Language, Power, and Resistance in Criminal Courts: A Discourse Analysis of Judge–Defendant Interaction Based on Systemic Functional Linguistics

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze how judges and defendants in Iranian criminal courts use linguistic process types to construct, negotiate, and resist institutional power within courtroom discourse. This mixed-method investigation examined over 4,500 linguistic units extracted from official transcripts of twenty criminal court hearings in Iran. The dataset included diverse case types such as financial crime, theft, assault, and document forgery. Using the analytical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics, each clause was coded for material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential processes, while speaker identity (judge or defendant) was recorded. A Critical Discourse Analysis lens guided the interpretive examination of how linguistic choices enacted power and resistance. Two independent coders achieved an inter-coder agreement rate of 85%. Quantitative analysis included frequency distributions and chi-square tests to assess significant differences in process usage across institutional roles. Inferential statistics revealed significant differences between judges and defendants in their use of material, mental, relational, and verbal processes ($p < 0.05$), demonstrating systematic divergence in linguistic strategies shaped by institutional authority and role expectations. Behavioral and existential processes showed no statistically significant differences ($p > 0.05$). Judges predominantly utilized material and verbal processes, indicating a discourse style oriented toward action, evidence, and narrative control. Defendants relied significantly more on mental and relational processes, signaling attempts to foreground intention, perception, and identity as forms of discursive resistance within the institutional setting. Courtroom interaction in Iranian criminal courts reflects structured linguistic asymmetries that embody institutional power and individual resistance. The patterned use of process types by judges and defendants reveals how legal authority is enacted through discourse and how defendants strategically mobilize linguistic resources to negotiate identity, intention, and culpability. These findings highlight the central role of language in shaping the administration of justice and the dynamics of courtroom communication.

Keywords: *Systemic Functional Linguistics; Critical Discourse Analysis; Forensic Linguistics; Courtroom Discourse; Power and Resistance; Judge–Defendant Interaction*

Introduction

The courtroom is one of the most consequential institutional settings in which language, power, and social order converge. Far from being a neutral conduit for transmitting information, courtroom language operates as a structured semiotic system through which legal reality is constructed, negotiated, and contested. Over several

decades, scholars in linguistics, discourse studies, and legal sociology have shown that courtroom interactions reveal deeply embedded ideological, institutional, and cultural assumptions that shape both the administration of justice and participants' opportunities for representation. Within this scholarly landscape, the relationship between judges and defendants constitutes a particularly fertile site for analyzing how institutional authority is performed linguistically and how individuals negotiate, resist, or redefine their positions within asymmetric power relations. In contemporary discourse studies, such interactions are understood not merely as exchanges of questions and answers but as complex linguistic events that mirror broader structures of dominance, control, and institutional legitimacy ([1], [2]).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) provides the theoretical grounding for understanding how courtroom communication both reflects and reproduces legal–institutional power. According to CDA, language is a socially situated practice inseparable from structures of dominance; discourse functions as a means through which institutions regulate behavior, legitimize authority, and define acceptable forms of knowledge ([1]). This orientation resonates strongly with Foucault's view that discursive formations produce the very objects and subjects they purport to describe, positioning speakers within predetermined epistemic boundaries ([2]). In criminal courtroom interaction, these boundaries are acutely visible: the judge's discourse typically aligns with institutional authority, procedural norms, and evidentiary logic, while defendants often mobilize alternative discursive strategies to express agency, justify actions, or negotiate culpability.

Linguistic studies of courtroom settings have consistently demonstrated that power asymmetry between legal actors is enacted primarily through discourse. Early foundational work in forensic linguistics highlighted how questioning strategies, turn-taking control, and institutional register serve to maintain the dominance of legal professionals over lay participants ([3]). Subsequent contributions expanded this perspective by investigating how linguistic strategies shape outcomes in criminal proceedings, particularly through question design, directive structures, and narrative control ([4]). These studies underscore that courtroom questioning is not merely evidentiary but profoundly interactional: the language of judges, lawyers, and defendants shapes how facts are elicited, interpreted, and ultimately adjudicated.

