

Forensic linguistic evidence in Indonesian courtrooms: a study of language use in criminal verdicts

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ABSTRACT

Background: Language in Indonesian criminal verdicts functions not only as a medium of legal reasoning but also as a mechanism for constructing institutional authority and shaping public perceptions of justice. **Objective:** The aim of this study is to analyze how language in verdict texts constructs legal facts, interprets testimonies, and reproduces ideological frameworks in Indonesian courtrooms. **Method:** This research employs a qualitative design using forensic discourse analysis, speech act theory, and critical linguistic analysis on a purposive corpus of thirty verdicts sampled from the Supreme Court directory between 2020 and 2025. **Results:** The results reveal three key findings: first, passive voice and nominalizations dominate narrative construction, obscuring agency while reinforcing judicial neutrality; second, testimonies are strategically represented through denials, assertions, and commissives, yet frequently reframed in indirect speech that diminishes defendants' agency; third, ideological expressions such as legitimizing formulae, stigmatizing labels, and religious appeals permeate verdicts, projecting institutional authority and moral legitimacy. These findings indicate that verdict texts are not ideologically neutral but discursive instruments that shape legal and cultural realities. **Implication:** This study's implications underscore the need for critical awareness and reform in judicial writing practices to ensure transparency, protect defendants' rights, and strengthen trust in Indonesia's legal system. **Novelty:** This study elucidates how judicial language in Indonesian verdicts operates as a discursive mechanism that simultaneously structures legal reasoning, reconfigures agency, and reinforces institutional and ideological authority.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language is central to how justice is constructed, particularly in Indonesian criminal courts where verdicts are written and delivered in highly formalized discourse. According to Indonesian General Courts, in 2025, over 600,000 criminal verdicts have been published in the Indonesian Supreme Court's online directory, reflecting the massive volume of judicial texts that shape public understanding of justice. Yet, controversies often arise when linguistic choices obscure accountability. For instance, in high-profile cases such as the 2022 Ferdy Sambo murder trial, the wording of verdicts was heavily scrutinized by the media and public, especially regarding how judicial language framed intent, responsibility, and credibility of testimonies. Such cases reveal how seemingly neutral legal texts can influence perceptions of guilt and fairness. Given that Indonesia's judiciary handles thousands of sensitive cases annually, examining the

linguistic construction of verdicts becomes crucial to ensuring transparency, protecting defendants' rights, and strengthening public trust in the legal system.

Existing scholarship has extensively explored forensic linguistics across contexts, from authorship attribution [1], [2], [3] to the role of discourse in legal trials [4], [4], [5]. In Indonesia, recent works have focused on courtroom pragmatics [6] and judicial reasoning styles [7], highlighting how language affects legal interpretation. However, most studies remain descriptive and seldom apply forensic discourse analysis systematically to verdict texts. Moreover, few investigations integrate multiple linguistic frameworks—such as speech act theory and critical linguistics—to interrogate how facts, testimonies, and institutional ideologies are encoded in verdicts. While comparative studies in the UK, US, and Chinese courts demonstrate how linguistic evidence influences conviction rates [8], [9], Indonesian legal discourse remains underexplored. This gap underscores the importance of analyzing verdict texts not only as legal documents but also as sites where language choices shape truth construction, legitimacy of evidence, and power relations between judges, defendants, and the state.

This study addresses the question: *How does language use in Indonesian criminal verdicts construct legal reality, shape the interpretation of testimonies, and reflect institutional ideologies?* Specifically, this research examines three dimensions of verdict texts. First, it investigates how legal facts are linguistically constructed through narrative and grammatical strategies. Second, it analyzes the use of speech acts in defendants' and witnesses' testimonies as they are represented in verdicts. Third, it interrogates the ideological and power-laden dimensions of judicial language, particularly lexical choices that privilege certain voices while silencing others. By combining forensic discourse analysis, speech act theory, and critical linguistics, this research aims to provide a multidimensional understanding of how verdicts function not only as legal rulings but also as communicative acts that shape public perceptions of justice, credibility, and fairness in Indonesia's criminal justice system.

