Taiwan region in the late 1990s. It refers to fraudulent activities conducted through telecommunication or broadcast media, including telephones, television, radio, and computer networks (Cui et al., 2018). These scams may operate unilaterally from overseas or through collusion between international and domestic criminal groups (Zhang, 2017).

Due to the remote nature of this fraud, scammers must rapidly establish trust during calls or online interactions to illicitly obtain funds. Sophisticated fraud organizations typically develop tailored playbooks for specific target demographics. By crafting responses adapted to victims' profiles and scenarios, they ensure the scam progresses smoothly toward financial theft. Therefore, research analyzing the goal behind fraudsters' communication patterns holds significant practical value: it empowers potential victims to recognize deceptive tactics and avoid becoming targets.

2. Literature Review

Linguistic researches on discourse strategies of telecommunication fraud discourse are in the ascendant at home and abroad.

At home, scholars have explored the discourse strategies used in telecommunications fraud from various perspectives, primarily focusing on discourse patterns and identity construction. This research provides a theoretical foundation for identifying and preventing fraudulent activities. Yuan Ying (2019), based on the theory of pragmatic presupposition, examined the discourse patterns and verbal strategies in telecommunication fraud cases. The study identified five verbal strategies used by criminals: linguistic disguise, linguistic imitation, linguistic trap, linguistic probing, and linguistic truth. This research offers insights for solving such fraud cases. Qian Yonghong (2019) pointed out that fraudsters mainly construct two types of identities—individual identity and relational identity—during the scam. Their discourse strategies cover various aspects, including code choice, style choice, discourse features, speech acts and so on. In the process of identity construction, they actively adapt to the victim's mental state to achieve their fraudulent goals. Lu Jiaxuan (2024) further analyzed how fraudsters construct their own identity, the victim's identity, and the identity of a third party from a pragmatic identity perspective. The study employs five pragmatic strategies for identity construction: generalization, default, highlighting, reconstruction, and deconstruction. To distinguish between these strategies, the study introduces three variables: the level of definiteness of the dimension, the fraudster's initiative in pragmatic identity construction, and their emotional attitude towards each identity compared to the victim's.

At abroad, studies have developed a relatively systematic framework, combining discourse analysis with cognitive and pragmatic approaches. Ye et al. (2019) identified that fraudsters employ semiotic resources to construct false identities through discursive practices, particularly from the perspectives of interdiscursivity, intersubjectivity, power, and control. Olajimbiti (2018), drawing on Halliday and Hasan's Generic Structure Potential and Fetzer's cognitive context model, analyzed six discourse patterns—salutation, discourse initiation, enticing information, mild conscription into business, request, and subscription. The study further highlighted pragmatic strategies of adversatives, evocation of business ideas, evocation of religious affinity, and the invocation of a messianic figure. Whitty and Buchanan (2016) examined the prevalence of online romance scams in Great Britain, exploring both the public's awareness of such crimes and the ways individuals acquire knowledge about them.

Building on the researches discussed above, this study adopts a goal-adaptional framework to analyze the types of discourse strategies fraudsters use during the process. These strategies are employed after the fraudsters have adapted to the victim's mental, social, and physical worlds, and are driven by their specific communicative goals. Therefore, based on the theoretical framework, research questions, and goals involved, we have integrated the classifications of discourse strategies from Lu Jiaxuan (2024), Yuan Ying (2019), and Ye et al. (2019). We classify the discourse strategies used by fraudsters in telecommunications fraud as: impersonation, emotional manipulation, and default.

3. Theoretical Framework

Verschueren (2000) states that "the theory of language adaptation posits that language is a continuous process of selection, encompassing three core concepts: variability, negotiability, and adaptability." Essentially, language adaptation is a dynamic and ongoing process.

Furthermore, a specific research perspective of Adaptation Theory is its focus on contextual correlation. Contextual correlation refers to the components of the communicative context that mutually adapt to language choices, namely the physical, social, and mental worlds (Verschueren, 1999). The physical world primarily includes the deictic relationships of time and space, as well as the narrators' body posture, gestures, appearance, and physical characteristics. The social world refers to social occasions, the social environment, and the principles and norms that regulate a narrator's verbal behavior. The social world is deeply influenced by social relationships and culture, as language users are individuals who live in specific socio-cultural environments. Their language is constrained by the social relationships between the interlocutors and the prevailing socio-cultural norms. The mental world mainly involves mental factors such as the narrators' personalities, emotions, beliefs, and intentions. The adaptiveness of language choices in this dimension demonstrates a progressive layering that ultimately points to the liar's true communicative intentions (Chen, 2013).

