

## SPEAKING BEHAVIOUR OF INTERNET DATING SCAMMERS

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*The article focuses on a study of speaking behaviour of catfish (dating scammers). The investigation is based on real events which took place in 2017–19. The priority is given to highlighting the scammers' steps leading to fraud. It also provides a classification of dating scammers (based on their experience) and such related issue as their fictional personal names, which can be one of the telltale signs for identifying a dating scammer. A considerable amount of space and attention is devoted to stages of 'romantic' relations, which demonstrate the tendency to escalate: 1) friend request, introduction and positive self-presentation; 2) development of relations, language manipulating and accurate investigation of victim's financial standing; 3) swift decision to pay a visit to his lady; 4) travelling to another country to meet some contractual obligations; 5) unforeseen financial problem(s); 6) the result. The chief of these stages are the first three. The article is organised around three main domains: theories, facts, and conclusions.*

**Key words:** catfish, dating scammer, discourse, internet swindling, manipulation, typology of dating scammers

**Калитюк Л.П.**

### Мовленнєва поведінка англомовного шлюбного інтернет-шахрая

*На матеріалі сучасної англійської мови та реальних подій, що відбулися у 2017–2019 роках, досліджується мовленнєва поведінка шлюбних інтернет-шахраїв. Запропонована класифікація шлюбних інтернет-шахраїв з погляду їхньої мовленнєвої маніпулятивної техніки. Описано етапи сценарію фінансового шахрайства з аналізом мовленнєвих ходів шлюбних інтернет-шахраїв. Розкрито механізм мовленнєвого впливу на жертв інтернет-шахрайства. Встановлено, що основними факторами, що приваблюють потенційну жертву, є: 1) вправна кортеж-самоідентифікація злочинця, 2) мовленнєва підготовка цільового об'єкта за рахунок комплексу ходів, 3) вибудовування психологічної залежності від романтичних стосунків.*

**Ключові слова:** дискурс, дискурс-портрет, інтернет-шахрайство, маніпуляція, типологія шлюбних інтернет-шахраїв, шлюбний шахрай.

**Калитюк Л.П.**

### Языковое поведение англоязычного брачного интернет-афериста

*На материале современного английского языка и реальных событий, произошедших в 2017–2019 гг., исследуется языковое поведение брачных интернет-аферистов. Предложена классификация брачных интернет-аферистов, разработанная с учетом их языковой манипулятивной техники. Описаны этапы сценария финансового мошенничества с анализом языковых ходов брачных интернет-аферистов. Раскрыт механизм языкового воздействия на жертв интернет-мошенничества. Установлено, что основными факторами, привлекающими потенциальную жертву, являются: 1) искусная кортеж-самоидентификация преступника, 2) языковая подготовка целевого объекта посредством ряда ходов, 3) построение психологической зависимости от романтических отношений.*

**Ключевые слова:** дискурс, дискурс-портрет, интернет-мошенничество, манипуляция, типология брачных интернет-мошенников, брачный мошенник

Once you saw one penguin,  
you've seen them all.

### Introduction

Social network expands our communication possibilities breaking borders, distances, time differences, cultural restrictions and makes communication swift and easily accessible. It is both a godsend and a highly risky challenge for the user [1; 2].

The aim of this investigation is to identify and describe the stages of internet dating scamming, and to shed some light on how a talented scammer works in the situation in question. The material for this investigation was picked from *Messenger*, *Facebook*, *Twoo*, *Badoo* by the author herself,

considerable amount of data was obtained from her close and distant friends, colleagues and complete strangers, who had the courage and determination to share the sensitive material with her and in doing so help potential victims avoid this painful and heart-breaking experience. The delicacy of the matter under investigation explains our wish to refrain from providing references to the sources of the illustrative material because the author of the article had promised that ladies' privacy would be respected.

### The theoretical background

Successful dating scammers use a set of effective tools to influence their potential victims, and manipulation together with suggestion prove to be workable. In this respect, we employ the findings of psychological linguistics to understand how the scammers act [3]. The central focus of our investigation is upon language means used for manipulation. It is also concerned with the environment in which such scammers operate. Using some of professor I. Ukhvanova-Shmygova [6] discourse methods we seek to draw the typical portrait of the scammer. In doing so, the interrelationship between manipulation, recipient and discourse portrait of the scammer becomes readily apparent.

