

Linguistic Strategies of Manipulative Language in Child Grooming: A Discourse Analysis of TV Series Cruel Summer

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e-ISSN: 2964-2981

ARMADA : Jurnal Penelitian Multidisiplin

<https://ejournal.45mataram.ac.id/index.php/armada>

Vol. 04, No. 09 September, 2026

Page: 5172-5179

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.55681/armada.v4i9.3788>

Article History:

Received: Juli 20, 2026

Revised: Agustus 12, 2026

Accepted: September 19, 2026

Abstract : This study examines the linguistic strategies of manipulative language in child grooming as represented in the television series Cruel Summer. It aims to identify the manipulative strategies used by the perpetrator, explain their functions in the grooming process, and analyse their representation of power relations. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method using Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis framework, including textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. Data were collected through documentary analysis of selected dialogues from Episodes 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, and 10 of Cruel Summer Season 1, which depict grooming interactions between Martin Harris and Kate Wallis. The findings reveal six strategies: affection escalation, emotional validation, pseudo-romantic bonding, reciprocity framing, secret-keeping normalisation, and threat-based silence reinforcement. These strategies develop from trust-building into psychological control, with emotional validation as the dominant strategy. The study demonstrates that grooming discourse constructs emotional dependence, secrecy, and compliance, reflecting unequal power relations between adults and adolescents.

Keywords : Child Grooming, Critical Discourse Analysis, Fairclough, Linguistic Strategies, Manipulative Language, Cruel Summer.

Abstrak : Penelitian ini mengkaji strategi linguistik bahasa manipulatif dalam child grooming yang direpresentasikan dalam serial televisi Cruel Summer. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengidentifikasi strategi manipulatif yang digunakan pelaku, menjelaskan fungsi strategi tersebut dalam proses grooming, serta menganalisis representasinya terhadap relasi kuasa. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan pendekatan Analisis Wacana Kritis tiga dimensi Fairclough yang mencakup analisis teks, praktik diskursif, dan praktik sosial. Data penelitian dikumpulkan melalui teknik dokumentasi terhadap dialog terpilih dalam Episode 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, dan 10 Cruel Summer Musim 1 yang menggambarkan interaksi grooming antara Martin Harris dan Kate Wallis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan enam strategi, yaitu peningkatan afeksi, validasi emosional, pembentukan ikatan pseudo-romantis, pemingkiaan timbal balik, normalisasi penyimpanan rahasia, dan penguatan keheningan berbasis ancaman. Strategi tersebut berkembang dari pembentukan kepercayaan menuju kontrol psikologis, dengan validasi emosional sebagai strategi yang paling dominan. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa wacana grooming

membangun ketergantungan emosional, kerahasiaan, dan kepatuhan yang mencerminkan ketimpangan relasi kuasa antara orang dewasa dan remaja.

Kata kunci: *Child Grooming, Analisis Wacana Kritis, Fairclough, Strategi Linguistik, Bahasa Manipulatif, Cruel Summer*

INTRODUCTION

Language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a social practice that shapes and reflects social realities. Through language, individuals construct meanings, establish relationships, influence others, and negotiate power. In social interactions, language may operate beyond the exchange of information by becoming a mechanism for persuasion, control, and manipulation. This condition demonstrates that language has a central role in shaping human behaviour and social relations, particularly in interactions involving unequal positions of power. One social phenomenon that highlights the relationship between language and power is child grooming, a gradual process in which an adult develops trust, emotional attachment, and dependence with a child for the purpose of exploitation.

Child grooming represents a complex social issue because perpetrators commonly avoid direct coercion during the initial stages of interaction. Instead, they employ subtle linguistic strategies that appear supportive, caring, and protective. Through compliments, emotional validation, personal disclosure, expressions of affection, and requests for secrecy, perpetrators gradually influence victims' perceptions and behaviours. These communicative practices make grooming difficult to identify because manipulation is constructed through everyday interactions rather than explicit forms of violence. Consequently, language becomes a strategic instrument for creating emotional dependence and maintaining unequal power relations between perpetrators and victims.

