

Linguistic Grooming in Higher Education: A Forensic Discourse Analysis of Power, Manipulation, and Symbolic Control in Academic Relations

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Abstract. This study examines how language operates as a tool of manipulation in academic grooming within Indonesian higher education. Using a qualitative forensic-linguistic approach integrating Critical Discourse Analysis, Speech Act Theory, and Thematic Analysis, it analyses approximately 850 utterances from authentic lecturer-student communications, supplemented by interviews with six victims and one expert. The findings show that grooming unfolds through three interrelated linguistic mechanisms, affective persuasion, instrumental exploitation, and symbolic control, that gradually transform professional discourse into emotional dependency and compliance. Affective and instrumental lexis dominates grooming communication (71%), embedding coercion within rhetoric of care, mentorship, and professionalism, and producing discursive entrapment in which victims internalise control as trust. The study proposes a Forensic Linguistic Indicator Model (FLIM) for the early detection of grooming language, conceptualising academic grooming as institutionalised linguistic coercion and offering policy-relevant insights for safeguarding and prevention in higher education.

Keywords: forensic linguistics; grooming; discourse analysis; sexual violence; higher education.

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Introduction

Sexual grooming is increasingly recognised as a strategic and manipulative process in which offenders cultivate emotional dependency, trust, and compliance prior to sexual exploitation (Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006). It is a gradual process rather than a single act, characterised by linguistic persuasion, psychological conditioning, and the systematic erosion of personal boundaries (McAlinden 2012). Extensive research on online and child grooming has examined patterns of persuasion, flattery, and desensitisation that offenders employ to lower victims' resistance (Whittle et al., 2014; Black et al., 2015; Kloess et al., 2019). However, grooming within higher education institutions, where intellectual authority, institutional trust, and hierarchical power are structurally embedded, remains significantly underexplored, particularly from a linguistic perspective (Bull and Page 2021).

Within academic environments, grooming is frequently disguised as mentorship, professional guidance, or pastoral care. Perpetrators may exploit institutional hierarchies and students' academic dependence to establish emotional closeness and legitimise inappropriate intimacy (Page, 2022; Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019). Empirical research has demonstrated how academic staff deploy discourses of care, mentorship, and pastoral responsibility to justify or obscure boundary violations with students (Fileborn and Loney-Howes 2019). Similar studies have shown that linguistic practices such as excessive praise, personal attention, or academic favour function to normalise coercive relationships while sustaining a façade of professionalism (Jones, 2001; Bull & Page, 2021). Nevertheless, these studies largely adopt sociological or psychological approaches, leaving the linguistic mechanisms through which grooming is enacted and sustained in academic discourse insufficiently theorised (Harper and Hicks 2022).

Forensic-linguistic approaches to grooming have begun to emerge within criminological research, particularly in the analysis of online interactions where language serves simultaneously as evidence and as a tool of abuse (Black et al. 2015; Kleinberg et al. 2018). These studies reveal how language choices, such as endearments, modal constructions of obligation, and gradual informalisation, signal stages of manipulation. Yet, comparable linguistic inquiry into face-to-face or hybrid grooming communication in universities remains absent, despite the similar reliance on discursive authority and institutional trust. Prior research has established that credibility, legitimacy, and power in higher education are constructed through communicative practices embedded in academic discourse (Bachmann and Inkpen 2011; Fairclough 2013). This suggests a critical gap in understanding how these discursive resources may be mobilised for grooming-related purposes within academic settings.

Responding to these theoretical, methodological, and regulatory gaps, this study aims to examine grooming in Indonesian higher education as a discursive and interactional phenomenon. Drawing on forensic linguistics, critical discourse analysis, and speech act theory, the study investigates how linguistic strategies are employed to construct dependency, legitimise authority, and normalise asymmetrical relationships within academic interactions. By identifying recurrent affective, instrumental, and symbolic language patterns, this research seeks to develop an empirically grounded Forensic Linguistic Indicator Model (FLIM) that

can support the early detection and prevention of grooming practices in academic environments.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative forensic-linguistic approach integrating Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995), Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1969), and Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to examine how language functions as a medium of manipulation and control during the grooming phase of sexual misconduct in higher education. The analysis focused on identifying speech acts that indexed relational power and tracing discursive strategies across micro (lexical), meso (interactional), and macro (institutional) levels of text. The study focused exclusively on the grooming stage, that is, communicative interactions occurring prior to any explicit sexual act, in order to capture the discursive mechanisms through which dependency, trust, and asymmetrical power relations are constructed and normalised within academic contexts.

