

Deceiving the Deceived: An analysis of the United Nations Compensation Scam

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Abstract

The world today is full of deception by fellowman that can go on deceiving the other neither feeling guilt for the act nor sympathy for the victim. Even the “already deceived” can be lured in another trap in the name of compensation. This research wanted to expose the linguistic and nonlinguistic characteristics of the United Nations Compensation Scam which is one of the World Fund Recovery scam. It is a scam which is meant to deceive the scam victims in the name of compensation by the so-called United Nations organization. The research used a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method, a research tool that views language usage as a social practice activity in society, to analyze a randomly selected scam vignettes extracted from the scam data base. CDA seeks to understand the intention of the communicator through linguistic and nonlinguistic means as well as the possible impact of the communication to the receiver. The three phased Fairclough’s Model and Analytical Framework (1995), that is, text analysis (description), processing analysis (interpretation) and social analysis (explanation) was used. Findings revealed errors of all kinds including: Redundant sentences, wrong spellings, wrong words, poor punctuation, wrong plurals and wrong capitalization as United Nations Compensation Scam linguistic features while exaggeration, persuasive and flattering language, raising of false hopes and false chains being nonlinguistic features of a scam.

Keywords: scam; deception; linguistic features; non-linguistic features

1. Introduction

Deception has been there time immemorial. People deceive others mainly for their own advantage; the situation has been worsened by the presence of the internet where internet scam has become rampant in the current millennium. A scam has been defined by Singh (2011) as obtaining money by means of deception including fake personalities, fake photos, fake template letters, non-existent addresses and phone numbers as well as forged documents. A scam is not easy to detect because it is a deliberate and well thought plan by the deceiver who knowingly manipulating information, which is usually presented in a sincere way. Although humans are far from being infallible in their efforts to diagnose lies as Buller and Burgoon (1996) put it, they are substantially better at the task (of analyzing the message) than would result merely by chance. The whole scam problem crops in due to unethical people who violets the communication principles.

Communication Theory elaborates on ethics based on the assumption that communicators interact in just and beneficial ways. This ethical responsibility of communicators dates back to Plato and Aristotle’s time (Richard 2014). Although the contemporary discussions of morality are being fraught by the rise of ethical relativism (one of the Postmodern challenges to all claims of truth), there is a worldwide adoption of Credo for Communication Ethics (1999). It states that ethical communication is fundamental to responsible thinking, decision making and the development of relationships within and across cultures. It enhances human worth and dignity by fostering truthfulness, fairness, responsibility, personal integrity and respect for self and others (National Communication Association 1999). Some of the Credo for Communication Ethics principles include the following:

- “We promote access to communication resources and opportunities as necessary to fulfil human potential and contribute to the wellbeing of families, communities and society.”

The above principle centers on the accessibility of every member of the society to communication technology but calls for its positive use.

- “We are committed to the courageous expression of personal convictions in pursuit of fairness and justice”.

This principle is calling for fairness and justice in communication.

- “We condemn communication that degrades individuals through distortion....”

This one is against lying; lying in a communication is unethical, and, unfortunately is not expected by the other communicator, hence violation of expectancy (breach of expectations).

The above principles show that, universally, people are interested in ethical communication. Andersen (2000) traced aspects of the evolution of interest in ethical issues specifically by the National Communication Association (NCA) as well as their effort to develop a Professional Code. The research also included the development of the Credo for Ethical Communication adopted by the NCA Legislative Council November 6, 1999 which is elaborated above. The scam is thus an exception and not the norm, but due to its existence, people should be aware of it so as to safeguard against it.

1:1 Deception Theory

Buller and Burgoon (1996) in “Interpersonal Deception Theory” defined deception as a message knowingly transmitted by a sender to foster a false belief or conclusion by the receiver. They also pointed out that some personal life and responsibility are full of cheating mainly for personal gains. In a deceptive communication, the sender attempts to manipulate a message so as to be untruthful. This is why it is important for the receiver to try to unveil or detect the validity of any information received; otherwise, the receiver can be deceived.

