

A Pragmatic Study on the Identity Construction of Deceptive Telecom Discourse*

Hongya Fan

School of Foreign Languages, Shanxi University, Shanxi, China

Yanduo Dou

School of Foreign Languages, Shanxi University, Shanxi, China

Abstract—Taking identified fraud telephone recordings as the corpus, the study first analyses the lexicon and overall structure of fraud discourse from the perspective of pragmatics and then explores the identities constructed by fraudsters. It found that, in deceptive telecom discourse, address forms and technical terms are used to construct the turn, and the fraud conversation has a relatively complete structure, including a beginning, problem construction, problem solving, and a closing. In addition, the lexical choice and the overall structure of deceptive conversation help to construct the fraudster's individual identity, interpersonal identity and group identity. Individual identity includes the real identity as a fraudster and the false identity as a help seeker; interpersonal identity involves identity as a relative or superior; and group identity can be divided into institutional identity and professional identity. This study aims to enhance people's awareness of fraud and assist in identifying the fraudulent identities of scammers, thereby reducing the occurrence of telecom fraud incidents.

Index Terms—conversation analysis, identity construction, deceptive discourse

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, with the advent of the digital and information age, personal information leaks have occurred from time to time, which provides opportunities for fraudsters. Fraud acts are conducted repeatedly, and novel deceptions emerge continuously, causing countless victims to be defrauded. Therefore, deceptive telecom discourse is receiving increasing attention within the linguistic community. Fraud that is implemented using network telecommunications tools for illegitimate purposes is known as network telecommunications fraud (Koong et al., 2012). As early as the 1980s, foreign scholars in different research fields began studying deceptive discourse. For example, Subudhi and Panigrahi (2015) discussed deceptive discourse from the perspectives of communication technology and detection (communication rules and language clues). In addition, some scholars have tried to use software to detect the linguistic features and methods of fraudulent discourse (Moreau et al., 1997; Zhou et al., 2004; Hancock et al., 2005; Zhou et al., 2014). Domestic scholars have also carried out relevant research in communication, psychology, linguistics, and other relevant areas. For example, Ye and Duan (2020) analysed the fraud cases of the “pig-butcher scam” from the perspective of decision-making psychology. Further, some scholars have studied discourse patterns and speech strategies in telecommunications fraud cases (Yuan, 2019). Ye and Zhao (2022) analysed the identity construction of criminal suspects in fraud cases involving impersonating public prosecutors from the perspective of social semiotics.

Identity construction, as a new topic and research focus in pragmatics, involves various research objects. Both domestic and international applied research on identity construction has been quite extensive, encompassing various areas such as everyday conversations, institutional discourse (such as courtroom discourse and news discourse), and business discourse (Yuan, 2013). With the rapid development of communication technology and network virtual space, fraud cases occur frequently, and fraud discourse and the identity construction of fraudsters have attracted the attention of some researchers. Some studies have explored the pragmatic identity of the deceiver in the process of communication using case studies (Liu, 2020; Lv, 2021). Other studies have discussed the construction of the fraudster's false identity. For example, Sun (2016) argues that fraudsters mainly construct the identities of false experts, airline employees, and acquaintances, and has analysed the speech acts involved in such discourse. Qian (2019) believes that fraudsters mainly construct two kinds of false identities, personal identity and relational identity, in order to meet the social and psychological needs of their targets. There is still room for further research on the identity construction of fraudsters.