### Methods

Broadly the investigation follows the approach of CDA (Critical discourse analysis) (Fairclough N.), with combining micro and meso-level interpretation. At the micro-level, various aspects of textual / linguistic analysis are considered, — syntactic analysis, use of metaphors, selection of words and rhetorical devices. The meso-level or 'level of discursive practice' involves studying issues of production and consumption, with primary attention to the person, who produced the messages, the target audience being secondary. Our investigation rests upon professor I. Ukhvanova-Shmygova's discourse portraiting methods (*addressor-, cortege-identification*) [6].

The American synonym to *dating scamming* is *catfishing* (inspired by 'Catfish,' the American documentary, 2010).

*Scam* (verb) — *lure = tempt (someone) into a relationship by adopting a fictional online persona.*

*Dating scammer, catfish* — *is a person, who creates a fake account, sets up a false personal profile on a social networking site for fraudulent or deceptive purposes* [5].

These internet predators fabricate more or less successfully (due to their skills, talents and experience) online identities to trick people into emotional / romantic relationships (over a certain period of time). They create unreal reality and one of the possible motivations of such activity is financial interest. The common feature of dating scammers, studied

in this article, is their self-presentation as belonging to English speaking cultural community. Taking into account behaviour, quality of manipulative skills, and the difficulty to identify the communicator as a scammer, we can classify them as:

- 1) the beginners;
- 2) inexperienced and inaccurate;
- 3) average;
- 4) professionals;
- 5) talented maestros.

The above-mentioned first three categories are of little value for our investigation, with speaking behaviour being transparent and self-evident. These scammers' English is poor, e.g.: *we <...> hanged out together*, they demonstrate sluggish pace of communication (one abstract message a week, lack of attention to details), violating punctuation rules, misspelling words, inaccurate clumsy flirting, forcing the events, no respect to privacy resulting in bold intrusion into private life as in the example: *what the matter, babe, you don't wanna talk to me?!* (two hours after accepting a friend request), sending pictures or images of Mickey Mouse, white puppies, swans in caustic pink or red colours, which collectively testifies that the sender of the stuff mentioned is most likely to have low or no aesthetic upbringing, low social status and young age (no older than twenty). The inexperienced scammers avoid using proper names in the messages (*your country* instead of *Ukraine*), and tend to drop occasionally strange irrelevant exultant messages. The exceeding emotional outbursts can serve as additional proof of the scammer's immature age, e.g.: *to find the courage to write you*; metaphors (*we are in the same boat*); begging, tautology (*please, please; wait, wait*), lamentations, abundant parallel constructions, and other language means which can identify an exultant and pathetic liar: *ever, never, anymore + synonyms (hurt, offended)* or antonyms (*joy and grief*).

Another telltale sign of dealing with an average scammer is the name, which often contradicts the English anthroponymic tradition: *Dani Mani, Kutty Edward Muhammad, Padilla Maldonado, Pooran*. Anthroponymic unawareness may be a sign that the addresser has different cultural background. Such inaccurate, random picking of personal names can also indicate that the scammer serves a number of profiles at a time and is too busy to think about a more natural name. Very often such scammers' fake names consist of two first names: *Alex Antonio, Allen Andy, David Andrew, James Jeffrey, Peter James, Giovanni Michael, Richard Christopher, David Harry, Martin Gary, Matthew Kevin* or a combination of male + female name: *Edward Ellison*, or two surnames: *Williams Johnson, Campbell Collins*. Sometimes scammers choose pathetic (*Jan Honest*) or self-explanatory names: *Clement Massimiliano Alfonso* [4]. Those scammers can change not only their names, or photos, but jokingly enough their sex, shifting from male to female without changing the name using the same FB profile. In addition,

I observed this and joked about it, the scammer heroically being silent.

