

# THE FRAMES OF ROMANCE SCAMMING

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**Abstract.** This paper studies love fraud or romance scamming as scripted communication within a commercial transaction frame. The main participants are the seller (fraudster), buyer (victim), goods (long-term romantic relationship), and money (paid by the victim). The data for this study were collected from 53 conversations between fraudsters and the author. The romance scamming frame was activated by language and lexical choices and geared to winning her trust. The process took place in stages or subframes that guided the victim towards the payment of a large sum of money. These subframes also corresponded to the different ‘subformats’ of an authentic script or ‘format’ used by romance scammers in West Africa.

**Keywords:** romance scamming; frame; script; format, love fraud

## 1. Introduction

Romance scamming or love fraud is a form of online deception in which individuals create false identities with the personal qualities regarded as desirable in a long-term partner (Cross & Layt, 2021). These fraudsters present themselves as someone in quest of an ideal soulmate. Guided by destiny, they came across the victim’s profile on a social media platform or dating site and felt irresistibly attracted to him/her. After a period of online interaction, during which they strive to gain the victim’s love and trust, an emergency arises that requires the payment of a large sum of money. Since fraudsters never have access to their bank accounts “for security reasons” or because their credit card has expired or been lost, they ask the victim for money, which they promise to pay back twofold. After extracting as much money as possible, they then disappear.

This type of deception is not new. As has been widely observed, romance scamming is a variant of the 419 advance fee scam (Levi et al., 2017), which is a modern online version of the Spanish Prisoner, a popular confidence game of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Gillespie, 2017, pp. 217-218). The sequence of events that love fraud generally follows is reflected in the multi-stage model proposed by Whitty (2013ab, 2018):

- Stage 1: profile
- Stage 2: grooming process
- Stage 3: crisis in which the fraudster requests financial assistance
- Stage 4: sexual abuse (threat to publicize sexual pictures/videos of the victim)
- Stage 5: revelation of the deception

This type of fraud is largely underreported because victims are ashamed of falling for the deception (Wang & Topalli, 2022). Even so, according to the US Federal Trade Commission, in 2022, nearly 70,000 people reported a romance scam with losses of a staggering \$1.3 billion.<sup>1</sup> These statistics indicate its effectiveness, which is based on the fraudster's ability to create an attractive context that the victim is willing to buy into in return for both emotional and financial gain.

This online fraud is constructed with written texts. Since language is the tool used to manipulate victims and to persuade them to send money, it is worth analyzing. According to Shuy (2016), linguistic analysis should be more frequently applied to fraud cases. In the past, the focus has largely been on Nigerian scam email, namely, its linguistic features (Schaffer, 2012), discourse patterns (Olajimbiti, 2018) and pragmatics (Chiluwa, 2010). More recently, Carter (2023) used discourse analysis to examine exchanges between fraudsters and victims in telephone-mediated frauds and examined the interactional techniques to gain and maintain compliance from victims, without causing alarm.

Although recent studies have targeted other aspects of love fraud (see Coluccia et al. [2020] and Bilz et al. [2023] for systematic reviews), research on love fraud language includes Dreijers and Rudziša (2020), who analyze the use of linguopsychological devices by fraudsters to lure victims into the scam scenario, and Koon and Yoong (2017), who identified the linguistic characteristics of the online interaction between scammers and their targets. Carter (2020) showed how the fraudster uses language to manipulate victims and detach them from their support network. Lee et al. (2022) applied corpus methodology to reveal linguistic features that are typical of scammer profiles on online dating portals.

Evidently, for love fraud to be successful, it is necessary for the fraudsters to choose the right words. Given the rather sketchy grammar and syntax of the average romance scammer, the burden of persuasion rests on the lexical choices made, which include words and phrases that tap into the victims' values and belief system and also connect to their desire for a partner who can fulfil their emotional and material needs. This web of words is what entraps the victims and makes them more susceptible to manipulation.

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<sup>1</sup> The median reported loss is \$4,400 (<https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/data-visualizations/data-spotlight/2023/02/romance-scammers-favorite-lies-exposed>)

Instead of using data from police reports and/or victim interviews, this study is original because it analyzes the authentic language of love fraud in a corpus of 53 conversations between romance scammers and their victim (the author), which were obtained over a two-year period (2021-2023)<sup>2</sup>. The analysis of this ongoing corpus highlighted the repetitive use of terms and phrases, which point to the use of scripts by romance scammers. All of these scripts evoke traditional frames of LOVE, COMMITMENT, TRUST, and RELATIONSHIP, based on solemn declarations, vows, guarantees, and promises.

In a parallel way, the lexical choices also activated the commercial transaction frame (Fillmore, 1982). This is hardly surprising because love fraud is basically a commercial transaction in which the fraudster offers an attractive product (relationship, status, wealth) to the victim, who is asked to purchase it at a certain price. For the transaction to be successful, the fraudster must gain the victim's trust, convince them of the value of the merchandise, and persuade them to buy it. In this frame, the victim is thus the BUYER, and the fraudster is the SELLER. The victim is asked to spend MONEY on the GOODS, which can take different forms, depending on the script. The progression of the deception not only followed the stages in Whitty (2013a, 2013b) but also corresponded to 'formats' obtained by the author from two confessed ex-scammers in Nigeria. This highlighted the heavily scripted nature of the event.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the theoretical framework. Section 3 describes the materials and methods used to carry out the study. Section 4 explains and discusses the results obtained. Section 5 presents the conclusions that can be derived from this research.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Frames