Conversation analysis research methods can reveal the dynamism of identity, showing how communicators construct, change, maintain, and negotiate identity in communication (Raymond & Heritage, 2006). Conversation analysis, proposed by Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson in the 1960s, is a qualitative, empirical, and inductive research method with social communication as its research object (Yu, 2022). In terms of discourse content,

* This paper is funded by the research project “A Study on the Five-in-One Identity Construction of ‘Bookworm’ Learners” granted by the State Press and Publication Administration of China.

the study of conversation analysis has involved analysis of ordinary conversation and institutional conversation, such as parent-child conversation (Wootton, 1981; Tannen, 2001; Hepburn, 2020), doctor-patient communication (Byrne & Long, 1976; Heritage & Maynard, 2006; Heritage & Clayman, 2010; Wang & Yu, 2021), teacher-student conversation (Gardner, 2013; Zhang, 2021), news interviews (Clayman, 2013; Yu, 2020), and so on. Fraudulent telephone conversation not only has the characteristics of daily conversation but also sometimes exhibits the features of institutional conversation because of the institutional identity that the fraudster attempts to construct. However, using conversation analysis methods to analyse deceptive discourse is still rare.

From the above brief overview of fraudulent discourse, conversation analysis research, and identity construction research, it is evident that, first, the conversation structure and linguistic features of fraudulent discourse still require in-depth analysis; second, the identity construction process within fraudulent discourse is yet to be further elucidated; and finally, there is still room to conduct identity construction research on fraudulent discourse using conversation analysis methods. Therefore, this paper will use the method of conversation analysis to analyse the fraudsters' discourse and explore the pragmatic identities constructed by fraudsters in the communicative context. The paper aims to reveal the true face of fraudsters as well as help to improve citizens' vigilance and discernment so that they can effectively identify the fake identities of fraudsters in specific situations and avoid losses.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Theoretical Framework

Tracy and Robles (2013) categorise research on identity and discourse into two perspectives: a cultural perspective and a rhetorical perspective. The former focuses on how pre-existing identities shape the way people talk, while the latter emphasises how discursive practices shape one's identity. Tracy contends that verbal communication is a discursive practice where speakers construct their identities through simple means such as personal references, speech acts, sound, and language selection, as well as through more complex methods like controlling interaction structures, styles, genres, and stances. Using this analytical framework in conjunction with the content of conversation analysis research, this article primarily focuses on the study of the identity construction of fraudsters' lexical choice and overall structure.

B. Research Question

The study, taking the identified fraud telephone recordings released by official anti-fraud accounts on short video platforms as the corpus, tries to analyse the featured fraud conversations with the research method of CA and then further explore the identity types constructed by fraudsters. Specifically, the following two questions will be answered:

RQ1: What are the characteristics of fraud discourse in terms of lexical choice and overall structure?

RQ2: What identity do these features help to construct for the fraudsters?

C. Corpus Collection and Analysis

The corpus of this study includes 20 recordings, mainly sourced from the identified fraud recordings shared by official anti-fraud accounts on a self-media platform. After being collected, the raw recordings were transcribed following the rules of Jefferson (1984). Conversation analysis methods were combined with the rhetorical perspective of identity construction theory, first examining the lexical choice and overall structure of fraudulent discourse and then uncovering the process and types of fraudsters' identity construction.

III. CONVERSATION ANALYSIS OF DECEPTIVE DISCOURSE

The fundamental structure of conversation is an essential aspect of conversation analysis research (Yu, 2022). Vocabulary serves as the smallest building block of discourse, reflecting specific language usage phenomena, while the overall structure reveals the macro-level organisation of verbal communication. Therefore, this section primarily consists of a systematic analysis of fraudulent discourse from the perspectives of lexical choice and overall structure.

A. Lexical Choice

Because fraud is always pre-organised and carried out on a large scale, fraud conversation shows some general patterns at the level of verbal communication. Fraud conversation, just like other types of conversation, has a sequence structure composed of turns, and turns are generally composed of three turn construction units (TCUs): lexical TCUs, phrasal TCUs, and sentential TCUs (Fan & Ren, 2019). Lexical choice is one of the means by which communicators adapt to specific structures, and it also demonstrates the institutional features of verbal responses (Yu, 2010). In a fraud conversation, the fraudsters' choice of lexical building blocks mainly involves the use of address terms and technical terms.