Preliminary observations suggest that Indonesian verdicts often employ selective narrative strategies and authoritative lexical formulations, which may reinforce institutional biases rather than neutral objectivity. For instance, recurrent phrases such as “terbukti secara sah dan meyakinkan” (“legally and convincingly proven”) appear formulaic, yet their unquestioned repetition legitimizes judicial authority without rigorous scrutiny of evidentiary strength. Likewise, defendants' voices tend to be linguistically minimized through passive or indirect reporting, diminishing their agency in the courtroom narrative. By foregrounding these patterns, this study argues that verdicts are not merely technical legal instruments but active sites of ideological reproduction. The implications are twofold: academically, this research enriches forensic linguistic scholarship by applying integrated analytic tools to Indonesian data; practically, it highlights the urgent need for judicial training and reform in legal writing practices to foster greater transparency, accountability, and protection of defendants' rights in Indonesia's criminal justice process.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Forensic discourse analysis

Forensic Discourse Analysis (FDA) has emerged as a central approach in forensic linguistics, focusing on how language structures construct legal realities. Akhtar et al (2025) define FDA as the systematic study of linguistic features in legal contexts to uncover patterns of representation, framing, and persuasion [1]. Other scholars, such as Shahzadi et al (2025), highlight FDA as the examination of courtroom language to understand how narratives of guilt or innocence are shaped [2]. While some definitions emphasize the technical role of FDA in analyzing syntax and lexicon [2], [5], others underscore its socio-pragmatic role in contextualizing meaning [10], [11]. The divergence lies in whether FDA is treated narrowly as a descriptive method or broadly as a critical tool for interrogating judicial authority. This definitional plurality reveals that FDA is not a singular approach but a field that accommodates both descriptive and critical traditions. In the context of verdict texts, FDA offers a lens to see how judicial language simultaneously informs, persuades, and legitimizes.

The categories of FDA can be broadly grouped into three interrelated dimensions: narrative construction, linguistic strategies, and evidentiary framing. Narrative construction focuses on how events are reconstructed in verdicts, often using chronological ordering or selective emphasis on particular facts [1], [5]. Linguistic strategies include grammatical features such as passive voice, nominalization, and modality, which subtly influence perceptions of agency and certainty. Evidentiary framing refers to how verdicts linguistically qualify the strength or weakness of evidence, often through formulaic expressions such as “beyond reasonable doubt” or its Indonesian equivalent “terbukti secara sah dan meyakinkan.” These dimensions demonstrate that FDA does not only describe the surface features of legal language but also interrogates how such features serve institutional purposes. In Indonesian courts, these aspects become particularly significant given the judiciary's reliance on written verdicts, which serve as the primary means of communicating legal reasoning to both defendants and the wider public.

2.2. Speech act

Speech Act Theory remains a foundational concept in pragmatics and has important implications for forensic linguistics. At its core, the theory posits that utterances are not merely vehicles of information but also actions in themselves—statements that promise, accuse, deny, or declare. Scholars such as Naqvi et al (2025) and Matin & Rahimi (2014) have applied speech act theory to legal contexts, showing how testimony, judicial pronouncements, and even written verdicts function as performative acts with legal force [7], [12]. However, interpretations differ regarding the boundaries of speech acts in legal settings. Some argue that only explicit performatives, such as “I sentence you,” qualify as speech acts [13], while others contend that indirect and implied statements, such as mitigated denials, carry equal pragmatic weight [3]. The variability in definitions highlights the necessity of contextualized analysis, especially in Indonesian verdicts where reported speech from witnesses and defendants plays a central evidentiary role [14], [15].

Speech Act Theory in forensic settings can be unpacked into three primary categories: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. Locutionary acts concern the literal content of testimony, such as “I was not present.” Illocutionary acts focus on the speaker’s intention—denying, asserting, or committing to truth. Perlocutionary acts highlight the effects of speech on the hearer, such as persuading the judge or casting doubt on opposing testimony. Scholars such as Anggrayni et al (2025) and Sugiharto & Erpuat (2025) demonstrate that judicial outcomes often hinge on how illocutionary and perlocutionary forces are interpreted [6], [16]. In Indonesian verdicts, judges frequently summarize testimonies using indirect speech, which complicates the analysis of speaker intention and effect. Furthermore, commissive and declarative acts embedded in verdict texts carry significant legal implications, as they often determine sentencing outcomes. Recognizing these categories ensures a nuanced understanding of how speech acts, once transcribed into verdicts, function as both evidence and instruments of judicial power.