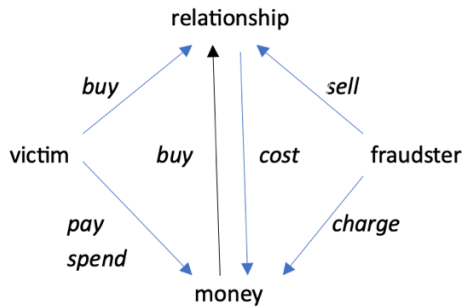
The romance scamming event is conceived as a frame that takes place in stages and involves various participants. The notion of 'frame' was introduced to linguistics by Fillmore (1982). Frame Semantics explains how meanings are structured and associated with words, and how these provide access to our conceptual system. The assumption that frames are also reflected in texts is the foundation of Frame Semantics, based on Fillmore's (1976, 1982, 1985) Case Grammar. One of its premises is that all concepts are part of a larger structure and are related in such a way that the activation of one word evokes the entire frame. One of the most frequently cited frames is the commercial transaction frame, which has four main elements: BUYER, SELLER, GOODS, and MONEY, linked by verbs such as *buy*, *sell*, *cost*, *pay*, *spend* and *charge*. The mention of any of the elements of a frame activates the whole frame.

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<sup>2</sup> Since all of the interactions in this study were between male fraudsters and a female victim, the fraudster will always be referred to as *he* and the victim as *she*.

In the romance scam event, the fraudster *sells* a romantic relationship to the victim, and *charges* the victim money for it. In a successful scam, the victim *buys* a romantic relationship and *pays* money to the fraudster. The romantic relationship *costs* money.

**Figure 1.** The romance scam ‘commercial transaction’ frame



However, before the transaction takes place, the victim must first be persuaded that the goods are worth purchasing. In other words, the fraudster must convince the victim of their honesty, trustworthiness, and sincerity. In short, the fraudster must embody all conceivable virtues. This is achieved by following a script specifically designed for this purpose.

## 2.2. Scripts

According to Schank and Abelson (1977), people’s knowledge of events consists of a variety of stereotyped sequences of routine actions. These scripts are accounts of what happens inside a frame. For example, there are scripts for events, such as going to a doctor's office or to a restaurant. Scripts provide scenarios for social interaction through language in action (St. Clair et al., 2005).

The romance scamming event involves a script or ‘format’<sup>3</sup>, which guides the social interaction between fraudster and victim. A typical love fraud or romance scam consists of the following sub-formats:

- Sub-format 1: Introduction
- Sub-format 2: Personal information and shared interests
- Sub-format 3: Prelude to love
- Sub-format 4: Love declaration
- Sub-format 5: Love confirmation and consolidation
- Sub-format 6: Trust building

<sup>3</sup> Term for the ‘script’ used by fraudsters in West Africa.

### Sub-format 7: Crisis and request for money

The use of scripts by romance scammers was confirmed in the corpus data, which showed the repetition of words, phrases, and entire paragraphs by different fraudsters in their effort to extract money from the victim.

## 3. Materials and methods

### 3.1. Subjects

The data for this study were obtained over a two-year period (2021-2023) and were extracted from conversations between 53 fraudsters and the author, who assumed the role of the target. Since the author was the only ‘victim’, no informed consent was necessary. Also helpful were three romance scamming formats widely used in Nigeria<sup>4</sup>.

The fraudsters in this study all identified as male in false profiles that they had created on Facebook. Twenty claimed to be high-ranking army officers, usually generals (*Gen*), deployed in Afghanistan, Korea, Yemen, or Syria; thirteen said that they were doctors (*Doc*) working for the United Nations in Syria, Yemen or Somalia; eight described themselves as oil riggers (*Oil*) on oil platforms in the Gulf of Mexico, the North Sea, or the Persian Gulf; nine portrayed themselves as engineers (*Eng*) who worked on ships or were in charge of expensive projects in Saudi Arabia, Cyprus, or Ireland. Two were ship captains (*Capt*), sailing the “high sea”; and one was a retired UNICEF director (*UNICEF*), who was in London, trying to claim an inheritance for his 13-year-old daughter. However, in 18 cases in which IPLogger was used to trace their locations, five fraudsters were found to be in Nigeria; two were in Ghana; and 11 were using a VPN to disguise their real location.

Their self-reported ages ranged from 45 to 78. They were all widowed or divorced, with no family except for one child, who was in the care of another person (Whitty, 2013a). Interaction began when the fraudster spontaneously posted a message similar to the following on the author’s Facebook page:

- (1) Hello gorgeous lady, sorry you don't know me. I was browsing when I came across your adorable profile. It is so awesome going through your timeline. Sending you a request without your consent would be rude of me. If you don't mind, kindly add me up but if you do not wish to, then I'm so sorry that I invaded your privacy. Please accept my apologies.

The author portrayed herself as a lonely widow, aged 57, with grown children. Although the conversations all began on Facebook Messenger, they were rapidly

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<sup>4</sup> The source of the scripts are two former romance scammers in Nigeria who wished to remain anonymous.

transferred to GoogleChat, Telegram or Skype because of the ‘nature’ of the individual’s job.

- (2) Due to the nature of my job am not expected on Facebook, you have Gmail? (Doc10)
- (3) But I don’t often come online on Facebook due to the nature of my job (Gen14)
- (4) I’m not always on here due to the nature of my job add me up on google chat so we can talk alright (Oil05)

The fraudsters and victim subsequently chatted at least twice a day during time periods ranging from one week to four months. Their ‘relationship’ lasted until the fraudster asked the victim for money. In all cases, a direct request for money ended the relationship. After the victim refused to pay, the fraudster was informed that he had been deceived, and that the data collected would be used in a linguistic study.

### 3.2. Corpus methodology

All of the conversations between the scammers and the author were compiled in a corpus and uploaded to SketchEngine, a corpus manager and text analysis software developed by Lexical Computing CZ s.r.o. (Kilgarriff et al., 2014). The corpus has a total of 65,251 sentences, 724,393 words, and 843,037 tokens. Corpus analysis was based on data extracted with the Concordance, WordSketch, Keywords, and Thesaurus modules of SketchEngine.