Table 1 summarises the dataset used in this study, outlining the range, volume, and purpose of each data source. The combination of authentic digital evidence, interview transcripts, and institutional documents provides a triangulated foundation for analysing the linguistic mechanisms of grooming within academic contexts.

Tabel 1. Data Overview

Data Source	Type of Data	Quantity / Volume	Description / Purpose
Digital evidence from victims	Emails, text messages, chat logs (grooming phase only)	3 legally convicted cases (\approx 850 utterances)	Authentic communication evidence provided by victims under consent
Interview transcripts	Semi-structured interviews with victims and expert	7 participants (6 victims, 1 expert)	Supporting interpretation and validation
Institutional documents	Ethics codes, disciplinary rulings, internal reports	8 documents	Contextualising institutional discourse and response

Data Collection

Data were collected over a one-year period (September 2024-September 2025). The primary dataset consisted of authentic digital communication evidence voluntarily provided by victims, including email exchanges, text messages, and chat logs between lecturers and students. All cases involved perpetrators who had been legally convicted of sexual misconduct, ensuring that the data represented post-adjudicated cases rather than ongoing institutional investigations.

To ensure evidential authenticity, all digital materials were verified through court documents and cross-checked against participants' personal records. Only communications corresponding to the grooming phase were included in the analysis. The final corpus comprised approximately 850 utterances drawn from three legally adjudicated cases.

To enhance interpretive accuracy and analytical depth, supplementary semi-structured interviews were conducted with six victims and one forensic linguistics expert. These interviews focused on participants' interpretations of the communicative interactions and served to triangulate linguistic findings. In addition, institutional documents, including ethics codes, disciplinary rulings, and internal policy statements, were examined to contextualise the discourse of academic authority and institutional power.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted manually using an iterative, multi-stage coding process. First, open coding was applied to identify salient linguistic features associated with grooming, such as affective language, modal constructions, mitigation strategies, and directive speech acts. Second, axial coding was used to establish relationships between linguistic features and broader discursive functions, including persuasion, normalisation, and authority legitimisation. Finally, thematic coding synthesised these patterns into analytically coherent categories of affective, instrumental, and symbolic control.

To ensure analytical rigour, 20% of the dataset was subjected to a secondary review to assess coding consistency. An audit trail was maintained to document analytical decisions and category development. Reliability and interpretive validity were further strengthened through expert consultation and cross-validation between linguistic analysis, interview data, and institutional documents.

Ethical Considerations

This study involved sensitive data related to sexual misconduct and therefore adhered strictly to internationally recognised ethical standards for research involving human participants. Ethical clearance was obtained through an independent ethical review process, which confirmed that the study met ethical requirements for non-institutional research due to the nature and source of the data analysed.

Institutional permission was not sought because the study did not involve access to institutional systems, internal records, or university personnel. All primary data consisted of privately owned digital communications voluntarily provided by victims after the legal adjudication of the cases. The institutions involved were treated as contextual settings rather than as research subjects. Accordingly, participant consent, rather than institutional approval, constituted the primary ethical basis for the study.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were fully informed of the study's aims, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. All identifying information was removed, pseudonyms were used, and all data were anonymised and securely stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher. The study complied with the Declaration of Helsinki (2013) and the ethical guidelines of the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL, 2021).

Findings and Discussion

The linguistic patterns identified in the communication evidence demonstrate that grooming in higher education operates as a layered process of emotional manipulation, boundary erosion, and symbolic control. These discursive mechanisms are sustained through language that performs care and authority simultaneously, an ambivalence consistent with prior research on power and sexual misconduct in teacher–student relations (McAlinden, 2012; Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019).

Data for this study were drawn from authentic digital communication, emails, chat messages, and personal notes, collected from six victims across three legally adjudicated sexual misconduct cases. Only the grooming stage preceding any explicit sexual act was examined. The analysis reveals how routine linguistic choices progressively normalised intimacy, dependence, and control within unequal academic relationships.