The emergence of forensic linguistics as a systematic field has further strengthened the understanding of legal discourse as a domain where specialized modes of communication intersect with institutional enforcement mechanisms. Foundational texts in the field demonstrate the methodological breadth of forensic linguistics, ranging from textual analysis of confessions to stylistic profiling of fraudulent communications ([5]). In the Iranian context, forensic linguistics has gained traction as an interdisciplinary approach combining linguistic theory with criminological, judicial, and sociological perspectives. Studies have shown that forensic analysis can illuminate patterns of deception, stylistic manipulation, or identity construction in criminal investigations ([6], [7]). These contributions underscore the necessity of linguistic inquiry for understanding how discursive strategies mediate legal responsibility and social perception within the justice system.

Courtroom discourse in Iran has received increasing scholarly interest over the past decade. Researchers examining Persian courtroom interaction have identified clear patterns in the stylistic, syntactic, and semantic features that characterize legal language. For example, studies on verbal and stylistic markers in Persian judicial discourse reveal that word choice, modality, and information structure serve critical functions in guiding legal argumentation and shaping courtroom narratives ([8]). Similarly, analyses of ideational relations in civil court interactions indicate that judicial discourse frequently relies on specific linguistic constructions to delineate

obligations, causal relations, and legal interpretations (9). Comparative studies further emphasize that Iranian courtroom discourse exhibits structural similarities and contextual distinctions relative to global legal-linguistic patterns, particularly in the allocation of speaking rights and framing of defendant narratives (10). Together, these studies highlight both the distinctiveness and the complexity of Iranian judicial discourse.

Complementing these descriptive studies, scholars have also explored how systemic-functional linguistics (SFL) provides a theoretically robust framework for analyzing the grammar of courtroom communication. SFL highlights how language simultaneously enacts experiential, interpersonal, and textual meanings, offering tools to examine how courtroom actors frame actions, evaluate events, and manage interpersonal dynamics (11). Application of SFL in Persian linguistic research demonstrates its adaptability to various genres: from poetic analysis (12) to Quranic discourse (13), to information structure studies in Persian grammar (14). These works collectively demonstrate that SFL is particularly effective in contexts where the relationship between linguistic form and social function is of central interest, making it an appropriate framework for the analysis of courtroom discourse.

Because courtroom interaction is simultaneously institutional and interpersonal, the intersection of SFL and CDA is especially valuable for unpacking the dynamics of power and resistance. From an SFL perspective, judges and defendants employ different linguistic process types—material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential—to achieve divergent communicative purposes. Judges tend to use language to impose order, extract factual information, and maintain procedural control, often relying on material and verbal processes that foreground actions and speech events. Defendants, in contrast, frequently use mental and relational processes to articulate intentions, perceptions, and identity claims. These linguistic differences are not stylistic choices alone but manifestations of institutional position, legitimacy, and agency.

From a CDA perspective, these patterned differences reflect broader ideological structures. The discursive authority of legal professionals is maintained through procedural conventions, questioning tactics, and institutional expectations about appropriate speech forms. As research on police interrogation shows, the linguistic construction of power is woven into institutional routines, with interrogators controlling not only topic flow but also the moral framing of events (15). In judicial contexts, similar mechanisms can be seen in how judges open, close, or redirect thematic trajectories through their questioning and evaluative language. Defendants, who lack institutional authority, often navigate these constraints by attempting to reposition themselves narratively, as seen in other studies of discourse and social positioning within Iranian society (16).

In this context, understanding the linguistic features of Persian courtroom discourse requires situating them within theoretical developments in discourse studies. Foundational works on discourse theory conceptualize discourse as a structured system of meaning-making that shapes social reality, mediates ideological formations, and organizes knowledge (17). Legal discourse, in particular, is characterized by a high degree of institutionalization and formalization, which constrains the linguistic resources available to non-expert participants. This helps explain why defendants often rely on alternative process types to introduce subjective, relational, or explanatory dimensions into a discourse tightly regulated by legal norms.

