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Engaging in predatory practices: How editors persuade prospective authors

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Abstract. A number of studies have explored the main features of predatory practices that prevail in predatory academic journals and conferences. However, not much has been investigated regarding the ways predatory journal editors convey credibility and trustworthiness when addressing scholars looking for publication outlets and, more specifically, what interpersonal resources (like proximity or engagement markers) are used to persuade them. This exploratory study draws on a dataset of fifty email messages from predatory publishers collected during the past two years. It seeks to delve into the ways predatory journal editors address "scholar customers" with the aim of persuading them to submit their work. This dataset was first coded following Hyland's models of proximity and interaction in academic texts, and then qualitatively analysed using NVivo 11 Pro. The analysis shows that (i) textual data provide direct evidence of the texts that predatory publishers send to scholars and the interpersonal dialogue they intend to build with authors in haste for publication; (ii) interactional resources abound, particularly engagement markers, which explicitly aim at building a rapport with the prospective author; and (iii) these predatory texts also contain other engagement-related elements directed to have an effect on the reader's decision for eventual submission.
Keywords: engagement, interaction, predatory journals, proximity.

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1. Introduction

Predatory practices have proliferated in the last decade as a part of the pressure-to-publish explosion in scholarly publishing (Bloch, 2021; Fazel and Hartse, 2020). These practices are often and wrongly associated with online open access publishing because predatory publishers exploit the open access model in which the author pays (gold open access) (Beall, 2012; Memon, 2019). Predatory journals have therefore contributed to casting doubt on the quality of all digital journals that offer free unlimited access – and not only of those that exploit the gold open access model for their own profit (Beall, 2012; Bocanegra-Valle, 2023; Salager-Meyer, 2012). Very often, the promise of fast and easy publication has been reported to be the main driver for the success of these publishing practices (Beall, 2012; Shamseer et al., 2017), particularly among scholars in developing countries (Fazel and Hartse, 2018), and also among young and inexperienced researchers who need to build up their curricula vitae in a short period of time (Forero et al., 2018; Kurt, 2018). It also seems to be the case among researchers who lack the sufficient language and writing skills to meet the requirements of prestigious top-tier journals (Soler and Cooper, 2019) or are deprived of other resources (Xia et al., 2015) that are necessary to succeed in a highly competitive academia.

A number of studies have set out to investigate the discourse that prevails in predatory academic journals and conferences – see discussion in section 2.2. However, to this author's knowledge, there is a dearth of research regarding the ways predatory journal editors interact with prospective authors to appear reliable and trustworthy as well as the persuasive resources that they employ to achieve this alleged credibility. Thus, this study explores predatory email messages and examines the linguistic strategies that predatory journal editors and publishers use to appeal scholars and researchers and engage them in the predatory discourse for eventual submission and publication. Predatory emails, also known as spam emails (Beall, 2015; Kurt, 2018) or fishing

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emails (Gasparyan et al., 2015), are unsolicited email messages that are thrown into scholars' incoming or spam email boxes offering flattering requests for article submission to a particular journal in return of fast peer review and open access publication.

This article comprises five main sections. It begins with a brief overview of scholarly predatory practices in academia. This section first provides a short introduction of what predatory publishing and predatory journals are, and it then discusses the extant literature about predatory practices in the field of Applied Linguistics. The next section introduces the framework of the Hylandian proximity and interpersonal models of metadiscourse with a particular focus on interaction and proximity as key strategies to attain engagement. After this, the research aims and the methodology for the qualitative data analysis are explained. In the next section results are discussed in light of the research questions, and examples from the corpus are also provided to illustrate the main findings. The study closes with some concluding remarks which consider study limitations, suggest some pedagogical implications, and open further research avenues in the field.

2. Scholarly predatory practices

In the first part of this section I provide an overview of what predatory publishing and predatory journals are, and discuss the reasons for its expansion during the last decade. In the second part, I review the existing (and scarce) literature on predatory publishing practices in the field of Applied Linguistics.

2.1. Predatory publishing and predatory journals

Predatory publishing is a relatively recent phenomenon that has expanded rapidly in the past decade. It has been attested that predatory journals have increased by 25 % between 2018 and 2020 (Oermann et al., 2018), and also predatory conferences are rapidly growing as part of the academic landscape (Pecorari, 2021). Back in 2010, Jeffrey Beall, a librarian at the University of Colorado Denver, coined the term "predatory" to refer to those publishers (especially of academic journals) who exploit open access publishing to generate as much revenue as possible without safeguarding academic evaluation processes in scholarly communication (Beall, 2016). In 2011 he compiled a list of potential open access predatory journal publishers, and established the criteria to identify them. This first list of predatory publishers contained 18 journals and, by the beginning of 2017, had been extended to 1 294 titles of potential, possible, or probably predatory scholarly open access journals (Beall, 2017). According to some authors, there is an estimate of around 8 000 fraudulent journals in the world (Habibzadeh and Simundic, 2017), which means that Beall's list only contains 16 % of today's predatory journals.

Predatory journals appear in current literature under diverse terms (e.g. illegitimate, fraudulent, deceptive, sub-par, parasitic, spam, fake, scamming or pseudo-scientific journals – for a comprehensive list of terms see Bocanegra-Valle, 2023), and are the opposite of trusted or legitimate journals. Also, predatory publishers are often confused with "vanity publishers", but they do not operate in the same way: whereas the latter do not promise peer review or any form of quality control, the former assure that studies will be subjected to a peer review process, but this practice is often flawed or even inexistent (Beall, 2017).