Linguistic Strategies of Grooming

Three interrelated linguistic strategies emerged from manual analysis: affective persuasion, boundary blurring, and symbolic control. In the initial phase, lecturers established deceptive trust through flattering speech acts detached from academic merit, such as “*you are my most promising student*” or “*I believe you more than anyone else.*” These utterances serve to construct emotional indebtedness and dependency, resonating with Craven et al. (2006) observation that early grooming reduces victims’ psychological resistance through positive reinforcement.

The second phase involved register shifting, where formal academic address gradually turned into personal, affectionate communication using nicknames or emojis. This shift normalised intimacy and blurred hierarchical boundaries. As Steele et al. (2024) found, such linguistic familiarity often rationalises coercion as mentorship, while Lisa (2022) highlight how discourses of care are used to conceal exploitative intent.

Finally, symbolic control emerged through conditional offers and evaluative statements like “*I can help your thesis if you stay close*” or “*Don’t worry, I determine your grade.*” These utterances combine reassurance and coercion, echoing Bourdieu’s (1991) concept of *symbolic violence* and Foucault’s (1980) notion of *micro-physics of power* in institutional relations.

These three linguistic strategies form a continuum of coercive communication in which emotional intimacy, personal obligation, and institutional authority overlap seamlessly. Each stage is not discrete but recursive: the language of affection prepares the ground for dependency, while dependency sustains control through symbolic legitimacy. The subtlety of this process lies in its reversibility, utterances that appear supportive or pedagogical can, under different contexts, function as instruments of subjugation. This discursive fluidity explains why grooming within academia often evades detection: it thrives on the same communicative norms that define effective mentorship, empathy, encouragement, and accessibility.

Furthermore, the cumulative effect of these strategies produces a psycholinguistic entrapment where victims internalise manipulation as voluntary connection. Repetition of affective and conditional phrases gradually shifts the

locus of control from institutional oversight to personal loyalty. What begins as encouragement evolves into dependence, and later into obedience disguised as gratitude. The victim's interpretive frame is reshaped linguistically, care becomes compliance, and supervision becomes possession. This transformation exposes the paradox of grooming language: it maintains its coercive force precisely because it imitates the speech of kindness and trust.

This finding is analytically significant because it clarifies that affective persuasion, boundary blurring, and symbolic control function as the primary linguistic mechanisms through which grooming is enacted in academic contexts. Rather than appearing as isolated or incidental communicative choices, these strategies operate sequentially and recursively to reshape relational expectations between lecturers and students. This directly addresses the study's first research objective by demonstrating how grooming is linguistically constructed through patterned speech acts that gradually transform pedagogical interaction into asymmetrical personal dependency.

The relevance of this finding lies in its explanation of why grooming in higher education is often difficult to identify at an early stage. Each strategy draws on communicative norms that are institutionally sanctioned, encouragement, care, mentorship, and professional guidance, allowing coercive intent to remain concealed within legitimate academic discourse. By foregrounding these strategies as key findings, the study moves beyond descriptive categorisation and shows how everyday academic language can be systematically mobilised to normalise intimacy, obligation, and control without overtly violating institutional expectations.

Linguistic Evidence and Analysis

Manual coding of 850 utterances produced three dominant lexical clusters: affective, instrumental, and symbolic. Together, affective and instrumental lexis accounted for over 70% of the dataset, confirming that grooming discourse relies on persuasion and dependency rather than explicit threat. This is consistent with findings by Black et al. (2015) and O'Connell (2003), who identified emotional and utilitarian vocabulary as key scaffolds in grooming communication.

Table 2. Lexical Distribution in Grooming Communication

Category	Frequent Lexemes / Phrases	Occurrence (%)	Function
Affective lexis	trust, proud, special, care, close, comfortable	38	Building intimacy and emotional dependency
Instrumental lexis	help, project, grade, opportunity, recommendation	33	Linking academic advantage to personal compliance
Symbolic lexis	authority, supervisor, rule, loyalty, respect	17	Reinforcing hierarchical legitimacy
Neutral academic terms	data, revision, topic, citation	12	Masking coercion within academic language

The lexical distribution in Table 2 shows that grooming discourse in academia is dominated by affective and instrumental lexis (71%), revealing how emotional appeal and utilitarian promises underpin manipulative communication. Affective lexis (38%), such as *trust*, *proud*, *special*, and *care*, builds emotional closeness and dependency, creating an illusion of mentorship and mutuality. Instrumental lexis (33%), including *help*, *grade*, and *recommendation*, links academic benefits to personal compliance, a form of synthetic personalization that disguises authority as support. Symbolic lexis (17%), like *authority* and *loyalty*, legitimises hierarchy and moral obligation, while neutral academic terms (12%) mask coercive subtext within legitimate scholarly language.