In the Goal Principle, it states that speech acts are intended to express, practice, and ultimately achieve specific goals; goal is the reason for and the driving force behind the generation of speech (Liao, 2005). During the execution of a speech act, goal is always present and plays a guiding role. As social beings, human interaction is ubiquitous. In telecommunications fraud, the continuous interaction between the fraudster and the victim transmits fraudulent information, driving the progression of the fraud. Meaning exists precisely in the process of selecting and pursuing goals during this interaction. In essence, purpose drives interaction, runs through it, and dominates it (Liao, 2005).

As social beings, human behavior is inherently purposeful. In interpersonal interaction, goal acts as the central driving force. According to the Goal Principle, goal is not only the reason for speech generation but also the motivation for its development (Liao, 2005). Therefore, the essence of interaction lies in goal itself. Linguistic symbols are merely the form and vehicle through which interaction unfolds. What truly initiates, maintains, and has a substantive impact on the interaction between parties is their underlying goal. Interaction is, in essence, goal-driven.

During communication, communicators constantly weigh their options and make strategic choices to adapt to the communicative context based on their communicative goals (Yuan, 2014). Combining the Goal Principle with Adaptation Theory aims to meet the communicative needs of the narrators. It explores which discourse strategies narrators construct in the process to adapt to both the communicative context and their goals.

4. Fraudsters' Discourse Strategies

The discourse of telecommunications fraud is heavily shaped by its spatiotemporal limitations, which manifest in its core characteristics: the non-contact nature of the crime, the wide variety of fraudulent methods, and the high frequency of cross-border operations.

In this section, we will utilize the theoretical framework outlined previously to categorize the discourse strategies employed by fraudsters. We will provide case examples to illustrate how these strategies are put into practice. Based on the classifications by Lu Jiaxuan (2024), Yuan Ying (2019), and Whitty and Buchanan (2016), we divide the discourse strategies used in telecommunications fraud into three main types: impersonation, emotional manipulation, and default.

4.1 Impersonation

Impersonation is a linguistic strategy scammers use to gain trust and an informational advantage. It involves a narrator adopting a specific identity to achieve their fraudulent goals. This strategy is seen at various points within a interaction and typically focuses on two key groups: personal contacts like family and friends, and authority figures from law enforcement or judicial bodies (Yuan, 2019). By exploiting the unique status and credibility of these groups, fraudsters can manipulate a victim's judgment, secure their trust, and ultimately defraud them.

Example 1:

(Context: Ms. Wang, who has recently purchased a bag from an overseas website, receives a phone call at home from someone claiming to be a law enforcement officer, asking about her purchase.)

Ms. Wang: Hello.

Fraudster: May I speak with Ms. Wang?

Ms. Wang: Yes, this is she. What can I do for you?

Fraudster: I'm from the Provincial Public Security Department. We've received a tip-off and our investigation shows you recently purchased a luxury bag from an overseas shopping website. Is that correct?

Ms. Wang: Yes, that's right.

Fraudster: Ms. Wang, based on our information, this overseas website is actually a money-laundering platform disguised as a luxury brand store. The transaction you made has been flagged by us as being involved in illegal fund transfers.

Ms. Wang: What? That's impossible! I was just doing some normal shopping...

In this case, the fraudster impersonates a law enforcement officer from the Public Security Bureau. The opening question, “May I speak with Ms. Wang?”, is in the turn-initial position. Its goal is to sustain the conversation. By imitating the formal and direct speech of a law enforcement officer, the fraudster activates the victim’s interest-orientation or fear-driven response. The fraudster adapts to the non-contact nature of telecommunications fraud and the victim’s recent online shopping activity. By creating and adapting to the victim’s psychological state, they ensure the victim cooperates in the conversation, allowing the scam to proceed. The use of crime-related vocabulary in the later dialogue reinforces the victim’s trust in the fraudster’s identity as a law enforcement officer.

Both the fraudster’s identity construction and their choice of discourse strategies are purpose-driven and adaptable to the interactive context. The fraudster’s goal is to establish a certain level of trust early in the interaction to facilitate the rest of the fraudulent activity.

4.2 Emotional Manipulation

Through emotional manipulation, fraudsters build a deep emotional connection with victims and use empathy to carry out the fraud. Fraudsters initially invest significant time to understand and echo the victim’s emotions and needs, thereby establishing a trusting relationship (Whitty and Buchanan, 2016). This strategy is especially common in online romance scams.

Example 2:

(Mr. Li meets a woman online. After chatting, he feels they have great chemistry. They start a relationship, and she asks him for \$1,314 to buy shoes.)