Predatory journals can be defined as "entities that prioritize self-interest at the expense of scholarship and are characterized by false or misleading information, deviation from best editorial and publication practices, a lack of transparency, and/or the use of aggressive and indiscriminate solicitation practices" (Grudniewicz et al., 2019: 211). Three main factors account for the proliferation of these journals (Bloch, 2021; Fazel and Hartse, 2020; Kurt, 2018; Memon, 2019; Shamseer et al., 2017). Firstly, the publish-or-perish pressure to publish in English-language, internationally-renowned journals leads researchers and scholars to look for fast publication that offer prompt peer reviews and show high acceptance rates. Next, the rise of open access assists researchers in disseminating their work easily, quickly, and globally. Lastly, the emergence of electronic publishing allows for the easy creation of journals by pseudo-publishers that only need a computer, internet connection, and basic editorial skills, at the same time that handling and production costs are reduced.

The literature also reports that researchers from all disciplines, and particularly from the health and the information sciences, are concerned with the expansion of predatory practices and the way papers that are not well-checked and evidence-based (i.e. that are published in fraudulent journals) may impinge on scientific knowledge, scholarly credibility, and researchers' careers (Beall, 2016; Elmore and Weston, 2020; Gasparyan et al., 2015; Pflugfelder, 2022; Shamseer et al., 2017). For predatory publishers, scholars are "customers" and therefore journals try to persuade authors in different ways. As its name stands, predatory journals prey on scholars and researchers for their financial profit and without meeting the expected editorial standards that safeguard the quality and trustworthiness of the journal.

Websites and other tools have been developed to assist researchers in the identification of illegitimate journals. By way of example, <thinkchecksubmit.org> provides a checklist that can be used to assess a suspicious journal or book publisher as well as to find suitable publication venues for a particular piece of

research. The items in the checklist are meant to show the level of commitment of predatory journals to those editorial practices that are expected from legitimate journals: clear identification of the publishers, peer review, indexing and archiving, article fees, provision of guidelines for authors, or membership of a recognized industry initiative (like the Committee on Publication Ethics, COPE). Also at <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/librarian_pubs/40/> authors can download the "Journal evaluation tool", which is a rubric and a scoring sheet that allows for the evaluation of journal credibility so that at the end of the process authors will know if a particular journal is a good, fair, or poor choice for their research (Rele, Kennedy and Blas 2017).

2.2. Predatory practices in Applied Linguistics

In the field of Applied Linguistics, research on predatory practices is certainly very scarce and, as the literature attests, an emerging topic as of late. This review thus aims to provide an overview of this limited literature and the main themes that have been object of investigation in this field.

Fazel and Hartse (2020) wrote a discussion paper in which they provided an overview of what predatory meant to academic publishing, explored the implications of predatory publishing for the field of English for Research Publication Purposes (ERPP), and reflected on the possibilities and potential paths forward. Fazel and Hartse's (2020) text is useful to understand the concept and its challenges for academics; however, its theoretical focus contrasts with the more practical approach in an earlier research study (Fazel and Hartse, 2018), and in those studies by Soler and Cooper (2019), Soler and Wang (2019), Pecorari (2021), Pflugfelder (2022), and Bocanegra-Valle (2023) on predatory emails, predatory articles, predatory journals, and predatory conferences. These are discussed below.

A first group of studies focuses on the unsolicited email messages sent by predatory journal editors to authors. With a corpus of 58 unexpected emails, Soler and Cooper (2019) report the rhetorical moves of those predatory emails and discuss the ways they might potentially affect young English L2 scholars more negatively in comparison with other non-English L2 and/or more experienced scholars. Moreover, they find that predatory publishers present "a gradation of competences" (p. 7) in diverse areas (from computer communication to pragmatic or linguistic competence) that point at a publisher (or email writer) as either reliable or a potential fraud. Bocanegra-Valle (2023) also investigates predatory email messages but with a particular focus on the themes employed by journal editors to render credibility among prospective authors as well as on the implications of predatory publishing practice for knowledge dissemination and the expansion of the open access movement in scholarly communication.

A second group of studies examines the articles published in predatory academic journals. Soler and Wang (2019) work on the general assumption that articles from predatory journals deviate substantially from articles published in trusted journals. For that purpose, they compare the linguistic differences of articles published in two journals in political science (a well-established top-ranking journal vis-à-vis an alleged predatory journal) and conclude that predatory articles do not conform to those linguistic norms that are expected in articles published in legitimate journals. A relevant finding is also the indication that poor writing skills might be one of the causes that leads authors to choose to publish their research in a predatory journal. In the same vein, Pflugfelder (2022) offers a taxonomy of illegitimate research articles and explores their common rhetorical features in the belief that the lack of scrutiny from predatory publishers offer predatory research articles "a veneer of scholarly credibility" (p. 303). An innovative focus of this study is that the author situates this type of articles in posttruth discourse so that they work as "evidence engines" that promote conspiracy theories and intentionally disseminate untrue claims or ideologically-driven erroneous beliefs.

