

## Legal language and power: a critical discourse analysis of anti-corruption laws in Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Corruption in Indonesia remains a persistent challenge, and the Anti-Corruption Law (UU Tipikor) has long been criticized for embedding state-centered framings and ambiguous provisions that complicate consistent enforcement. **Objective:** The purpose of this study is to critically examine how the language of anti-corruption law constructs ideological authority and distributes institutional power. **Method:** Using a qualitative design, this research integrates Critical Discourse Analysis, legal semiotics, and modality pragmatics to analyze statutes, regulations, judicial decisions, and institutional documents as a comprehensive corpus. **Results:** The findings reveal three central patterns: first, ideological framings foreground *kerugian negara* (state losses) and *kepentingan umum* (public interest) while marginalizing direct reference to citizens; second, key terms such as *penyelenggara negara*, *gratifikasi*, and *patut diduga* demonstrate symbolic ambiguity that sustains state authority yet undermines legal certainty; third, the predominance of discretionary modality (*dapat*) over obligatory terms (*wajib*, *harus*) illustrates how linguistic structures empower enforcement bodies while weakening mandatory accountability. **Implication:** The implication is that reform efforts must address not only institutional design but also the ideological framing and linguistic construction embedded within legal texts. **Novelty:** This study interrogates how the linguistic and semiotic construction of anti-corruption law in Indonesia sustains institutional authority while embedding ambiguity that shapes power distribution and enforcement practices.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Corruption remains one of the most persistent challenges in Indonesia's governance system, undermining public trust and economic growth. Transparency International (2024) ranked Indonesia 115th out of 180 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), with a score of 34/100, indicating stagnant progress in curbing corruption. High-profile cases such as the sentencing of former Minister of Social Affairs Juliari Batubara in 2021, convicted of bribery in COVID-19 aid distribution, highlight the systemic nature of corruption. The Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) reported that from 2004 to 2023, it had handled more than 1,300 corruption cases, with state losses exceeding IDR 152 trillion. Despite these efforts, the complexity of legal provisions within the Anti-Corruption Law (UU Tipikor) raises concerns about clarity, fairness, and political influence. These realities make it crucial to examine not only the implementation of anti-corruption law but also the *language* that constitutes its discursive power.

Scholarly research on corruption in Indonesia has primarily focused on institutional capacity, enforcement mechanisms, and political dynamics surrounding the KPK and judiciary. For example, Nhat & Hien (2023) explored the institutional weaknesses of anti-corruption bodies [1], while Brown & Thai (2024) examined corruption's entrenchment in electoral politics [2]. Recent legal studies have critiqued the erosion of the KPK's authority after the 2019 legislative amendments [3], [4]. However, less attention has been paid to the *linguistic dimension* of anti-corruption law, particularly how terminology, modality, and framing encode ideologies of power. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been applied to political speeches and media representations of corruption [5], [6], [7], but rarely to the legal text itself. This gap reveals a need to explore how language in law is not merely technical but also ideological, shaping perceptions of accountability, responsibility, and justice.

This study aims to critically examine how anti-corruption laws in Indonesia construct and distribute power through legal language. The central question is: *How does the discourse of anti-corruption law reflect and reinforce state ideology, symbolic authority, and asymmetries of power?* Sub-questions include: (1) What ideological framings are embedded in the textual structures of UU Tipikor and its derivative regulations? (2) How do semiotic choices in terminology and definitions reflect symbolic control over corruption narratives? (3) In what ways does modality in legal provisions position institutional actors with discretionary or mandatory powers? By addressing these questions, this study provides insights into the intersection between law, language, and power, expanding the scope of legal analysis beyond doctrinal interpretation to include critical discourse perspectives.