The methodology began with the extraction of the key words from the corpus. The words were then grouped in semantic categories and their relations specified. The most frequent terms in the corpus were extracted by means of the Keyword module in Sketch Engine, which compares corpora and identifies what is unique or typical. The RomanceScam corpus was compared to the SketchEngine EnglishWeb2021 corpus (21,52,268,268,493 words) to identify keywords in the form of individual words, multi-word expressions, and N-grams (any sequence of tokens). In this case, the most informative terms were JOB (occupation, profession), RELATIONSHIP (commitment, marriage), SOULMATE (fiancée, wife,) trust, FEELING (love, trust) PAYMENT (money charge, fee), and GOODS (portfolio, gold, jewelry).

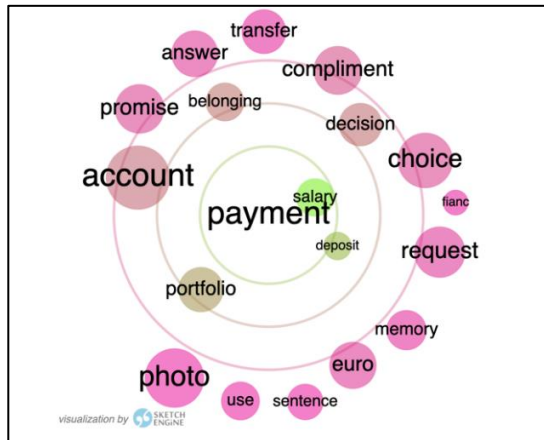
To define the terms and specify semantic relations, the WordSketch module was used to process the collocates of each term as well as others in the immediate vicinity. The results for each word were organized according to its grammatical relations with other words and the meaning dimensions highlighted in the premodification. For example, the WordSketch for *payment* includes the following information: (i) modifiers of *payment*; (ii) verbs with *payment* as object; (iii) verbs with *payment* as subject; and (iv) *payment* and/or another word. This information was helpful since grammatical relations are often pointers to the semantic connections of a word to other words.

Table 1. WordSketch for *payment*

nouns modified by "payment"	verbs with "payment" as object	modifiers of "payment"	verbs with "payment" as subject	"payment" and/or ...
<b>method</b> ... payment methods	<b>involve</b> ... It must involve the payment of fees on	<b>period</b> ... from the previous period , payment can be made	<b>compound</b> ... compounded by the payment	<b>period</b> ... from the previous period , payment can be made
<b>receipt</b> ... payment receipt	<b>make</b> ... make the payment	<b>month</b> ... month payment	<b>leave</b> ... payments left	<b>outlet</b> ... outlets and complete payment
<b>detail</b> ... the payment details	<b>receive</b> ... registered only after receiving the payment for the duration	<b>mortgage</b> ... mortgage payments	<b>be</b> ... payment is made	<b>delivery</b> ... delivery and payment
<b>procedure</b> ... payment procedures	<b>annex</b> ... Annex the payment	<b>complete</b> ... complete payment		<b>saving</b> ... savings and my payment
<b>outlet</b> ... payment remittance outlets	<b>require</b> ... required payment	<b>Bitcoin</b> ... Bitcoin payment		<b>expense</b> ... expenses and mortgage payments
<b>Mode</b> ... Payment Mode	<b>want</b> ... want a payment	<b>necessary</b> ... necessary payment		<b>transfer</b> ... payments , bank transfers
<b>information</b> ... the payment information	<b>believe</b> ... believe that payment	<b>card</b> ... card payments		<b>connection</b> ... connections , and payments
<b>instruction</b> ... payment instructions	<b>get</b> ... get the payment	<b>credit</b> ... credit card payments		
<b>transfer</b> ... payments , bank transfers	<b>do</b> ... payment done	<b>bank</b> ... bank payments		
<b>tomorrow</b> ... will make the payment tomorrow . PFB	<b>be</b> ... is the only payment	<b>big</b> ... big payment		
<b>today</b> ... payment today	<b>have</b> ... have payments	<b>first</b> ... first payment		
<b>Okay</b> ... payment Okay		<b>only</b> ... only payment		

The Thesaurus module in SketchEngine was also informative. This module is an automatically generated list of synonyms or words in the same semantic domain. The list is based on the context in which the words appear in the corpus. Words with similar collocations were thus assumed to be similar in meaning or connected in some way within the romance scamming event.

Figure 2. Thesaurus bubble diagram for *payment*



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## 4. Results and discussion

Corpus data were extracted for each section of the script or format. In each case, the concordances highlighted that the fraudsters were disguising a commercial transaction frame as a developing romantic relationship. In this context, the declaration of love was actually a contract to buy the goods (or relationship) offered by the fraudster so that the victim would feel obliged to pay.

### 4.1. Introduction

The key terms of this first stage were *job (occupation, profession)*, *age, destiny (fate, God)*, and *photo (picture)*. In the introduction phase, the fraudster's objective was to impress the victim, make her continue chatting with him, and discover whether she was open to a romantic relationship.

#### 4.1.1 Job

The initial information given consisted of the fraudster's occupation. All fraudsters had prestigious professions:

- (5) I'm a United States commanding General but I am currently here in Syria for a US Peacekeeping Mission, Aleppo Military Base. (*Gen13*)
- (6) I work under the united nation North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) working as an orthopedic surgeon. I treat bullet wounds and broken bones currently now am in a peacekeeping mission in sadad Syria. (*Doc 1*)
- (7) I'm a Marine Engineer. I'm currently serving in the Oil Platform here in Ireland. (*Oil03*)

The fraudster then queried the victim about her profession, age, marital status, and family. This provided information regarding her earning power, whether she was still working, her relationship availability, and family members who might interfere with their relationship.