Lastly, predatory journals and predatory conferences are the focus of Fazel and Hartse (2018) and Pecorari (2021), respectively. Fazel and Hartse (2018) examine the scholarly legitimacy of twenty "potentially predatory" journals and explore their most notable features with particular attention to geographical locations of editorial board members and contributors. Adopting a similar focus and also driven by the goal of unveiling illegitimate practices in research publication and dissemination, Pecorari (2021) analyses the attributes that can most easily and reliably be used to distinguish predatory from legitimate conferences. She introduces a 16-question tool that works as a checklist to assist prospective participants in differentiating between legitimate and predatory conferences when making decisions about conference attendance. This study is relevant in that, if compared with investigations on deceptive journals, research on predatory conferences is certainly very scarce, probably because "they are arguably harder to distinguish from legitimate ones" (p. 344).

All these studies claim the need for educating researchers and providing them with the necessary skills for judging predatory from legitimate practices in academia and scholarly communication, as well as for recognising fraudulent publishing in order to avoid the dissemination of "junk science" (Forero et al., 2018: 586) and non-validated scientific knowledge (Bocanegra-Valle, 2023). By investigating what resources predatory emails employ to engage their readers, and what language is used to make journals appear credible and trustworthy, this study promotes the development of an area within the scope of academic literacy referred to as "scholarly publishing literacy" (Beall, 2013: 48), so that authors can be prepared to make informed choices regarding where to submit their work and have it eventually published.

3. Engaging readers in predatory practices

The ways in which readers are engaged through discourse have been extensively investigated in the field of academic and professional discourse, with a preponderance of a large body of research conducted in academic settings. Regarding engagement-related studies in the academic field, research articles have been the main genre under scrutiny in a variety of disciplines and writing cultures (e.g. Alghazo, Salem and Alrashdan, 2021; Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2021; Lafuente-Millán, 2014; McGrath and Kuteeva, 2012; Xu and Nesi, 2019), although other genres, both oral and written or digital have also attracted researchers' attention (e.g. Carrió-Pastor and Muñiz Calderón, 2015; Jiang and Ma, 2018; Kramar, 2019; Orpin, 2019; Pascual and Mur-Dueñas, 2022; Qiu and Jiang, 2021; Sancho Guinda, 2012; Xia and Hafner, 2021; Zou and Hyland, 2020). In professional discourses, engagement has been approached differently depending on the genres characterised by particular disciplines. By way of example, the book edited by Sancho Guinda (2019) presents a networked picture of engagement under the theoretical frameworks of the Appraisal System, the Hylandian Metadiscourse Model, and Multimodality, with regard to business emails, news reports, corporate press releases, earnings calls, doctor-patient relationships, recruitment websites, or e-tourism promotional genres.

All these studies of engagement in academic and professional discourse have contributed to furthering our knowledge on how academic writers, or writers within disciplines and professions, establish connections with the expectations of their readers. They have also served to strengthen the potential of engagement in interaction. Engagement embodies interaction (the interaction of writers with their readers, the interaction of speakers with their audience, the interaction of interlocutors with their context) and, most importantly, "interaction is impossible without engagement" (Hyland, 2019b: xi).

In this study, I argue that predatory emails are examples of persuasive discourse and interactional texts within academia. Particular focus will be placed on the discursive resources predatory email writers employ to engage and build a rapport with their readers (i.e. scholars and researchers). To this author knowledge, the present-day number of studies on predatory email messages (see discussion in section 2.2) has not addressed the engagement realisations that feature in these texts.

The theoretical frameworks that inform analysis and interpretation in this study are, on the one hand, Hyland's (2010b) model of proximity, and, on the other, Hyland's (2005a, 2005b, 2010a, 2019a) model for interactional discourse. The proximity and engagement resources contained in both frameworks have assisted in this exploration of the range of discursive strategies employed by predatory email writers to entice readers and involve them in the predatory practice.

Proximity refers to the writers' control of rhetorical features to display authority, to attain a personal position, and to represent themselves, their readers and their material in ways which best meet readers' expectations (Hyland, 2010b). It also refers to "the strategies a writer uses to interact with the reader and tailor the ideational content of the text to their needs" (Orpin, 2019: 175) and "the feeling of nearness induced by inclusive pronominal use, conversational style and personal disclosure" (Sancho Guinda, 2012: 169) that create "a sense of alliance and solidarity" (Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2021: 21). Hyland's (2010b) model of proximity contains five facets, or ways that are employed by writers to attain proximity: organisation, argument structures, credibility, stance, and reader engagement. Within this framework, "engagement" is defined as:

> an alignment dimension of interaction where writers acknowledge and connect to others, recognising the presence of their readers, pulling them along with their argument, focusing their attention, acknowledging their uncertainties, including them as discourse participants, and guiding them to interpretations. (Hyland, 2010b: 125)

The model of interaction in academic discourse (or interactional model of metadiscourse) (Hyland, 2005a, 2005b, 2010a, 2019a) deals with the writers' positioning in relation to their audience and to others, and enhances the two facets of proximity that signal "stance" and "engagement". In this model, stance and engagement are two sides of the same coin in that the writers' attitude (stance) involves the audience as participants (engagement). Hyland's interactional model is a part of the interpersonal model of metadiscourse, together with the interactive model of metadiscourse. The interactive model helps to guide the reader through the text, whereas the interactional model pursues the involvement of the reader in the text by achieving stance and engagement. Each of these two models (interactive and interactional) contains a number of categories which perform different functions and are articulated by diverse resources. The interactional model, which establishes the analytical framework in this study and covers two of the facets of proximity (i.e., stance and engagement), comprises several categories as follows (see also Figure 1 in the next section):

- Hedges: they show the writer's full commitment to a proposition as well as an open dialogue. It is performed by items like "might", "likely", or "possibly".
- Boosters: they emphasise force, writer's certainty in a proposition or close dialogue. It is performed by items like "certainly", "obviously", or "indeed".