The lexical hierarchy revealed in Table 2 demonstrates that grooming communication is not spontaneous but strategically structured to manage emotion, compliance, and legitimacy. The interplay of affective and instrumental lexis transforms institutional power into relational intimacy—praise and care reduce distance, while academic offers turn dependence into perceived opportunity. This controlled alternation between emotional comfort and conditional promise forms the linguistic mechanism through which persuasion becomes self-sustaining and coercion appears voluntary.

At a deeper level, the quantitative pattern exposes semantic camouflage: language that conforms to academic norms yet encodes asymmetric power. The fusion of professional and emotional vocabulary produces a hybrid register that normalises exploitation as mentorship. Here, linguistic manipulation does not operate through explicit threat but through the discursive economy of trust, where emotional language functions as symbolic currency to secure obedience. These tendencies, as later illustrated in Table 3, materialise in utterances that begin as gestures of care but culminate in subtle acts of dominance and dependency.

This lexical pattern is analytically significant because it demonstrates that grooming discourse in academic contexts is structured around persuasion and dependency rather than overt coercion. The predominance of affective and instrumental lexis directly addresses the study's second research objective by showing how emotional appeal and utilitarian promise function as the primary linguistic drivers of control. Rather than relying on explicit threat, grooming communication operates through lexical choices that are socially acceptable within academic interaction, making coercion difficult to recognise in its early stages.

The relevance of this finding lies in its explanatory power. The lexical hierarchy reveals that grooming discourse is not spontaneous but strategically organised: affective lexis establishes emotional proximity, instrumental lexis converts proximity into compliance through academic incentives, and symbolic lexis stabilises authority by invoking professional and moral legitimacy. By identifying this patterned distribution as a key finding, the study moves beyond descriptive frequency counts and demonstrates how lexical choice functions as a mechanism for sustaining asymmetrical power relations within institutional discourse.

To further illustrate how these lexical patterns are realised in context, Table 3 presents representative excerpts from the dataset. These examples capture the gradual transformation of academic discourse into personal communication, where expressions of care, support, and empathy evolve into subtle instruments of control. Each excerpt demonstrates how grooming discourse operates pragmatically,

through words that appear harmless yet progressively erode boundaries and reinforce dependency.

Table 3. Illustrative Data Excerpts

No.	Context	Data	Linguistic Strategy
(1)	Email after supervision	<p><i>Kamu istimewa. Mahasiswa se pertimu membuat saya bersemangat membimbing. Mungkin kita bisa lanjut ngobrol di kafe nanti sore?</i></p> <p>‘You’re special. Students like you make my supervision meaningful. Maybe we can continue our talk at a café this evening?’</p> <p><i>Jangan khawatir soal nilaimu, saya pastikan kamu lulus asal kamu tetap dekat dengan saya.</i></p>	Affective persuasion (expressive → directive)
(2)	Private chat	<p>‘Don’t worry about your grade; I’ll make sure you pass as long as you stay close to me’</p> <p><i>Kamu terlalu stres. Biasanya kedekatan emosional bisa membantu fokus. Percaya deh.</i></p>	Conditional promise; instrumental control
(3)	Victim’s personal documentation	<p>You seem too stressed. Emotional closeness helps productivity. You can trust me.’</p>	Symbolic legitimisation; benevolent domination

The excerpts in Table 3 illustrate how linguistic grooming progresses from emotional engagement to implicit coercion. In Excerpt (1), the utterance begins with an expressive act of praise (“*Kamu istimewa*” / “*You’re special*”) and shifts into a directive invitation. This transition demonstrates affective persuasion—language that appears caring but functions to establish intimacy beyond academic boundaries.

Excerpt (2) contains a conditional commissive (“*saya pastikan kamu lulus asal kamu tetap dekat dengan saya*” / “*I’ll make sure you pass as long as you stay close*”), linking academic privilege to personal compliance. This reflects what Fairclough (1995) calls *synthetic personalization*, where institutional power adopts the tone of personal concern to secure obedience.

In Excerpt (3), benevolence becomes a tool of control through pseudo-therapeutic language (“*kedekatan emosional bisa membantu fokus*” / “*emotional closeness helps productivity*”). This statement legitimises dependency as emotional support, aligning with Bourdieu’s (1991) notion of *symbolic violence*, where domination is naturalised through caring discourse.

