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## **“*cause ur special*”: Understanding Trust and Complimenting Behaviour in Online Grooming Discourse**

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### **Abstract**

Online Grooming is the process whereby an adult gains the trust of a minor in order to exploit him/her, through the use of cyber-technology. Despite a global increase in online sexual exploitation, research into online grooming is scant, especially from a linguistic perspective. Our study examines online groomers' attempts at gaining their targets' trust through compliments. This focus is justified by the fact that, although praise is known to be used regularly in online and offline grooming, its linguistic realisation via the speech act of complimenting has not been analysed to date. We analyse the topics, syntactic realisation patterns and discourse functions of a corpus of 1268 compliments extracted from 68 online grooming interactions. The results point to (1) a prevalence of compliments about physical appearance, of both a sexual and a non-sexual orientation, which increases alongside speed of grooming; (2) high syntactic formulaicity levels regardless of speed of grooming; and (3) use of compliments to frame and support online grooming processes that seek to isolate the targets, provide the online groomers' with sexual gratification and enable them to gauge the targets' compliance levels. Overall, the results both provide new insights into the speech act of complimenting from a hitherto unexamined communicative context and contribute to understanding the communicative process of online grooming.

**Key words:** compliments, online grooming, trust, praise.

### **1. Introduction**

Online Grooming (OG) is broadly understood as the process whereby an adult develops a sexually abusive relationship with a minor through the use of cyber-technology, such as mobile telephones, internet games and chat rooms. The process is characterised by deviance as it relies on groomers' ability to gain the trust of minors in order to exploit them sexually (Olson et al 2007). The interactions that groomers have with minors online already provide them (the groomers) with sexual

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gratification. This is why, regardless of whether it is followed by offline sexual abuse, OG constitutes a form of child sexual exploitation and is classified as a specific type of internet offence (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) 2013). Despite the global increase in online child sexual exploitation, research into OG is comparatively scant, especially in terms of the language used by groomers to lure children. This represents a worrying gap in knowledge given calls from researchers working on developing OG detection software to enhance our understanding of the communicative strategies used in OG (see e.g. Gupta et al., 2009; Kontostathis et al., 2009). This study takes up that call. It examines online groomers' attempts at gaining their targets' trust through compliments. This focus is justified by the fact that, although praise is known to be used regularly in online and offline grooming (see, e.g. O'Connell, 2003; Black et al., 2015; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016;), its linguistic realisation via compliments has not been analysed to date.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the extant literature on OG, with a focus on groomers' discourse geared towards trust development and the role of praise therein. Section 3 reviews relevant work on compliments. Section 4 describes the study's methodology and, in Section 5, its results are reported and discussed vis-à-vis its research questions. In the concluding section – Section 6 – the study results are positioned in the context of the need for discourse analytic approaches to understanding, and helping to prevent, OG.

## **2. Online grooming discourse**

In the most comprehensive theoretical model of *offline* grooming to date, based on an extensive review of multi-discipline literature, Olson et al (2007) characterise grooming as a process of communicative deviance, the intended outcome of which is the sexual abuse of a minor by an adult. Olson et al (2007) also identify trust development, which they label “deceptive trust development” given its mendaciousness, as the core phase within this process.

The importance for online groomers of being able to establish and maintain high levels of trust conducive to sexual abuse has also been acknowledged (Davidson et al., 2011; McAlinden, 2012; Webster et al., 2014). O'Connell (2003) frames such trust development in terms of “relationship forming,” whereby online groomers seek to create the illusion of being the child's best friend. Similarly, Williams et al (2013) state the importance of “rapport-building” in OG, by which they mean online groomers' attempts at developing a friendship with a child. Although these studies coincide in characterising OG as being communicatively patterned, including regarding how trust is developed, they do not examine those patterns linguistically.

To our knowledge, there are only two studies to date that have examined OG from a linguistic perspective. In one of them, Black et al (2015) combined computational linguistics (specifically, Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC)) and content analysis to examine OG interactions published on the *Perverved Justice* website ([www.pjfi.org](http://www.pjfi.org); see Section 4 for details). The LIWC analysis

identified five “language types” in the groomers’ discourse, namely: friendship, relationship, risk assessment, exclusivity, and sexual-contact terms. The content analysis, for its part, identified seven “manipulation techniques” used by online groomers: flattery, inquiring about the target’s parents’ schedule, asking the target whether he/she was an undercover police officer or probing about whether the chat log was a sting, remarking the relationship was inappropriate to gauge the target’s reaction, mentioning the dangers of communicating with others on the Internet, expressing love and trust, trying to find out about the target’s past sexual experience, and assessing the possibility of travel to meet the target (Black et al., 2015: 148-9). By correlating the findings of the content and the LIWC analysis the study concluded that, although online and offline grooming make use of the same “strategies”, they differ regarding the order of timing of these strategies, which “calls for the development of a revised model for grooming in online environments.” (2015: 140). Importantly for our work, the study also concluded that the friendship and relationship building frequently included flattery, often as “an opening line to increase the likelihood that the target would respond positively.” (2015:147). No analysis of the linguistic realisations of flattery (or the other manipulation techniques identified through the content analysis) was conducted.

In the second study, Lorenzo-Dus et al (2016) combined language-based content analysis (see Herring, 2004), Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962) and relational-work (Locher and Watts, 2005) to examine a corpus of OG interactions also from the *Perverved Justice* website. Their analysis led to the formulation of a model of OG Discourse, which is reproduced in Figure 1.

[Please insert Figure 1 here]

Figure 1: A Model of OG Discourse (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016:44)

In the OG Discourse model, *access* entails groomers making initial online contact with potential victims and therefore marks, as in offline contexts, the onset of grooming. *Approach* refers to groomers’ use of verbal lead-ins online as requests to meet with the child offline for sexual purposes. The *entrapment* phase is the most complex. It entails a series of partly overlapping processes and strategies, the ultimate aim of which is to lure victims into different forms of sexual behaviour, including soliciting and / or sharing indecent images of children and / or groomers. Four porous processes are identified within the entrapment phase: *deceptive trust development*, *sexual gratification*, *isolation*, and *compliance testing*.

Five strategies are included within the *deceptive trust development* process: praise, sociability, exchange of personal information, activities, and relationships. Praise is primarily realised via compliments; sociability via small talk; and the remaining three strategies through a varied range of speech act and politeness strategies. *Isolation* enables groomers to establish and develop the secrecy of their intended relationship with the child by creating physical and emotional separation from other

individuals who may be close to him / her, typically family and friends. *Sexual gratification* entails groomers' use of desensitisation (i.e., use of sexually explicit / implicit language) and reframing (i.e., presenting sexual activity with them as being beneficial to the child) strategies in order to prepare the child to accept not only offline but also online sexual activity – hence the choice of a term that denotes the occurrence of digitally-mediated sexual exploitation. Finally, *compliance testing* is a process used by online groomers to gauge – via the use of strategic withdrawal, role reversal, and reverse psychology strategies – the extent to which a child may agree to engage in the sexual activities proposed to him / her.