(a). Address Forms

Address form is an indispensable part of verbal communication, and without it, it is often difficult to start a conversation. Therefore, it can be said that address forms are the first step in initiating communication. In interpersonal communication, commonly used address forms include pronoun titles, kinship titles, social titles, relational titles,

occupational titles, respectful titles, family name titles, affectionate titles, and playful titles (Cui, 1996). In specific communication contexts, the use of these forms of address is often driven or controlled by interpersonal interaction principles or preference principles within the personal reference system, resulting in certain regular characteristics. In a fraud conversation, the fraudster tends to choose the address form according to their communicative aims.

Example1

- 01 Victim: wei::
Hello?
- 02 Fraudster: >qingwen ninshi Xu Lei benren ma? nihao<=
Excuse me, are you Xu Lei? Hello.
- 03 Victim: =a
Yeah.
- 04 Fraudster: nihaoxu nihao xuxiansheng↑tingdedaoma?
Hello, Xu. Hello, Mr. Xu. Can you hear me?
- 05 Victim: a nihao↑
Yes. Hello.

This dialogue appears at the beginning of the fraud conversation. On the one hand, the fraudster uses the proper name “Xu Lei” (02 turn) to address the victim, showing knowledge about the addressee’s personal information, such as their name and phone number. The fraudster’s choice of family name aims to show knowledge possession. On the other hand, the fraudster also uses address forms such as “nin” (an honorific title of “you”) in the 02 turn and “Xu xiansheng” (“Mr. Xu”) in the 04 turn. Both the address forms of “nin” (one of the pronoun titles) and “xiansheng” (one of the social titles, also known as polite titles) are relatively formal and express a respectful attitude.

(b). *Technical Terms*

Scammers sometimes prefer to construct institutionalised conversational contexts, where institutionalised conversations are driven by specific tasks. Within the framework of these tasks, scammers, during their own speaking turns, use professional terminology to construct conversational turns in order to demonstrate their mastery of specialised knowledge in the respective field, thus constructing their status in terms of “knowledge by acquaintance” (Li & Li, 2022).

Example2

- 04 Fraudster: shideng()qinbenrenma?
Are you Dengqin?
- 05 Victim: shide
Yes.
- 06 Fraudster: nihao zhelishi liupanshuishi gong’anju↑xingzhengke
Hello. This is the criminal investigation department of the Public Security Bureau in LiuPanShui City.
- 07 woshi jingyuan LiLong(.)
I’m LiLong, a police constable.
- 08 >woshigonganju< shoudao yifen youguannide <xiechagongwu>
Our Municipal Public Security Bureau received an official document.
- 09 xuyao geini benren heshi yixie qingkuang.
We need to check something with you.
- 10 qingnindaizheshenfenzhengdaoshigonganju yitang
Please take your ID card to the Municipal Public Security Bureau.

In this conversation, the fraudster uses professional law enforcement terms numerous times, such as “xingzheng” in the 06 turn, which means “criminal investigation”, and “xiecha gongwen” in the 08 turn, which refers to an official document requesting help with the investigation of public affairs. From the perspective of epistemology in conversation analysis, first, in turn 08, the speaker performs a speech act of information announcement, presuming that the listener does not know the information, indicating a high level of the speaker’s own knowledge access. Second, the scammer, by using the aforementioned professional terminology, demonstrates deep, specific, and comprehensive knowledge of the subject. These two aspects collectively reflect the asymmetry of knowledge between the fraudster and the victim, constituting a communicative driving force for the further development of the fraud.

B. *Overall Structure*

The study of the overall structure of conversation examines the conversation process as a whole and studies how it starts, progresses, and ends (Wang, 2006). Public security authorities, when investigating cases of telecommunications network fraud, have discovered that criminal groups are highly organised, have clearly defined roles, and operate in a “corporate” manner (Ye & Zhao, 2022). Telecommunications network fraud groups use carefully prepared scripts to carry out widespread fraudulent activities targeting the general public. The script is actually a type of relatively structure-fixed discourse. Through the analysis of the collected fraud conversations, we conclude that the overall structure of fraud conversations is mainly divided into the beginning stage, the problem construction stage, the problem-solving stage, and the closing stage.