Together, these examples confirm that grooming discourse relies on linguistic duality, speech that simultaneously expresses empathy and enacts control, rendering coercion linguistically invisible.

The analysis reveals that power in academic grooming is exercised through linguistic subtlety rather than explicit coercion. Language functions as an emotional and institutional weapon: expressions of care, trust, and mentorship mask mechanisms of control. Rather than commanding, perpetrators employ collaborative and affectionate tones, phrases such as “*you must trust me*” or “*we can do this together*”, to disguise hierarchical domination as partnership. This discursive construction of intimacy transforms authority into attachment, binding the victim through gratitude and emotional obligation.

Across the data, grooming emerges as a micro-level linguistic process that builds dependence and compliance through repetition and affective exchange. Personal pronouns (*you, I, we*) dominate interactions, signalling exclusivity and emotional possession. The illusion of equality linguistically isolates victims from external support, making coercion appear consensual. Grooming thus operates as a slow normalization of power through linguistic care.

Three dominant discursive modes were identified.

1. Affective language establishes trust and emotional safety that disarms resistance.
2. Instrumental language links academic privilege (grades, supervision, or recommendations) to personal compliance.
3. Symbolic language legitimises authority through moral and professional discourse.

These linguistic mechanisms demonstrate that grooming is not a sudden act but a discursive continuum of control, in which power is reproduced through everyday talk disguised as empathy. The study’s novelty lies in showing that coercion in academic settings can be forensically detected through linguistic indicators before any explicit act of abuse occurs. By integrating discourse analysis and speech act examination, this research develops the Forensic Linguistic Indicator Model (FLIM), a framework for early detection of manipulative communication within hierarchical institutions.

This model contributes not only to forensic linguistics but also to institutional policy design, offering practical tools for identifying high-risk communication patterns in supervision and mentorship. The findings redefine grooming as institutionalised linguistic coercion, transforming power into consent through language that performs care, trust, and moral legitimacy.

The qualitative evidence further strengthens this contribution by showing that linguistic grooming is not only detectable at the textual level but is also experienced and internalised by victims as a gradual transformation of meaning. The excerpts and narratives illustrate how utterances initially interpreted as care, guidance, or emotional support acquire coercive force through repetition and contextual accumulation. This directly addresses the study’s third research objective by explaining how grooming discourse reshapes victims’ interpretive frames over time, making manipulation appear relational and voluntary rather than imposed.

The relevance of this finding lies in its capacity to explain why grooming in academic contexts often remains unreported and institutionally invisible. Because each utterance remains individually defensible within prevailing academic norms, victims frequently interpret emerging discomfort as personal misunderstanding

rather than structural abuse. This discursive ambiguity allows power to operate invisibly through empathy and trust, enabling coercion to persist without explicit threat or command. By foregrounding lived experience alongside linguistic evidence, the analysis adds qualitative depth and demonstrates how grooming functions as a psycholinguistic process of entrapment within hierarchical academic relationships.

Limitations

This study is limited by its relatively small dataset, comprising communication evidence from three legally adjudicated cases and seven participants. While this scope enabled in-depth qualitative interpretation, it may not capture the full variability of grooming discourse across institutions and cultural contexts. The focus on textual and verbal communication excludes multimodal cues—such as tone, gesture, or timing—that could further illuminate the mechanics of manipulation. Additionally, manual coding, though rigorous, carries inherent subjectivity despite validation and audit measures. Future research should expand the corpus size and apply computational or multimodal discourse analysis to strengthen generalisability and methodological precision.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that academic grooming operates as a linguistic system of control, where care and professionalism are linguistically weaponised to sustain dependency and obedience. Through forensic discourse analysis, three recurrent mechanisms, affective persuasion, instrumental exploitation, and symbolic control, were identified as central to the manipulation process. The findings advance the understanding of grooming as a form of institutionalised linguistic coercion rather than purely psychological manipulation. The proposed Forensic Linguistic Indicator Model (FLIM) provides a diagnostic framework for early detection of grooming patterns, offering practical value for policy, training, and prevention in higher education. Ultimately, recognising coercive language as a precursor to abuse underscores the need for linguistic awareness in institutional governance to foster safer and more accountable academic environments.

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