### 3. Complimenting Behaviour

As discussed, praise is one of the strategies by which online groomers seek to develop their victims' trust in them. In order to better understand how they do so, one can examine how praise is linguistically realised by drawing upon an extensive body of research into the speech act of complimenting (for comprehensive reviews see Golato, 2005; Jucker, 2009; Chen, 2010).

Several definitions of compliments have been proposed to date (see e.g. Manes and Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson, 1983; Holmes, 1986), from which Holmes' (1988:446) succinctly captures the essence of the phenomenon that we are concerned with in this article:

A compliment is a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some “good” (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer.

A number of key components in Holmes' definition are worth discussing. Firstly, the “good” being positively evaluated in the compliment. As Jucker (2009:1627) observes, much of the extant research into compliments has been devoted to answering the questions of “What do speakers compliment on?” and “Are there entities or ‘goods’ that are more often complimented on than others?” These questions are important because compliments are, as famously stated by Manes (1983), a “mirror of cultural values” and “one means whereby an individual or, more importantly, society as a whole can encourage, through such reinforcement, certain desired behaviors.” (1983: 97). The picture that cumulatively emerges from research into compliment topics in English (and other languages) points to “appearance”, “ability / performance / skills”, “possessions” and “personality” being the main goods about which compliments are paid. The order of frequency of these topics varies according to non-linguistic variables such as the gender, age, power status of the complimenter vis-à-vis the complimentee, as well as the setting in which the compliment is being paid (e.g. goal oriented or unstructured (Rees-Miller, 2011); online or offline (Maíz-Arévalo and García-Gómez, 2013)). Within American English, for example, appearance has been consistently reported as the main object of

complimenting, even if the actual frequencies of use vary across studies (see Manes, 1983; Yu, 2005; Placencia and Lower, 2013).

Given the nature of grooming, one might expect appearance compliments to predominate in an OG setting, especially compliments on sexual(ised) physical features, such as breast size or having a “sexy” voice. In terms of non-linguistic variables, compliment topics may also be expected to vary according to speed of grooming. As CEOP warns, although “slow-time” OG still occurs, “the dynamics of this threat have changed considerably over the last few years. Today the period of time between initial engagement with a child and an offending outcome is often extremely short.” (CEOP, 2013:10).<sup>2</sup> This is compounded by the fact that online groomers are known to target multiple children at once, pursuing those who they perceive to be the most compliant to their ongoing solicitations (Davidson and Martellozzo, 2013). Thus, for instance, if an online groomer’s main goal is to obtain sexual gratification quickly, he may decide to focus on sexual topics when praising his victims, rather than expending any time / communicative effort on building a romantic relationship by, for example, complimenting them on aspects of their personality.<sup>3</sup> Given the lack of empirical evidence regarding the potential effect of this non-linguistic variable on OG communication generally, and on OG compliment topic specifically, the first research question in our study is: Do compliment topics vary according to OG speed?

Secondly, Holmes’ (1988) definition of a compliment refers to it requiring credit being attributed explicitly or implicitly to the complimentee. This points to a further, long-standing line of enquiry into the speech act of complimenting, namely the syntactic realisation patterns via which credit is attributed. The origins of this line of enquiry can be traced back to Manes and Wolfson’s (1981) study of compliments paid by American men and women of different social and educational backgrounds. One conclusion of that study was the “almost total lack of originality” of compliments: 80% of the 686 compliments that they collected and analysed fell into the top three of the nine syntactic patterns listed in Table 1.

[Please insert Table 1 here]

Table 1: Main syntactic formulae in compliments, and illustrative examples (source: Manes and Wolfson, 1981: 120-121).

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<sup>2</sup> CEOP does not specify what the actual duration of slow-time OG is. To our knowledge, no academic study to date has done so either.

<sup>3</sup> As the overwhelming majority of online groomers in the *Perverved Justice* website, and certainly all whose discourse is examined in this article, are males, we use masculine pronouns to refer to them throughout. For their part, OG victims are predominantly female, hence we use feminine pronouns to refer to them in the article.

Pattern (1), which accounted for over half of the compliments in Manes and Wolfson's corpus, depends on an adjective to carry the positive semantic load of the speech act. In their study, two-thirds of all adjectival compliments within this pattern made use of only five adjectives: "nice", "good", "beautiful", "pretty" and "great". As for the non-adjectival compliments (patterns (2) and (3)), although these depend on a wider range of semantically positive verbs (such as "like", "love", "enjoy" and "admire"), "like" and "love" accounted for 86% of all these compliments in their work.

Recent work into the syntactic realisation of compliments in American English (Yu, 2005; Placencia and Lower, 2013) has further confirmed their high formulaicity.<sup>4</sup> In the case of Placencia and Lower (2013), compliments from a digital context – Facebook – were examined. As in Manes and Wolfson's (1981) study, patterns (1) and (2) emerged as the two most frequent realisations in Placencia and Lower's (2013) work. Slight variations were however identified regarding pattern (8), which was noticeably more frequent in their corpus (12%) than in Manes and Wolfson's (1.6%). Placencia and Lower (2013: 642) interpreted this finding as being "possibly linked to the FB [FaceBook] online environment and its informality."

Moreover, Herbert (1991) classified a corpus of American English compliments according to their "personal focus" into: "1<sup>st</sup> person" (32.8%), "2<sup>nd</sup> person" (29%) and "3<sup>rd</sup> person (impersonal)" (38%) (pro)noun compliments. His findings contrast with the frequencies of use found in Manes and Wolfson's (1981) study, also on American English compliments, where 2<sup>nd</sup> person (63.6%, of which 53.6% came from pattern (1)) were much more frequent than both 1<sup>st</sup> person (16.1%) and 3<sup>rd</sup> person (17.5%, of which 14.9% came from pattern (3)) ones.<sup>5</sup>

The above studies were collected via a "field" method, that is, through researchers' "observation of naturally occurring data" (Jucker, 2009: 1615).<sup>6</sup> The syntactic formulaicity of compliments has been tentatively confirmed in studies that make use of other methods. For instance, Jucker et al (2008) compared the syntactic patterns in Manes and Wolfson's (1981) study with all the compliments (n=343) that could be extracted from a general British English language use corpus, the British National Corpus, through a combination of automatic and manual formulation, identification and classification of compliment search strings. The same nine syntactic patterns were found to account for all the compliments in both studies. At 76.4% of the total number of compliments, pattern (1) was much more frequent in Jucker et al's (2008) study than in Manes and Wolfson's. For their part, patterns (2) and (3), accounting for 3.2% each, were much less frequent in Jucker et al's work

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<sup>4</sup> This is also the case in other varieties of English. For example, Holmes' (1988; 1995) research into compliments in New Zealand English found four syntactic patterns (including patterns (1) - (3)) to account for 78% of all the compliments examined, and for the same limited lexis identified in Manes and Wolfson (1981) to predominate.

<sup>5</sup> Manes and Wolfson (1981) did not use the terms "1<sup>st</sup> person", "2<sup>nd</sup> person" and "3<sup>rd</sup> person" compliments. However, the patterns they used fit the labels in Herbert's (1991) work: 1<sup>st</sup> person: pattern (2); 2<sup>nd</sup> person: patterns (1), (4), (5), (6) and (7), and 3<sup>rd</sup> person: patterns (3), (8) and (9).