#### 4.1.2. Age

Age, for example, was important because fraudsters prefer older victims, who are generally more financially secure. In fact, the older and more unattractive, the better.<sup>5</sup> The statement that age is not a barrier is thus part of the script. In fact, the phrase that "age is just a number" appeared in some form in almost all conversations even when the self-reported ages of fraudsters and the victim were very similar.

- (8) [...] age is just a number. (Gen 03, Gen 17, Gen19, Doc01, Doc02, Doc09, Doc14, Oil07)

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<sup>5</sup> Personal communication from a former romance scammer in Lagos, Nigeria.



### 4.1.3. *Destiny*

Another vital part of the script was the cosmic force that had brought fraudster and victim together. All of the fraudsters wished the victim to believe that some higher power (Destiny, God, Faith, or Fate) had caused their paths to cross. In fact, six of the fraudsters used exactly the same phrase to state this to the victim.

- (9) I have a feeling that destiny brought us together. (Gen05, Gen16, Eng01, Eng04, Oil01, Oil03, Oilr05, Doc09, Doc10, Doc13, Doc14)

Even so, other fraudsters preferred to attribute the meeting to God or Fate.

- (10) God brought us together on the internet. (*Gen06*)  
 (11) having you alone in my life is enough fate and assurance that I'm on the right path of having a united, happy, peaceful and lively family. (*Oil07*)

### 4.1.4. *Photo*

From the very beginning, all of the fraudsters asked the victim to provide photos/pictures of herself.

- (12) If you don't mind, can I ask you for a few of your photos? (*Gen05*)  
 (13) I hope you don't mind sending me 2 of your photo? (*Doc01*)  
 (14) I will like you to send me some of your pictures. (*Oil03*)

The fraudsters invariably claimed that they were unable to send more photos of themselves for security reasons. In contrast, they continuously requested photos of their victim, which they profusely complimented with the following scripted phrase:

- (15) You look so enchanting, highly like goddess. (*Doc10, Gen06, Gen19, Eng04, Eng07*)

However, even if the victim had been the twin sister of Quasimodo, her photo would still have elicited the same extravagant praise because of the fraudsters' need to establish a relationship. In fact, when they gazed at her likeness for the first time, they claimed to be rendered speechless. This feeling was so 'unique' that four fraudsters described it in exactly the same words and with the same spelling error (*conceteration*).

- (16) Oh dear, I have received your photos and I actually lost **conceteration** all by looking at your photos, I must confess that you are really an angel and that you are such a gorgeous lady. (*Oil03, Oilrig07, Oil09, Eng05*)

The photos also made their brain feel intoxicated to the point that their head was "going whiskey". This somewhat unusual phrase was in the script of eight fraudsters.

- (17) In a nutshell, you actually look amazing, and my head is going whiskey right now. (Eng04, Eng07, Oil03, Oil07, Eng05, Gen11, Gen05, Gen09)

As the ultimate tribute to the victim's beauty, six of the fraudsters said that they had used her photo as wallpaper.

- (18) Guess what? I used your picture as my wallpaper, because you are indeed a beautiful and attractive woman. (Eng01, Eng07, Doc01, Oilr01, Oil03, Oil07)

Needless to say, if any of the pictures had been mildly revealing, this would have indicated her willingness to send other more explicit photos in the future.<sup>6</sup> Such photos would have been used to blackmail her later on.

## 4.2. Personal information and shared interests

This part of the event provided biographical information, finances, and shared preferences regarding colors, food, music, activities, etc.

### 4.2.1. Personal information

The fraudsters had had sad lives and claimed to be alone in the world. In fact, all of them had been raised in an orphanage or by adoptive parents, a teacher or a Catholic priest. All were single fathers of a son or daughter, who was in the care of someone else. This story inevitably resurfaced in the payment phase to inspire pity. Strikingly, seven fraudsters had exactly the same life story.

- (19) I'm the only child of my parents. My parents died long ago. my father was a military man who died in a military war when I was 7 years old, and my mother died when I was 13 years old. I was raised by a neighbouring teacher. Growing up was quite difficult for me, but I never gave up. (Oil01, Oil03, Doc09, Gen08, Gen09, Gen13, Eng05).

Marriage to one of these men was hazardous because in all cases, their wives had either died of cancer or had been killed in a traffic accident. The tragedy was always announced with "I lost my wife".

- (20) I lost my wife to ovarian cancer. (Oil08)  
 (21) I lost my wife 5 years ago in a car accident. (Doc10)  
 (22) I lost my wife to the cold hands of death. (Doc09)

In this part of the script, the fraudsters informed the victim that they were very wealthy and possessed various properties and cars. They then asked about her occupation and material possessions.

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<sup>6</sup> Personal communication from ex-scammer.

- (23) So, are you living in a rented apartment or your own house? (*Doc09, Oil02*)  
 (24) Do you have your own house or rent? (*Oil03*)

They were also interested in whether she had a car.

- (25) Can you drive a vehicle? Do you have a car? (*Eng02, Eng06, Eng09, Gen02, Gen13, Gen19*)

These questions helped the fraudster evaluate her financial status and calculate how much she could be ‘charged’ for the relationship.

#### 4.2.2. *Shared interests or my favorite things*

In the romance scamming playbook, an important objective is to become intimate chatmates. One of the first steps towards digital intimacy is to coincide in as many likes and dislikes as possible. All 53 conversations in the corpus thus included queries regarding favorite color, food, flower, music, and movie. Example (26) shows the importance of a favorite color in a relationship. (16 fraudsters).

- (26) What’s/What is your favorite color? (*Oil01, Oilr08 Eng02, Eng04, Eng05, Eng08, Doc05, Doc07, Doc08, Doc09, Gen02, Gen05, Gen06, Gen14, Gen16, Gen20*)

Favorite food was also an important issue.

