"Parece q no te gustó jeje": Laughter in Online Child Sexual Grooming conversations

According to Save the Children, 1 out of 5 teenagers in Spain has been a victim of online child sexual grooming (OCSG). OCSG is a practice of communicative manipulation: groomers use language and other semiotic means, such as emojis (McMahon & Kirley, 2019), to lure their victims into sexual behaviour online and at times offline (Lorenzo-Dus et al 2016; 2020). Groomers' linguistic strategies of manipulation include victim complimenting (Lorenzo-Dus & Izura, 2017), using sexually explicit but also vague language (Lorenzo-Dus & Kinzel, 2021; Pérez-Sabater, García-Montes & Lorenzo-Dus, 2022), and coercing /threating (Chiang & Grant 2017, 2019). Crucially, these linguistic strategies entail complex facework that relies on frequent pivoting between 'nice and nasty talk' (Lorenzo-Dus, 2023). The present study focuses on a hitherto unexplored manifestation of such facework, namely use of laughing particles (e.g., haha, hehe).

Previous studies about laughing particles in WhatsApp conversations have found that their primary function is to point out something said or shared as being funny (Petitjean & Morel, 2017; König, 2019). Specifically, this study aims to identify the pragmatic functions of laughing particles used by groomers in a corpus of 70 OCSG chat logs in Spanish (104,000 words and 27,500 messages). We employ two complementary discourse-based methods, namely speech act and pragmatic analysis (Herring & Ge, 2018). A total of 1,103 laughing particles are found (jaja, jeje, jiji and jojo). Our results show that groomers use laughing particles more frequently than children do (59% compared to 41% cases) and that groomers mainly use these particles as reactions to a previous comment, usually followed by compliments to the child. A follow-up analysis of 3 frequent laughing particles (221 instances) in a sub-corpus of 20 chat logs reveals that they are being primarily employed in combination with sexually explicit words. Groomers insert laughing particles to mitigate the face-threatening effect of their illegal, sexually oriented discourse. This combination of laughing particles plus sexually explicit lexis can inform the development of AI tools aiming at the prevention, detection, and prioritization of OCSG cases by Spanish LEAs.

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