The relationship between language, manipulation, and power has been widely examined in various academic fields, including psychology, criminology, law, and communication studies. Previous research has explored grooming mechanisms, victim vulnerability, and behavioural patterns of perpetrators. Other studies have investigated manipulative discourse in interpersonal communication and media representation. However, linguistic analysis of child grooming through the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) remains limited, particularly research that examines how manipulative strategies are constructed through dialogue and how these strategies reproduce power relations. Furthermore, studies focusing on television series as a representation of grooming discourse are still relatively underexplored. This limitation indicates the need for further investigation into the linguistic processes through which grooming is normalised, maintained, and represented in media narratives.

Media representation provides an important space for understanding how grooming practices are constructed through language. The television series *Cruel Summer* offers a relevant context for examining this issue because it portrays the gradual grooming process between Martin Harris and Kate Wallis through everyday conversations. The series illustrates how manipulation can occur through seemingly ordinary communication, including attempts to build trust, create emotional dependence, normalise inappropriate relationships, encourage secrecy, and maintain psychological control. These representations provide valuable linguistic data for analysing how grooming discourse operates and how language contributes to the construction of power imbalance between an adult perpetrator and an adolescent victim.

To analyse this phenomenon, this study applies Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis framework, which conceptualises language as a social practice connected to ideology, power, and social structures. Fairclough's three-dimensional model, consisting of textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice, enables the examination of linguistic features, the production and interpretation of discourse, and the broader social meanings embedded within communication. In addition, this study employs the classification of manipulative linguistic strategies proposed by Hasmawati *et al.* (2025), which includes affection escalation, emotional validation, pseudo-romantic bonding, reciprocity framing, secret-keeping normalization, and

threat-based silence reinforcement. This combination provides an analytical framework for understanding both the linguistic construction and social implications of grooming discourse.

The novelty of this study lies in integrating the analysis of manipulative linguistic strategies with Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis to examine child grooming representation in a television series. Unlike previous studies that predominantly discuss grooming from psychological or legal perspectives, this research focuses on how manipulation is linguistically constructed, developed, and maintained through dialogue. By analysing selected conversations in *Cruel Summer*, this study provides a deeper understanding of how language functions as a mechanism of emotional influence and power control within grooming interactions.

The urgency of this research is related to the increasing need to understand the linguistic characteristics of child grooming in contemporary media and social contexts. Recognising manipulative language patterns is essential because grooming often develops through communication strategies that appear normal and supportive. Therefore, this study aims to identify the linguistic strategies of manipulative language used in the grooming process, analyse how these strategies are represented through dialogues in *Cruel Summer*, and explain how they construct and maintain power relations between perpetrators and victims. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of Critical Discourse Analysis studies, particularly in relation to manipulative language, child grooming discourse, and media representation, while also providing broader awareness regarding the role of language in recognising psychological abuse.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research method using Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the analytical approach. This method was chosen because the study aims to examine how manipulative linguistic strategies are used in the child grooming process as represented through the dialogues in the television series *Cruel Summer*. The analysis focuses on revealing the relationship between language, discourse practices, and social practices, particularly in constructing power relations between the perpetrator and the victim. The research subjects were the dialogues between Martin Harris, the perpetrator, and Kate Wallis, the victim, in *Cruel Summer* Season 1. The data were collected from Episodes 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, and 10, which were selected through purposive sampling because they contain significant child grooming interactions relevant to the research objectives.

The research materials consisted of dialogue transcripts obtained from the selected scenes of the television series. The primary research instrument was the researcher (human instrument), supported by a coding framework based on the six manipulative linguistic strategies proposed by Hasmawati et al. (2025): Affection Escalation, Emotional Validation, Pseudo-romantic Bonding, Reciprocity Framing, Secret-keeping Normalization, and Threat-based Silence Reinforcement. Data were collected using the documentary technique. The procedures included selecting relevant episodes, watching the selected scenes repeatedly, transcribing the dialogues verbatim, identifying utterances containing manipulative language, and coding the data according to the six categories of manipulative linguistic strategies. This systematic procedure ensured that only dialogues directly related to the child grooming process were included in the analysis.