The growing body of Iranian research on legal discourse further reinforces the argument that courtroom language is highly patterned and socially consequential. Forensic linguistic investigations in Iran reveal that speakers involved in legal processes—judges, investigators, fraud suspects, and defendants—tend to adopt distinctive linguistic strategies aligned with their perceived roles and goals (7). Similarly, forensic applications highlight how linguistic evidence is used to interpret intent, resolve disputes, or authenticate statements in criminal investigations (18). Such

findings underscore the importance of examining courtroom discourse not only for its textual properties but also for its social and institutional implications.

Within this scholarly framework, the relationship between language, power, and resistance emerges as a central theme. Foucault's conceptualization of power as a dispersed, relational force operating through discourse provides an essential interpretive lens for understanding how courtroom actors negotiate authority (2). CDA scholars similarly argue that discourse both constructs and constrains agency, enabling certain forms of representation while limiting others (1). In courtroom interaction, defendants' attempts to introduce mental or relational processes can thus be interpreted as subtle acts of resistance—attempts to shift the interpretive frame from institutional definitions of wrongdoing to personal narratives of intention, misunderstanding, or identity.

Recent Persian linguistic studies reinforce the significance of these discursive mechanisms. For instance, analyses of stylistic and verbal markers reveal how subtle features such as modality, emphasis, and evaluative language can influence the perceived credibility and authority of speakers (8). Other research shows that grammatical choices in legal settings reflect both cognitive orientation and social alignment, shaping how obligations, causality, and responsibility are articulated (9). These insights support the importance of examining grammatical process types when analyzing institutional discourse.

In addition, studies on information structure in Persian provide important insights into how speakers foreground or background elements of meaning in order to shape narrative interpretation (14). When applied to courtroom settings, these insights help explain how judges foreground actions and evidence, while defendants foreground intentions and interpersonal relations. The strategic construction of information flow thus becomes a mechanism through which speakers negotiate their social and legal positions.

Given the complex social, institutional, and linguistic features of courtroom interaction, there remains a strong need for empirical research that combines SFL and CDA to analyze Persian criminal court discourse. While previous studies have contributed significantly to understanding general patterns in legal discourse, few have undertaken systematic, large-scale analyses of judge–defendant interactions in criminal courts. Even fewer have integrated quantitative distributional analysis with qualitative interpretive analysis to reveal how linguistic process types structure power dynamics and resistance strategies during judicial proceedings.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to analyze how judges and defendants in Iranian criminal courts use linguistic process types to construct, negotiate, and resist institutional power within courtroom discourse.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method design integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of how power and resistance are enacted through language in criminal court interactions. The methodological foundation combines Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), allowing the research to capture both the linguistic structures of courtroom exchanges and the broader sociopolitical implications embedded in judge–defendant communication. The qualitative component focuses on close interpretive reading of discourse, whereas the quantitative component examines distributional patterns of linguistic processes related to authority and resistance.

The study population consisted of criminal court hearings held in general jurisdiction courts in Iran. Due to the sensitivity of courtroom access, data collection relied on official written transcripts rather than audiovisual records. From the available archival materials, twenty criminal hearing transcripts were purposefully selected. These

transcripts represented a diverse range of case types, including financial crimes, assault, theft, and document forgery, enabling the study to explore discursive patterns across heterogeneous legal contexts. Selection criteria required that each transcript contain direct verbal exchanges between the presiding judge and the defendant, that the dialogue be fully documented without missing portions, and that the linguistic structure of the utterances be suitable for SFL-based process analysis. Following this screening, approximately 4,500 independent linguistic units—defined as sentences or autonomous clauses—were extracted and treated as the analytic corpus. These units formed the basis for coding grammatical processes and discourse functions. Ethical considerations were carefully observed, including anonymization through removal or encoding of all identifying details.