- Attitude markers: They express the writer's attitude to a proposition, and include items like "unfortunately" or "I agree".
- Self-mentions: They make explicit reference to the authors using first-person personal pronouns and possessives.
- Engagement markers: They refer to the reader explicitly, build relationship with the authors or negotiate with them. Engagement markers comprise five subcategories: reader mentions, directives, questions, shared knowledge and personal asides.

The following sections explore the discourse of predatory emails to discuss these categories under the lens of the Hylandian models of proximity and interaction in academic discourse.

4. The study

This section presents the research aim and explains the way the dataset was compiled and qualitatively analysed.

4.1. Research aim

This study sets out to investigate the resources that predatory journal editors use when addressing "scholar customers" with the aim of persuading and engaging them to submit their work. Thus, focal questions are: How do editors of predatory journals interact with authors to appear reliable and trustworthy? How do predatory journal editors convince authors to submit their work? What engagement-related strategies are used?

4.2. Data collection and analysis

The investigation draws on a corpus of fifty email messages sent by predatory publishers and directly addressed to the author of this study. During the past two years seventy predatory email messages were collected, and fifty of them (totalling 16 194 words) were selected for the corpus after the rejection of duplicated or short messages that offered poor content. They were collected verbatim and identified with a code number (e.g. E6) following chronological order of reception. NVivo 11 Pro was used for conducting a qualitative analysis of this dataset given its relevance and adequacy for the study of academic discourse – e.g. this software enhances qualitative data analysis by assisting researchers when coding and organising the resulting mass of text data (Bocanegra-Valle, 2020).

The first step was to establish a list of pre-set categories following Hyland's (2005a, 2005b, 2010a, 2010b, 2019a) models of proximity and interaction in academic discourse shown in Figure 1. Next, a top-down analysis process was applied and deductive coding was conducted. The dataset was tagged with the interactional and proximity categories "hedges", "boosters", "attitude markers", "self-mentions", and "engagement markers". After this, the engagement markers were re-organised and codes were narrowed down to tag "reader mentions", "directives", "questions", "shared knowledge", and "personal asides" (see again Figure 1). Then this initial open coding was conducted again in order to (i) repair wrong data or add data which had not been initially coded (that is, to rebuild missing data); (ii) reduce the body of data into smaller parts to gain more information (that is, to slice data); and (iii) eliminate excessive copies of the same data (that is, to de-duplicate data). In this second stage of the process, or axial coding, I became aware of other linguistic elements that were related to engagement and could be added to the coding scheme in order to enhance the analysis. This refined view helped to gain new insights into the engagement-related elements that featured in predatory emails. Lastly, samples for each identified element were extracted and text queries were conducted with a view to refining the final analysis.

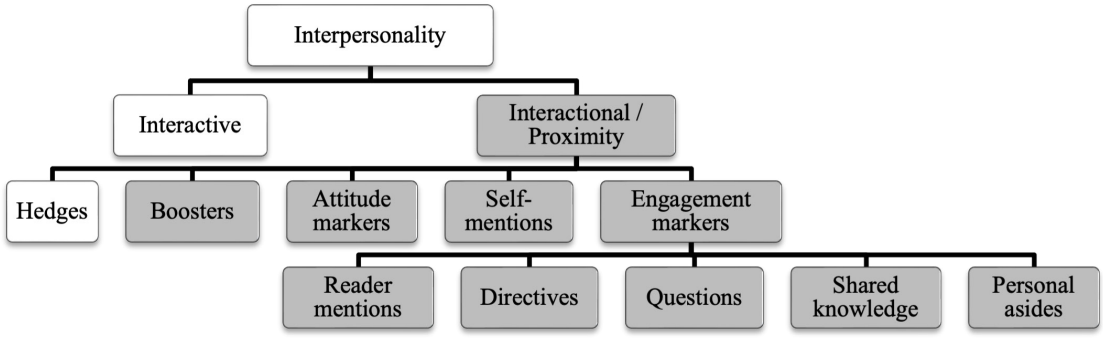

Figure 1. Engagement features applied to the analysis of predatory emails – based on Hyland's (2005a, 2005b, 2010a, 2010b, 2019a) interpersonal and proximity discourse models.

5. Results and discussion

Figure 1 summarizes the interactional elements that were searched and coded following Hyland's (2005a, 2005b, 2010a, 2010b, 2019a) interpersonal and proximity discourse models. The highlighted boxes indicate the interactional and proximity elements that were found in the corpus of predatory emails. In the discussion and examples that follow, target elements have been highlighted, and journal or editorship details have been removed for anonymity and ethical-related reasons.

In this corpus of predatory emails, no hedges have been found; however, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions, and all types of engagement markers are present – being reader mentions, directives, and shared knowledge appeals the most recurrent, and questions and personal asides the most infrequent.

Boosters are generally used to emphasise the force of the message and express certainty (Hyland, 2005a). Nevertheless, they can also be used to provide propositions with a more assertive tone (Mur-Dueñas, 2011) and increase their illocutionary force (Carrió-Pastor and Muñiz Calderón, 2015). In the case of this corpus of predatory messages, journal editors aim to strengthen the argument at some point of the message, and assist readers in the understanding that they are fully committed to successful publication. As email recipients, scholars and researchers are given different reasons for considering a particular journal for publication and, by using boosters, predatory publishers show determination and appear reliable for eventual article submission. The examples show that boosters can take the form of adverbs (example 1), deontic modal verbs (example 2), or solidarity features (example 3).