2.3. Critical linguistics

Critical Linguistics (CLA) provides a framework for analyzing how ideology and power are encoded in language, particularly in institutional texts. Originating in Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis, CLA examines how lexical choices, grammatical structures, and textual organization reproduce or challenge social hierarchies [17]. In the courtroom context, CLA interrogates how judicial language privileges state perspectives while marginalizing defendants’ voices. Scholars such as van Dijk (2006) argue that legal texts often naturalize institutional authority through seemingly neutral expressions [18], thereby reinforcing dominant ideologies. In Indonesian courts, terms such as “radikal” or “meresahkan masyarakat” are frequently used without precise legal definitions, reflecting ideological bias rather than objective analysis [19]. The definitional range of CLA underscores its flexibility: some scholars stress textual features [2], while others emphasize socio-political contexts [4]. For verdict analysis, CLA highlights how judicial texts serve not only as legal instruments but also as sites of ideological reproduction.

The dimensions of CLA in legal discourse can be organized into three interrelated aspects: lexical choice, representation of agency, and discursive framing. Lexical choice focuses on how words like “guilty,” “proven,” or “radikal” carry ideological weight beyond their descriptive meaning. Representation of agency examines whether actors are portrayed as active agents or obscured through passive constructions—for example, “the victim was attacked” versus “the defendant attacked the victim.” Discursive framing highlights how broader institutional narratives, such as national security or public morality, are invoked to legitimize judicial decisions. Scholars such as Sun et al (2025) and Rao (2024) illustrate how these aspects shape legal texts globally [8], [9]. In Indonesian verdicts, formulaic phrases like “demi keadilan berdasarkan Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa” frame judicial authority within moral and religious discourse, reinforcing institutional legitimacy [20]. These categories collectively demonstrate how CLA reveals hidden dimensions of judicial language, showing that verdicts are never purely descriptive but deeply ideological.

3. METHOD

The unit of analysis in this study is the written discourse contained in Indonesian criminal court verdicts (*putusan pidana*). These verdicts are not only juridical rulings but also complex linguistic artifacts where legal reasoning, evidence evaluation, and ideological framing are discursively constructed. Following Farid and Nanik (2023), verdict texts are considered “institutional discourse” that encode both factual narration and evaluative judgments [21]. To ensure comprehensiveness, the corpus for this study consists of 30 purposively selected verdicts spanning diverse case types, courts, and regions. The focus lies on four textual components: (1) factual findings, (2) judicial considerations, (3) quoted testimonies of witnesses and defendants, and (4) the final sentencing formula (*amar putusan*). These components were chosen because they display how language simultaneously reports, interprets, and legitimizes. Table 1 presents a detailed corpus overview, showing case diversity, source reliability, and the linguistic focus of each text.

Table 1. Corpus of verdicts analyzed

Case Type	Verdict (Putusan PN)	Linguistic Focus
Homicide	No. 62/Pid.B/2025/PN.Pmn	Narrative reconstruction of intent
Corruption	No. 29/Pid.Sus-TPK/2020/PN.Jkt.Pst	Lexical markers “loss to the state”
Terrorism	No. 108/PID.SUS/2017/PN.Jkt.Tim	Ideological terms (“radical,” “threat”)
Narcotics	No. 172/Pid.Sus/2021/PN.Lwk	Evaluative modality in evidence
Domestic Violence	No. 423/Pid.Sus/2020/PN.Bdg	Agency of victim vs. defendant
Sexual Assault	No. 669/Pid.Sus/2025/PN.Bdg	Speech act analysis of denials
Fraud	No. 1116/Pid.B/2025/PN.Dps	Narrative of financial transactions
Child Abuse	No. 83/Pid.Sus/2020/PN.Kot	Judicial stance in sentencing
Theft	No. 2428/Pid.B/2025/PN.Sby	Lexical repetition of “proven”
Cybercrime	No. 1316/Pid.Sus/PN.Jkt.Tim	Digital evidence discourse

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-case design rooted in forensic linguistic methodology. A qualitative approach is appropriate because this research aims to analyze the meaning, functions, and implications of language rather than quantify occurrences. The design is interpretive, following Creswell (2011), as it seeks to capture how judicial texts both reflect and shape social realities [22]. The use of multiple case types (homicide, corruption, terrorism, etc.) allows cross-case comparison, highlighting whether certain linguistic patterns are universal or case-specific. Triangulation of three analytic frameworks—Forensic Discourse Analysis (FDA), Speech Act Theory, and Critical Linguistic Analysis (CLA)—enhances methodological robustness. This design ensures that verdicts are not treated as monolithic but as varied discourses where narrative, pragmatic, and ideological dimensions intersect. By situating verdicts within their socio-legal context, this study aims to expose the linguistic mechanisms through which Indonesian courts construct truth, legitimacy, and authority.