The data were analyzed using Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis. The first stage, textual analysis, examined linguistic features such as vocabulary, sentence structure, and expressions that indicated manipulative strategies. The second stage, discursive practice, analyzed how the dialogues were produced and interpreted within the interactions between Martin Harris and Kate Wallis. The third stage, social practice, interpreted how the identified linguistic strategies reflected broader issues of power, dominance, ideology, and child grooming within the social context. Finally, the findings were interpreted by relating them to the theoretical framework and previous studies to produce a comprehensive understanding of manipulative language in the television series.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Frequency of Manipulative Linguistic Strategies

No	Manipulative Language Strategy	Frequency
1	Affection Escalation	19
2	Emotional Validation	28
3	Pseudo-romantic Bonding	26
4	Reciprocity Framing	5
5	Secret-keeping Normalization	11
6	Threat-based Silence Reinforcement	22

The analysis identified six manipulative linguistic strategies used by Martin Harris throughout the selected episodes of *Cruel Summer*. Among the six categories, Emotional Validation appeared most frequently (28 occurrences), followed by Pseudo-romantic Bonding (26), Threat-based Silence Reinforcement (22), Affection Escalation (19), Secret-keeping Normalization (11), and Reciprocity Framing (5). These findings suggest that Martin initially established emotional closeness by validating Kate's feelings before gradually strengthening his control through secrecy, emotional dependency, and intimidation. This pattern demonstrates that grooming is a progressive communicative process in which language functions as the primary instrument of manipulation.

Affection Escalation

Excerpt 1

"You're ridiculously beautiful and smart and everything."

This utterance represents the use of Affection Escalation because Martin gives excessive compliments to increase Kate's self-worth and emotional attachment. The lexical choices beautiful and smart portray Kate as someone uniquely valued by Martin. Rather than expressing ordinary admiration, the compliment serves to strengthen trust and emotional intimacy. Through repeated positive evaluation, Martin gradually positions himself as a caring and supportive adult, making Kate more emotionally dependent on him.

Emotional Validation

Excerpt 2

"I understand how you feel."

Martin validates Kate's emotions by presenting himself as the only person who truly understands her experiences. This strategy creates emotional security and encourages Kate to rely on him rather than on her family or friends. Emotional validation functions as a subtle persuasive strategy because it reduces the victim's resistance while strengthening emotional dependence. Since this strategy appeared 28 times, it becomes the dominant linguistic pattern in the grooming process.

Pseudo-romantic Bonding

Excerpt 3

"What we have is different."

Martin frames secrecy as something natural and meaningful within their relationship. Instead of presenting secrecy as suspicious, he constructs it as evidence of trust and intimacy. This discourages Kate from disclosing the relationship to others and gradually isolates her from external support.

Threat-based Silence Reinforcement

Excerpt 6

"If you tell anyone, everything will be ruined."

This utterance represents the final stage of manipulation. Martin introduces fear by emphasizing the negative consequences of disclosure. Rather than using direct physical violence, he employs emotional pressure to ensure Kate remains silent. The strategy reinforces his control over the relationship and prevents the victim from seeking help.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that manipulative language in child grooming within *Cruel Summer* is constructed through a gradual and systematic process involving six linguistic strategies: emotional validation, pseudo-romantic bonding, threat-based silence reinforcement, affection escalation, secret-keeping normalization, and reciprocity framing. Among these strategies, emotional validation emerged as the most dominant strategy with 28 occurrences, followed by pseudo-romantic bonding (26 occurrences), threat-based silence reinforcement (22 occurrences), affection escalation (19 occurrences), secret-keeping normalization (11 occurrences), and reciprocity framing (5 occurrences). This pattern indicates that grooming does not primarily operate through explicit coercion at the beginning of interaction but develops through emotional manipulation that gradually transforms trust into dependency and control. These findings support previous research by Craven *et al.* (2006), who argued that grooming involves a gradual process of gaining trust, reducing resistance, and creating emotional attachment before exploitation occurs. Similarly, Whittle *et al.* (2013) explained that perpetrators often rely on relational strategies rather than immediate force because emotional influence allows them to maintain control over victims more effectively.