(1) **Your** academic background and expertise in this field are **highly** appreciated by the Editorial board, so **we really** hope **you** can be a part of **our** team. (E45)
(2) Articles submitted to the journal **should** meet these criteria and **must not** be under consideration for publication elsewhere. (E16)
(3) **Last but not least**, while reviewing **my** journal and this invitation, please REMEMBER that **you** have **my** personal assurance that you are working with the professional team from [name of corporation]. (E20)

Attitude markers are relevant because they express the writers' stance towards a proposition in order to convince readers of their credibility and the validity of their statements (Mur-Dueñas, 2010). They also aim at expressing a fixed position and encouraging the readers' agreement (Carrió-Pastor, 2019). In this case, email writers express appraisal by showing agreement or disagreement, surprise, frustration or importance. In this group of predatory emails, editors and publishers develop their affective attitude mainly by means of verbs (examples 4 and 6), sentence adverbs (example 5), adverbs (examples 8 and 9 below) or evaluative adjectives (example 6, also 9 below). In particular, the adjective "unique" in example 6 has been identified as a polarised attitude marker that shows a high or marked attitudinal value (Mur-Dueñas, 2010). Also, as is the case in academic writing, the editors' choice of attitude markers helps them "to invoke an intelligent reader and a credible, collegial writer" (Hyland, 2005a: 188) and connects directly with their need to persuade the email recipient about the strength and benefit of the journal.

(4) [journal name] uses a blind peer review system to **ensure** originality, timeliness, relevance, and readability. (E49)
(5) **Seriously**, choose [journal name] for fast track article publication with high impact factor. (E14)
(6) I **hope** that **you** will encourage the efforts and the success of this **unique** journal. (E9)

Together with these types of markers, predatory emails contain other attitudinal realisations (like the use of comparatives or punctuation) which will be discussed at the end of this section.

Self-mentions help to extend the publishers' presence in the publication process. By using first person singular and plural pronouns as well as possessives, editors adopt a prominent position and show close involvement in the admission-publication cycle. They endeavour to project a positive impression of themselves, therefore building confidence and generating credibility. In examples 7 and 8, the repetitive use of "I", strengthened with the adverb "personally" and the possessive "my" (see also example 3), provides the message with the publishers' full presence and signals a favourable stance towards potential article publication. In other words, article authors will feel more confident because they are already receiving support and encouragement from the responsible person (the editor who is sending the email). Journal editors also present themselves as gatekeepers of the publication process (see "I personally review and send my feedback" in example 8). It is in this way that self-mentions contribute to providing the publishers/editors with a veneer of respectability and authority. By using first person plural pronouns the editors present themselves as representatives of a strong corporation, a group of devoted people which works together for successful academic publication. Also, "we" contributes to strengthening a feeling of community in which both editors/publishers and authors/researchers are the main actors, share concerns and follow the same academic goals (see examples 1 and 9). Additionally, it should be

noted that the attitude markers in examples 8 ("immediately") and 9 ("important", "excellent", and "broadly") aim at highlighting the significance of the publication proposal.

(7) **I** have had an opportunity to read **your** paper entitled [article title authored by the email recipient]. **I** can tell from **your** work that **you** are an expert in this field. (E2)
(8) In most cases **I personally** review and send **my** feedback to the author almost **immediately**. (E21)
(9) **We** know that metrics are **important** for **you** and **we** provide an **excellent** platform for the exchange of thoughts between researchers interested **broadly** in the field of Social Science and Humanity. (E38)

Together with boosters, attitude markers and self-mentions, engagement markers are the next group of interactional elements that aim to create proximity. All types of engagement markers are present in this corpus of predatory emails. However, whereas there is a preponderance of reader mentions, directives and shared knowledge appeals, questions are scarce and personal asides are rare. This last finding concurs with McGrath and Kuteeva (2012), who also found that personal asides and questions were very infrequent in their corpus of pure mathematics research articles. For Lafuente-Millán (2014) and Dontcheva-Navratilova (2021) personal asides were also found to be the least frequent engagement feature in their respective corpora of English-Spanish business management articles, and English-medium research articles in the fields of linguistics and economics.

Like self-mentions, reader mentions try to build an interactional dialogue between the publishers and the authors. Reader mentions in the form of reader pronouns "are obviously the most direct way in which the writer can appeal to the reader" (Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2021: 24); thus, by using second personal pronouns and possessives, journal editors aim to bring the email recipients closer in the conversation, to get them involved, and to construct a feeling of community (see examples 1, 3, 6, 7, 9 and 10).

(10) Due to **your rich** academic experience and **excellent** research achievements, **we** would like to invite **you** to submit articles to **our** journal and join **us** as a member of the Editorial Board/Reviewer Team. (E45)

The combination of self- and reader mentions strengthens the interaction between the sender (publisher/editor) and the recipient (reader/scholar/researcher/author); therefore, constructing the interpersonal dynamics of joint work for generating trust in the journal. By explicitly asking authors to "join us" (example 10), editors are not only making potential authors participants in an argument, but, most importantly, they are making them participants in the editorial process. In example 9, for instance, by claiming that "metrics are important" for both editors ("we") and articles writers ("you"), the editor is highlighting the importance of indexing and attaining high impact factors in scholarly publishing. With the strategic use of markers, journal editors are therefore sharing their readers' values, interests and assumptions at the same time they make researchers pay close attention to what the editor of an academic journal has to tell them.