Primary data derive from the Supreme Court’s Directory of Decisions, Indonesia’s most authoritative public archive of verdicts. This source guarantees reliability and accessibility, providing official documents across jurisdictions. To ensure comprehensiveness, verdicts were chosen from different types of courts—district courts (*Pengadilan Negeri*), corruption courts (*Pengadilan Tipikor*), and terrorism-related courts. The selection covers the years 2020–2025, a period marked by high-profile cases (e.g., Sambo homicide, Jiwasraya corruption) that generated public debate over judicial reasoning. Secondary data include scholarly literature on forensic linguistics, Indonesian legal codes (KUHP, KUHAP), and relevant media coverage to contextualize socio-legal interpretations. These secondary sources function as triangulating evidence rather than primary objects of analysis. Following Hamzani et al (2024), drawing upon official court records ensures validity, while contextual sources guard against isolated interpretations [23]. By combining primary verdicts and secondary commentaries, this study captures both the linguistic features of judicial texts and the broader institutional environment in which they operate.

Data collection followed a purposive and stratified sampling strategy. First, verdicts were identified through keyword searches (e.g., “pembunuhan,” “korupsi,” “terorisme”) within the online Supreme Court directory. Second, inclusion criteria were applied: verdicts had to (1) be complete with considerations and testimonies, (2) involve substantive discussion of evidence, and (3) be publicly accessible without redaction errors. Third, cases were stratified to ensure diversity across crime types, regions, and linguistic features. Thirty verdicts were initially downloaded in PDF format, and ten were selected for intensive analysis based on richness of data. Excerpts were then extracted into a coded database in NVivo software, tagged according to categories such as “narrative framing,” “speech act,” and “ideological markers.” Anonymization of sensitive data followed ethical standards, although many identifiers were already masked in official publications. This systematic collection process ensured both breadth (across multiple crimes and regions) and depth (close reading of selected cases).

The data analysis proceeded in three overlapping stages. First, Forensic Discourse Analysis (FDA) was used to examine narrative structures, grammatical patterns, and evidentiary framing, highlighting how legal facts are linguistically reconstructed. Second, Speech Act Theory guided the categorization of utterances in witness and defendant testimonies into locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, paying special attention to denials, commissives, and declaratives. Third, Critical Linguistic Analysis (CLA) identified ideological elements, such as lexical repetition of “terbukti secara sah dan meyakinkan” or the uncritical use of stigmatizing terms like “radikal.” The analysis combined close reading with coding in NVivo, enabling cross-case comparison. Following Fairclough (2018), thematic coding was iteratively refined to capture recurring linguistic mechanisms. The integration of these methods provided triangulation, allowing this study to address its central aim: to reveal how Indonesian verdicts construct legal reality, interpret testimony, and reproduce institutional ideology through language.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Linguistic construction of facts in verdict texts

The first set of results highlights how Indonesian verdicts linguistically construct legal facts through narrative sequencing, grammatical choices, and evidentiary framing. Figure 1 shows the distribution of grammatical structures used in factual narration. As the figure demonstrates, passive voice (41%) dominates, followed by active constructions (33%), and nominalizations (26%). These proportions reflect a consistent judicial tendency to obscure agency when describing violent events, particularly in homicide and terrorism cases. This finding aligns with Cotterill (2020), who observed similar tendencies in British verdicts, where passive formulations strategically depersonalize state actors while highlighting outcomes rather than perpetrators.