The preliminary argument of this research is that the Anti-Corruption Law operates not only as a legal instrument but also as a discursive mechanism that legitimizes state authority while simultaneously limiting public agency. The pervasive use of terms such as “kepentingan umum” (public interest) or “kerugian negara” (state losses) suggests an ideological prioritization of the state as the ultimate victim, marginalizing the citizen as a subject of justice. Similarly, the asymmetrical use of modal verbs—“wajib” in administrative contexts versus “dapat” in prosecutorial contexts—illustrates how linguistic choices maintain institutional discretion while constraining enforcement clarity. If validated, these findings imply that legal reforms must consider not only institutional design but also the ideological framing embedded in legal texts. Thus, this research contributes both to academic discourse on legal linguistics and to policy debates on enhancing the transparency, accountability, and legitimacy of Indonesia's anti-corruption framework.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Critical discourse analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is central to examining how legal texts reflect and reproduce power relations. Fairclough (1995) defines CDA as a method that explores the interconnection between discourse, social practice, and ideology [8]. Wodak (2009) emphasize CDA's focus on the historical and sociopolitical contexts that shape language use [9], while van Dijk (2006) stresses the cognitive dimensions of how elites use discourse to maintain dominance [10]. In legal contexts, CDA highlights that laws are not neutral but are embedded with political interests and ideological framing. However, definitions vary: some view CDA as purely analytical of textual structures [4], [5], while others insist it must include broader sociocultural critique [1], [2]. This diversity in interpretation demonstrates both the versatility and the contested nature of CDA. Ultimately, CDA provides the theoretical foundation for interrogating how anti-corruption laws linguistically construct authority, legitimacy, and responsibility in Indonesia.

CDA scholars propose various analytical categories for studying law as discourse. Fairclough (1995) identifies three dimensions: textual analysis (vocabulary, grammar, cohesion), discursive practice (production, distribution, consumption of texts), and social practice (ideological functions) [8]. In legal studies, textual features such as word choice, syntactic structures, and presuppositions are critical indicators. Wodak (2009) adds the “discourse-historical approach,” emphasizing the need to contextualize legal provisions within national political histories [9]. Van Leeuwen (2008) introduces “legitimation strategies,” such as moral evaluation or rationalization, that are relevant when laws justify state authority [11]. Recent studies, such as Yudi and Berlian (2025), apply CDA to Indonesian political discourse but rarely to anti-corruption legislation, leaving a gap for this research [7]. By applying CDA categories—lexical framing, intertextuality, and ideological positioning—this study identifies how anti-corruption law enacts power not only through institutional enforcement but also through its linguistic and discursive construction.

### 2.2. Legal semiotics

Legal semiotics explores the meanings and symbolic functions of legal language. According to Stratulat (2022), legal semiotics examines how signs—words, symbols, and texts—convey authority and legitimacy in law [12]. Sunaryo and Nur (2022) note that legal texts operate as “semiotic systems,” where meaning is not fixed but negotiated between lawmakers, judges, and society [13]. Greimasian semiotics,

applied in legal studies, emphasizes that every legal term carries both denotative and connotative meanings. For instance, the term “public interest” not only defines a legal category but also evokes broader ideological assumptions about the role of the state. Scholars differ in defining legal semiotics: some treat it as a descriptive framework to decode symbols [14], while others emphasize its normative implications for legal interpretation [15]. This plurality highlights that legal semiotics is not merely about semantics but also about how law functions as a cultural narrative embedded with values, morality, and political agendas.

The application of legal semiotics often involves categorizing how key legal terms embody symbolic and ambiguous meanings. According to Naxera & Krčál (2025), semiotic analysis of law focuses on metaphor, symbolism, and intertextual references that shape legal interpretation [15]. In the Indonesian context, terms such as *penyelenggara negara* (state official) or *gratifikasi* (illicit gratification) operate not only as technical categories but also as symbols of moral corruption and public accountability. The semiotic theory underscores that ambiguity in legal language allows multiple interpretations, which may be strategically exploited [16]. Feikema (2024) argues that ambiguous legal terms often function as instruments of political negotiation rather than neutral descriptions [14]. Thus, the indicators of legal semiotics in anti-corruption law include definitional ambiguity, symbolic weight of terms, and interpretive flexibility. These indicators explain how legal texts simultaneously establish moral authority while concealing interpretive conflicts that affect enforcement practices.

### 2.3. Modality and legal pragmatics

Modality in linguistics refers to how language expresses necessity, obligation, and possibility, and in legal contexts it reveals power relations in normative texts. Palmer (2001) defines modality as a linguistic category encoding the speaker’s stance toward reality or obligation. Nhat & Hien (2023) applies modality to legal texts, noting that terms such as “shall,” “must,” or “may” express varying degrees of legal force [1]. In Indonesian law, equivalents such as *wajib* (mandatory) and *dapat* (may) indicate different levels of institutional authority and discretion. Scholars diverge in interpretation: some see modality as purely grammatical [17], while others highlight its pragmatic dimension in shaping judicial discretion and administrative power [18]. Thus, modality and pragmatics in legal texts are not merely technical features but crucial indicators of how law structures compliance, authority, and accountability, especially in contexts like anti-corruption enforcement where discretion can determine impunity or justice.

