



Language as Manipulation: Pragmatic Functions of Speech Acts in Child Grooming

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Abstract. This study investigates manipulative speech acts employed in child grooming practices through a pragmatic lens, highlighting how language serves as a tool for psychological control. The participants in this research included child caregivers such as teachers, family members, and personnel from child protection services who have been involved with cases of child sexual violence. Their narratives and experiences offer valuable secondary insights into the linguistic strategies commonly observed in grooming interactions. The findings reveal that perpetrators utilize four types of manipulative speech acts in these practices: directives, expressive, commissive, and threatening acts. Together, these speech acts constitute a systematic pattern of manipulation that progressively diminishes the victim's agency. This research contributes to the field of pragmatics by mapping the manipulative functions of speech acts within grooming discourse and offers practical implications for prevention efforts. Enhancing linguistic awareness among teachers, families, and child protection professionals can improve early detection of grooming strategies and support interventions aimed at safeguarding children from sexual violence.

Keywords: Child Grooming, Pragmatics, Language and Violence, Speech Acts.

1 Introduction

Child grooming is a form of sexual violence that is increasingly being recognized in child protection studies [4, 6, 7, 8]. Grooming encompasses not only physical acts but also a gradual psychological process that occurs through communication and interactions designed to ensnare the victim [1, 9]. Language plays a crucial role in this context, as perpetrators use specific utterances to build trust, create emotional bonds, and ultimately exert control over the victim. Therefore, understanding how language functions in grooming practices is essential for uncovering the manipulation that often lies hidden in everyday conversations.

Linguistic studies, particularly in the field of pragmatics, provide a valuable theoretical framework for examining this phenomenon. The speech act approach allows us to identify how perpetrators convey messages and carry out social actions through lan-

guage [3, 5]. In the context of grooming, seemingly simple utterances can serve as manipulative strategies that restrict the victim's freedom of movement. However, pragmatic analyses of grooming are still relatively rare, especially in Indonesia.

Previous studies have primarily focused on the psychological and criminological aspects of grooming, emphasizing the perpetrator's behaviour and the impact of trauma on victims [4, 6, 7, 8]. Meanwhile, studies that specifically highlight manipulative speech acts as tools of violence are limited. Yet, language often serves as the medium through which perpetrators engage in grooming before any actual sexual violence occurs. This focus on language is critical and warrants a pragmatic analysis of manipulative speech acts.

This research aims to identify four main categories of manipulative speech acts used by groomers: directives, expressive, commissive, and threatening acts. These categories are understood not only as linguistic variations but also as complementary strategies that create unequal power relations. By examining the structure of these four types of speech acts, the research can provide new insights into how linguistic manipulation systematically occurs. The novelty of this research lies in its explicit focus on analysing manipulative speech acts in child grooming, taking a pragmatic perspective that has rarely been applied in the Indonesian context. Furthermore, this study does not collect data directly from child victims due to ethical and trauma-related considerations. Instead, it gathers information from child advocates, teachers, families, and child protection service officers who have real-life experience assisting with cases. This methodological approach ensures a safe environment for sensitive research while still offering rich empirical data for analysis.

The findings of the study are expected to contribute theoretically to linguistic studies by demonstrating that speech acts function not only as a means of communication but also as mechanisms of social and psychological control. Practically, these results have significant implications for efforts to prevent sexual violence against children. Teachers, families, and service providers can be equipped with critical language literacy skills to identify early signs of grooming through specific speech patterns. Therefore, this research can bridge the gap between linguistic theory and child protection practices. Its findings offer opportunities to formulate more contextual, language-based intervention strategies. For example, training modules for teachers and families might include examples of manipulative speech acts and guidance on appropriate responses. Child protection agencies could also utilize these findings to develop preventative communication guidelines. In this way, the research contributes not only to the development of linguistics but also to significant practical benefits in efforts to protect children from the dangers of grooming and sexual violence.

2 Research Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a pragmatic study design. The re-search focuses on analysing manipulative speech acts in cases of child grooming by examining the narratives and experiences of child caregivers. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the contextual meaning of language and understand the pragmatic functions of speech acts as manipulation strategies used by perpetrators. Given the sensitivity surrounding child sexual violence, this study did not involve the direct participation of victims. All respondents were provided with clear explanations

of the research objectives, the right to confidentiality, and informed consent. The identities of the respondents and cases have been disguised to maintain privacy and ensure their safety.

The respondents in this study included individuals who have assisted child victims of sexual violence. These respondents comprised: (1) school teachers or private tutors involved in supporting student victims, (2) family members acting as primary caregivers, and (3) child protection service officers who handled the cases professionally. Respondents were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on their direct experience in assisting victims. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the respondents. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for open-ended narratives while still addressing the respondents' experiences regarding the forms of manipulative speech used by perpetrators. Each interview was recorded (with the respondents' permission) and transcribed verbatim. In addition, supplementary data were gathered from case notes, service reports, and reflections from the support team.