<sup>6</sup> Four approaches can be differentiated within the field method: "notebook, philological, conversation analytical and corpus method." The studies reported in this section up to this point used the notebook method in which the researcher "takes notes of compliments that he or she encounters in his or her daily life." (Jucker, 2009: 1616).

(2008) than in Manes and Wolfson's (1981) study where they accounted for 16.1% and 14.9% respectively of the total.

Upon reviewing the literature on compliment formulae from a methodological perspective, Jucker (2009) acknowledged that the method used in Jucker et al (2008: 1625) "successfully retrieved a large number of compliments from the British National Corpus, but it does not allow the identification of deviant realization patterns and even the frequency results are not entirely convincing". Coupled to the inconclusiveness of findings of other studies regarding the syntactic realisation patterns of compliments (Yuan, 2001), this led Jucker et al (2008:1625) to state the need for further work "to assess Manes and Wolfson's (1981) claim about the lack of originality of compliments in American English." Our study contributes to this call through its second research question: What syntactic patterns are most / least frequently used in OG compliments, and can they be related to their functions within the OG process?

The second part of the question is prompted by the link established in the literature between compliment formulaicity and functionality. In their pioneer work, Manes and Wolfson (1981: 131) stated that the formulaic nature of compliments was also "highly functional" – different compliment syntactic patterns, framed within discourse units that include other speech acts, can fulfil different functions. Although the multifunctionality of compliments has been reported in the literature (see e.g. Jaworski, 1995; Golato, 2005), the related issue of their truth value, or sincerity, has received the least attention in the Pragmatics literature to date, despite being a crucial aspect in understanding this speech act (see Jucker, 2009).

In one of the first *discourse analytic* studies of compliments, Jaworski (1995) developed the notion of "procedural" (as opposed to "relational") solidarity to account for the presence of "manipulative or instrumental" compliments in a corpus of Polish compliments. Instrumental compliments were found to be used when compliment givers sought to "elicit desired information ... or to reinforce desired behaviour, rather than as genuine positive evaluation" (1995:90). Importantly, Jaworski's (1995) study showed that both procedural and relational solidarity could be linguistically realised via the same complimenting formulae and in relation to the same compliment topics.

In seeking to understand the functions of compliments in OG, one can productively build on Jaworski's (1995) work. Some online groomers may believe what they say in their compliments to be true, and use them as "social lubricants" (Wolfson, 1983:8) to establish 'genuine' relational solidarity with their targets, despite the legally and morally condemnable nature of their behaviour. Other online groomers, however, may not find particular attributes of their target genuinely worthy of praise but may still compliment her in order to advance various procedural solidarity goals: to desensitise the target, to isolate her and so forth. And yet other online groomers may both find the target's attributes genuinely worthy of praise but use the compliments to advance procedural goals.

Online groomers' compliment choices, both in terms of topic and syntactic formula, may be consequently driven by their need to generate "preferential reactions" (Walther, 2010) from their



target, i.e., accepting a sexual relationship with them. Praising their targets on a range of attributes may not only signal that the groomers approve of them but it may also make verbally explicit areas of groomer-victim commonality (e.g. a shared appreciation of attractive photo posing). The target, as a result, may be increasingly more willing to reciprocate self-disclosure across a range of personal domains, including sexuality. Moreover, some procedural solidarity goals underlying online groomers' use of compliments may be self- (groomer) rather than other- (victim) orientated: paying compliments on explicitly sex-oriented topics, especially if focusing on the groomer's feelings about that topic, is known to provide online groomers with feelings of sexual gratification (Lorenzo-Dus et al, 2016). Although it is not possible to ascertain the sincerity of OG compliments using only textual analysis methods, by examining their multifunctionality one can advance understanding of OG as a networked communicative process.

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Data**

The corpus for this study consists of all the compliments (n= 1,269) identified in 68 OG chat logs from *Perverted Justice.com*. Each chat log corresponded to a different online groomer and all the online groomers were male with a mean age of 37 years (range 22 to 63).

The *Perverted Justice.com* website is a project of Perverted Justice Foundation Inc. (henceforth PJJF), a non-profit foundation based in the United States that specialises in fighting online groomers. PJJF has a number of volunteers, called contributors, who pose as children online and receive training on how to interact with potential groomers online. Contributors build profiles on social networking sites and/or enter chat rooms on a regular basis. According to the PJJF rules of engagement, contributors then wait to be contacted by an adult, at which point they begin a conversation. If the conversation turns sexual, they collaborate with law enforcement to try to secure the arrest and eventual conviction of the online groomer. If a conviction is secured, PJJF makes available the relevant chat log on its website, along with the screen name, real name, age, photograph (if available), email address, and conviction notes of the groomer. Given the difficulty of accessing large datasets of actual children interacting with groomers online, the PJJF database offers a valuable resource for studies into OG that, like ours, focus on groomers' discourse.

### **4.2 Procedure**

In order to collect and analyse our compliments corpus we followed these steps:

- 1) We selected chat logs from the PJF website that met two criteria: the contributor was active at the point of data collection (November 2015) and had a minimum of ten chat logs in their PJF archive. From the consequent list of contributors we randomly selected seven. The number of chat logs available from these selected contributors ranged from 15 to 30. Ten chat logs from each of our seven contributors with different online groomers were randomly selected, totalling 70 chat logs (approx. 150,000 words).
- 2) As PJF chat logs are time-stamped, we noted the duration of each of the 70 chat logs and the number of different log-ins (i.e., discrete, time-bound interactions) within each. We then classified the chat logs into three speed-of-grooming groups: fast (less than four hours between first and last post in chat log), average (between five and eleven hours between first and last post in chat log) and slow (more than twelve hours between first and last post in chat log).<sup>7</sup>
- 3) We manually identified all the compliments in the 70 chat logs, across the three speed-of-grooming profiles (total number of compliments = 1,269) Two chat logs in the fast group did not contain compliments and were thus removed from the corpus for the purposes of this study.
- 4) Using existing taxonomies of compliment topics and syntactic patterns (see Section 3), we coded a randomly selected sample (c.10%) of compliments from each of the three speed-of-grooming groups (please see Table 2): 15 compliments from the fast group, 50 from the average group and 60 from the slow group.
- 5) We modified the taxonomies slightly to account for the features identified in 4). As regards compliment topics, we further divided the “appearance”, “personality”, “performance” and “skills” categories into sexually and non-sexually oriented. As for syntactic patterns, we included emoticons in pattern 10 and added a catchall category (pattern (11) that we labelled ‘Other’).<sup>8</sup>
- 6) The corpus was coded by the authors of this study and two trained researchers. Inter-coder reliability was achieved by resolving each coding difference individually through inter-coder discussion.<sup>9</sup>

### 4.3 Framework

Our study adopts a Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) approach (Herring, 2004, 2013; Herring and Androutsopoulos, 2015). CMDA builds on three theoretical assumptions of “linguistic discourse analysis, broadly construed”, namely that discourse “exhibits recurrent patterns”, that it “involves speaker choices” and – specifically regarding online communication – that “computer-mediated discourse may be, but it is not inevitably shaped by the technological features of computer-

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<sup>7</sup> See Lorenzo-Dus and Izura (2016) for an overview of the communicative features of these three speed-of-grooming profiles.