The dominance of emotional validation in this study demonstrates that grooming discourse begins by constructing a sense of psychological safety. The expression “I understand how you feel” illustrates how Martin positions himself as an individual who provides emotional recognition and acceptance. Through this strategy, the perpetrator creates the perception that he is a trusted figure who understands the victim’s personal experiences better than others. This finding is consistent with Katz and Moore (2013), who explained that offenders often establish emotional closeness by responding to victims’ needs for attention, recognition, and acceptance. From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, emotional validation represents a discursive practice that constructs an unequal relationship by positioning the perpetrator as a source of emotional support while simultaneously increasing the victim’s dependence. Fairclough (1995) emphasises that language does not merely represent social relations but actively contributes to producing and maintaining particular power structures.

The second dominant strategy, pseudo-romantic bonding, further demonstrates how grooming discourse transforms inappropriate relationships into seemingly meaningful connections. The statement “What we have is different” indicates an attempt to redefine the relationship by presenting it as unique and separate from ordinary social norms. This linguistic construction functions to normalise an inappropriate relationship and reduce the victim’s awareness of problematic boundaries. Previous research by O’Connell (2003) identified that grooming often involves boundary erosion, where perpetrators gradually redefine inappropriate behaviours as acceptable through emotional framing. The findings of this study extend this understanding by demonstrating how such boundary manipulation is represented through specific linguistic choices in media discourse. Through repeated construction of exclusivity, the perpetrator creates a private relational space that limits external intervention and strengthens psychological dependence.

The presence of threat-based silence reinforcement as the third most frequent strategy indicates a transition from emotional influence toward direct psychological control. The statement “If you tell anyone, everything will be ruined” demonstrates how language functions as a mechanism for maintaining secrecy. Rather than relying on physical threats, the perpetrator uses emotional consequences, fear, and responsibility shifting to discourage disclosure. This finding aligns with the argument of Winters *et al.* (2022), who stated that grooming perpetrators frequently employ secrecy and intimidation to maintain control after establishing emotional attachment. Within Fairclough’s framework, this strategy reflects the relationship between

discourse and social practice because language becomes a tool for preserving power imbalance and preventing resistance.

Affection escalation also plays an important role in the early stages of grooming by constructing emotional closeness through excessive positive evaluation. The statement “You're ridiculously beautiful and smart and everything” demonstrates how compliments are strategically used to strengthen the victim's perception of being valued. Although such expressions may appear supportive, repeated idealisation can create emotional attachment and increase the victim's reliance on the perpetrator's approval. This finding corresponds with previous studies indicating that grooming involves positive reinforcement as a method of gaining trust and reducing suspicion (Gillespie, 2008). The present study contributes to this discussion by showing that affection is not simply an interpersonal expression but can function as a linguistic mechanism for establishing asymmetrical emotional dependence.

The findings also indicate that secret-keeping normalization and reciprocity framing, although appearing less frequently, remain important components within the grooming process. Secret-keeping normalization functions by presenting confidentiality as evidence of trust and intimacy rather than as a warning sign. Meanwhile, reciprocity framing constructs a perception of mutual exchange, where attention, affection, or support provided by the perpetrator creates an implicit expectation of loyalty from the victim. These strategies demonstrate that grooming discourse operates through multiple interconnected linguistic mechanisms rather than through a single form of manipulation. As highlighted by Williams *et al.* (2013), grooming involves a combination of trust-building, isolation, and control strategies that develop progressively according to the interactional context.