Data analysis was conducted in several stages: (1) transcription of interview data, (2) initial coding to identify manipulative utterances, (3) classification of speech acts into categories such as directive, expressive, commissive, and threatening, (4) analysis of the pragmatic function of each speech act, and (5) interpretation of the relationships between these categories to understand how manipulation strategies developed over time. The analysis utilized a pragmatic approach based on Searle's speech act theory and advancements in critical discourse analysis. To ensure data validity, the study employed source triangulation techniques by comparing narratives from teachers, family members, and service personnel. Member checking was also conducted with several respondents to verify that the interpretations aligned with their intended experiences.

3 Findings and Discussion

In the context of child sexual violence, the practice of child grooming illustrates how language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a powerful tool for manipulation. Perpetrators employ various forms of speech acts to establish relationships, foster trust, and gradually influence the victim's thoughts and emotions. This study identifies four types of manipulative speech acts commonly used in child grooming practices: directive, expressive, commissive, and threatening acts.

3.1 Directive Speech Acts

Directive Speech Acts focus on the perpetrator's attempts to control and direct the victim's actions to serve their own interests. These utterances typically manifest as instructions, commands, prohibitions, or manipulative requests. There are some examples of speech acts by child groomers categorized as Directive Speech Acts:

“Jangan cerita sama orang tuamu soal ini, nanti mereka salah paham”.
(Don't tell your parents about this; they'll misunderstand). The perpetrator is the victim's close neighbour.

“Coba hapus pesan ini biar tidak ada yang lihat”. (Try deleting this message so no one sees it). The perpetrator is the victim's private tutor

“Besok kamu temui saya di perpustakaan, jangan bilang siapa-siapa”. (Meet me at the library tomorrow, and don't tell anyone). The perpetrator is a school teacher.

“Kalau ada temanmu tanya, bilang saja kita lagi kerja tugas bareng”. (If your friends ask, just say we're working on an assignment together). The perpetrator is an older cousin.

These statements indicate that the perpetrator is trying to impose directives that limit the victim's interactions with others and keep the relationship a secret. In grooming practices, these directives are used not only to regulate the victim's behavior but also to isolate them from their social environment, such as forbidding them from discussing their interactions with the perpetrator with parents or friends. This strategy aims to create dependency and maintain secrecy, making the victim feel compelled to follow the perpetrator's instructions. In other words, directive speech acts serve as a means of control that restricts the victim's access to external sources of support and reinforces the perpetrator's dominance in their communication. Groomers often use commands or direct instructions to ensure that the victim adheres to their directions, including cutting off communication with outside parties [11]. Directive acts are viewed as a form of coercive control that limits the victim's options, making them more susceptible to manipulation

3.2 Expressive Speech Acts

Expressive Speech Acts are used to convey the emotions, feelings, or attitudes of the perpetrator with the intention of influencing the victim's psychological state. In the context of grooming, these expressions are often insincere and function as manipulative strategies to generate empathy, sympathy, or even guilt in the victim. Perpetrators frequently present themselves as weak, lonely, or in need of attention, compelling the victim to provide emotional support. There are some examples of statements made by child groomers that can be categorized as Expressive Speech Acts:

“Saya kecewa kalau kamu nggak percaya sama saya”. (I'm disappointed when you don't trust me). The perpetrator is a teacher trusted by the student.

“Saya sedih sekali kalau kamu jarang balas pesan saya”. (I'm so sad when you rarely reply to my messages). The perpetrator is a neighbor close to the family.

“Kamu bikin saya merasa sendiri kalau kamu tidak cerita apapun”. (You make me feel alone when you don't tell me anything). The perpetrator is the victim's uncle.

“Saya capek kalau kamu terus ragu sama niat baik saya”. (I'm tired of you constantly doubting my good intentions). The perpetrator is the victim's private tutor.

These statements demonstrate how perpetrators express their emotions to induce guilt in the victim, thereby encouraging the victim to protect the perpetrator's feelings. Research indicates that this strategy can also manifest as complaints, regrets, or expressions of "hurt," which ultimately places the victim in a position of guilt if they do not respond as expected. Thus, expressive speech acts create a false emotional bond and make it easier for the perpetrator to control the victim by instilling an emotional burden. Perpetrators of sexual violence often rely on persuasive and emotional speech during the initial stages of building a relationship, including compliments and expressions of intimacy that elicit sympathy from the victim [2].