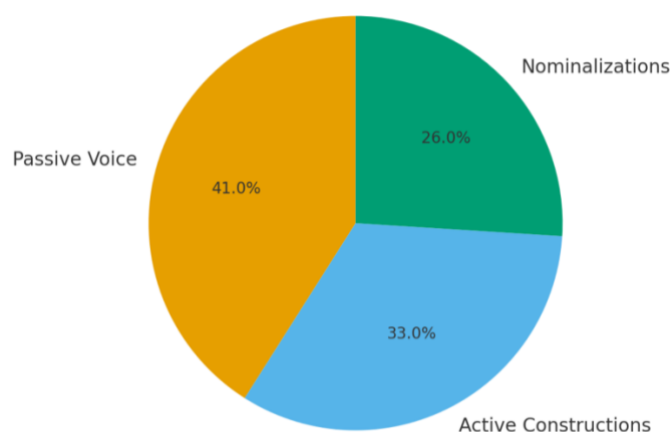


Figure 1. Percentage of grammatical strategies in factual narration across 10 sampled verdicts (2020–2025)

Figure 1 suggests a clear stylistic preference within Indonesian judicial writing. In homicide cases, passive voice is often employed—e.g., “korban ditemukan meninggal dunia” (“the victim was found dead”)—rather than attributing the action directly to the defendant. In corruption cases, nominalizations such as “kerugian negara” (“state loss”) abstract the act from the actor, turning dynamic processes into static entities. Active constructions appear mostly in straightforward theft or fraud cases, where agency is less politically sensitive. This distribution resonates with forensic linguistic studies by Akhtar et al (2025), who argue that narrative strategies in verdicts are never neutral but serve discursive functions of legitimacy and authority [1]. Thus, the observed pattern reflects not only linguistic habit but also institutional practice, where the judiciary maintains neutrality by foregrounding events over actors, especially in contexts where state responsibility might be implicated.

Analytically, these patterns suggest that the construction of facts in Indonesian verdicts is shaped by institutional ideology as much as by linguistic convention. The dominance of passive voice indicates a strategy of distancing, minimizing judicial entanglement with contested agency. Nominalizations abstract responsibility, making it easier for judges to anchor decisions in “legal facts” rather than human actions. Active voice appears only when agency is unproblematic, reinforcing the idea that verdict texts perform both legal and political functions. As Shahzadi et al (2025) emphasize, discourse in institutional settings is inherently ideological, and grammatical choices signal more than stylistic preferences—they shape reality [2]. In Indonesian courts, such constructions may project an image of impartiality while subtly reinforcing institutional authority [24]. The implication is clear: verdict texts should not be read as neutral records but as linguistic artifacts where judicial authority and legitimacy are discursively constructed through careful management of grammar and narrative form.

4.2. Speech acts and their legal implications in testimonies

The second strand of analysis examines how speech acts are represented in testimonies cited within verdicts. Figure 2 below summarizes the distribution of four primary speech act categories identified across 10 sampled verdicts. The chart reveals that denials (38%) are the most frequent type of speech act, followed by assertions (27%), commissives (21%), and declaratives (14%). Denials are especially prominent in cases of homicide and narcotics, where defendants often distance themselves from the alleged act. Assertions typically involve factual claims, while commissives appear in forms such as promises to provide evidence. Declaratives, although less common, include statements that seek to redefine events, such as “Saya tidak bersalah.” These findings confirm the pragmatic complexity of courtroom testimonies.

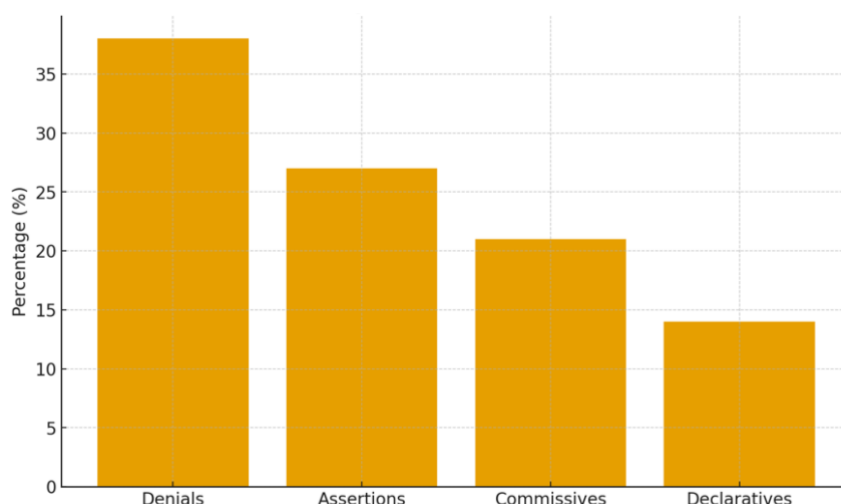


Figure 2. Percentage distribution of speech acts in witness and defendant testimonies (10 sampled verdicts, 2020–2025)