More experienced scammers block their ex-friends after the deal is over, which is not the case with the beginners. Their FB profiles are typically pathetic, with American flags, often combined with crosses, angels, icons, pictures of suggestive content, sometimes with Arabic inscriptions. The list of friends is hidden, if not, it is not consistent with the age, ethnicity, citizenship and status of the FB profile. The overabundance of women-friends from different countries and continents is another telltale sign of a dating scammer. If the list of friends is not exposed, the 'likes' under cover photo can tell the story. Usually the 'likes / loves / wows' belong to women of the relatively same age group, but geographically scattered (Yakutia, Slovakia, Lithuania, Venezuela, Mexico, Monaco, Moldova). Another identifying feature of an inexperienced scammer is their inability to communicate coherently, — short phrases like *love you, kiss you, miss you* are combined with such abstract philosophic long readers as:

*My days are happier just because I have a friend like you.*

*You make my world happier and more complete.*

*Feel great to be able to count on your unsuspected affection and friendship.*

*You're the type of friend that everyone should have: A friend like you makes everything easier!*

*Your friendship brings me nothing but joy and satisfaction.*

Sometimes the scammer overlooks some pivotal details in their messages (e.g.: using the wrong name) with resulting comical situations:

*i really like you **Renate**, i have talk to you and i have found out you are such a special and wonderful woman and you seem like all i want in life, please i want you to be the woman of my dreams, i want you to be the reason behind my smile and i will be the reason behind your smile, i want to love you forever, i want you to be the woman that i will spend the rest of my life with, please be my wife and my love forever.*

In response to a comment that the addressee is not exactly the Renata, the scammer said that his wife's name was Renata and he identified the receiver of the message with his late wife. So, for an attentive reader there is no difficulty in identifying an average scammer. But it is worth while reminding that the scammer, though inexperienced, is a criminal and his intentions are far from being friendly and can be really alarming, like in the following example:

*You are lucky i didn't get to meet you in person or have your personally data if not by now you would*

*have been crying all your life and sold out everything since, i would make sure you even sale everything about you and your family to make sure you lose all your life and money in both your house and all, go and thank God for your life you are lucky basted.*

The most interesting part of this investigation was the study of speaking behaviour of talented, high ranked scammers, skilled manipulators, masters of creating unparalleled suggestive texts and visual messages. A master manipulator, digs deep and creates a strong emotional hold on his victim, he is very realistic, attentive to details, responds quickly, has got high communicative skills, caring and gentle, strong personality. He writes passionate messages or calls every day, makes a woman feel heaven on earth, needed, adored and cherished. He is polite and patient, has got a remarkable sense of humour.

Fortunately, such brilliantly effective scammers are few and far between. However, the author of the article was in luck to obtain such material. Such scammers create psychological dependency and are a real financial disaster for a potential victim. As a rule, their target audience is ladies in their second youth (40–60). Dating scammers do not react to provocative 'likes' or other attention boosters, leaving to themselves to decide to whom the next friend request goes. They may try to avoid the unpleasant possibility of being hooked by police. Not getting a prompt acceptance of the friend request, such scammers are not persistent and delete the previously sent request in a couple of days.

Usually in the dating scamming scenario, the following stages can be traced:

- 1) friend request, introduction and positive self-presentation;
- 2) development of relations, manipulating and accurate investigation of victim's financial standing;
- 3) very swift decision to come to his sweetheart after fulfilling the contract obligations in his business;
- 4) arrival to another country to meet contractual obligations;
- 5) unforeseen financial problem which doesn't allow any procrastination;
- 6) the result.

The first two stages are crucial for the scammer to decide whether the affair is worth spending time and effort.

At the first stage the scammer presents himself to be a successful owner of some promising business, he is single or a widower, often childless. This stage can be described as 'breaking the ice' and the scammer creates the image of an active, lively, serious man. The span of his hobbies is impressive, — *singing, dancing, cooking, swimming, playing polo, watching films, travelling, football*. He loves children. The pragmatics of such self-portraying pursues

the idea of carving the image of the man of ladies' dreams, a godsend, 'the prince on the white horse' and naturally such portrait will get the right respond from the addressee. His cortege identification is a combination of (in)direct references and can be deduced from the profile in the social network. A few scammer's sketches to his portrait 'reveal' the masculine well-off man, who lives in a prestigious rich country, which is often the desired destination for emigration. He is family-oriented, usually a widower (one of the reasons, why widowers are more preferable than divorced men is that they can keep the family relations for a long time), owns a business. And here goes one piece of alarming information, — he does not have any friends, no sisters or brothers, or living parents to rely on if anything happens. The scammer pretends to be a *'successful, family oriented lonely wolf'*. The potential victim swallows this bait, and becomes aware that the man, though strong, is vulnerable and needs some care from a lady, whom he will *'not spare the expense in keeping'*.