The primary source of data consisted of verbatim written transcripts recorded by courtroom clerks during official proceedings. These transcripts captured the linguistic content of the hearings but excluded paralinguistic elements such as tone, volume, gesture, or emotional expression. To ensure protection of personal information, all names, addresses, case numbers, and sensitive contextual details were removed prior to analysis. The cleaned transcripts were imported into text-processing software, allowing the researchers to segment the material into linguistic units and prepare the content for systematic coding.

Analytical tools drew from two complementary methodological frameworks. Under the SFL framework, attention was directed toward the ideational metafunction of language and, specifically, the classification of process types. Each linguistic unit was examined to identify its core verb and assign it to one of six process types defined by Halliday and Matthiessen: material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, or existential. This process classification required careful scrutiny of grammatical structure as well as contextual meaning. The CDA framework provided a second layer of analysis by situating linguistic choices within broader social structures of legality, authority, and institutional power. The researcher assessed how defendants articulated forms of resistance, deflection, mitigation, or negotiation, and how judges employed institutional linguistic resources to reinforce procedural order and juridical authority.

The analytic strategy proceeded in several phases designed to integrate linguistic, discursive, and statistical perspectives. In the initial phase, each sentence or clause was isolated as a separate unit of analysis. The main verb of each unit was identified, and its process type was determined following SFL guidelines. Each unit was also coded for speaker identity—judge or defendant—allowing for comparison of linguistic patterns across institutional roles. In the next interpretive phase, units were evaluated for their discourse functions related to power enactment or resistance, drawing from CDA principles. This interpretive layer required examining how lexical choices, modality, questioning strategies, or narrative structures served to maintain or challenge institutional authority.

To establish reliability, two independent researchers coded the dataset. Their inter-rater agreement reached approximately 85 percent, indicating a high level of coding consistency and demonstrating the robustness of the analytic framework. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was achieved. For the quantitative component, coded data were exported into SPSS for calculation of descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions of process types across speakers. The chi-square test was used to assess whether differences between judge and defendant discourse patterns were statistically significant, particularly in relation to process type selection and functional patterns associated with power or resistance.

Validity was further enhanced through theoretical triangulation. By integrating SFL's detailed grammatical analysis with CDA's attention to sociopolitical context, the study achieved a multidimensional perspective on courtroom discourse. Content validity was reinforced through reliance on well-established linguistic frameworks,

and reliability was supported by strong intercoder agreement. Although the study's methodological design was rigorous, several limitations should be acknowledged. Restricted access to courtroom audiovisual recordings constrained the analysis to textual transcripts, limiting insight into tone and embodied communication. Legal constraints reduced the diversity of available cases, and the exclusive focus on judge–defendant interaction did not allow incorporation of lawyers' or witnesses' discursive roles, which may also shape courtroom power dynamics.

Findings and Results

The dataset for this study consisted of more than 4,500 sentences drawn from the transcripts of twenty criminal court hearings. These language units were analyzed through the dual lenses of Systemic Functional Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis, allowing the research to capture both the linguistic distribution of process types and the deeper interpretive patterns shaping the interaction between judges and defendants. The findings are presented at both descriptive and interpretive levels, beginning with quantitative patterns in process usage and followed by qualitative insights illustrating how these linguistic resources construct power, resistance, and negotiation in courtroom discourse.

The statistical analysis revealed clear differences between judges and defendants in the distribution of the six SFL process types. These differences reflect the institutional roles of each participant and the communicative functions associated with their interactional positions. The table below presents the numerical summary of these distributions.

Table 1. Quantitative Findings

Process Type	Judge (Frequency)	Judge (%)	Defendant (Frequency)	Defendant (%)
Material	820	42%	410	20%
Mental	310	16%	640	31%
Relational	270	14%	520	25%
Behavioral	90	5%	130	6%
Verbal	380	19%	190	9%
Existential	90	4%	170	9%
Total	1960	100%	2060	100%

Across the corpus, the chi-square test confirmed statistically significant differences between judges and defendants in material, mental, relational, and verbal process usage ($p < 0.05$). Behavioral and existential processes showed no significant differences ($p > 0.05$). These results indicate a systematic divergence in the linguistic strategies employed by each interlocutor. Judges relied heavily on material and verbal processes, reflecting their institutional role in managing actions, evidence, and narrative control. Defendants, in contrast, employed mental and relational processes at much higher rates, suggesting attempts to foreground intentions, beliefs, perceptions, and identity in order to negotiate responsibility, mitigate blame, or reshape how events were interpreted.