Intentional deception, Buller and Burgoon (1996) argued, requires significantly more cognitive resources than truthful communication, whether the sender engages in falsification (lying), concealment (omitting material facts) or equivocation (skirting issues by changing the subject or offering indirect responses). The two also purported that studied on deception started long back and they cited Sigmund Freud who studied nonverbal cues to detect deception, about a century ago.

In 1989, DePaulo and Kirkendol developed the Motivation Impairment Effect (MIE) which states that the harder people try to deceive others; the more likely they are to get caught. However, Burgoon and Floyd (quoted in Buller and Burgoon 1996) revisited this research and found that deceivers are more active in their attempt to deceive than most would anticipate or expect. The deceivers take the advantage of people’s truth bias, that is, the persistent expectation by humanity that people will tell the truth.

1:2 Scam Classification

Below is a scam classification as highlighted in Financial Highway (2014):

- *Soft scams*: Soft scams are hard to detect and often go unnoticed until it’s too late. These types of scams misrepresent genuine products or companies. In these scams the product or company actually exists, but the con artist misrepresents certain aspects of it to make it more attractive than it really is.
- *Hard scams*: they involve nonexistent companies and products. In these types of scams the con artist makes up a product or company and recruits potential investors who in turn recruit others. Often these sound like legitimate business ventures and may seem very attractive.
- *Bad investment scams*: involve actual products and companies with extremely high risk. Often investors are assured by the con artist of high returns and no or little risk, which should signal a red flag to potential investors. It should always be remembered that *high return comes high risk*.
- *Affinity Scams*: involves scams that prey upon members of identifiable groups such as ethnic groups, religious groups or professional groups. The con artist who promotes the affinity scam often either belongs to the similar group or pretends to belong to the group.
- *Identity theft scams*: one of the fastest growing white-collar crimes in North America. There are many places and many ways one can steal someone else’s ID, stolen ID can be used for variety of things. It can be used to purchase things online, commit crime in someone else’s name, and commit tax fraud, and so on.
- *Internet scams*: simply refers to scams via internet. With the rapid growth of the Internet we have seen a rapid growth in Internet scams, these ranges from hacking into your computer and stealing your personal information to fraudulent loan offers and fake websites
- *Pyramid schemes*: Pyramid scheme and Ponzi schemes have recently received a lot of press attention mainly due to Bernard Madoff’s investment fraud. These types of scams rely on continuous recruitment of new investors. Basically you pay a fee (say \$1000) to join and for every new member you recruit you receive a fee (say \$200), the plan works well until there are no more new members to join.

1:3 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Discourse Analysis can be defined in simple terms as the analysis of language in use. It considers the relationship between language and the contexts in which it is used. Discourse analysts are also concerned with the description and analysis of both the spoken and the written interactions. Komalasari (2013) argued that the primary purpose of discourse analysis is to provide a deeper understanding of texts while Dijk (2008) affirmed that it focuses primarily on social problems.

A more acute analysis of discourse is known as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and has been defined by Fairclough, 1992, quoted in Luke (2011) as the use of an ensemble of techniques for the study of textual practice and language use as social and cultural practices. CDA focuses on language use, that is, its informative and social functions. It involves systematic functional language analysis (Le and Xuefeng (2009). CDA mainly focuses on word, phrase, clause and sentence structure analysis of the linguistic, social and psychological function of these. In CDA, texts can, thus, be analyzed in terms of their structures as well as the stipulated social relations that they portray.

Critical Discourse Analysis therefore differs from ordinary discourse analysis in that while the CDA

describes, interprets and explains the relationship between language and society (Rogers 2004), ordinary discourse analysis is limited to language in use. CDA, since it involves linguistics, social and cultural approaches, is therefore an interdisciplinary analytic technique which can be used to expose critical language awareness to the society.