(a). Beginning

Example 3

- 01 Victim: wei::?
Hello.
- 02 Fraudster: >wei()nihao<=
Hello.
- 03 Victim: =weinihao=
Hello.
- 04 Fraudster: shideng(qinbenrenma?
Are you Dengqin?
- 05 Victim: shide
Yes.
- 06 Fraudster: nihao zhelishi liupanshuishi gong'anju↑xingzhengke
Hello. This is the criminal investigation department of the Public Security Bureau in LiuPanShui City.
- 07
woshi jingyuan LiLong(.)
I'm LiLong, a police constable.

The most classical research model proposed by Schegloff includes four sequence structures for the beginning of a telephone conversation: the summons/response sequence, the identification sequence, the greeting sequence, and the initial inquiry sequence. At the beginning of a deceptive conversation, the greeting sequence (turns 01-03) and the identification sequence (turns 04 and 07) are generally included. The greeting in turn 01 is not only the second part of summons-answer sequence but also the first part of greeting sequence. After greeting, the fraudster takes the initiative to identify the victim and provide a pseudo identity, falsifying a circumstance for subsequent fraud.

(b). Problem Construction

Example 4

- 08 Fraudster: >woshigonganju< shoudao yifen yoguannide <xiechagongwu>
Our Municipal Public Security Bureau received an official document.
- 09
xuyao geini benren heshi yixie qingkuang.
We need to check something with you.

In example 3, in turns 01-07, the caller and the recipient exchange greetings and confirm their identities. However, starting from turn 08 in example 4, the conversation transitions to the next sequence, the problem construction sequence. At this stage, the scammer initiates the problem and then prompts the victim to understand the issue. The problems constructed by the fraudster vary across the conversations analysed from investigation documents about the victim, to damage to the victim's express delivery, to the need to update bank account details, and so on.

(c). Problem Solving

Example 5

- 10 Fraudster: qingnin daizhe shenfenzheng dao shigonganju yitang
Please take your ID card to the Municipal Public Security Bureau.

After explaining the issue, scammers typically take the initiative to suggest or induce the victim to ask for relevant solutions, which signals the start of the problem-solving stage. For example, the fraudsters will propose solutions in the form of suggestions or requests, such as asking the victim to go to the Public Security Bureau in example 5 and asking them to download unknown applications.

(d). Closing

The fraud calls are often closed in two ways after the victim identifies the attempted fraud. The fraudster may choose to hang up the phone, which may happen at any stage of the conversation. Alternatively, they may choose to be honest with the victim, explaining that they were forced to defraud, thus closing the deceptive conversation and starting a real conversation.

IV. IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF DECEPTIVE DISCOURSE

Brewer and Gardner (1986) argue that it is necessary to distinguish between three levels of identity representation: individual representation, interpersonal representation, and group representation. Drawing on the trichotomy of identity representation theory, this study further explores how lexicon and overall structure construct the specific identities of fraudsters from the individual, interpersonal, and group perspectives.

A. Individual Identity

Individual identity refers to the unique concept of self-identity with distinguishing characteristics at the individual level (Chen, 2014). Individual identities constructed by fraudsters can be divided into real individual identities and fake individual identities.

(a). *Real Identity as a Fraudster*

Example 6

- 20 Fraudster: yaobuyao yiqi laizuo(.)zhebian hen querende=
Do you want to join us? They are shorthanded.
- 21 Victim: =que shenme ren?
What?
- 22 Fraudster: yaobuyao yiqilai zuo zhege hangye a?
Do you want to do this together with me?
- 23 Gongzi hengaode
It's very well paid.