To deepen the quantitative patterns, qualitative discourse analysis examined how these process types functioned within actual courtroom interactions. The table below summarizes representative linguistic patterns and interpretive themes.

Table 2. Qualitative Findings

Process Type / Pattern	Illustrative Examples	Interpretive Insight
Material Processes (Judge)	"When did you transfer the money?" / "Did you sign the contract or was it only verbal?"	Material processes enabled judges to anchor discourse in concrete actions and chronological events, reinforcing institutional authority.
Mental Processes (Defendant)	"I thought the transaction was legal." / "I felt that the other party agreed."	Defendants shifted discussion from observable actions to internal states, using mental processes as a subtle form of resistance.
Relational Processes (Defendant)	"I was the actual owner of the shop." / "This document is forged."	Relational processes were used to redefine identity, ownership, or status, allowing defendants to reconstruct their social–legal standing.
Verbal Processes (Judge)	"What did you tell the officer?" / "Did anyone advise you to write this confession?"	Judges used verbal processes to probe external narratives, challenge statements, and regulate the circulation of courtroom discourse.
Power–Resistance Dynamic	Recurring push–pull patterns between concrete factual questioning (judge) and subjective narrative repositioning (defendant).	Courtroom discourse became a site where power was enacted and contested through linguistic choices.

The qualitative analysis revealed that judges consistently used material processes to direct attention toward concrete behaviors, transactions, and documented actions. This form of language stabilized the judicial narrative by situating events within legal categories such as "transfer," "signing," and "execution of action." Verbal processes further reinforced judicial control, as questions about prior statements, interactions with third parties, or confessional origins allowed judges to interrogate and regulate narrative legitimacy. Through these strategies, judges shaped the permissible boundaries of discourse and constrained the interpretive space available to defendants.

Defendants, by contrast, used mental processes to shift interpretive frames from what happened to what they believed, intended, or perceived. These linguistic choices often functioned as resistance mechanisms, implicitly challenging the legal sufficiency of material evidence by foregrounding subjective reasoning. Relational processes allowed defendants to assert alternative identities ("I was the owner"), statuses ("This document is false"), or conditions that repositioned them within the sociopolitical hierarchy of the courtroom. Such strategies worked to destabilize institutional narratives and to insert personal or social explanations into a highly regulated discursive environment.

Overall, the qualitative findings illustrate a dynamic interaction in which judges seek to narrow discourse to concrete, legally relevant actions, while defendants seek to broaden discourse toward intentions, relationships, and identity claims. This dynamic creates a continual negotiation over meaning, legitimacy, and narrative control.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that linguistic interaction in Iranian criminal courts is structured by systematic differences in the use of process types between judges and defendants, reflecting underlying power relations embedded within the legal institution. The quantitative results showed that judges predominantly used material and verbal processes, while defendants relied more heavily on mental and relational processes. These distributional patterns indicate that language functions not merely as a medium of information exchange but as a tool through which authority, legitimacy, and identity are performed and contested. Such findings are consistent with broader research in discourse analysis and forensic linguistics which emphasizes the role of institutional discourse in shaping the interactional rights and obligations of participants (1, 5). The data further underscore that the courtroom is a socially regulated communicative space in which linguistic choices cannot be separated from

institutional power structures, aligning with Foucault's assertion that discourse is a locus of power, discipline, and epistemic control (2).