The second stage of the scenario is very warm with pictures of coffee, chocolate hearts on white plates, bunches of beautiful flowers on grayish-white silk bed sheets or pillows. A delicate courtship is full of fantastic, heart touching words: *my sweetheart, my love, honey, my precious love, my queen, my world, my life, my heart and everything*; he jokes a lot and to the point, he uses positive adjectives: *adorable, precious, lovely, gorgeous, intelligent*. The victim develops dependency on everyday messages, accurately selected music hellos. And here is another alarming sign. No video calls. For a 'very good reason', — he is a man of a certain position and avoids any risk of being blackmailed, but he gives his telephone number but very soon he hopes to come and hug his precious queen and will never let her go, because he *loved her before he met her*. At this very stage there are lexical dominants like *trust, support, you deserve a better life <= you deserve me>*. Then follows his desire to be involved in all aspects of the lady's life, and gradually the victim gives out sensitive information. The scammer announces his desire to materialize himself, to give the feeling of presence and he either sends flowers with a courier, or says that he has bought a present to his sweetheart. He asks for different photos, sometimes of intimate character and can initiate night / sex chats. Such a bit impudent and pushy behaviour adds some attractive flavour to his already masculine personality:

You are always in my mind, by the time I wake up till I close my eyes. I just want to see your face. I want to feel your warm body, hear your precious voice.

He is very much present through his messages and the woman is happy, confident that she

is the chosen one, one in a million, desired, cherished, loved, adored, she has got a hero, who will protect her against all troubles:

*You just don't understand how much I adore you or appreciate you, admire you, trust you, respect you, and over all love you; You are the best girlfriend any guy could ever ask for; You are first and all for me now; You are like an answered prayer; I miss you, my darling. I only hope and pray that this relationship will surely hold by the special grace of God. My love I understand and will guide and protect you always. I love you so much and can't afford to lose you.*

The key word here is TRUST. In scammer's speech repeatedly appear words like *trust, true, truth, honest, believe* which are, on the one hand, the markers of a typical liar's speaking pattern. On the other hand, these words impose upon the victim the feeling of responsibility for future events.

This 'love-you-kiss-you' stage is still routinely supported by pictures of coffees every morning, evening good-byes, hourly *hugs and big kisses* and already habitual *I love you, honey*. The lady is showered with love and affection and there is the feeling that her 'lover' is an alpha male, who is interested in every detail of her life: *What are you wearing now, honey? Go naked, I am naked here*. Such behaviour of the scammer seems to be important for psychological dependency and creates the illusion of man's total presence in lady's life. This can be supported by occasional telephone calls. At this moment, a lady could intuitively feel that there is something disturbing and suspicious in the man's voice. Being too low- / too high-pitched, the voice may not meet her expectations, or there is something wrong with the accent, or the dry speaking manner does not correlate with the intimacy of written messages.

The scammer's target group, as was mentioned, is attractive ladies, who often don't suspect anything wrong in this swift, whirlwind romance. The reason of such unawareness lies on the surface: being attractive, they are a catch for the opposite sex and know their charms. All of my respondents were noted for their good looks, many of them proved to be kind, refined, intelligent, well-behaved, educated, sometimes deeply religious. One of my respondents from Latin America did not suspect anything wrong for half a year, and in this case, the author of the article played the part of eye-opener. On the other hand, loneliness, selectiveness and sincere trust that the ladies are the chosen ones add to their serenity in this dangerous trap which is about to snap shut. Thus there is a strong emotional bond between communicators and it will be felt months after the situation resolves. One of my respondents wrote: *He was quite charming, it's a shame he had to be deceptive*.