- (27) So tell me, what is your favorite food? (*Doc03, Doc07, Doc08, Eng02, Eng06, Gen02, Gen04, Gen09, Gen13, Gen14, Gen19, Oilrig08*)

This game of Twenty Questions was often tiresome for both victim and fraudster. In fact, *Gen01* asked the victim the entire list of questions all at once, although the most important was the final question about helping someone in need. He then expressed his hope that the list was not excessive.

- (28) Just to get to know u better:  
 Do u wear jewelry?  
 What's the funniest thing that has ever happened to you?  
 What was your most embarrassing moment?  
 What things do you feel passionate about?  
 Do you believe in love at first sight?  
 If you had three wishes, what would you wish for?  
 What do you want most from life?  
 What I want most from life is love, happiness and peace.  
 What do you do when you feel sad or depressed?  
 What three words best describe you?  
 What is your idea of a perfect date?  
**Would you ever spend fund on assisting your partner when in trouble?**  
 Hope this is not too much for you. (*Gen01*)

If nothing else, these questions helped to create the illusion of a conversational exchange.

### 4.3. Prelude to love

After arriving at a consensus regarding favorite color, food, flower, movie, etc., the fraudsters began to advertise themselves as an attractive product for the victim to purchase.

#### 4.3.1 A valuable acquisition

The fraudsters usually emphasized their attractiveness by self-reporting their positive qualities. However, in some cases, the list was excessively long and achieved the opposite effect (Camiciottoli, 2011). Examples (29-31) show that none of these gentlemen suffered from a lack of self-esteem.

- (29) I am a man of High Moral Integrity, Kind, honest, loving, funny, and very Supportive. I am a man with a soft heart, loving, caring, honest, compassionate and affectionate. (*Gen01*)
- (30) I'm a gentle man with big heart and beautiful personality, a man with a good sense of humor, a man that knows what it takes to be in a good relationship. (*Doc01*)
- (31) I am a sincere, honest, dedicated, responsible, romantic, and passionate gentleman with a good sense of humor and strong values. (*Gen11*)

In many cases, the list of virtues was complemented by charitable activities.

- (32) I usually visit the motherless baby home every holiday to spend some quality time with the orphanage children there and also give my little support to them the best way I can. (*Gen01, Gen05, Gen11, Gen12, Oilr01, Oil03, Eng07, Doc14*)

Various fraudsters even wanted the victim to direct the hospitals and orphanage that they would build on their estates. The objective was not only to enhance the credibility of the fraudster, but also to involve the victim in his life.

- (33) As for me, I don't want to rush things after I retire. I also plan to build a hospital, an orphanage and a hotel. (*Gen01*)
- (34) We like to build an estate where we'll have a big private hospital inside, which my destiny wife we be managing. (*Gen06*)
- (35) I'm actually planning on having a private orphanage home for homeless children when the fund is released. (*UNICEF*)

The supreme virtue, however, was religious faith. The implicit assumption was that if the victim were a true Christian, she would be more willing to unselfishly help a person in need, especially someone like the fraudster, who goes to church every Sunday, reads the Bible, and spends his life in constant prayer.

- (36) I always say my prayers and read my bible every day. I also listen to church services online and I read Christian books. (*Gen03*)
- (37) I do try to read my Bible every day. (*Gen14*)

This emphasis on religious faith and weekly church attendance was a way of preparing the victim to respond positively to his requests for money. Two of the fraudsters even set themselves up as examples of good Samaritans, who would help strangers in need.

- (38) Yes, I would help [a stranger] in anyway, because God in heaven says it is good to help those that are in need and he loves a cheerful giver. I think it's important to have compassion for others in need of help. (*Gen02, Gen04*)

Not surprisingly, all fraudsters had a keen interest in the victim's religious faith. In fact, an important religious buzzword in the fraudsters' lexicon was *God fearing*.

- (39) Tell me, are you a God fearing woman? (*Doc01, Gen02, Gen04, Gen13, Gen14, Eng06*)

#### 4.3.2. *Emotions, inspiration, hopes, and dreams*

The fraudsters also expressed a keen interest in the victim's emotions as well as her hopes, and dreams. One of the standard questions in this phase was related to things that the fraudster and victim disliked. As reflected in example (40), most of the fraudsters used exactly the same scripted phrase to underline their utter abhorrence of lies and deceit:

- (40) For me I hate lies. [...] Anything fame, lies, deceit, cheating, quarreling, and argument turns me off. (*Doc01, Doc08, Doc14, Gen01, Gen04, Gen13, Gen16, Gen19, Eng08*)

Another frequent query about negative emotions was how to calm down when angry.

- (41) How do you feel when someone upsets you? And what will you do to calm yourself down? (*Doc01, Doc03, Doc08, Doc14, Gen02, Gen04, Gen08, Gen13, Gen19, Eng08, Eng09*)

The fraudsters also asked the victim about her inspirations, hopes, and dreams, mostly to elicit information about her ideal partner.

- (42) What are your goals or dreams in life? (*Doc03, Doc08, Gen04, Gen13, Eng02, Eng04*)

As for the fraudsters, 11 of them had exactly the same life goal.

- (43) I feel lonely a lot of times and that's why I need to find my true love, a person that will love me as much as I'll love her. (*Doc01, Doc06, Doc09, Doc10, Doc14, Eng05, Eng07, Gen05, Gen08, Oilrigger03, Oilrigger05*)

### 4.3.3. Love at first text

The fraudsters also continuously asked the victim whether she believed in the possibility of love at first sight. The purpose was to establish a relation of romantic love with the victim so that she would ultimately decide to purchase it.

- (44) Do you believe in love at first sight? (*Doc06, Capt01, Gen14, Eng01, Eng07*)
- (45) Do you believe that a true love can take place within a twinkle of an eye? (*Doc09*)

Another frequent topic was the need for secrecy. As reflected in examples (46-47), the fraudster did not wish the victim to communicate with anyone else about their relation or about his possessions.