<sup>8</sup> The resulting coding framework is provided in the Appendix, which also contains illustrative examples from the corpus.

<sup>9</sup> See Herring (2004) on the suitability of this inter-rater reliability method in Corpus-Mediated Discourse Analysis.

mediated communication systems” (Herring, 2004: 341). In terms of the specific CMDA language domains<sup>10</sup> selected for analysis, we focused on meaning (Pragmatics / speech acts) and social behaviour (Interactional Sociolinguistics / relational-work).

A speech act (Pragmatics) approach to examining praise in OG was thought to be useful because OG constitutes a performative context of communication in the truest sense of Austin’s (1962) “doing things with words” dictum: online groomers report fulfilling some of their sexual desires through their online chats with their victims. As for Interactional Sociolinguistics, we found the notion of relational work (Locher and Watts, 2005) helpful in order to help answer our second research question. Relational work encompasses the whole spectrum of discourse behaviour geared towards managing interpersonal relations, which includes polite, impolite and politic (or contextually appropriate) behaviour, and can be used to understand how online groomers seek to achieve relational and procedural solidarity goals, such as establishing a broad sociability platform (as required within the bounds of politic interaction) from which they may, for example, develop exclusivity feelings that may be perceived as face-enhancing (polite) by their targets.

## 5. Results and Discussion

### 5.1. Compliment Use and Speed of Online Grooming

Table 2 shows the number of compliments identified across the three speed-of-grooming groups in our corpus.

[Please insert table 2 here]

Table 2: Compliments by speed-of-grooming group

The above figures show that the number of compliments increases as OG speed decreases, with averages of 6.4, 18.4 and 37.9 compliments per groomer in the fast, average and slow groups, respectively. The length/duration of the chat logs is clearly a factor here. Some of the fast OG chat logs developed within less than twenty minutes and included less than three log-ins. In contrast, some of the slow OG chat logs developed over weeks and included more than fifty log-ins (see Lorenzo-Dus and Izura, 2016). Notwithstanding this, the overall number of compliments in our study is conspicuous given the much lower frequency of use of, for example, compliments in general British English language use (see Section 3) and in other social media American English complimenting contexts (Placencia and Lower, 2013). At a general level, then, the results reported in Table 2 lend

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<sup>10</sup> These are structure, meaning, interaction and social behaviour (Herring, 2004: 354-358). In Herring (2013) multimodal communication is discussed as a possible fifth language domain or level to be added to the CMDA approach.

support to the salience of praise in OG and therefore justify the aim of our study to understand how compliments are used therein, to which we turn next.

## 5.2. Compliment topics in online grooming

Figure 2 shows the results of the classification of compliment topics across the three speed-of-grooming profiles in our corpus.

[Please insert Figure 2 here]

Figure 2: Frequency of use of compliment topics (1-10) by speed of grooming group

Three patterns of use can be ascertained in Figure 2. Firstly, when pulling together the three speed-of-grooming groups, physical appearance (topics 8 and 9) and personality (topics 5 and 6) compliments emerge as the most frequent topics. Physical appearance compliments (topics 8 and 9) accounted for 59.1%, 48% and 43.8% of all compliment topics in, respectively, the fast, average and slow groups. Personality compliments (topics 5 and 6), for their part, accounted for 23.3%, 28.2% and 31.8% of the, respectively, fast, average and slow groups. Together, appearance and personality thus totalled 82.4% (fast group), 76.3% (average group) and 75.6% (slow group) of all the compliments in the corpus. This is not surprising given, on the one hand, the sexual but also deceptive trust building nature of OG and, on the other, that physical appearance and personality have been consistently reported to be the two most frequent compliment topics across a number of contexts and compliment giver / receiver variables (see Section 2).

Secondly, sexually-oriented compliments (topics 1,3, 5 and 8) were frequently used in the corpus, cumulatively accounting for 57.3%, 45.6% and 37.3% of all the compliments in the fast, average and slow groups, respectively. Moreover, with the exception of topic 1, which in any case displayed very low frequencies of use (fast group – 1.6%; average group – 1.8%; slow group – 2.5%), the frequency of these sexually-oriented compliment topics increased as online grooming speed also increased. This was especially the case in relation to topics 5 and 8. In the former (topic 5), the slow group (5.4%) exhibited a markedly lower frequency of use than the fast (13.3%) and average (12.6%) groups. In topic 8, the slow (26.9%) and average (28.5%) groups displayed lower frequencies of use than the fast group (39.1%).

Thirdly, although topic 8 was the most frequent topic for the three groups, they all used non-sexually oriented compliments as their second most frequent topic. In the fast and average groups, the second most frequent topic was topic 9 (physical appearance – non sex; 20% fast group and 19.5% average group); in the slow group it was topic 6 (personality – non sex; 26.4%).

Regarding our first research question, therefore, the results show a relationship between speed of grooming and choice of compliment topic, whereby the faster the OG process the more sexually-oriented compliment topics are used. Nevertheless, one must avoid a simplistic interpretation of such a relationship: strategic balancing of sexually-oriented vis-à-vis non sexually-oriented topics occurred within and across the groups. The results also show that sexually-oriented compliments ranged from just over half of all compliments in the fast group to just over a third in the slow group. Given understanding of OG as a form of child sexual exploitation, most current advice on preventing it understandably focuses on identifying sexual content in OG interactions. Similarly, OG prevention software is primarily geared towards identification of sexual language. Yet the salience of non sexually-oriented compliment topics in our data calls for an expansion of this focus to encompass discourse geared towards developing trust, in which sexuality may be implied and / or re-framed in ‘romantic’ terms rather than explicitly stated.

### 5.3. The formulaicity of online grooming compliments

Figure 3 shows the frequency and distribution of the compliments’ syntactic patterns identified, across the speed-of-grooming groups in the corpus. The percentages in Figure 3 provide support, from a previously unexamined communicative context, for the view that compliments are highly formulaic.

[Please insert Figure 3 here]

Figure 3: Compliment syntactic patterns across the three speed of grooming groups

Two key trends emerged from our analysis. Firstly, a significant number of patterns either displayed very low frequencies (>5%) of use across the three groups (patterns (3), (4), (5), (7), (10), (11)), or were not used at all (pattern (9)). Secondly, and consequently, syntactic realisations principally clustered around four patterns (patterns (1), (2), (6) and (8)), the frequencies of use of which across groups ranged from 14.3% (pattern (6), slow group) to 28.9% (pattern (1), fast group). Together, these four patterns accounted for 89.7%, 89.2% and 82.4% of all the compliments in, respectively, the fast, average and slow groups. When considered individually:

Pattern (1) was the most frequent across the three speed of grooming groups: 28.9% (fast group), 25.6% (average group) and 22.6% (slow group). This finding is consistent with previous studies of compliments in American English (Manes and Wolfson 1982; Placencia and Lower, 2013).