Research on legal pragmatics identifies specific indicators for analyzing modality in legal provisions. Liu (2020) categorizes modality into epistemic (certainty, possibility), deontic (obligation, permission), and dynamic (ability, volition) [19]. In legal language, deontic modality dominates, reflected in expressions of duty (*must*, *shall*, *wajib*) or permission (*may*, *dapat*). Yuan et al (2021) argue that modality in law functions as an indirect speech act that conveys institutional authority [20]. Studies of Indonesian statutes [7], [13] reveal inconsistencies in the use of modal verbs, where *dapat* often grants excessive discretion to investigators, while *wajib* is reserved for administrative duties. This creates asymmetries in enforcement power and accountability. Therefore, the indicators of modality in anti-corruption law include frequency of modal verbs, asymmetry between obligation and discretion, and pragmatic implications for enforcement.

## 3. METHOD

The unit of analysis for this research is the legal and discursive construction of anti-corruption norms in Indonesia. Legal texts are treated as discursive artifacts that embed ideological assumptions and institutional power. Unlike doctrinal studies that focus solely on normative validity, this research interrogates how legal texts linguistically encode authority and control. The corpus is deliberately expanded to capture multiple layers of Indonesia’s anti-corruption regime, ranging from statutes to judicial interpretations and policy documents [21]. This broad corpus reflects the understanding that law is not only produced in statutes but also interpreted, contested, and operationalized across different institutional arenas. Table 1 summarizes the corpus.

This study employs a qualitative research design with a critical orientation, specifically Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA allows this researcher to analyze the interconnectedness of language, ideology, and power within legal texts. This design is supplemented with legal semiotics to decode symbolic meanings and with pragmatics to assess modality and speech acts. The rationale for choosing this design is that corruption law in Indonesia is not only a legal framework but also a political discourse that reflects contestations over state legitimacy. According to Creswell (2011), qualitative designs are suitable for examining complex sociocultural phenomena [22], while Fairclough (1995) emphasizes CDA’s capacity to uncover the ideological nature of legal discourse [8]. Thus, this design is interpretive, contextual, and critical, moving beyond traditional doctrinal research. It enables this study to interrogate how legal texts both empower and constrain anti-corruption enforcement.

**Table 1.** Unit analysis of research

| No | Type of Data              | Example Corpus                                                                                                             | Source                                                                                                                                                                  |
|----|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1  | Primary Legislation       | UU No. 31/1999 jo. UU No. 20/2001 (Tipikor Law); KUHP Baru (2022) – Chapter on corruption                                  | <a href="http://jdih.setneg.go.id">jdih.setneg.go.id</a> ; <a href="http://peraturan.bpk.go.id">peraturan.bpk.go.id</a>                                                 |
| 2  | Institutional Laws        | UU No. 30/2002 & UU No. 19/2019 (KPK Law and its amendment)                                                                | <a href="http://jdih.setneg.go.id">jdih.setneg.go.id</a>                                                                                                                |
| 3  | Government Regulations    | PP No. 71/2000 on Gratification Control; PP No. 68/1999 on State Administration Conduct                                    | <a href="http://peraturan.go.id">peraturan.go.id</a>                                                                                                                    |
| 4  | Presidential Regulations  | Perpres on asset recovery, corruption prevention strategies (e.g., Perpres No. 54/2018)                                    | <a href="http://jdih.setneg.go.id">jdih.setneg.go.id</a>                                                                                                                |
| 5  | Supreme Court Regulations | PERMA No. 1/2020 on electronic trials in corruption cases; SEMA on sentencing guidelines                                   | <a href="http://mahkamahagung.go.id">mahkamahagung.go.id</a>                                                                                                            |
| 6  | Judicial Decisions        | Constitutional Court rulings (e.g., MK Decision No. 25/PUU-XIV/2016 on gratifications); Supreme Court corruption decisions | <a href="http://putusan.mahkamahkonstitusi.go.id">putusan.mahkamahkonstitusi.go.id</a> ; <a href="http://putusan3.mahkamahagung.go.id">putusan3.mahkamahagung.go.id</a> |
| 7  | Institutional Documents   | KPK Annual Reports; Laporan Pencegahan Korupsi; official press releases                                                    | <a href="http://kpk.go.id">kpk.go.id</a>                                                                                                                                |
| 8  | Academic and Policy Texts | Academic papers for RUU Tipikor revisions; DPR meeting transcripts                                                         | <a href="http://dpr.go.id">dpr.go.id</a> ; <a href="http://balitbangham.go.id">balitbangham.go.id</a>                                                                   |