After the fraudster is identified, the fraudster uses a closed question (turn 20), which is the first of an adjacent pair of question-answers. The victim does not directly answer yes or no but instead responds with an open question (turn 21), a dispreference organisation, to guide the fraudster to provide more information, taking control of the turn. In the follow-up answer, the fraudster uses “zhegehangye” (“this industry”) to indicate the industry of committing fraud and “gongzigao” (“well-paid”) to show that he or she knows the fraud industry well and is one of its participants. The norms of epistemic primacy dictate that speakers with higher authority and more detailed knowledge have the right to make assertions and evaluations in that domain (Li & Li, 2022). Therefore, the fraudster holds a high epistemic status (K+) in terms of the relevant activity, which constructed his real identity as a fraudster. In turns 20 and 22, the fraudster conducts the act of invitation twice to recruit members to the fraudulent organisation, which also constructs his identity as a fraudster.

(b). *Fake Identity as a Help Seeker*

Example 7

- 01 Fraudster: nihao↑nide kuaidi zaipeisongtuzhong beiwo nongdiule
Hello, I lost your express delivery on the way.
- 02 wozhebian(.)gerengeinisanbeipeifu=
I will personally give you three times as much the value of the lost item as compensation.
- 03 =qingni buyao he shangjia shuo haoma?
Please don't tell the boss, okay?
- 04 Victim: a::nage kuaidi ya?
Ah, which one?
- 05 Fraudster: Dingdanweihao2387()de nage
The order number ends with 2837.
- 06 buxiaoxin beiwo nongdiule
I lost it by accident.
- 07 qiuni qian::wanbie heshangjiashuo(.)yebie tousu keyima
Please don't tell the boss or complain on the platform, okay?

In the first two turns, the fraudster explains the problem and proposes a way to deal with it. Then, in turn 03, the fraudster conducts a speech act of requesting in a very humble tone, asking the recipient not to tell the merchant or make a complaint. With this series of verbal acts of committing, offering compensation, and pleading, the fraudster constructs a lowly identity in an attempt to gain the sympathy of the recipient and induce the recipient to be deceived. Directives, such as demands or requests, often occur at the beginning and middle of a fraud conversation.

B. *Interpersonal Identity*

Interpersonal identity is constructed in verbal interactions between people (Chen, 2014). Interpersonal identities constructed in deceptive discourse include relatives and superiors, which are mainly constructed by address forms.

(a). *Identity as Relatives*

Example 8

- 01 Victim: >wei↑ma::<
Hello, mom.
- 02 Fraudster: haizi niba chushile
Child, something happened to your dad.
- 03 tuishuai guzhele
He broke his leg.

In this case, the victim identifies the other party according to their telephone number and calls the other party “mother”. The fraudster also uses the term “child”, which is not only an anti-preemptive use of deixis with the function of pragmatic empathy but is also a general term, reducing the risk of exposure so that she successfully constructs her identity as the mother of the victim. The construct of pseudo interpersonal identity narrows the distance between the two sides of communication and lays the foundation for successful deception.

(b). Identity as Superior

Example 9

- 01 Fraudster: mingzao:: niguolaiyixiawobangongshi
Come to my office in the morning.
- 02 Victim: nishi(.)nishinawei?=
You're...Who are you?
- 03 Fraudster: =dou jiaoni dao bangongshi la::
I've called you to come to my office.
- 07 >neng hanni laibangongshide< lingdao:: haineng youshei a?
Which other leader can call you to the office?

The fraudster uses the directive speech act at the beginning of the conversation and directly addresses the recipient as “ni” (“you”), which constructs an acquainted and unequal relationship between them and establishes the fraudster’s authoritative identity. He calls himself “lingdao” (“leader”) in the 07 turn to construct his interpersonal identity as a superior so that he can use his authority to conduct fraud, reflecting his adaptability to the communicative aim.

C. Group Identity

Group identity reflects the institutional identity and professional identity of communicators (Chen, 2014). In deceptive discourse, fraudsters also construct these two kinds of identities.