As has been illustrated in examples 1, 3, and 7 to 10, self- and reader mentions co-occur frequently in these messages. The recurrent alternative use of first and second pronouns helps to induce a feeling of nearness (Sancho Guinda, 2012), and to strengthen proximity by reducing the distance between writer and reader (Lafuente-Millán, 2014). They also serve to bring the texts closer to spoken discourse, where these pronouns are more extensively used (Kramar, 2019), or even make texts appear less formal because they convey a "more involved stance" that contrasts with the distanced stance that characterise formal academic texts (Qin and Uccelli, 2019, 34). As is the case in other texts in academia, the iterative use of self-mentions and reader mentions creates a greater sense of proximity and conversational intimacy (Zou and Hyland, 2020) as well as a feeling of mutual understanding and cooperation that emerges from the establishment of in-group relationship and collegiality among writers and readers (Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2021).

Directives comprise the next group of elements that create a persuasive appeal and engage readers. Following Hyland (2002a: 217), directives are utterances that express an obligation on the message recipient to do or not to do something, and "while these devices may convey different degrees of emphasis, they all carry the authority of the writer in specifying how the reader should participate in the text or perform some action outside it". In this corpus of predatory emails, journal editors use directives to make authors participate or perform a particular action or consider things in a particular way. According to Hyland (2002a and 2005b), readers may be instructed (i) to refer to another part of the text or another text (textual acts); (ii) to perform some kind of real world action (physical acts); or (iii) to be involved in some kind of particular reasoning that supports the writer's claims (cognitive acts). Here, directives that prompt physical acts (examples 11, 12, 14 and 16) or textual acts (example 13 and 15) abound; however, directives that lead to cognitive acts (examples 17 and 18) are less frequent. This is because these email messages are usually short and packed with the most relevant information to engage the reader (mainly appraisal of previous authors' work, and promise of open access and fast publication). It is not frequent to find writers' claims (in the sense of stating something as true), and as a result, there is no need to understand a particular idea in a certain way and to convince recipients of other arguments different from eventual submission.

(11) **Reply to** this email now with your manuscript and abstract attached. (E20)
(12) **Please visit** our website [journal website] (E63)
(13) Manuscripts **should follow** the style of the journal. (E16)
(14) You **should create** an account before you can submit papers. (E26)
(15) **We recommend that you review** the About the Journal page for the journal's section policies. (E49)
(16) The journal editorial board members hereby **invite you to submit** your scientific manuscripts to [journal name] (E22).
(17) You **will know that** the **greatest difficulty** for scholars is the delay in publishing. (E20)
(18) **It is essential that** all submitted articles are original and not under consideration for publication elsewhere. (E66)

Directives are deployed through the use of imperatives (examples 11 and 12), modals (examples 13 and 14) or by an adjective or performative verb introducing *to-* or *that-* clauses and expressing necessity or significance (examples 15 to 18). As it occurs in other texts, these three realisations of directives represent several degrees of imposition (Lafuente-Millán, 2014) or emphasis (Hyland, 2002a). In comparison with the use of imperatives, which might render a more intrusive tone, the other two realisations of directives (that is, modals and clauses) indicate that the writer is conveying a less impositional voice and signalling what is deemed necessary or desirable (Jiang and Ma, 2019).

The next group of engagement elements is questions. Questions are usually regarded as "the most direct interpersonal device by which writers can engage in dialogue with readers" (Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2021: 27). As is also the case in academic writing, questions in predatory emails are mostly rhetorical (Hyland, 2002b). However, unlike other texts in which questions aim at creating involvement and bringing readers into the discussion as participants (Kramar, 2019; Xia and Hafner, 2021), recruiting them into a debate (Zou and Hyland, 2020), or hooking the audience (Pascual and Mur-Dueñas, 2022), in predatory emails their main goal is to surprise the reader and generate interest. As is the case of non-conducive or non-assertive questions in other contexts (e.g. Sala, 2019), the questions that these email messages contain aim at eliciting the readers' curiosity rather than a response. Similarly to boosters and reader mentions, questions bring the reader (message recipient) closer to the writer (message sender). Direct questions prevail in this corpus (examples 19 and 20), and indirect questions take the form of *if-* clauses (example 21). As just discussed, in these rhetorical questions no response is really expected from the recipient and their purpose is to act as invitations that arouse curiosity and interest in the journal (example 20) and to act as prompts to introduce information pertaining to the journal (example 19) or to the submission procedure (example 20).

(19) Why publish in [name of journal]**?** (E23)
(20) Interested in submitting to this journal**?** (E49)
(21) **If you have** any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact us. (E46)

The next group of engagement markers comprises shared knowledge appeals. Journal editors write predatory emails to address the academic community, which might initially be understood as homogeneous; however, it should be noted that the scholars and researchers that are targeted in these messages are also members of a heterogeneous audience in terms of writing experience, writing cultures, research disciplines and publishing expectations. Thus, by appealing to shared knowledge, journal editors aim at addressing collective understandings and take the opportunity to anticipate readers' views to meet their expectations regarding academic publishing. Moreover, they position themselves and their readers as, first and foremost, members of the same academic community (Zou and Hyland, 2020). Shared knowledge appeals also contribute to claiming some kind of "collective proximity" that assists in understanding propositions "from an agreed perspective" (Jiang and Ma, 2019: 33). Together with self-mentions and reader mentions, shared knowledge appeals help to construct a sense of solidarity and alliance between journal editors and potential article writers on the basis of familiarity and previous knowledge (Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2021).