The third and the fourth stages are the most emotionally exhausting. The scammer announces that he is going to Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam or some African country to fulfill his contractual obligations. In all likelihood, this is the scammer's actual resident country. At first, the wording is traditionally warm and there are many details of his stay there. Along with warmth and intimacy in the texts there appear some scattered markers of financial issues. Together with 'trust' words, 'money' words become increasingly present: *expensive, high prices here* that are combined with suggestive elements, intended to program the lady into saving her 'hero' in the nearest future:

*My love believe and trust me, because i do believe and trust you so much. You have the talent to transform anything into something more beautiful than the moment when it was created, as you add warmth and joy to our world. Without you, life would be sadder and the days would be darker. It's so expensive here. Whenever I have a problem and need some type of comfort, you are there for me. I wouldn't ever think that I would be as lucky to have you, but now that I have you I don't ever want to let go. You have brought so much love, joy, and happiness that no other woman has ever shown me.*

The fifth stage is totally unexpected for the victim. Before a dramatic twist of events there is a pause from 3 to 24 hours and then goes a long emotional message with lots of details and sums of money being stated. The manipulator's behavior is a sham; he applies an excessive amount of pressure on her 'sweetheart' in an attempt to get her make the costly decision before she is ready to react accordingly. By creating a false sense of urgency, the scammer tries to raise the level of tension. But still there are some telltale signs indicating at the absurdity of the situation. For example, the man in reality would refrain from revealing his lady that he was hungry or ate only a banana or saying that he was crying bitterly. Such behaviour is not typical for an experienced businessman and such scenario may indicate at scammer's relatively young age. Then the scammer blames the lady, making her feel responsible for breaking relations and emotional betrayal, he also displays biases, exaggerates, makes excuses. He is interested in money (*if you want to help then go ahead and do it, but if you do not want, then forget about me*); and no other suggestions are taken into consideration. He creates a situation of absurdity with constant begging and accusing the lady for being heartless, wicked, egoistic: *this is what my true love cost me, living in pain.*

It is the information having been obtained from the victim that determines the purpose and the amount of money asked from her at the fifth stage. These can be rescuing his business, or contract,

or buying the ticket, or financial support in medical issues. Any lady's attempts to calm him down, to make a call to the embassy, to arrange a meeting with a reliable businessman in an effort to assess the problem on the spot, or to arrange for a video call are all indignantly rejected. Gradually the balance of responsibility for saving these romantic relations shifts and is placed entirely on the woman. At this stage the scammer commits several tactic manipulative mistakes which reduce considerably the flow of money to his pocket. However, in this article these manipulative shortcomings are intentionally not analysed in order not to provide the scammers with a valuable workable guide for future.

When it becomes obvious that the lady is not likely to invest money to save the love of her lifetime, the scammer's behavior can develop in different variants, which can be described as:

- 1) reserved;
- 2) emotional;
- 3) aggressive.

The first of these is marked by scammer's languid retreat and elimination of any contacts. The second one is marked with emotional outbursts, multiple goodbyes forever:

*I am done with these relations, bye forever! I am tired of all this argument, you don't deserve me, stop disturbing yourself, it's up to you to say whatever you want, but for me i am sick and tired of all this nonsense, we are no longer kids ok? I hate the day I met you here. I regret meeting you. You're the worst thing that happened in my life.*

After such lengthy and exhausting farewells there can be plentiful friend requests on Facebook, which can serve as an indirect indication of either more than one FB profiles of the scammer, or the existence of an organized gang of scammers, who share information about ladies. However, the latter casts some doubt on the scammer's proficiency, which is not the case with the dating maestro. Some material under investigation indicates that there can be at least two people working behind the scammer's profile and they often use ready-made texts with totally different wording. My observations allow me to think that scammers may be sharing their 'duties'. The most efficient one works at early stages (1-3), the average works at sex chats (this may be carried out even by a group scammers for fun) and the poorest performance is demonstrated at the 5<sup>th</sup> stage.

### Conclusions

Dating scamming is a psychological manipulation, exercise of undue influence through mental distortion and emotional exploitation, with the intention to seize financial benefits at the victim's expense. The talented scammer

possesses superior ability to understand others but with low emotional intelligence. This type of manipulator is Machiavellian. The most popular scammers' tricks are

1) unreasonable blaming of the addressee for failure and unhappiness of the catfish;

2) deliberate frailty to elicit sympathy or favour, thus inspiring the addressee's sense of duty and obligation;

3) putting excessive pressure on the recipient to make hasty and illogical decisions. Their target group — unprotected, unsuspecting well-off women.

P.S. Let me express my **heartiest thanks** to the ladies, who shared the material with me. **Dear** Expensive scammers, I am not sorry for any inconvenience caused. It was intentional. 'Better luck next time' hopefully will never come to you.

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