Pattern (2) displayed very similar frequencies of use in the fast (15.8%) and average (15.9%) groups to those found in Manes and Wolfson (16.1%) and Placencia and Lower 2013 (16%). However, the slow group made considerably more frequent use of this pattern (26.9%) than the other

two groups in our study and had been the case in previous studies. Moreover, across the three groups, pattern (2) was less frequent than both pattern (8) and, with the exception of the slow group, pattern (6). In other words, although the frequency of use of pattern (2) was broadly in line with that found in past research, it did not emerge as consistently the second most frequent pattern in our study.

Pattern (6) displayed a much higher frequency of use in our corpus, especially in the fast (20.9%) and average (22.8%) groups, than in both Manes and Wolfson's (2.4%) and Placencia and Lower's (0%) study.

Pattern (8) displayed higher frequencies of use across the three grooming groups (25.1%, fast; 24.9%, average; 18.6%, slow) than in Placencia and Lower's (2013) study (12% in their study). However, in both studies pattern (8) was significantly more frequent than in Manes and Wolfson's study (1.6%). Unlike the latter, in our and Placencia and Lower's work, compliments came from social media contexts, where abbreviated / elliptical syntax and expressive / informal lexis are commonplace (e.g. Lorenzo-Dus and Di Cristofaro 2016; Zapavigna 2013). Examples 1-3 illustrate how pattern (8) was indeed characterised by a combination of ellipsis and expressivity in our corpus:

1. [Slow group]: great body :o)
2. [Average group]: dream come true!!
3. [Fast group]: sooooo cute! (in response to the target sharing a photograph)

Regarding ellipsis, in the compliments following this pattern in our data the main verbs were always elided, such as using 'great body' for 'you have a great body', in example 1; 'sooooo cute!' for 'you are so cute', in example 3 and 'dream come true' for 'you are a dream come true', in example 2. As for expressivity, this was often realised via punctuation (example 2), emphatic orthography (example 3) and emoticons. The latter were mainly used to signal affect (e.g. a smile in example 1) and playfulness (e.g. wink).

Ellipsis is known to "have the effect of creating a bond of respect and shared assumptions" between interactants, who "become collaborators in the [elliptical] discourse" (Grant-Davie, 1995: 461). This may explain its salience in interpersonally close social media communities, such as Facebook groups (see Maíz-Arévalo and García-Gómez, 2013). A similar emphasis, on the groomers' part, on co-constructing affective bonds with their victims may have accounted for the high frequency of use of elliptic clauses as compliments in our data, especially as they were often accompanied by expressivity.

As for the personal focus of compliments, Figure 4 shows that, across the three groups in our study, 2nd-person compliments were the most frequent, followed by impersonal and then 1st-person compliments.

[Please insert Figure 4 here]

Figure 4: Personal focus patterns across speed of grooming groups

Impersonal compliments were predominantly realised via syntactic pattern (8). Elliptical discourse is of course particularly suited to the conditions of brevity and informality associated with many forms of digital communication, rather than with just OG settings. This does not mean that digital technology determines what individuals do with words online. Instead, and as per the Hyperpersonal Model of CMC (see, e.g. Walther, 2010), individuals exploit the digital resources at their disposal in order to communicate and negotiate meaning. In OG contexts, this may entail groomers syntactically realising compliments via elliptical structures that, through brevity and bonding potential, may be perceived to assist online groomers' goal to develop their victims' trust in them.

Second person compliments, as examples 4-5 illustrate, placed the focus of the online groomer's praise on the target:

4. [Slow group]: but you are just so sweet and sexy.... fun, all that
5. [Fast group]: Hmmmm ...what a nice hot pic of you!

In example 4, for instance, positive evaluation is reiterated via a three-topic complimenting speech act on the target's personality ("sweet" and "fun") and personal attractiveness ("sexy"). This may fulfil a self-gratification purpose through repeated verbal reification of the groomers' "object of desire". In example 5, the compliment "what a nice hot pic of you!" is prefaced by "Hmmmm..." which is used by this groomer throughout the chat log to refer to his sexual arousal from different verbal, or in this case, visual input from the target.

First person compliments, as illustrated in examples 6-7 below, included the groomer in the actual speech act, explicitly stating that he thought, believed, knew etc. that the target should be praised on a given attribute.

6. [Slow group]: I see the real beauty you have and others don't
7. [Average group]: Im just a friend who thinks ur beautiful

In first person compliment structures, the groomer engaged in some form of self-talk that simultaneously constructed his target in a positive light, placing himself and the target literally (through the inclusion of both in a single clause) and metaphorically within a shared evaluative space. This may have advanced the deceptive trust development process, especially when – as in example 7 – self-talk made explicit reference to friendship, rather than to sexuality: "Im just a friend who..." – note, too, the use of negative politeness via the hedge "just". First person structures may have also

helped to advance the process of sexual gratification, specifically the mental isolation of the victims. By explicitly stating his positive evaluation of his targets, the online groomer may have made his victims feel that their relationships with others were not as special – that they could not receive similar levels of shared positive evaluation from others – and therefore less worthy of further interpersonal investment. Example 6 suggests this likelihood strongly, with the groomer also positioning others’ evaluations not just as different to his but also as non-complimentary.

In terms of the first part of our second research question, then, syntactic patterns were found to display different frequencies of use (Figure 3) and those used were fairly consistent across the three groups (Figure 4). We next discuss the second part of our second research question, namely the functions that compliments perform in online grooming.

#### 5.4. The multifunctionality of compliments in online grooming

Our analysis found no correlation between syntactic realisation patterns and particular processes within the OGC Model (Figure 1). In addition to being regularly used within the *deceptive trust development* process, 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and impersonal syntactic patterns were found to support the other three OG processes in the entrapment phase: *sexual gratification*, *compliance testing* and *isolation*. Examples 8 and 9 illustrate this multifunctionality of compliments in the corpus and some of the ways in which it contributes to the procedural solidarity goals of the OG processes with which compliments interact. The examples are also illustrative of a pattern in the corpus whereby compliments framed other OG processes, as ‘opening and closing turns’, within the sequences in which such processes were developed.

8. [Average speed group; example occurs within the second half of the chat log]<sup>11</sup>

01	OG	4:06:53 PM	you are special ←
02	T	4:07:10 PM	thanx lol u make me feel like it
03	OG	4:07:15 PM	how do you feel
04	T	4:07:31 PM	kinda special lol
05	OG	4:07:44 PM	your heart feel good?
06	T	4:07:50 PM	yeah :)
07	OG	4:08:05 PM	can i ask some bad questions? [ <i>sexual gratification - implicit desensitisation</i> ]
08	T	4:08:11 PM	k lol
09	OG	4:08:24 PM	how do your breasts feel? [ <i>sexual gratification - explicit</i> ]

<sup>11</sup> In this and subsequent examples: OG: Online Groomer; T: Target. ← compliment; OGC process in [*italics*].