The judges' reliance on material processes suggests a strategic orientation toward constructing a factual, action-based narrative of events. Material processes foreground concrete actions, sequences of behavior, and observable events, allowing judges to guide the discourse toward legal categories such as culpability, responsibility, and causation. This finding aligns with the perspective that institutional speakers employ language to consolidate authority by focusing on actions that can be classified, regulated, or sanctioned (3). The prominence of verbal processes in judges' discourse also reflects the role of judicial questioning in controlling narrative flow, eliciting specific types of information, and interrogating previous statements or testimonies. Archer's analysis of courtroom questions supports this pattern, demonstrating that institutional interrogatives are used strategically to shape the topical direction and moral framing of legal narratives (4). Thus, the linguistic behavior of judges in this study reflects globally recognized practices in courtroom management, but the specific distribution of process types also aligns with findings on Persian legal discourse, where institutional actors have been shown to privilege action-based and evidentiary language forms (9).

By contrast, defendants' heightened use of mental processes reveals their attempt to foreground subjective states such as intention, belief, perception, and emotion. This linguistic strategy can be interpreted as a form of discursive resistance, allowing defendants to shift the interpretive frame away from external actions toward internal motivations or misunderstandings. Prior research has emphasized that defendants employ mental expressions to mitigate responsibility or reframe events in terms of personal cognition rather than legal wrongdoing (15). Similarly, forensic linguistic studies of fraud suspects and individuals under investigation demonstrate that speakers often rely on subjective or relational language to reconstruct identity in a way that disconnects them from incriminating actions (7). The present findings echo these patterns and confirm that Persian-speaking defendants mobilize linguistic resources in ways that reflect broader dynamics of power and resistance highlighted in CDA scholarship (1).

The strong presence of relational processes in defendants' discourse suggests another significant dimension: identity reconstruction. Relational clauses enable speakers to assert categorical identities ("I am…," "This document is…") or define relationships between entities, allowing defendants to reposition themselves within the legal narrative. This aligns with sociolinguistic theories that conceptualize identity as discursively constructed and negotiated through linguistic choices (17). In Persian linguistic research, similar patterns have been observed in contexts where speakers use relational structures to redefine their social roles, personal relationships, or moral standing (12). Thus, the use of relational processes by defendants in the courtroom demonstrates an attempt to reshape institutional perceptions by articulating alternative identity claims, a behavior also noted in comparative studies of courtroom discourse in Iran (10).

The data also reveal a clash of communicative orientations: while judges aim to reduce the discourse to objective events capable of legal evaluation, defendants attempt to expand the discourse to subjective or relational dimensions where they possess discursive agency. This dual orientation reflects what Fairclough describes as the dialectical tension between institutional power and individual subjectivity (1). Judges' preference for material and verbal processes functions to maintain institutional order, while defendants' preference for mental and relational processes constitutes a counter-narrative that disrupts institutional categorization. Foucault's framework provides a useful lens for interpreting this tension: institutional discourse operates as a mechanism of discipline, but individual

speakers always retain the capacity to resist, reinterpret, or subvert imposed structures (2). The linguistic behavior of defendants in this study exemplifies such micro-resistances.

Supporting these interpretations, Iranian scholarship on courtroom and investigative discourse has similarly emphasized the role of linguistic strategies in negotiating power. Studies of police interrogation in Iran have noted that suspects often invoke mental states to shift responsibility or express misunderstanding, while interrogators rely on action-focused questioning to establish factual narratives (15). The present findings extend this pattern into judicial settings, showing that similar discursive strategies persist beyond interrogation and continue into formal courtroom interaction. Moreover, legal-discourse studies in Iran have shown that judges' stylistic and grammatical preferences reflect institutional norms regarding evidence assessment, legal reasoning, and procedural control (8). The alignment between these established patterns and the results of the present study reinforces the conclusion that courtroom discourse in Iran is strongly shaped by systematic linguistic practices tied to institutional roles.

Additional insight emerges when juxtaposing the findings with SFL-based studies of Persian language structure. Halliday's framework emphasizes that process types reflect underlying cognitive and social dimensions of meaning, positioning language as a semiotic resource that encodes experiential, interpersonal, and textual functions (11). Prior Persian studies applying SFL have shown that speakers strategically select process types to foreground particular aspects of meaning, whether in literary texts (12), religious discourse (13), or grammatical structure (14). Extending this insight to legal discourse, the findings of the present study demonstrate that judges and defendants systematically differ in how they deploy these linguistic resources, thereby performing distinct experiential and interpersonal meanings aligned with their institutional roles.