In this corpus of predatory emails, instances of shared knowledge elements point at those conventions that characterise academic publishing and authors expect to find in academic journals. As is the case here, the use of shared knowledge propositions reinforces the credibility of the information and promotes proximity with readers (Hyland, 2010b). Instances of shared knowledge also refer to those elements in the scholarly publishing industry which may impinge on authors' research if eventually submitted for publication. These elements have to do with bibliometrics, like information about indexing, databases or impact factors (example 22), citation counts (example 23), peer reviewing (example 24) or open access options (example 25). Every researcher looking for publication opportunities to advance their career is well aware of the need to publish in journals with (preferably high) impact factors (example 22); to be cited by other researchers so that their study becomes evidence in the field (example 23); to have their piece of research properly and positively evaluated

by peers so that it can be trusted (example 24); and to have the opportunity of rapidly disseminating their research by making their publication digitally and freely available (example 25).

(22) The journal 5-year **impact factor** is now: 0.649**!!!** (E22)
(23) Some papers **have been cited** for more than 50 times**!** (E48)
(24) The paper **will be reviewed** within one week. (E13)
(25) We adhere to the **open access mode**. (E18)

In addition to those appeals to shared knowledge in examples 22-25, exclamation marks emphasise an action and, as is the case in other contexts (e.g. Pascual and Mur-Dueñas, 2022), are used as dialogic markers to attract readers' attention (examples 22 and 23). Moreover, as noted by Orpin (2019), comparison and intensification through the use of quantification (see "more than 50 times" in example 23) may function as boosters to reinforce the proposition. Likewise, some messages use bold or bright-coloured fonts, capitals (see "REMEMBER" in example 3), or underlining to highlight a particular term or phrase. This technique also aims at attracting readers' attention towards particular information or particular parts in the text at the same time it unveils the partly informal nature of these messages.

Examples illustrate that not only direct shared knowledge appeals contribute to creating a rapport with the readers. Thanks to the co-occurrence of a number of engagement elements, like boosters, self-mentions, reader mentions, and directives (e.g. examples 3, 6, 7, or 17), journal editors enhance the sense of shared knowledge to construct a relationship of sympathy and mutual understanding with the researchers addressed in these emails. Moreover, in their endeavour to persuade authors for article submission, journal editors present themselves as supportive peers in academia, rather than as publishers or editors with a more neutral, non-emotional stance. This concurs with similar findings in the field of online communication studies (Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas, 2005; Valeiras-Jurado et al., 2018; Xia and Hafner, 2021).

The last group of engagement markers comprises personal asides. These have been found to help to "intimate writer-reader proximity" (Zou and Hyland, 2020: 10). As is also the case in other texts (Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2021; Jiang and Ma, 2019; Lafuente-Millán, 2014), personal asides are rare in this corpus of predatory emails (example 26). Because they usually offer a flattering comment to catch attention and persuade authors for eventual submission, it may be claimed that (i) they serve as an introduction to prompt an interpersonal dialogue; and (ii) they are also an opportunity for the journal editor to strengthen its relationship with the recipient scholar.

(26) **As you have the relative academic background**, we would like to invite you to contribute your original research work to us. (E32)

The analysis of predatory email messages also shows that these messages contain other linguistic elements that fall outside the Hylandian interactional and proximity models, but also aim at engaging the reader, conveying credibility, and presenting email writers as trustworthy publishers in the field. These are the use of explicit and implicit performative verbs (examples 27 and 28 respectively), positive and flattering adjectives (examples 29 and 30), the provision of facts and figures (examples 22, 23, and 30) and the use of exclamation marks (see again examples 22 and 23).

(27) We **are committed to** provide Quality and Fast publication (E11)
(28) The manuscripts **will be published** online shortly after acceptance and the article proof **will be mailed** to the corresponding author (E19)
(29) I hope 2-page article isn't time taken for **eminent** people like you (E52)
(30) We currently have **800+ citations** for **550+ papers** after **4.5 years** of **successful and continuous** publication. (E39)

Both explicit and implicit performative verbs express certainty of a future action. Statements containing these performatives function as promises by which journal editors try to appear convincing and reliable. Moreover, in the statements for examples 27 and 28 (also 24) full commitment is shown to assure fast turn-around times. Commitment to prompt publication will obviously appeal researchers in need of enhancing their curricula vitae and publication portfolios.

The use of positive adjectives (sometimes in superlative form like "the greatest difficulty" in example 17) pursues a flattering aim to move the recipient and cause positive thoughts towards the publishers and the journal. Positive evaluative adjectives have been found to function as boosters towards engagement in other contexts (Suau-Jiménez, 2019). Examples like 7, 10 and 29 aim at constructing the researcher as an expert in the field and are stimulating, encouraging, persuasive, and engaging. By using these positive and superlative adjectives, journal editors are taking a step further and moving closer to the scholar in this interaction. For

some researchers, this engagement target may appear too threatening and will make them suspicious about the real intentions of the journal; for others, it will work efficiently in engaging them for their article submission.