			<i>desensitisation]</i>
10	T	4:08:38 PM	kinda funny lol
11	OG	4:08:44 PM	are your nipples hard? [ <i>sexual gratification - explicit desensitisation]</i>
12	T	4:09:35 PM	kinda lol
13	OG	4:10:38 PM	would you like it if i could play with your breasts? [ <i>compliance testing / sexual gratification – explicit desensitisation]</i>
14	T	4:11:22 PM	guess if u wanna lol
15	OG	4:11:34 PM	im askin what you would like [ <i>compliance testing / sexual gratification – implicit desensitisation]</i>
16	T	4:11:51 PM	b cool if u wanted
17	T	4:11:53 PM	lol
18	OG	4:12:00 PM	i would
19-25			[describes sexual activity he would perform <sup>12</sup> ] [ <i>sexual gratification - explicit desensitisation]</i>
26	T	4:13:08 PM	yeah sounds romantic
27	OG	4:13:11 PM	yeah cause u r special ← [ <i>isolation]</i>

The opening (line 1) and closing (line 27) compliments in example 8 are 2<sup>nd</sup> person compliments that praise the victim on her personality, couching that praise in non-sexual terms: “you are special” (line 01) and “u r special” (line 27). The grooming sequence that takes place in between these compliments, however, is decisively sexual. It commences with two questions about the target’s feelings at being complimented on her specialness, with reference being made to emotions (“how do you feel”, line 03; “your heart feel good?”, line 05). These seem to be geared towards addressing the positive face needs of the target, by showing an interest in her feelings. The target’s replies in 04 and 06 seem to encourage the groomer to progress to the *sexual gratification* process of the entrapment phase. In line 07 he engages in implicit desensitisation via a request for permission from the target to ask “some bad questions”. These surely follow in lines 09 and 11, in which the sexual gratification process is further realised via explicit desensitisation, for the questions being asked now contain terms with explicit and increasing sexual meaning: from “how do your breasts feel?” (line 09), which refers to sexual female body parts, to “are your nipples hard” (line 11), which connotes sexual arousal. In lines 13 and 15, the online groomer continues to seek sexual gratification via, respectively, explicit and implicit desensitisation. Given the degree of imposition of requesting illicit sexual behaviour from a presumed minor and earlier reference to an interest in the target’s feelings, it is perhaps not surprising that he uses negative politeness in both questions. In line 13, this is realised via the modal verbs “would” and “could” for the other- (“would you like it”) and self- (“if i could play...”) oriented

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<sup>12</sup> This has been omitted because of space constraints and the sexual graphicness of the discourse.

parts of a question that entails explicit desensitisation in its reference to the groomer’s desire to “play with [the target’s] breast”. In line 15, the illocutionary force of the speech act (interrogative) is explicitly stated (“im asking”), before repeating the negative politeness modal (“would”). This time, implicit desensitisation is used by leaving the referent of “what” in “what you would like” unstated – though easily retrievable from the previous questions. In addition to contributing to sexual gratification, lines 13 and 15 also seek to gauge the target’s compliance level. Once preferential reactions to those compliance testing questions are obtained (see lines 17 and 18), the online groomer escalates the sexual gratification process through detailed, explicit desensitisation talk (lines 19-25). The target rephrases that turn as “romantic” (line 26). This is far from an objective evaluation of its content, possibly because the target (a PJF volunteer) may be steering the conversation towards eliciting potentially incriminating textual evidence from the online groomer. Notwithstanding, in line 27 he endorses (“yeah”) the target’s appraisal and returns to the initial non sexually-oriented compliment (now expressed as “u r special”) in order to justify (“cause”) the preceding sexually-explicit grooming exchange.

Let us next consider example 9, in which compliments frame and support an OG sequence characterised by the processes of *isolation* and *sexual gratification*.

9 [Fast speed group. Example occurs within the first third of the chat log]

- |    |    |             |   |
|----|----|-------------|---|
| 01 | OG | 11:03:46 PM | damn ur good looking too ←  |
| 02 | OG | 11:03:58 PM | very attractive ← [ <i>sexual gratification - implicit desensitisation</i> ]  |
| 03 | T  | 11:03:58 PM | thx   |
| 04 | OG | 11:04:08 PM | very womanly← [ <i>sexual gratification - implicit desensitisation</i> ]  |
| 05 | T  | 11:04:16 PM | wow thx   |
| 06 | OG | 11:04:46 PM | i bet ur folks dont let you do much huh [ <i>mental isolation</i> ]   |
| 07 | T  | 11:05:06 PM | i just live w my mom  |
| 08 | OG | 11:05:27 PM | has she ever brought home men u did like [ <i>mental and physical isolation / sexual gratification - implicit desensitisation</i> ] |
| 09 | T  | 11:05:41 PM | no she dosent date anyl   |
| 10 | OG | 11:06:10 PM | i can’t see why if she looks anything like u ← [ <i>mental isolation</i> ]  |

The four compliments in example 9 focus on physical appearance. The first and last one, in line 01 and 10, are not explicitly oriented towards sexual attributes, but towards a more generic

physical trait: “looking good”. The other two serve to desensitise the target implicitly by complimenting her on attributes such as may be appropriate between adults seeking to develop a sexual relationship: “very attractive” (line 04) and “very womanly” (line 06). Possibly encouraged by the target’s increasing expressions of appreciation in lines 03 and 05, the groomer advances the entrapment phase via a formulaic performative statement (“i bet...”; line 08) that portrays an image in which the target’s maturity is not recognised by her mother/parents – a mental isolation tactic typical in grooming on and off-line (e.g. Craven et al, 2006; Marcum, 2007). When that image is not met by, presumably, a preferential answer, in which the target would have disclosed a problem in her parental relationship (line 07), the groomer uses the information provided to ask a further question (line 08). This is ostensibly about the target’s mother’s sexual habits (“bringing home men u did like”) and hence serves to extract information that may help him find out about the target’s family environment – physical and emotional. In addition, the question in line 08 serves to further desensitise the target implicitly, this time by assuming a sexual interest in adult males on her part. When faced with another non-preferential reaction from the target in line 09 (“no she dosent date any1”), the groomer concludes this grooming sequence by returning in line 10 to the same non sexually-oriented compliment with which he initiated it in line 01. The syntactic pattern used for this final compliment - a 1st person one - enables him to emphasise his unique relationship with the target: he is someone who “can’t see” why others may not see what he does in his target.

Examples 8 and 9 are typical of some of the ways in which online groomers’ compliments in our corpus saliently contributed to the other processes within the OG entrapment phase. As noted earlier, whether or not the compliments were sincerely paid cannot be ascertained through the discourse analysis approach taken in this research. However, in our view, that does not detract from it being able to enhance our understanding of a discourse context characterised by deviance as a whole.<sup>13</sup>

## **6. Conclusions**

Child sexual predators are often described as lacking in social adeptness because many of them also suffer from psychiatric or personality and substance abuse disorders (e.g. Fagan et al, 2002; Murray, 2000). The results of this study show that, whatever disorders a number of online groomers may suffer from, these conditions do not significantly affect their sociopragmatic competence when it comes to both offering praise via compliments and using compliments to support a range of OG processes, including trust development.

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<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that the truth value of online groomers’ compliments, and indeed their overall discourse, is irrelevant for studies that seek to understand their motivations (see, e.g. Sullivan and Quayle, 2012).