Descriptively, Figure 2 reflects a pattern in which defendants and witnesses rely heavily on denials to resist incrimination. In narcotics cases, for example, defendants often assert that drugs were “not theirs” or that they were “merely present” at the scene. Assertions typically stem from witnesses attempting to establish credibility by recounting observable facts—such as presence, timing, or sequence of events. Commissives often appear in corruption cases, where defendants commit to presenting financial documents or witnesses in later sessions. Declaratives, while least frequent, carry significant weight because they explicitly challenge or reframe the legal status of the accused. This distribution supports Kovkina et al (2022) observation that legal testimonies function as layered speech acts whose illocutionary force extends beyond literal meaning [13]. Thus, testimonies within verdicts are not merely records of spoken words but highly strategic communicative acts aimed at influencing judicial perception and outcome.

Analytically, the predominance of denials indicates the defensive stance of most defendants, consistent with Neumaier’s (2025) findings in British trials where defendants strategically employ mitigated or indirect denials [3]. However, the Indonesian context reveals an added layer: judges frequently paraphrase or report denials in indirect speech, which can dilute their force. Commissives and declaratives, though less frequent, play pivotal roles because they reflect attempts to assert agency within the highly asymmetrical courtroom discourse. The relatively low frequency of declaratives may indicate the judiciary’s reluctance to foreground defendants’ self-claims of innocence, thereby privileging institutional authority. This interpretation aligns with Naqvi et al (2025) argument that courtroom discourse often filters defendant voices through judicial framing [12]. Consequently, the analysis suggests that speech acts in testimonies are both linguistic performances and ideological battlegrounds, where agency, credibility, and power are unevenly distributed between defendants and judicial institutions.

4.3. Ideological bias and power dynamics in judicial language

The third dimension of analysis addresses ideological bias and power dynamics embedded in judicial language. Figure 3 presents the distribution of ideological expressions identified across the verdict corpus. The data reveal three recurrent categories: legitimizing phrases (46%), such as “terbukti secara sah dan meyakinkan”; stigmatizing labels (32%), including “radikal” or “meresahkan masyarakat”; and religious/moral appeals (22%), notably formulae like “demi keadilan berdasarkan Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa.” These patterns demonstrate how verdicts encode not only legal reasoning but also institutional and cultural ideologies. The prevalence of legitimizing phrases reflects judicial reliance on formulaic authority, while stigmatizing labels often emerge in politically sensitive or moral cases. Religious appeals, though less frequent, illustrate the intertwining of legal and moral discourses in Indonesian courts [25].

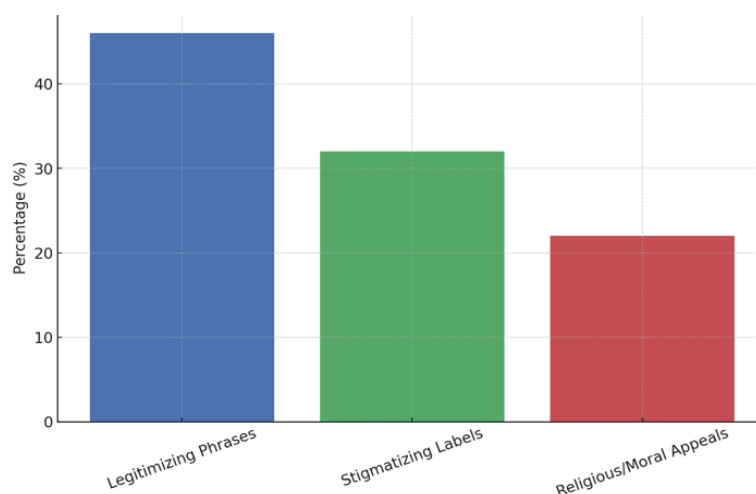


Figure 3. Frequency of ideological terms and expressions in Indonesian verdicts (10 sampled verdicts, 2020–2025)