Mirzaee, S. and Hamidi, H. (2012) argued that Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis Model was purposed to gain results which are of practical significance to the social, cultural, political and economic contexts. Tileaga (2011) added that CDA earmarks at understanding and interpreting the relationships that get established between discourse versus social interactions and cognitive interface. By social interactions he encompasses social variable such as gender, class, ethnicity, age and identity while cognitive interface brings in the mental activities of those involved in the discourse.

Luke (2011) argued that Critical Discourse Analysis is associated with three theoretical orientations, that is, the post structuralism (which holds the view that discourse operates across local institutional positions while the texts have a constructive function) ; Bourdieu's sociology (which assumes that actual textual practices and interactions with texts are cultural based) and neo-Marxist cultural theory (which assumes that discourse is produced and used within political economies with broader ideological interests and social formations).

Luke (2011) went on propounding the following CDA characteristic:

- It provides an interdisciplinary analytic approach and a flexible metalanguage for the analysis of texts and discourses.
- CDA marks out a new set of methodological techniques and possibilities in linguistics.
- It marks out the grounds for rethinking pedagogical practices and outcomes as discourse. CDA suggests that mastery of discourse is the principle educational process and outcome, and that this mastery can be normatively reshaped to introduce people to critical analyses of text-based, postmodern cultures and economies.
- It provides a means for sociology to examine new phenomena, which include, new and unprecedented modes of expression, for example, newspaper formats; new popular cultural forms of textual expression, for example rock videos as well as infomercials; electronic genres, such as e-mail.

From the above explanation of Critical Discourse Analysis, it is clear that this analysis method is suitable to analyze the scam vignettes in question.

1:4 Related Researches

The scam issue is a real problem to the society and a number of researches have been made so as to expose the scam and conscientise the society at large. Rose (2010) researched on the Nigerian scam and argued that the reason why people are lured into it is that the operation of the Nigerian scam is highly unpredictable and misleading. Victims usually incur heavy losses in terms of considerable sums of money as well as other assets. They may also lose their capacity to trust in life. A scam also brings emotions to the victim, thus Rose (2010) wrote of an American who was murdered in Nigeria while pursuing his lost money. She also wrote about a scam victim who killed an official at the Nigerian embassy.

Another scam study in Nigeria was done by Javid (2013). It was entitled: *Why do the Nigerian scammers say they are from Nigeria?* The study revealed that it is because by saying that they come from Nigeria, the scammers are getting what they want, that is, victims. It should be noted that as the victims decreases, scammers reduces drastically, however, this is not currently the case in the world. Scam is rampant and it's unfortunate that those who have fallen for a Nigerian scam, may be more likely to fall for the related fraud funds recovery scam, for example, the United Nations Compensation Scam.

A similar research was carried out by Jaen (2012) on the credit card scam and he explained two most used terms in this type of scam, that is, phishing and skimming; he described phishing as an attempt to acquire information such as usernames, passwords and credit card details by an individual or group that masquerade as a legitimate business people. It is associated with a dishonest individuals or a group that pretend to be a lawful company and send spam or pop-up messages to trick people to reveal their personal information. On the other hand, skimming makes use of special storage device to steal the credit/debit card information during transactions, for instance, at an ATM point either at a bank or in a shop.

Singh (2011) studied scams in India and came up with what he termed *Top five scams of India*; these are: Commonwealth Games Scam, Satyam Scam, Indian Premier League (IPL) Scam, The Hawala Scandal and the Spectrum Scam.

- *Spectrum Scam*: It was associated with licenses that were issued to private telecom players at throwaway prices in 2008 and has cost the government Rs. 1.76 lakh crore. Rules and procedures flouted while issuing licenses. It involved the Telecom Minister of the period.
- *Common-Wealth-Games Scam*: Was associated with the 2010 Commonwealth Games when the event was drenched in the allegations of corruption in Delhi in connection to Rs 36,000 crores/ \$8 billion scam. It involved an Indian politician and a senior sports administrator.