Lastly, figures (some of them very impressive as in examples 23 and 30) are given to leave an imprint of journal quality. These figures, which clearly have an engagement function and resemble those from marketing campaigns, are powerful motivators that direct the readers' attention to that part of the text and encourage them to engage with the main idea behind – that is, high impact factors and high citation will be very valuable for your research, and both your university ranking and your h-index will rise if you publish in our journal. A rather different story is whether those figures are true, or whether they are fake and used by predatory journals just to persuade potential authors.

In relation to this last group of examples, and in line with relevant literature, it should be noted that some other realisations, and not only those attitude markers already discussed, can be used to implicitly convey an affective attitude to a proposition (Carrió-Pastor, 2019; Mur-Dueñas, 2010). Particularly, adjectives in examples 29 and 30 (as well as in previous examples like 9 and 10) embody a positive semantic charge and, by using them, editors aim at appealing and convincing readers about eventual submission. Also, the exclamation marks can be used "as intensifiers to express feelings" (Carrió-Pastor, 2019: 60). By using exclamation marks in examples 22 and 23, the email writer calls the readers' attention by rewording an apparently ordinary statement into some kind of warning that alerts the reader about the potential benefits of getting published in that particular journal.

Textual data in this section has provided direct evidence of the texts that predatory publishers send to scholars and the interpersonal dialogue they intend to build with authors in haste for publication. Results illustrate the ways proximity is attained in predatory emails by the use of interactional and engagement strategies, which journal editors employ to appear reliable and trustworthy. As Valeiras-Jurado et al. (2018: 95) claim, "addressees are more prone to be persuaded by speakers they trust" – thus, gaining credibility is an asset in predatory practices. Even though emails are monologic, they convey interaction because they aim at reducing the distance between addresser (publisher and journal editor – email writer) and addressee (scholar and researcher – email recipient). The major focus seems to be the building of confidence towards the journal as well as the establishment of convincing links with prospective authors.

The use of engagement markers and other engagement-related elements proves to be effective to build bridges and bring email recipients into the texts, sparking their interest in the journal and probably leading them to entertain the idea of (eventually and hopefully) submitting an article for publication. Drawing on the metadiscursive resources discussed in this study predatory publishers manage to create and provide the expected service (i.e. prompt publication) and generate expectations about it; therefore, engagement markers are a part of the lures and bait used by these fishing emails.

6. Conclusions

This study seeks to contribute to the present body of research into engagement in academic contexts. It has explored the interactional metadiscursive resources that predatory publishers use to attain proximity when addressing scholars and researchers, and has also provided evidence of their persuasive and engaging functions when inviting authors to submit their work to a particular journal. Broadly, the study has shown how predatory journals interact with authors to appear reliable and trustworthy; how predatory journal editors are willing to create a rapport with their readers, persuading authors for submitting their work; and what engagement-related resources they use to achieve these predatory aims.

The qualitative analysis of predatory emails has shown that engagement and proximity-oriented resources in the form of boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions, reader mentions, directives, and shared knowledge appeals abound in predatory emails. Interactional resources in the form of questions and personal asides are also present, although less prominently. No hedges were found, and this may be due to the fact that predatory editors do not wish to appear subjective, imprecise or open to negotiation or refutation. The texts also contain other engagement-related elements (like explicit and implicit performative verbs, positive and flattering adjectives, and facts and figures) that are also directed to have an effect on the readers' decision for eventual submission. Very often, all these elements co-occur, thereby strengthening the persuasive tone and the engaging goal of the propositions.

There are some limitations to this study which could be circumvented by further research. The corpus under analysis comprises fifty messages selected from a larger group of unsolicited messages that were unexpectedly received by this study author. This dataset has not therefore been compiled on the basis of certain features anticipated beforehand, and the corpus length is determined by the number of selected messages. It might be the case that other email messages that are reaching other scholars and were not received by this author may show a different picture of engagement-related elements; however, the time span in which these messages were gradually compiled provide the dataset with content validity for an exploratory analysis of engagement in predatory texts. The compilation of a larger corpus containing the websites of the journals that support

these messages (if they exist) and also of predatory conference websites and predatory conference emails, together with the use of corpus analytical tools, may add new findings to this piece of research and contribute to advancing our knowledge of predatory discourse.

Given that "evaluating predatory journals can provide many teachable moments" (Bloch, 2021: 152), findings from this analysis of predatory emails bring up relevant pedagogical implications for the field of academic writing and the subfield of scholarly publishing literacy. If the linguistic (and other) strategies that are used by predatory publishers to persuade and engage academics are investigated and unveiled, authors can be educated to improve their understanding of predatory practices, to be critical towards them, and to be ready to "recognise publishing fraud" (Beall, 2012: 179). Predatory practices are flourishing mainly in the form of deceptive journals and fraudulent conferences, and learning how to recognise them (e.g. by identifying the engagement goal that prevails in their texts) can be an interesting topic for exploration in academic writing courses and in courses of writing for research publication purposes. Educating scholars in predatory practices can at the same time assist in paving the way to socialisation in academia (Fazel and Hartse, 2018, 2020; Soler and Cooper, 2019). It may be particularly valuable for early-stage researchers in emerging countries who are most often impacted by these predatory practices (Forero et al., 2018; Kurt, 2018; Xia et al., 2015) and also a challenge to experienced researchers who need to develop a deeper understanding of publication spaces (Bloch, 2021) in today's academic publishing landscape.

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