Our study examined a corpus of over one thousand compliments from 68 different groomers whose OG *modus operandi* differed considerably as regards speed of grooming. In addition to lending further validity to the discrimination potential of profiles based on speed of grooming, our findings cumulatively point to, firstly, a non-random use of compliment topics in OG, secondly, their highly formulaic nature and, thirdly, their being mainly used to meet procedural solidarity goals.

Regarding compliment topics, the results reveal the prevalence of sexually-oriented compliment topics, principally physical appearance, and that this prevalence increases in relation to OG speed. However, they also show that sexually-oriented compliments were often strategically balanced with other compliment topics, including those displaying no sexual orientation. Even the fast group, whose compliments were primarily oriented towards appearance, combined sexually and non-sexually oriented topics both in their appearance and personality compliments. The slow group also interspersed sexually and non sexually-oriented compliments within their two most frequent topics, respectively physical appearance (topic 8) and personality (topic 6). And the groomers in the average group played their sexually / non sexually-oriented compliment topic ‘balancing act’ within their most frequent topics (8 and 9), both on physical appearance.

As for syntactic realisation patterns, our results support previous research findings regarding reliance primarily on a reduced set of such patterns, which in our study proved fairly consistent across the three speed-of-grooming groups. Second person compliments were found to be considerably more frequent than both 1st person and impersonal compliments, as in Manes and Wolfson’s (1981) study but unlike in Herbert’s (1991). Further studies are clearly needed before we can find an answer to the question of just how “unoriginal” (Manes, 1981) compliments are. Moreover, that question needs to be considered alongside the multifunctionality of compliments in discourse. In that respect, the results of our study clearly point to their playing a salient role across communicative processes in OG geared towards isolating targets emotionally and physically from their families and friends, desensitising them via explicit and implicit means and also testing their compliance levels vis-à-vis groomers’ goals.

It is important to state once again that the analysis presented here is based on a corpus of OG chat logs in which groomers believed to be interacting with children but were instead interacting with trained decoys who masqueraded as children. In as much as our focus was not on the decoys’ but the groomers’ discourse, we believe this limitation not to compromise our results. It would be advisable for further studies, however, to examine OG interactions with real children. Moreover, and more broadly, we hope that the present study has shown the benefits that a discourse analytic perspective can bring to research into OG. These can be summarised in terms of the very definition of discourse analysis as language in its context of use, beyond the word level. Research into development of OG prevention software currently operates principally at a word level, with a focus on sexual terms.

Whilst relevant, an exclusive focus on sexual lexis misses the structures, functions and interrelationships surrounding that lexis. Yet these - as our study of the speech act of complimenting has shown – are vital to understanding OG.

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**Tables and Figures**

Figure 1: A Model of OG Discourse (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016:44)

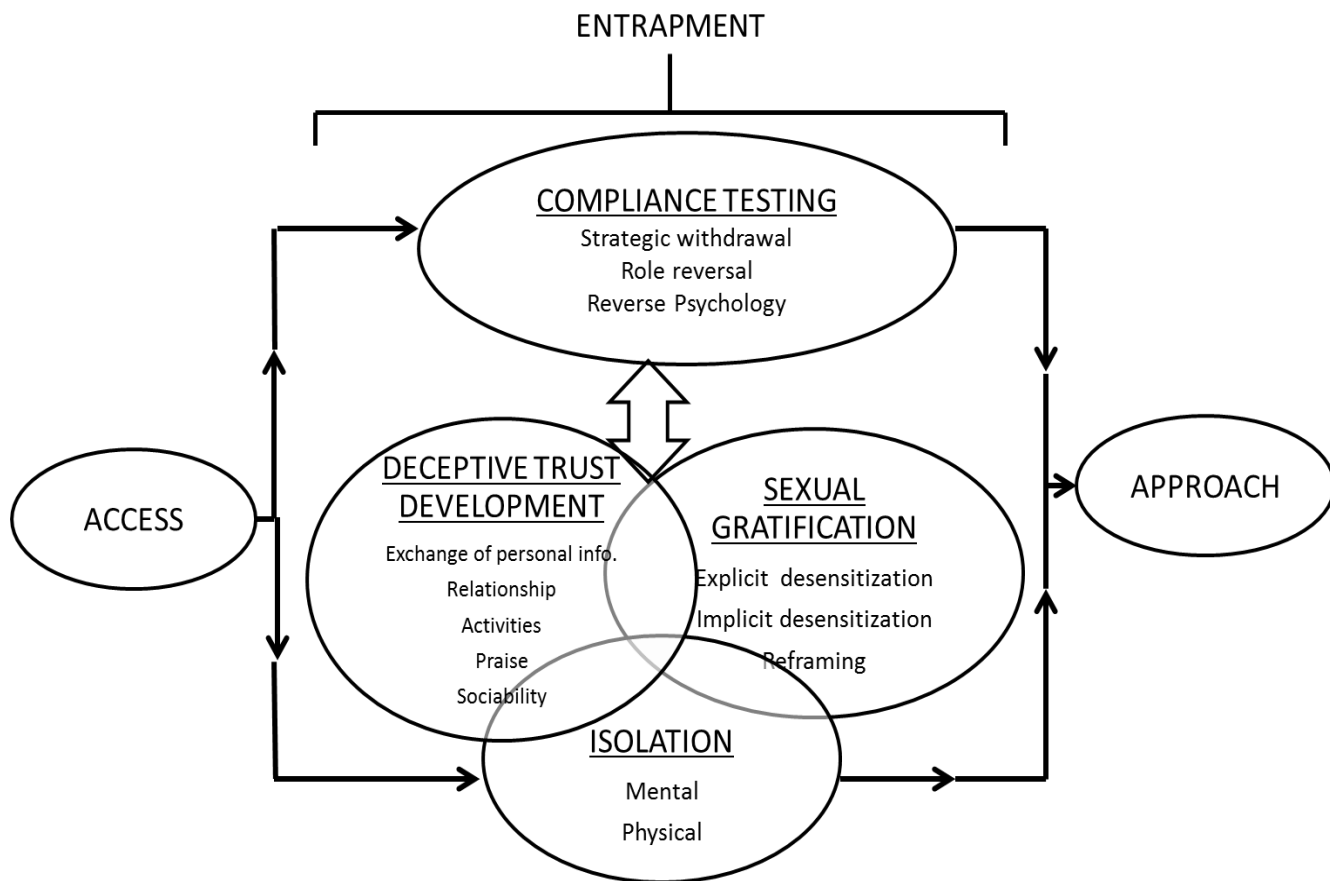


Table 1: Main syntactic formulae in compliments and illustrative examples (source: Manes and Wolfson, 1981: 120-121).

Pattern	Formula <sup>14</sup>	%	Illustrative example
(1)	NP {is / looks} (really) ADJ	53.6%	Your hair looks nice
(2)	I (really) {love / like} NP	16.1%	I love your hair
(3)	PRO is (really) (a) ADJ NP	14.9%	This is really a great meal
(4)	You V (a) (really) ADJ NP	3.3%	You did a good job

<sup>14</sup> NP: Non phrase; ADJ: positive adjective; ADV: positive adverb; (...): optional lexical item; PRO: demonstrative or personal pronoun.