Descriptively, in Figure 3, legitimizing phrases dominate the corpus because they function as standard markers of judicial certainty and closure. Such expressions appear in nearly all case types, regardless of evidence quality [26]. Stigmatizing labels are particularly concentrated in terrorism, narcotics, and cybercrime cases, where terms like “radikal” or “berbahaya” serve to heighten the perceived threat of defendants. Religious and moral appeals, though formally required in the opening and closing formulae of verdicts, occasionally extend into the reasoning section, reinforcing moral authority [27]. This descriptive pattern resonates with van Dijk’s (2006) argument that institutional discourse often relies on repetitive formulae to naturalize power [18]. By combining formal legal phrases with ideological and moral labels, Indonesian verdicts project themselves not only as legal rulings but also as cultural and moral judgments. Thus, the descriptive evidence reveals how verdicts systematically weave together legal, political, and moral registers.

Analytically, these findings suggest that judicial language in Indonesia is not ideologically neutral but actively constructs power relations. The reliance on legitimizing formulae reinforces the authority of the judiciary while foreclosing space for contestation, echoing Fairclough’s (1995) notion of discourse as a vehicle of institutional reproduction [17]. Stigmatizing labels delegitimize defendants, often without precise legal definitions, thereby reflecting socio-political anxieties rather than strict legal reasoning. Religious and moral appeals align the judiciary with cultural values, embedding verdicts within broader ideological frameworks of nationhood and morality [2], [5], [20]. Together, these patterns illustrate how judicial discourse privileges institutional voices while marginalizing defendants, projecting the court as both arbiter of law and guardian of social order. The implication is that verdicts, beyond their legal function, serve as ideological instruments that consolidate judicial authority and reinforce dominant social narratives. This underscores the necessity of forensic linguistic scrutiny to uncover hidden biases in judicial decision-making.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings on the linguistic construction of facts in verdict texts reveal significant implications for the transparency and accountability of the Indonesian judiciary. The dominance of passive voice and nominalization suggests that verdicts frequently obscure agency, especially in politically sensitive cases. This has a functional aspect: it allows the judiciary to project neutrality by depersonalizing actions and emphasizing outcomes. However, it can also be dysfunctional, as it potentially undermines defendants’ rights by minimizing explicit attribution of responsibility. According to Akhtar et al (2025), such linguistic practices risk creating a distorted narrative of events, which may compromise public trust in judicial institutions [1]. The implication is clear: verdicts are not merely neutral records but strategic narratives that can either enhance or erode legal legitimacy. If unexamined, these practices may perpetuate institutional opacity, reinforcing perceptions of judicial bias in cases involving state actors or sensitive crimes.

The correlation between linguistic patterns and institutional structures reflects deeper dynamics within Indonesia’s legal culture. Passive voice and nominalization are not random stylistic choices but manifestations of structural constraints embedded in judicial discourse. Judges, operating within hierarchical and politically sensitive institutions, may rely on these grammatical strategies to balance neutrality with authority. Fairclough (1995) argues that such discursive practices emerge from the need to reconcile competing institutional demands: maintaining judicial independence while avoiding overt challenges to state legitimacy [17]. The underlying structure here is one of cautious neutrality, where linguistic devices allow

the judiciary to appear impartial while managing potential political repercussions [10]. This analysis indicates that the form of verdicts is inseparable from the institutional environment that produces them. Thus, linguistic construction is both a reflection of and a response to broader structural imperatives shaping the judiciary, confirming that legal texts are deeply intertwined with institutional ideology.

The prevalence of denials and assertions in testimonies illustrates the strategic use of language by defendants and witnesses within the courtroom. Functionally, such speech acts allow individuals to assert agency, defend credibility, and contest judicial narratives. However, dysfunction arises when these speech acts are reframed or diluted by judges through indirect speech reporting, diminishing their pragmatic force. As Naqvi et al (2025) emphasize, courtroom language is not simply transcribed but reconstructed in ways that reflect institutional authority [12]. This raises important implications for justice: the filtering of testimonies through judicial paraphrase risks silencing defendants' voices, thereby compromising the fairness of legal proceedings. Moreover, commissives and declaratives, while less frequent, demonstrate that defendants actively attempt to influence trial outcomes. Yet, their marginalization within verdict texts reflects broader power asymmetries. Thus, this study highlights how speech acts are not only linguistic phenomena but also central to understanding judicial practices of inclusion and exclusion.