(a). Institutional Identity

Example 10

- 05 Victim: a nihao↑
Ah, hello.
- 06 Fraudster: nihao xuxiansheng(.)
Hello, Mr. Xu.
- 07 >woshi taobao↑shangchengde gongzuorenyuan<=
I am a staff member of Taobao Mall.
- 08 feichang baopian daraodaonin↑le
I’m sorry to bother you.

The fraudster first uses the formal address terms “xiansheng” (“Mr.”) and “ning” (an honorific title of “you”) to address the addressee, and then introduces himself to show his identity as a staff member. These two address forms are usually used to show respect. Finally, the fraudster uses the speech act of apologising to construct his institutional identity as a polite staff member. In this conversation, the fraudster tends to choose formal forms of address within their speech turns, attempting to reflect a standardised, organised institutional identity.

(b). Professional Identity

Example 11

- 04 Fraudster: shideng(qinbenrenma?
Are you Dengqin?
- 05 Victim: shide
Yes.
- 06 Fraudster: nihao zhelishi liupanshuishi gong’anju↑xingzhengke
Hello. This is the criminal investigation department of the Public Security Bureau in LiuPanShui City.
- 08 >woshigonganju< shoudao yifen yoguannide <xiechagongwu>
Our Municipal Public Security Bureau received an official document.
- 09 xuyao geini benren heshi yixie qingkuang.
We need to check something with you.
- 10 qingnindaizheshenfenzhengdaoshigonganjuyitang
Please take your ID card to the Municipal Public Security Bureau.

The fraudster first uses the restrictive question “shi Dengqin benren ma” (“Are you Dengqin?”) in the identification part (turn 04), showing that he has access to the victim’s personal information, and holds a high epistemic status, which helps to construct the identity of authoritative investigator. Second, he uses professional vocabulary to construct his turns (turns 06-10), including “xingzheng”, “xiechagongwen”, “heshi”, and so on. The terminology of investigation constructs his identity as an investigator. These strategies reflect his adaptability to institutional conversation and together construct his professional identity as a police officer.

V. CONCLUSION

Based on the data of telecommunications deceptive discourse, this study analysed lexical choice and overall structure using conversation analysis and explored what kind of fraudster identity is constructed by these conversational features. Due to the premeditation and organisation of fraud discourse, lexical choice and overall structure have certain

characteristics and paradigms: address forms and technical terms are often used to construct the turn, and the conversation has a relatively complete structure of four parts, always including a beginning, problem construction, problem solving, and a closing. The study found that these features of deceptive conversation help to construct the fraudsters' individual identity (as fraudsters or help seekers), interpersonal identity (as relatives or superiors), and group identity (as institutional or professional). Fraudsters, based on predetermined fraudulent scenarios and different interlocutors, employing various forms of address or specialised terminology and following specific conversational structures, construct distinct individual identities, interpersonal identities, and group identities. They adapt to and exploit the interlocutors' communicative psychology and actual needs within these identity relationships, aiming to carry out subtle psychological manipulation on the recipients and thereby achieve their fraudulent communication objectives.

Due to the limited size of the corpus, the analysis of lexical or structural fraud discourse in this study is somewhat subjective, and the summary of identity types is not comprehensive. More corpora can be collected in the future to fully analyse the characteristics of deceptive discourse and fully explore the pragmatic identity constructed by it. In addition, this paper is primarily a qualitative analysis, and the method is relatively simple, which can be improved by using quantitative analysis in the future.

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Hongya Fan was born in Shanxi, China in 1974. She received her PH.D Degree from Nankai University, China in 2012.

She is currently an associate professor in the School of Foreign Languages, Shanxi University, Taiyuan, China. Her research interests include pragmatics and conversation analysis.

Dr. Fan is a member of the Chinese Association of Foreign Language Teachers.

Yanduo Dou was born in Shanxi, China in 1998. She is currently a master student in the School of Foreign Languages, Shanxi University, Taiyuan, China. Her research interests are pragmatics and conversation analysis.