Fraudster: Baby, don’t you think it’s a bit much to spend a couple thousand on a pair of shoes?

Mr. Li: It is, but I wouldn’t buy them for myself. It’s what my baby wants, though. Besides, I feel bad that you didn’t take the red packet. I will send you. You deserve it every year, my good girl.

Fraudster: Hehehe, to be honest, I’ve been really worried about this for a while.

Mr. Li: Tell me what’s on your mind. No matter what it is, your baby will face it with you.

Fraudster: It’s just that every month I have to pay at least two or three hundred, and I’m always short on money. I have to face a lot of things by myself.

Mr. Li: No way. Let me give you some living expenses every month.

Fraudster: No, it’ll be fine once I pay off my credit card debt.

Mr. Li: Just think of it as a loan. You can pay me back after you start working. My baby’s still a student, after all.

Fraudster: If I borrow money from you, I won’t be able to get mad at you for real in the future.

In this case, after the fraudster has built a fake emotional connection with the victim, their language becomes very intimate. Initial trust has already been established. The fraudster uses the intimate term “baby” to not only adapt to the victim’s mental need for an emotional connection but also to fulfill the goal of the fraud: using this closeness to extort money from the victim.

Through this example, we can see that the fraudster’s emotional manipulation strategy appears in two ways. The first is through feigned vulnerability, as seen in “I’m always short on money. I have to face a

lot of things by myself.” Here, the fraudster reveals her difficult situation to evoke sympathy and get the victim to spend money on her. The second is through pretending to be considerate, as in, “If I borrow money from you, I won’t be able to get mad at you for real in the future.” The scammer seems to be rejecting the victim’s offer, but she is actually using a “take one step back to take two steps forward” approach. By feigning concern for the victim, she manipulates his emotions, making him feel even more sorry for her and laying the groundwork for the next stage of the fraud.

4.3 Default

The default discourse strategy is used in situations where the fraudster’s identity is uncertain (Lu, 2024). Fraudsters use the link between language and identity to achieve their fraudulent goals, leveraging the “resource effect” behind their pragmatic identity.

Example 3:

(Context: Ms. Lin is a recent college graduate who frequently used internet financial platforms during her studies.)

Fraudster: Hello, is this Ms. Lin? The last four digits of your ID number are 0000.

Ms. Lin: Yes, who is this?

Fraudster: Hello, madam. I’m an official Alipay customer service representative, employee number 1180. The purpose of this call is to formally inform you that, according to the latest national regulations on online loan credit management, you need to cooperate with us to close or upgrade the “Alipay student account” you opened during your studies. Failure to do so will seriously affect your personal credit record and result in negative marks.

Ms. Lin: I don’t think I’ve used it since I graduated... Will this really affect my credit score? How?

Fraudster: Yes, madam. If you don’t upgrade in time, the system will determine you have multiple accounts and flag you for malicious lending. Your personal credit score will be significantly reduced, and your future eligibility for home or car loans, and even for high-speed train or airplane tickets, will be restricted.

Ms. Lin: Oh? It’s that serious? But what should I do? I’m not a student anymore.

Fraudster: I understand you’re concerned, and I’m here to help you solve this problem. We have a complete process for this, so you don’t have to worry. It’s not complicated, and I’ll guide you through the entire process. To ensure we handle this correctly for you, I’ll need to verify some information first.

In this case, the fraudster’s initial identity is uncertain. They convey new regulations and the purpose of the call, demonstrating a service-oriented mindset from a customer’s perspective. With the fraudster’s true identity unconfirmed, they use the term “madam” to show respect for the victim and employ customer service language like “The purpose of this call is to formally inform you that...you need to cooperate with us to close or upgrade the ‘Alipay student account’ you opened during your studies” and “I understand you’re concerned, and I’m here to help you solve this problem” to project professionalism. This is an adaptation to the social world of the communicative context, which helps establish a power

dynamic between the scammer and the victim. The default strategy maintains the image of an Alipay customer service representative, winning the victim's trust.

5. Conclusion

Due to the remote nature of fraud cases, language is the most crucial component of a fraudster's operation. fraudsters use specific discourse strategies to serve their fraudulent purposes. Recognizing and understanding these strategies can help people avoid falling victim to scams and prevent financial loss before it occurs.

This study finds that fraudsters use three discourse strategies during the fraud process: impersonation, emotional manipulation, and default. The implementation of these three strategies serves a dual purpose: first, they adapt to the communicative context to ensure the smooth progression of the interaction; and second, they are purpose-oriented, helping fraudsters build the necessary connections and identity relationships with victims at different stages of the scam to advance their fraudulent agenda.

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