

Romance Scam and Legal Interpreting/Translation

Masako Mouri, Nagoya City University, Japan

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Abstract

Due to COVID-19 starting in 2020, the flow of people or goods was restricted. Along with that, the mobility of criminals, migration, or smuggling of criminal items such as drugs were also stopped. On the other hand, romance scams have skyrocketed through the internet or SNS so that criminal groups or violent groups could raise their fund or earn money on behalf of smuggling. Romance scams have been popular now; however, the interrogation procedure of criminals' selves has not accumulated so much and the method of fraud has changed and varied in many ways. The author has been involved in interrogation as a legal interpreter and translator at police, prosecutors' office, or the court in Japan, however, the knowledge about romance scams or fraud related to the relationship or romance affairs has not been recorded as "romance scams" but described just as "fraud" in Japan, thereby leading to the lack of dissemination of proper information or proper interrogation focusing on romance or affairs. This may also have contributed to the expansion of damages and a number of victims who did not understand the foreign languages or schemes in Japan. This presentation elaborates on the current situation of interrogation at various types of investigation institutions through foreign language interpreters or translators as legal interpreters and discusses how they need to work without proper information or proper conditions without accumulated knowledge or information.

Keywords: Romance Scam, Legal Interpreters, Interrogation, Organized Crimes, SNS

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1. Introduction

Due to COVID-19 starting in 2020, the flow of people or goods was suddenly restricted. Along with that, the mobility of criminals, migration, smuggling or trafficking of criminal/illegal items were also stopped.

On the other hand, a new type of crime, i.e. romance scams, has skyrocketed through the internet or SNS. Some people who scattered depended on SNS, such as Facebook, X (ex-Twitter), Instagram in Japan. Because of this, organized criminal groups or violent groups could earn money even though they could not fly. Romance scams, likewise, have been popular all over the world now.

Due to lack of real communication, meeting or talking, some started enjoying communication through the internet or SNS in a virtual atmosphere, however, not all the people were real or honest in communication. This kind of tendency caught the attention of criminal groups, who thought this might be a chance for fraud. Then, they decided to pretend to be “executive businessperson of blue-chip companies”, “medical doctor”, “military working in Syria, Iraq, or Afghanistan”. If it were real, it would be obvious that any military working in such conflict areas could not use the internet and communicate with others without any permission by the military or defense department. Some women, however, easily believed their stories and fell in love with those fake people. In Japan, some 941 cases were reported as romance scams in 2022: this was more than 10 times compared to 2019 (72 cases reported).

2. The Details of Cases

This chapter describes the details of three real romance scam cases in Japan. Those cases depict the method about how they use SNS and make casualties believe their stories.

2.1 Organized Groups Located in African Countries

Nigeria and Ghana have been centers of fraud (romance scam) groups. In particular, several Ghanaian and Japanese organized groups of romance scam, and some of them were finally arrested and deported from Ghana to Japan, then being indicted.

2.2 Yahoo Boy

Cybercrimes including romance scam have been serious social issues and those criminals were called Yahoo Boy. They have been pretending to be government officials or royal family members and asked to rend bank accounts for their secret capitals. In the past, they sent letters or fax message, but recently they started using yahoo mails, then they were called Yahoo Boy.

2.3 Mark Alan Ruffalo & Japanese Comic (Manga) Artist

A Japanese female as known as “a queen of lady’s comic artist” was also in trouble of romance scam.

She received the first message from a person named “Mark Alan Ruffalo” through Facebook around February 2018.

She has been an ardent fan of Mark Alan Ruffalo and watched most of his films. First, she didn't pay attention to his message. She thought that Mark might be a fan of her comics, since her works were translated all over the world.

After that, he continued sending message describing the backside stories of shootings or conventional conversation. She replied to his message and finally had a video chat with him, as he asked whether she believed he was a real Mark or not. Finally, the video chat screen showed "real Mark Alan Ruffalo", a Hollywood film actor and he had "A Tale of Genji" (one of her comic works). It should have been a deep fake with AI, but she believed "him".

Later, they often contacted and he told her that he was under the process of divorce agreement and his asset was confiscated by the court. She had sympathy with him and they finally promised to get married through the video chat around end of 2018.

Soon after that, he started asking money to her. He said to her, "I missed my flight. I need \$1,100 to buy a new ticket. Could you lend money because my asset is frozen?" He continued asking money for his hospitalization, medical treatment or litigation cost. She sold her autograph comic drawings or some high-brand items. She even borrowed money from her friends or children. People around her gradually found and noticed that she was cheated. She could not acknowledge, though.

One of her friends, who was really confused, eventually contacted with an attorney. This attorney found that all documents including a passport or receipts of items were fake and the guy pretending Mark spoke English with African accent.

When she understood the fact, she finally realized that she didn't need to pay any money. She was as if she woke up from a nightmare, but already transmitted 75 million yen (equivalent to about \$580,000) in 3 years and 5 months.

3. Interrogation and Interpreting

It is quite difficult to collect information and data on romance scams, since people pretend to be someone else and most communication are through virtual SNS. They don't show their own and just send message, or they use AI to make themselves on screen.

In addition, the Japanese government (National Police Agency) still accumulates the number of frauds including romance scam and investment scam, then it is impossible to pick up exact numbers and report of romance scams. It means the government has not accumulated the real number of romance scams and has not taken any specific countermeasures and has not eradicated the root causes.

Next, most of message exchange or contact through SNS and they actually don't talk face-to-face, which makes situations more complicated. Even though they talk online, the scam groups use AI or fake images. Then, some (most) casualties don't report their damages since they feel ashamed by cheating or got fraud just through message exchange.

Furthermore, most of cases are by non-native speakers (in English). They speak with strong accent (African) and wrong usage of grammar; however, some cannot distinguish the difference of accent or grammar usage. Moreover, the English conversation or message

exchange with weird foreign accent or a kind of “foreigner’s talk” seem to be a “Cinderella Dream” for those who have not travelled abroad.

The situation is quite hard for legal interpreters as well. The circumstances of crimes are usually vague and no information is usually disclosed to interpreters before interrogation. The National Policy Agency include every single case of romance scams to “fraud”, which makes it impossible to pick up specific characteristics of crimes and consequences.

Conclusion

Along with the Covid-19, new types of crimes have emerged and it is necessary to accumulate knowledge in order to make the current situation and criminal condition with consequences clear for better and quicker interrogation and to make better working condition for legal interpreters.

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Contact email: mouri@hum.nagoya-cu.ac.jp