- *Satyam Scam*: It was a scam at Satyam Computer Services that shattered the peace and tranquility of Indian investors and shareholder community. The Satyam scam was the biggest fraud (involving Rs 14000 crore) in the corporate history of India.
- *Indian Premier League (IPL) Scam*: Involved one of the world's richest sports leagues which was almost single-handedly turned into a \$4.1 billion enterprise.
- *Hawala Scandal*: It was a bribery scandal to the tune of \$18 million which was exposed in 1996. It involved payments allegedly received by country's leading politicians through hawala brokers.

The guardian (2009) captured a study that was carried out by the University of Exeter on the psychological effect of scam on the victims. The researchers sent fake prize draw mailings to a sample of 10,000 people. Findings showed that those people who are interested in the area of the scam are potential victims. Also, scam victims are not generally poor decision-makers but they have one or more of the following characteristics: lack of emotional control; some degree of isolation; a history of being scammed (serial victims); being susceptible to certain psychological triggers - such as the building of relationships (often through mails and phone calls) and being impressed by authority (many scam mails use techniques to give themselves sobriety).

It is assumed that some people (internet users) are more susceptible to scammers than others and Javid (2013) termed these "viable". He argued that viability is not directly observable since the scammer (whom he termed the "attacker") is not sure whether s/he will succeed unless s/he tries the attack. However, the fact that some internet users are better prospects than others is observable. He used a complex mathematical analysis where the attacker is assumed to have a simple score, x , that he assigns to each internet user. This means that the larger the score, the more likely the user becomes viable and prone to be scammed.

Deevy; Lucich and Beals (2012) argued that there is no question that financial fraud is a major problem in today's world especially with billions of dollars lost every year to millions of victims worldwide. They also purported that the urgency of the matter is reflected in the priorities of the American government, that is, the US Attorney General naming financial fraud as one of three top national priorities, after terrorism and violent crime.

Due to the devastating effects of scam, Serrao (2010) called for people to increase their awareness to internet scam (cybercrime) and warned that earthlings are no longer "alone" online; they share more in terms of their private details with both friend and strangers today than ever.

The above literature review shows that scam is rampant in today's world and it the ignorance of the victims that cause it to spread. It is also aggravated by the development in technology, especially the e-mail scam. People often fall victim. This research therefore wants to investigate and expose the characteristics of the scam language so that the public (who may read this research) is made aware and avoid scam trap.

2. Material and Method

This research wanted to expose the linguistic and nonlinguistic characteristics of the United Nations Compensation Scam which is one of the World Fund Recovery scam. It is a scam which is meant to deceive the scam victims in the name of compensation by the so-called United Nations. The research used a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method, a research tool that views language usage as a social practice activity in society, to analyze a randomly selected scam vignettes extracted from the scam data base. CDA seeks to understand the intention of the communicator through linguistic and nonlinguistic means as well as the possible impact of the communication to the receiver. The three phased Fairclough's Model and Analytical Framework (1995) quoted in Janks (Undated), that is, text analysis (description), processing analysis (interpretation) and social analysis (explanation) was used in the study.

3. Research Findings

Scams come in innumerable ways (see attachments) which is a pointer that the scammer is actively at work. The situation has been worsened by the use of the internet, hence the widespread of the internet scam. Incessant scam traps are set even for the already scammed victims. This is the case with the so called United Nations Compensation for the scammed. It is a scam within a scam whereby the scammed are trapped into another scam in the name of compensation.

One may wonder how this can happen; when one falls into the first trap, that is, the first scam, the con artists are aware that the victim is troubled and in a confused state and is trying to recover what has been lost as Rose (2010) pointed out. It is at this point that the scammers come back or potential scammers seize the opportunity. One way, among several, is that they request the victim on Face Book or Skype. When one accepts, they "lead" one to expose the scam that has befallen her/him. They then introduce the so-called United Nations compensation scheme for the scammed to the victim. Below is a real Skype compensation conversation that happened between a scammed victim and the UN compensation scammer in 2014.