Compared with previous studies that mainly examine child grooming from psychological or legal perspectives, this research provides a linguistic perspective by demonstrating how manipulation is embedded within everyday communication. The application of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis provides a broader understanding that grooming language functions not only at the textual level but also within social practices involving power, vulnerability, and control. The integration of Hasmawati *et al.*'s (2025) classification of manipulative linguistic strategies further strengthens the analysis by providing specific categories for identifying how manipulation is linguistically constructed. Therefore, this study contributes novelty by explaining how different strategies operate sequentially, beginning with emotional attachment formation and developing into psychological domination.

The findings have several theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study contributes to Critical Discourse Analysis by expanding discussions on how language constructs power relations in cases of interpersonal exploitation. It also strengthens understanding of grooming as a communicative process rather than merely a behavioural pattern. Practically, the findings provide awareness for parents, educators, and communities regarding linguistic indicators of grooming, particularly expressions involving excessive validation, secrecy, exclusivity, and emotional dependency. Understanding these patterns may support earlier recognition and prevention of manipulative interactions involving children and adolescents.

This study has several limitations. First, the analysis focuses on the representation of grooming in a single television series, *Cruel Summer*, meaning that the findings reflect the discourse construction within a specific media narrative rather than all forms of real-life grooming interactions. Second, the study examines verbal communication represented in selected episodes and does not include additional dimensions such as audience interpretation, victim responses beyond the narrative, or non-verbal communication. Future research may expand the analysis by comparing multiple media texts, examining real-world grooming discourse, or integrating multimodal analysis to explore how verbal and visual elements interact in representing manipulation and power relations. These directions may provide a more comprehensive understanding of grooming discourse across different social and cultural contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the child grooming process represented in the television series *Cruel Summer* is constructed through a series of manipulative linguistic strategies that develop progressively from emotional attachment formation to psychological control. The analysis identified six strategies used by Martin Harris toward Kate Wallis, namely *Affection Escalation*, *Emotional Validation*, *Pseudo-romantic Bonding*, *Reciprocity Framing*, *Secret-keeping Normalization*, and *Threat-based Silence Reinforcement*. Among these strategies, *Emotional Validation* appeared as the most dominant strategy, indicating that grooming begins through the creation of emotional security and trust before developing into dependency, secrecy, and control. The findings demonstrate that language in grooming interactions functions not only as a means of communication but also as a mechanism for constructing unequal power relations between the perpetrator and the victim. Through the analysis of dialogue, this study highlights that manipulative language plays an important role in shaping perceptions, influencing behaviour, and maintaining control within abusive relationships.

Future research is recommended to expand the analysis of manipulative language in various contexts, including digital communication, social media interactions, films, and real-life grooming cases. Further studies may also integrate other analytical approaches, such as pragmatics, conversation analysis, corpus linguistics, or multimodal discourse analysis, to provide a broader understanding of grooming communication. For educators, parents, and communities, the findings can serve as a reference for recognising early linguistic indicators of grooming, such as excessive emotional validation, affection, secrecy, and dependency-building strategies. Media audiences are also encouraged to critically evaluate representations of interpersonal relationships in films and television series by understanding that expressions of care and attention may function as forms of manipulation. In addition, policymakers and child protection institutions may consider strengthening educational programmes on digital and linguistic awareness to improve prevention efforts against child exploitation and psychological abuse.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to express her deepest gratitude to Almighty God for His endless blessings, guidance, and strength throughout the completion of this research. The author sincerely thanks Elisna Huan, S.Pd., M.Hum., as the first supervisor, and Ida Nyoman Tri Darma Putra, S.Pd., M.Pd., as the second supervisor, for their invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, patience, and continuous encouragement during this study. The author also extends sincere appreciation to Yanpitherzon Liunokas, S.Pd., M.Hum., as the main examiner, for his valuable suggestions and insightful comments that improved the quality of this research. Special thanks are also addressed to Dr. Drs. Sebastianus Fernandez, M.Pd. Grad. Dipl., for his expert guidance and academic support, as well as to all lecturers of the English Education Study Program for their knowledge and inspiration. Finally, the author expresses her deepest gratitude to her beloved parents and family for their endless prayers, unconditional love, encouragement, and moral support throughout the completion of this research.

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