- (46) Honey, I don't want you to say a word about this to anyone, this is my top secret and I want this to remain between us, honey. (*Gen16*).
- (47) Since I have 4 months left to be home, we should remain a surprise to our family (*Gen20*).

The next step was the declaration of eternal love, which took the budding relationship to the next level.

## 4.4. True love

The natural culmination of the process of getting acquainted by self-reporting positive qualities, discovering shared tastes and interests, and affirming emotional compatibility was a declaration of love. The fraudsters professed their love on an average of five days to three weeks after the friend request on Facebook. However, in a few cases, it was 'love at first chat'. When the victim expressed her surprise at such an early declaration, the fraudster strategically retreated and waited for a better moment to further the relationship. Examples (48-51) are only some of the numerous declarations of eternal love.

- (48) I love you so much I can't even explain it! Forever and ever baby. (*Doc01*)
- (49) I love you from the moon and back. (*Gen01, Gen05, Doc03, Doc06*)
- (50) I love you for as long as I live. (*Oilrigger08*)
- (51) I love you with all my heart (*Gen02*)

A declaration of love occurred in 52 of the 53 conversations. This was a crucial point in the script because the length of the relationship then depended on how long it took for the victim to reciprocate.

## 4.5. Love confirmation and consolidation

During this stage, the fraudsters reiterated their devotion and used continuous endearments (e.g., *my darling, beloved queen, princess, beautiful angel*, etc.). In this phase, the relationship was in a sort of holding pattern.

Conversations were daily interactions in which the fraudster queried the victim about her work, daily activity, health, and food intake. For some reason, there was special interest in whether she had eaten and what she had eaten. There were also the ubiquitous questions of “What time is it?”, “What is the weather condition there?”, and “What are you doing right now?”.

During this period, the fraudster inserted himself into the victim’s routine. If she was having any type of health or family issue, he appeared onscreen daily to ask how she was feeling, and how she planned to spend the day. He continuously sent messages to say that he had included her in his prayers so that she would always be safe. He also requested her prayers for himself.

- (52) I would always include you in my prayers. So the angels watch over you every single minutes of the day and night . (*Oil08*)
- (53) Remember that you are always in my thoughts and prayers. (*Eng05*)
- (54) Hope you remember to pray for me my love. (*Gen05*)

Apart from the endearments used throughout conversations, fraudsters bombarded the victim with phrases that defined her role within the context of the relationship. There were various examples of what the victim meant to them. For some of them, she was their entire universe (*my absolute everything, my world, my life*). For others, she was a BODY PART (*my heart*), a COSMIC FORCE (*my destiny*) or a deep EMOTION (*my happiness, my inspiration, my only hope*). Other possibilities included SOCIAL ROLE (*my partner for life, my darling wife*), WEATHER EVENT (*my sunshine on a rainy day*), or BEVERAGE (*my morning coffee*).

Multiple times, each fraudster promised the victim eternal love and vowed that he would be there for her forever. There were even plans for marriage, which was the definitive contract that would oblige her to pay what he asked.

- (55) I know how to make my woman contented with my love and if I eventually or you finally become my wife, I will love you with all my heart, respect you, care for you, cherish you so much and treat you like a Queen. (*Doc01, Doc04, Doc09, Doc14, Oil01, Oil03, Oil07, Gen05, Gen11, Eng07*)

In some cases, there were even formal marriage proposals by fraudsters who could not wait to be wed to the victim.

- (56) I have already made up my mind to spend the rest of my life with you sweetheart, please my love will you marry me and grown old with me? (*Gen02*)
- (57) As Time goes on, I would like to take you as my wife if you want because I would like for you to be my lovely wife (*Capt01*).

Another frequent ploy was to tie the knot virtually. At this point, the fraudster would often begin to call the victim “his wife” as though they were already married.

- (58) I love you to the moon and back, my sweet and darling wife. (*Gen01*)  
 (59) May you have a merry and cheerful day, my beautiful wife, and I could kiss the world for what it has given me. (*Gen05*)

In this stage of the fraud, *promising* was the predominant speech act. The fraudsters made promises to the victim as a way of enhancing their credibility. According to Searle (1969), a promise is a commissive speech act in which the speaker expresses a proposition that is a future action that he plans to carry out. The promise must not only be something that the hearer wants done but also something that the speaker intends to do. The speaker should also believe that the utterance places him under the obligation to carry out the action.

Examples (60-62) show a selection of the many promises made to the victim, none of which fulfilled Searle's felicity conditions. Their purpose was to reinforce the victim's belief in the fraudster's deep commitment to their relationship as well as to enhance his self-proclaimed credibility and trustworthiness.

- (60) I don't always make promises, but when I do, I always try to keep them. My promise of love always stands, I will never lie to you. (*Gen01*)  
 (61) I am promising you that I will always love, cherish, respect, and protect you and that nothing will be able to separate us from each other. (*Gen05*)  
 (62) I promise to protect you, cherish you, take good care of you, honor you, love you forever. (*Oil07*)

Such promises of love were inevitably linked to requests for money because the fraudster [SELLER] wished the victim [BUYER] to purchase a romantic relationship [GOODS] that he is offering. The requests were accompanied by more solemn promises to promptly pay the victim back.

- (63) I'm willing to pay back in the next 72hrs. I always keep to my promises. (*Oil07*).  
 (64) I promise that I will repay you for everything as soon as possible. (*Doc12*)  
 (65) I promise you that you will never regret helping me. I promise you that you will have your money back once I'm out of the sea. (*Oil05*)  
 (66) I will pay you back immediately. (*Gen11*)

Such promises were part of the commercial transaction and in the nature of a contract. The victim's silence was interpreted as implicit acceptance of his promises. It was as though by accepting them, she had signed a contract to buy the merchandise offered.