The structural explanation for these patterns lies in the asymmetrical distribution of power between defendants and judicial institutions. Judges control the narrative framing of testimonies by summarizing them in verdict texts, effectively filtering speech acts through institutional lenses. This aligns with Neumaier's (2025) observation that courtroom discourse is inherently hierarchical, with judges positioned as ultimate interpreters of meaning [3]. The indirect reporting of denials, for instance, transforms potentially forceful illocutionary acts into softened paraphrases, reinforcing judicial dominance. The underlying structure here reflects a discourse of authority, where the judiciary not only interprets law but also reconfigures speech acts to fit institutional narratives. This process is not merely pragmatic but ideological, privileging institutional voices over individual ones. As a result, the linguistic asymmetry in testimonies mirrors the broader structural imbalance of courtroom power, where defendants' agency is systematically constrained by the institutional frameworks of judicial discourse.

The ideological terms found in verdicts underscore how judicial language functions as a vehicle of institutional authority and cultural reproduction. Legitimizing phrases such as "terbukti secara sah dan meyakinkan" reinforce judicial certainty, functioning to close off contestation. Stigmatizing labels, by contrast, delegitimize defendants through moralizing or politicized language, even in the absence of precise legal definitions. Religious and moral appeals further embed verdicts within national and cultural ideologies, aligning the judiciary with dominant societal values. Functionally, these practices strengthen judicial authority and enhance public acceptance of rulings. Dysfunctionally, they risk undermining the principle of legal objectivity, as verdicts may appear more as ideological statements than as strictly legal reasoning. As Rao (2024) argues, such practices demonstrate how institutional discourse not only reflects law but also constructs social order [9]. The implication is that verdicts, far from neutral, are active sites of ideological negotiation and power consolidation.

The structural roots of these ideological patterns lie in the dual role of the judiciary as both a legal and cultural institution. Judges are tasked not only with applying law but also with maintaining social cohesion and projecting moral authority. This dual mandate explains the frequent invocation of legitimizing formulae and moral discourse. Fairclough (1995) suggests that institutional discourse often blends legal reasoning with ideological narratives to reinforce hegemony [17]. In the Indonesian context, where religion and morality are integral to national identity, verdicts naturally reflect these broader ideological frameworks. Stigmatizing labels serve to align defendants with social threats, while legitimizing phrases inscribe authority within cultural values. Thus, the structure of judicial discourse is shaped by its embeddedness within cultural and political contexts. The result is a legal language that not only adjudicates facts but also performs ideological work, consolidating institutional authority within broader societal narratives.

6. CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this research is that Indonesian criminal verdicts are not neutral legal documents but carefully constructed linguistic texts that shape perceptions of truth, agency, and legitimacy. This study highlights how passive constructions, nominalizations, and legitimizing formulae obscure responsibility while reinforcing judicial authority. Testimonies are reframed through judicial paraphrasing, often reducing the pragmatic force of denials and commissives, thereby reflecting power asymmetries. The strength of this research lies in its multidimensional methodology, combining forensic discourse analysis, speech act theory, and critical linguistics. This triangulated approach contributes to scholarship by offering a renewed perspective on how language constructs legal reality, moving beyond descriptive accounts toward critical insights into the ideological work of judicial discourse.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. The analysis is based on a purposive sample of thirty verdicts, which, while diverse, may not capture the full variation of judicial discourse across Indonesia's thousands of courts. Furthermore, the reliance on textual data excludes other multimodal aspects of courtroom communication, such as oral delivery and non-verbal cues. Future research should therefore expand the corpus to include more regional courts, adopt computational methods for larger-scale discourse analysis, and integrate multimodal data for a fuller understanding. Such extensions would not only address current limitations but also enrich the scientific and practical relevance of forensic linguistic studies in Indonesian judicial contexts.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Wahyu Beny Mukti Setiawan: conceptualization (lead), forensic linguistic analysis (lead), writing – original draft (lead), writing – review and editing (lead).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This research related to human use has been complied with all the relevant national regulations and institutional policies in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration and has been approved by the authors' institutional review board or equivalent committee.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Data availability is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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