(5)	You V (NP) (really) ADV	2.7%	You really handled that situation well
(6)	You have (a) (really) ADJ NP	2.4%	You have such beautiful hair
(7)	What (a) ADJ NP!	1.6%	What a lovely baby you have
(8)	ADJ NP!	1.6%	Nice game!
(9)	Isn't NP ADJ!	1.0%	Isn't it pretty!

Table 2: Compliments by speed-of-grooming group

Speed-of-grooming group	No. of different groomers	No. of compliments	Average groomer – compliment ratio
Fast	24	154	6.4
Average	28	508	18.4
Slow	16	607	37.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>1269</b>	<b>18.66</b>

Figure 2: Frequency of use of compliment topics (1-10) by speed of grooming group

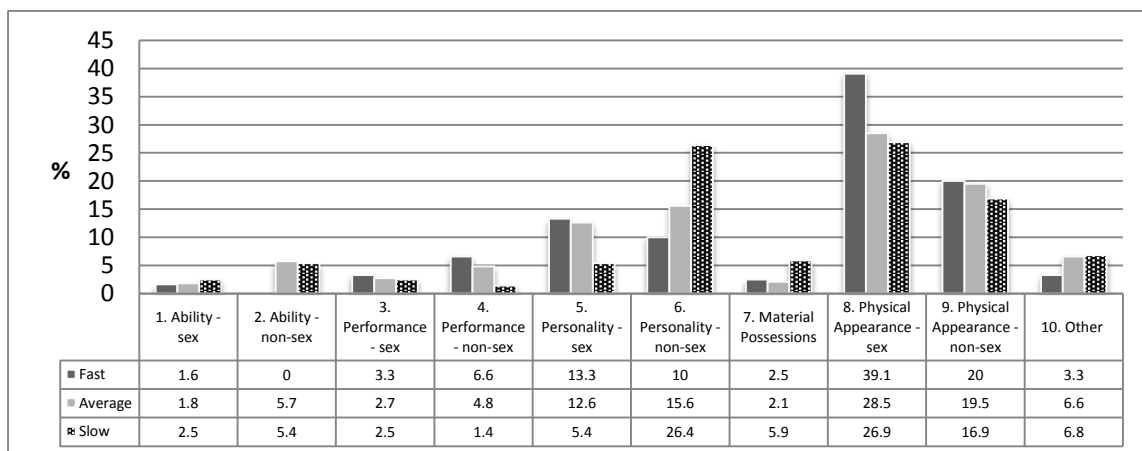


Figure 3: Compliment syntactic patterns across the three speed of grooming groups

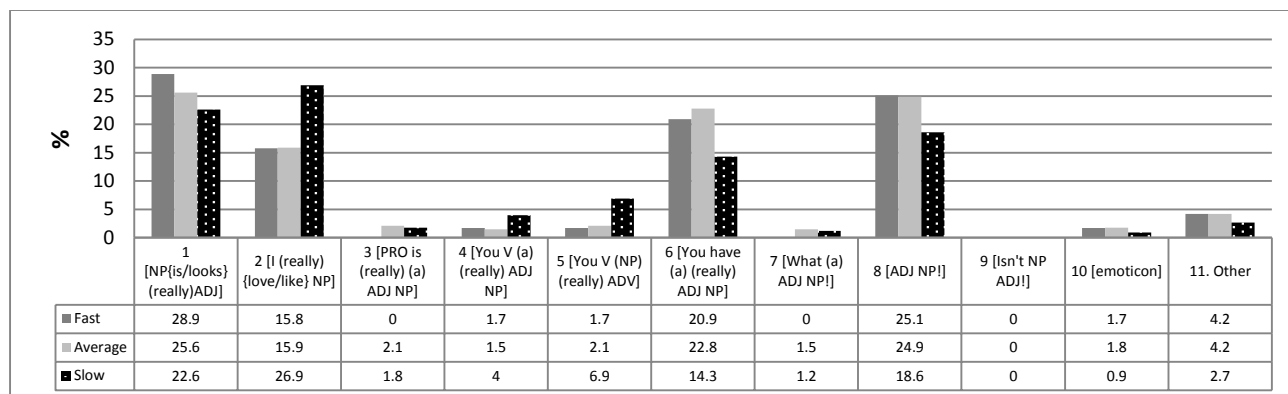
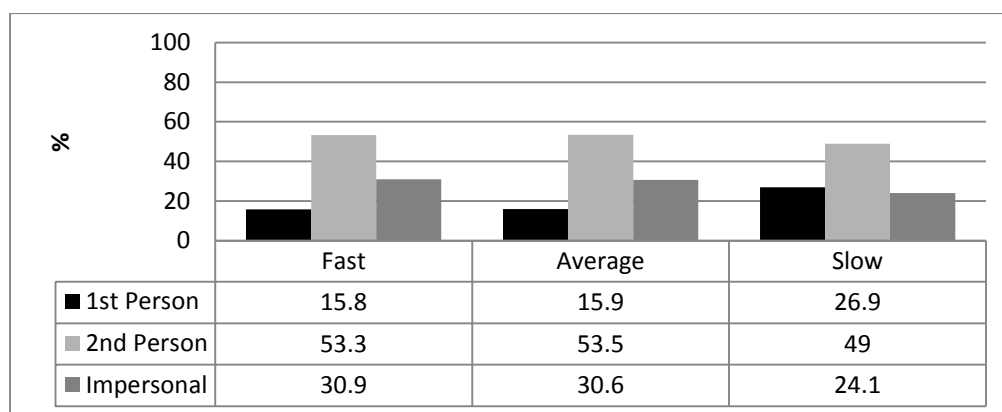


Figure 4: Personal focus patterns across speed of grooming groups



### Appendix – Compliments’ coding framework

Coding variable	Category in variable		Illustrative example from the corpus
Topic	1	Ability – sexually oriented	you kiss nice
	2	Ability – non sexually oriented	your learning fast
	3	Performance – sexually oriented	i bet you are wonderful in bed
	4	Performance – non sexually oriented	your amazing at playing that ( <i>referring to a video game</i> )
	5	Personality – sexually oriented	very sexy alluring too

	6	Personality – non sexually oriented	u make a wonderful daughter
	7	Material possessions	I like your home page
	8	Physical appearance – sexually oriented	u are a hot blonde
	9	Physical appearance – non sexually oriented	nice eyes
	10	Other	PLUS U HAVE A HOTT SEXY VOICE.....
Syntactic pattern	1	NP {is / looks} (really) ADJ	your lips look really kissable
	2	I (really) {love / like} NP	i like thouse really short shorts u have on in your bed pic
	3	PRO is (really) (a) ADJ NP	that's a nice neckless
	4	You V (a) (really) ADJ NP	ur skinny and hot
	5	You V (NP) (really) ADV	you really light up a room
	6	You have (a) (really) ADJ NP	wow you have a nice lil body
	7	What (a) ADJ NP!	what a hot pic!!!
	8	ADJ NP!	nice picture here also!
	9	Isn't NP ADJ!	
	10	Emoticons	;o) mmmmmmmmmmmmm
	11	Other(including interjections)	I can't stop looking at your pics Booooooyyyyyy!