#### 4.6. Trust

Previous to the request for money was the need to build absolute trust. To do this, the fraudster could only depend on the credibility accrued from his false identity, self-reported list of virtues, prayers for the victim's well-being, the rosy picture painted of their future, and above all, the magic of his words.



For example, *trust* was always linked to other positive words. In our corpus, its most frequent collocates were *honesty*, *understanding*, *heart*, *love*, *respect*, and *relationship*, all of which had high LogDICE scores in the corpus. In fact, trust is central to the romance scamming event because only absolute trust can make the deception work.

In this regard, *honesty* had the highest score as a collocate of *trust* because trust and honesty were perceived by fraudsters as important qualities of a good relationship. Example (67) was evidently a part of the script.

- (67) I will appreciate us being good friends in **sincerity, honesty, and trust**. to share ideas and get to know each other better. (*Doc01, Doc02, Doc05, Doc14, Gen02, Gen06, Oil09, Eng04*)
- (68) Distance doesn't matter if you really love me, what matters most is your **honesty and trust** for this relationship to work out. (*Gen04*)

## 4.7. Crisis

Of the 53 fraudsters, 31 reached the crisis stage and completed the script. Of the 22 fraudsters that did not finish it, 15 vanished without any explanation; three stopped texting because they were insulted when the author corrected their grammar and spelling; one became belligerent when the victim did not agree with them; one requested revealing photos; and two decided to stop scamming and confessed their real identity. A total of ten generals, nine doctors, six oil riggers, four engineers, one ship captain and one former UNICEF director completed the format. The type of crisis that ensued largely depended on the profession of the fraudster. However, in all cases, the payment of a large sum of money by the victim was the entry condition for the romantic relation to continue.

### 4.7.1. Generals

Five generals had millions of dollars as well as gold and jewels, gifted by grateful millionaires and Saudi royals, whom the general had saved from certain death. This fortune was to be sent to the victim by a security company, or in a portfolio with a 'UN diplomat'. However, to receive the general's possessions, it was first necessary to pay a 'small fee' ranging from \$1650 to \$4000. When the victim expressed her disbelief at the amount, the fraudsters said that the money was nothing in comparison to the fortune that she would enjoy when they were finally together.

Of the other generals, *Gen06* requested payment for emergency leave. *Gen16* needed money for a flight ticket home. *Gen11*, *Gen15*, and *Gen19* asked for steam cards to 'update' their Internet connection. Of all these generals, *Gen11* was the most philanthropic because as part of his UN peacekeeping mission in Yemen, he used his own money to buy weapons for his soldiers. However, this expense had left him without the \$600 needed to update his computer.

In contrast, *Gen02* was the unluckiest because after being so traumatized by an ISIS attack that he needed to retire (cost \$1500), he was then kidnapped by bandits and held for ransom (\$30,000, subsequently bargained down to \$15,000). During his captivity, his son was the victim of a drive-by shooting at his boarding school, and he also needed money to pay medical bills.

#### 4.7.2. Doctors

All of the doctors who completed the script were under contract with the United Nations in Syria, Yemen, Greece or Turkey. *Doc03* and *Doc04* wanted to send the author a box of gold for which she was asked to pay fees of \$2750 - \$4500. *Doc08*, *Doc09*, and *Doc10* wished to abandon their respective posts to meet her. Nevertheless, the procedure was for their fiancée (the victim) to write the United Nations and request emergency leave in their name. The UN response to her e-mail stated that all workers were required to pay a fee ranging from \$1550 to \$7870, depending on the number of weeks of vacation leave. In contrast, *Doc07* and *Doc12* chose to directly request money for plane tickets from Greece and Turkey so that they could return home to the USA, marry the victim, and retire. Finally, *Doc01* only asked for a gift card to update his internet connection.

#### 4.7.3. Oil riggers

The oil riggers had the most diverse reasons for requesting money. *Oil08* asked the author to pay a fee for the early termination of his contract and the cost of a plane ticket to Spain. *Oil03* needed \$750 for boarding school tuition and the living expenses of his children. In contrast, *Oil02*, who had fallen off the oil platform into the sea and lost everything, requested money to pay the salary of his employees and to upgrade his computer. *Oil07* also needed money for the Internet so that he could continue to chat with the author. *Oil05* wished her to pay a total of \$30,000 (later reduced to \$18,200) to replace malfunctioning equipment on his oil rig.

#### 4.7.4. Marine engineers/ship captains

The problems of the four engineers and a ship captain were mostly related to their faulty Internet connection (*Eng01*, *Eng05*, *Eng07*, *Capt02*). However, *Eng05* also had a chest of gold that he wished the victim to receive for a considerable fee, and *Capt02* had a box of money that needed to be urgently shipped from Turkey to Italy. However, the most original was *Eng08*, who requested funds to pay for a helicopter that would take him from an undefined location in the Indian Ocean (where he was being attacked by Somali pirates) to Cyprus, the location of his immense fortune.

#### 4.7.5. Former UNICEF director

After falling deeply in love with the victim's Internet photo, the ex-UNICEF director (*UNICEF*) flew to London to secure an inheritance left to his 13-year-old daughter by his late and unlamented wife. Nevertheless, because of a clause in the will, this money could only be obtained if he were married or engaged. He thus asked the victim to marry him (despite the fact that they had never met). After rapidly accepting his marriage proposal, the victim was contacted by the director of a bank in Ghana, who requested her bank information so that they could transfer the inheritance to her. After the bank 'verified' the victim's identity, she was then asked to pay a 'small fee' of only £2940 to secure the inheritance of four million pounds.

#### 4.8. Payment

Payment was the last phase of the commercial transactions. In this stage, a request was made for a significant sum of money to resolve a sudden crisis triggered by the attack of enemy forces, pirates, faulty equipment, need for urgent leave or retirement, lack of a good Internet connection, or a family emergency. This payment was to be made in the form of a bank transfer to a money mule, Bitcoin or even gift cards.