Scammer (X): Hello! Please add me to your Contact list.

Scammed (Y) has shared contact details with X.

X: Am new here on skype and is my first time with you

Y: It's well.

Y: Do you know Terra Verde Institute in Tacoma?

X: No i don't know

X: Why do you ask?

Y: I read that there is a seminar on Capacity Building and Sustainability, I want more info

X: Do you want to work there?

Y: I was called for a seminar. Anywhere, it proved to be a scam.

X: You mean they scammed you?

Y: Yes.

X: How much did you pay?

Y: A lot.

The conversation continued sometime later.

X: How much i mean tell me the amount

Y: What will you do to help me?

X: Well i can help you introduced to the UN compensation office to compensate you from all what you have lost from the scammer but you will have to show all payments slips of which you pay the money to them as a prove

X: i will help you to get a job after the UN compensate your lost and interests okay

Y: I have the letter and the bank details of where I send the money.

X: Ok here is my email address now i want you to forward all their emails and the payments slips and their picture to me

X: ---@gmail.com

X: Now i will ask of the personal private email address of the UN minister of human right UK and give it direct to contact him in the UN office and forward all this informations to them so he can look and investigate into it on how you can be compensated with all your lost and interest

X: Please give me a moment let me contact the head office for the address of the united nation (UN) office minister of information so i can give it to you now okay

The scam was on the yellow card.

X: The (UN) united nation of Great british UK has deposited the sum of \$30 million dollars in west africa Ghana Eco bank account in the Government of Ghana for so many women that has been scam in several ways and i have submit all your information to them now

Y: How?

X: According to the minister of human right that you will have to apply for the UN yellow card to get registered in the office of Ghana to process your compensation payment so you will have a file with them

Later it was said,

X: Write him how you can pay for the yellow card and the total amount scammed from you so he can process your compensation okay

And then,

X: Go run around and look for the money for the yellow card so you will be registered in their office for your compensation to process and you get all your lost money paid back and if you don't have up to the \$1000 charge for the yellow card then write to the UN officer and tell him how much you have then i can help you with the rest

And finally,

Y: I have nothing. I am poor. My friends are also poor.

X: It means you don't want to be helped and you will remain poor forever as you have made the declaration

X: Bye for now mrs poor

When analyzing the scammer's information above, one can say that, it is characterized by some outstanding linguistic and nonlinguistic features which are generic to most of the scam language (also see attachments in the appendix). The linguistic features are numerous poor English Language aspects that include:

Redundant sentences: In the above conversation, there are a number of redundant sentences which are syntactically compromised; they are usually too long and they contain gross errors of all kinds, for example:

"Well i can help you introduced to the UN compensation office to compensate you from all what you have lost from the scammer but you will have to show all payments slips of which you pay the money to them as a prove"

The sentence above has numerous errors, for instance: poor capitalization (i), wrong spellings (compensiate and compensation), wrong plurals (payments slips), wrong tense (introduced) and poor syntax (of which you pay the money to them as a prove) that compromise the meaning of the sentence as Mullany and Stockwell (2010) argued that meaningfulness is combined with syntactic form. A reader can easily sense the low English proficiency of the writer and this on its own is a characteristic of a scam message.

Wrong spellings: On the conversation above, the turn-take of the scammer is infested with numerous spelling errors which include: compensiate for compensate; compensation for compensation; declaration for declaration;

yello for yellow, supmit for submit; Gorvernment for government and bank accout for bank account. A closer look at these wrong spellings can show that they are not mistakes but they are errors which are made by a writer due to ignorance of the language, that is, English. The spellings for the words compasiate, accout, yello and supmit are far from the actual spellings. They indicate “spelling by the ear”, that is, someone tries to spell them just as they sound in a certain accent showing no evidence of the writer ever seeing the written correct word before. Such errors are evidence enough that the writer is of very limited literacy, which is another characteristic of a scam.