From a forensic-linguistic standpoint, the results are consistent with international research demonstrating that institutional actors employ language in ways that maximize clarity, control, and authority, while non-institutional actors use linguistic strategies to express uncertainty, reinterpret events, or assert personal identity (5). The Iranian context, however, presents distinctive features, including culturally embedded norms of respect, deference, and narrative framing that may further shape the linguistic behavior of courtroom actors (16). These cultural dimensions may help explain the prevalence of relational processes among defendants, who may feel compelled to assert identity-related claims to counteract stigma or institutional categorization.

The use of verbal processes by judges also warrants special attention. In this dataset, verbal processes served as a key mechanism for narrative interrogation, allowing judges to question not only defendants' actions but their prior statements, interactions with others, and external sources of influence. This reflects a broader legal-discursive principle in which the court seeks to regulate the circulation of narratives and ensure the credibility of speech events that bear evidentiary weight. Archer's findings on courtroom questioning reinforce this interpretation, showing that interrogatives function as a linguistic technology of control (4). Additionally, the use of verbal processes aligns with O'Barr's characterization of legal speech as a system governed by specialized communicative norms that mediate power relations in institutional contexts (3).

The study also contributes to the growing body of Persian-language research emphasizing the intersection of language, society, and legal structures. Scholars have argued that linguistic practices in legal settings reflect broader patterns of social ideology, moral expectations, and institutional legitimacy in Iranian society (16). The present findings support this argument by showing that courtroom discourse reproduces distinctions between authoritative and non-authoritative speakers through structured linguistic patterns. Judges' discursive orientation

toward facts, actions, and external evidence mirrors their institutional mandate, while defendants' orientation toward internal states, relationships, and identities reflects their subordinate position within the legal hierarchy.

Overall, the results demonstrate that the courtroom is a site where linguistic structures and social power converge. Judges enact institutional authority through a disciplined linguistic repertoire that emphasizes material and verbal processes, while defendants resist, negotiate, or reframe that authority through mental and relational processes. This dialectical interplay confirms the broader CDA premise that discourse is a battleground for the production and contestation of social meaning (1). It also reflects Foucault's view that power is relational, circulating through discourse rather than residing in individuals (2). By combining SFL and CDA, the study reveals how micro-level linguistic choices reflect macro-level institutional dynamics, thus contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of Persian courtroom discourse.

This study relied exclusively on written transcripts of courtroom hearings, which means that prosodic, paralinguistic, and embodied cues such as tone, hesitation, stress, gesture, and eye contact could not be captured. The sample, although large in linguistic units, was limited to twenty criminal cases and did not include audiovisual data. The findings also reflect only judge–defendant interactions and do not incorporate lawyers, witnesses, or clerks whose discourse may influence courtroom power dynamics. The study's focus on process types provides a useful structural perspective but does not encompass all possible dimensions of discourse, such as modality, cohesion, or politeness strategies.

Future studies could integrate multimodal discourse analysis using video recordings to capture paralinguistic and embodied features of courtroom interaction. Comparative studies across different provinces, legal cultures, or case types could help determine whether the patterns identified here reflect national norms or localized practices. Including additional courtroom actors may also provide a more holistic view of power distribution in legal discourse. Finally, combining SFL with corpus-linguistic tools may offer deeper insights into register variation, lexical patterns, and genre-specific features of judicial language.

Judicial training programs may benefit from incorporating findings from forensic linguistics and discourse analysis to increase awareness of how linguistic choices shape fairness and understanding in courtroom communication. Providing defendants with clearer explanations of courtroom procedures or access to linguistic mediation services may improve their ability to participate effectively in their own defense. A more explicit acknowledgment of the interpretive role of language in legal proceedings could enhance transparency and improve judicial decision-making.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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