Curiously, the verb *pay* was rarely used to formulate the request. The fraudster informed the author that she was expected to "take care of" or make a *payment*, *fee*, *charge*, or *fee*. In many cases, the passive voice was used without any mention of the payee (*when/as soon as payment is made*). There was also the use of *we* to indicate that the fraudster would also pay the sum.

- (69) I think there would be a little **delivery charges** in order for it to be delivered to you in your city and I want you to take care of that. (*Gen01*)
- (70) Within 48 hours if **payment** is made it will be approved. (*Gen02*)
- (71) As soon as the **payment** is made, I will be coming immediately. (*Gen06*)
- (72) I was informed about this **payment** but I didn't know the fees will be so high. (*UNICEF*)
- (73) We have to **pay a little fee**. I believe that will cover everything, my Queen. (*Doc09*)

When the author raised the possibility of borrowing money from her family, the fraudster asked her to keep their relation a secret so as to isolate her (Carter, 2021). Evidently, none of the fraudsters wished her to divulge any information regarding their relationship (or financial transaction) to the family.

- (74) Oh no darling, we shouldn't do anything that will prevent us or stop us from being together. We have to keep our relationship between me and you till I come over ok? (*Doc09*)
- (75) First, I must say I'm very disappointed at you for including third party into our relationship or our privacy. (*Gen11*)

When the author expressed her reluctance to pay the sum, the fraudster invariably vowed that he would pay her back without fail.

- (76) Okay honey just send me the money of the flight ticket when I come over then **I will pay you back.** (*Eng05*)  
 (77) Just try and make the payment, **I will pay you back** when I get there. (*Doc10*)  
 (78) Honey, please help me with it **I will pay you back** my love. (*Gen05*)

#### 4.9. Revelation

Generally speaking, in a romance scam event, it is the victim that eventually realizes that they have been defrauded. The fraudster finally disappears only when the victim cannot or will not send them any more money. However, in this study, it was the victim that informed the fraudster that he had been deceived and that the commercial transaction had failed. In this case, the BUYER (victim) refused to pay the MONEY because she did not wish to buy the GOODS (romantic relation) offered by the SELLER (fraudster).

To signal the end of their relationship, the author sent the fraudster a final message to inform him that she had been aware of the deception from the beginning, and that their conversations would be used as data in a research study. At that point, many fraudsters broke off the interaction and blocked her. Those who did not block her showed the following types of reaction.

- (79) [SADNESS] I'm totally heartbroken right now. I pray the Lord will find me the right woman of my heart. (*Doc09*)  
 (80) [DENIAL] Oh my God, Pamela, what has come over you? You're not the Pamela I used to know anymore. You have changed (*Gen11*).  
 (81) [PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE] I don't blame you, thanks for wasting my time. (*Doc10*)  
 (82) [INSULT] You are a Dog, you have no sense. MUMU<sup>7</sup> (*Gen03*)  
 (83) [MORAL REPROACH] You are a very wicked woman. Very bad of your character. Continue with your wickedness (*Oil01*)  
 (84) [ANGER] No Amazon card, okay, send me you nude. Honey, send me your nude. (*Eng08*)  
 (85) [THREAT] My heart is broken, and I don't need to prove shit to you but trust me you will regret your actions for you will find out the truth someday. (*Oilrig05*).  
 (86) [RESIGNATION] Okay, so what now? You want to know me? (*Gen18*)  
 (87) [HUMOR] Lol, did you study criminology? Wtf 🤔🤔🤔 (*Gen04*)

Examples (86-87) were the reactions of the fraudsters who subsequently confessed and became the source of the scripts. If nothing else, the variety of emotions triggered showed that those fraudsters that completed the scam truly believed in the eventual success of the commercial transaction.

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<sup>7</sup> “moron” or “idiot” in Nigerian pidgin English

## 5. Conclusion

This study has examined the love fraud or romance scamming event based on corpus data collected from the author's conversations with 53 fraudsters. The corpus of romance scam interactions compiled in SketchEngine highlights the repetition of words and phrases by different scammers and confirms the use of scripts to implement the scam. Using the five-stage process model described in Whitty (2013a,b) as well as the subformats in actual scripts or formats used by fraudsters in Nigeria and Ghana, romance scamming was analyzed as a type of scripted communication within the context of the commercial transaction frame.

In this frame, the victim is the BUYER, and the fraudster is the SELLER. The BUYER is asked to pay MONEY (Bitcoin, gift cards, bank transfer) for the reception of gold, jewelry, gift cards, plane tickets, etc., with the goal of helping the SELLER keep their possessions or fly home. However, in this type of transaction, the GOODS purchased actually consist of a relationship with the fraudster. Her implicit agreement to pay a large amount of money reflects her commitment to their relationship and her blind trust in the fraudster or in his false identity. This seems to blind her to the myriad red flags that appear during their online interactions.

The widespread success of romance scamming, as reflected in the huge amounts of money lost by victims throughout the world, shows how powerful language is as a means of persuasion. The choice of the right words by fraudsters causes victims to ignore their multiple grammatical and spelling errors. This causes the victim to enter a state of suspended disbelief, in which implausible situations are accepted as plausible.

The fraudsters' narrative becomes an attractive web of words, with terms such as *honor*, *love*, and *cherish*. It also includes *trust* and a *forever relationship* filled with intimate moments, long walks on the beach, and moonlit strolls. The fraudsters call the victim their *beautiful angel*, *beloved princess*, and *darling wife*. They claim that *destiny*, *fate*, or even *God* brought them together as they make tender promises of marriage that they do not plan to keep. These words in themselves are sufficient to activate a frame of idealized romantic love, a beautiful tapestry of lies, which is nothing more than a commercial transaction in disguise.

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