Poor punctuation: The scammer’s turns in the conversation are characterized by poor punctuation. At times there no full stops at the end of a number of sentences, for instance, “No i don’t know”. Also, some commas are omitted, for example, “Well i can help...”; there should be a comma after the word “well” as a collocation rule. Punctuations are neglected in a written conversation as above where there are necessary giving the impression of a scribbled message. However, for this particular conversation, it is clear that the writer is serious and could not, in any way, have scribbled the message; it’s clear that the writer is illiterate of the rules – another scam characteristic.

Poor capitalization: A number of capitalization errors appear in the scammer’s conversation above. There are instances where small letter are put, instead of capital letters and vice versa, for example, i instead of I; mrs instead of Mrs; africa for Africa and british for British. Contrary, capital letters were put where there was no need for such, for instance, ...Contact for ...contact. It should be noted that capitalization is elementary to any language learning. This means that any language teacher emphasizes capitalization, at least for obvious proper nouns. The errors above are therefore an indicator that the writer (scammer) hardly learn the English Language formally – another characteristic of a scam.

In the scammer’s turns in the conversation above are also other errors, that include, wrong prepositions, for instance, “to compasiate you from all what you have lost from the scammer” and “and investigate into it will ask of the personal private email address”; wrong subject verb agreement, for example, “women that has been scam”; wrong plurals including informations and payments slips; wrong words such as Great british and also omissions. All these errors are strong indicators of a scam.

The scammer’s turns in the conversation above is also characterized by non-linguistic features that betray the intention of the scammer. These include: limited comprehension, exaggeration, persuasive and flattering language.

Limited comprehension: The scammer’s responses show lack of understanding, obviously language understanding, for instance, to the question and explanation by X below, Y, the scammer, could not understand the idea of “seminar”, hence the response, “Do you want to work there?”

Y: Do you know Terra Verde Institute in Tacoma?

X: No i don’t know

X: Why do you ask?

Y: I read that there is a seminar on Capacity Building and Sustainability, I want more info

X: Do you want to work there?

Exaggeration and persuasive language: These are other features which are common for most scams and on the extract above, 30million dollars is said to be available for scammed women in Africa only which is too good to be true. There is also \$1000 which is charged for the so called yellow card and an unexplainable willingness to help from the scammer, (and if you don’t have up to the \$1000 charge for the yellow card then write to the UN officer and tell him how much you have then i can help you with the rest). These findings tally those by Modic and Lea (2013) who found susceptibility to persuasion as a major psychological condition linked to scam victims. This is why Deevy; Lucich and Beals (2012) pointed out that Successful fraud looks just good enough to be true. They went in to say that by mimicking the persuasive strategies, communication streams and payment procedures of legitimate commerce, skilled scammers often give few indications that their offers are scams.

False connections: False connections are also scam features, for instance, the statement, “...write to the UN officer and tell him how much you have then i can help you with the rest”, and the so called UN email address is provided. A victim may think that s/he is dealing with a network of service providers yet communicating to just an individual or one group. This is difficult to detect as Rose (2010) said that it is unpredictable and misleading.

It can be concluded that scam is a reality and a menace to humanity. There are features that betray a scam although rather hidden to the victim. They often raise false hopes and emotion in the victim as exposed by The University of Exeter’s study recorded in The guardian (2009) and Rose (2010) findings of the Nigerian Scam. Scammers play sophisticated psychological tricks to fool their marks, said Barras (2014), this means that anyone can be vulnerable to scam unless they are fully informed and they know what to look for.

This study therefore recommends internet users to:

- Avoid internet links that are embedded in email because they can easily be used to direct potential victims to mirror sites. This can be checked by typing the URL directly in the web browser.
- Be cautious with e-mails from unknown senders. Also, be careful with e-mail that asks for personal

information (including emails and passwords). Legitimate websites hardly do so.

- Avoid forwarding e-mails to others that you have not verified otherwise you spread scams unwittingly.

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