3.3 Commissive Speech Acts

Commissive Speech Acts are speech acts that bind the victim through promises, offers, or inducements made by the perpetrator. In grooming practices, these utterances are often used to create positive expectations in the victim's mind, leading them to perceive benefits or satisfaction from continuing the relationship with the perpetrator. These acts can take the form of promises of gifts, offers of protection, assurances of affection, or even the prospect of a better future. There are some examples of utterances by child groomers that can be categorized as Commissive Speech Acts:

"Kalau kamu menurut, nanti saya belikan pulsa" (If you comply, I'll buy you phone credit). The perpetrator is the victim's close neighbour.

"Saya janji rahasiamu aman sama saya" (I promise your secret is safe with me). The perpetrator is a school teacher.

"Kalau kamu ikut saya, kamu bisa jalan-jalan ke luar kota" (If you come with me, you can go on a trip out of town). The perpetrator is the victim's uncle.

"Saya kasih uang jajan lebih kalau kamu mau menuruti saya" (I'll give you more pocket money if you comply). The perpetrator is a close relative of the victim.

According to these examples, it is clear that the perpetrator makes promises or offers gifts to persuade the victim to comply with their wishes. This study's findings indicate that the primary focus of commissive acts is to create a false sense of commitment, where the victim feels "indebted" or bound by the promise. Meanwhile, the perpetrator uses this promise to strengthen the victim's emotional and psychological dependence. Thus, commissive speech acts become a manipulative strategy that traps the victim in an unbalanced relationship, where promises or enticements serve as a means of control rather than genuine intentions. Perpetrators involved in online grooming often use promises to gain trust and keep the victim connected, making it difficult for the victim to leave the grooming relationship once that hope has been established [10].

3.4 Threatening Acts

Threatening Acts are manipulative speech acts used by perpetrators to instill fear, anxiety, or threats in victims, so that they feel compelled to comply with their demands. The primary focus of these utterances is to create a stressful psychological environment, where victims believe there will be negative consequences if they refuse or resist. There are some examples of statements made by child groomers that can be categorized as Threatening Acts:

“Kalau kamu cerita ke orang lain, saya bisa bikin kamu malu”(If you tell anyone, I'll embarrass you). The perpetrator is the victim's neighbor.

“Kalau rahasia ini bocor, kamu bisa kena masalah besar di sekolah”(If this secret gets out, you'll get in big trouble at school). The perpetrator is a teacher.

“Kalau kamu nggak nurut, saya nggak akan bantu kamu lagi”(If you don't comply, I won't help you anymore). The perpetrator is a close relative of the victim.

“Jangan coba-coba bilang ke orang tuamu, nanti mereka marah sama kamu”(Don't even try to tell your parents, they'll be angry with you). The perpetrator is the victim's private tutor.

According to these utterances, it can be concluded that perpetrators tend to use direct and indirect threats to keep victims in a state of fear, leaving them feeling they have no other choice. The findings of this study indicate that threatening acts can function as an instrument of domination to maintain complete control over the victim. This type of grooming typically occurs when other manipulative strategies (such as inducements or emotional expressions) become less effective, leading the perpetrator to resort to fear-based coercion to ensure the victim's compliance. One of the most impactful types of grooming is threatening Grooming, in which the perpetrator uses threats or violence as part of the grooming process [12]. These threats are used to maintain control over the victim and prevent the victim from reporting or stopping the interaction

4 Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that the manipulative speech acts employed by child groomers can be pragmatically categorized into four primary types: directives, expressive, commissive, and threatening acts. These categories do not operate in isolation; instead, they interrelate to establish unequal power dynamics. Perpetrators utilize directives to exert control over the victim's behavior, expressive to elicit feelings of guilt or sympathy, commissive as tools for enticement and commitment, and threatening acts to instill fear, ensuring the victim remains silent and obedient. Consequently, language serves not only as a medium of communication but also as a potent instrument of psychological manipulation in the grooming process. The study's findings suggest that manipulation through language unfolds in stages, beginning with an emotional approach,

progressing to promises, advancing to direct control, and ultimately reinforcing dominance through threats. This linguistic strategy underscores the significance of understanding pragmatics in cases of child grooming, as language analysis can often reveal concealed mechanisms of manipulation. Therefore, the outcomes of this study offer valuable academic contributions to the fields of pragmatics and speech acts, while also providing practical implications for preventing sexual violence against children through enhanced critical language literacy among educators, parents, and child protection agencies. Future research may extend this pragmatic map by applying it to larger, cross-cultural corpora to examine whether similar manipulative speech act patterns emerge across different sociocultural and institutional contexts. Further studies could also integrate experimental and psycholinguistic approaches to test how specific pragmatic strategies identified in this map influence audience perception, emotional response, and decision-making, thereby strengthening its explanatory and predictive validity.

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