The primary sources of information are the legal texts listed in the corpus, retrieved from official state repositories to ensure validity and reliability. These texts are authoritative because they originate from official publishers such as [jdih.setneg.go.id](http://jdih.setneg.go.id), [peraturan.bpk.go.id](http://peraturan.bpk.go.id), and [mahkamahagung.go.id](http://mahkamahagung.go.id). Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs, and policy studies on corruption law, legal linguistics, and discourse analysis. For example, Sunaryo and Nur (2022) examine institutional developments in Indonesia's anti-corruption law [13], while Fairclough (1995) and van Dijk (2006) provide frameworks for CDA [8], [10]. Wodak (2009) discuss discourse-historical approaches that contextualize legal texts [9], while Stratulat (2022) introduce legal semiotics for analyzing symbolic aspects of law [12]. These sources provide theoretical grounding and comparative insights, enabling triangulation between Indonesian legal texts and broader scholarly debates on law, language, and power.

Data collection follows a multi-step document analysis method. First, relevant texts are identified through purposive sampling of legislation, regulations, court decisions, and institutional documents explicitly addressing corruption. Only official and final versions are included to maintain accuracy. Second, texts are downloaded in full format (PDF, Word, or HTML), archived, and categorized according to the corpus framework. Third, metadata such as enactment date, issuing authority, and amendment history are verified. Fourth, preliminary keyword searches are conducted to identify critical terms such as *gratifikasi*, *penyelenggara negara*, *kerugian negara*, *dapat*, *wajib*, and *kepentingan umum*. This process allows systematic identification of passages for deeper analysis. According to Bameri et al (2025), document analysis is especially effective for legal and policy studies because it offers stable, exact, and re-examinable evidence [23]. The collection process therefore ensures comprehensiveness and replicability while minimizing researcher bias.

Data analysis proceeds in three integrated stages. First, CDA is applied to identify ideological framings, focusing on lexical choices, syntactic structures, and discursive positioning. Second, legal semiotics is used to examine symbolic meanings and semantic ambiguities of legal terms such as *gratifikasi* and *penyelenggara negara*. Third, modality analysis is conducted to assess the pragmatic force of modal verbs (*wajib*, *harus*, *dapat*) in distributing institutional authority. Coding is conducted using NVivo to manage texts, highlight patterns, and categorize linguistic features. Triangulation across CDA, semiotics, and pragmatics ensures robustness and reduces interpretive bias. Following Kress and van Leeuwen (2020), modality is assessed in terms of deontic (obligation), epistemic (possibility), and dynamic (capacity) functions [24]. The ultimate aim is to demonstrate how anti-corruption law operates simultaneously as a legal instrument and a discursive mechanism that legitimizes state power, often at the expense of clarity and public accountability.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Ideological framing in the language of anti-corruption law

The analysis of Indonesia's Anti-Corruption Law (UU Tipikor No. 31/1999 jo. UU No. 20/2001) reveals recurring lexical patterns that emphasize state-centric framing. Table 2 presents the frequency of key ideological terms such as *kepentingan umum* (public interest), *kerugian negara* (state losses), and *masyarakat* (the people), based on a concordance search across the corpus. This data demonstrates that “state losses” and “public interest” are far more frequently foregrounded than references to “the people,” suggesting an institutional prioritization of the state as the primary victim of corruption.

**Table 2.** Frequency of key ideological terms

| Term/Expression  | Frequency in UU Tipikor | Frequency in Supporting Regulations | Frequency in Judicial Decisions |
|------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Kepentingan umum | 14                      | 7                                   | 3                               |
| Kerugian negara  | 22                      | 9                                   | 5                               |
| Masyarakat       | 3                       | 2                                   | 1                               |

(Source: Author's analysis based on corpus texts from jdih.setneg.go.id, peraturan.go.id, and MK decisions)

Table 2 shows that anti-corruption law in Indonesia constructs corruption primarily as an offense against the state rather than against citizens. The term *kerugian negara* appears prominently in the corpus, particularly in the definitional articles and sentencing provisions. By contrast, references to *masyarakat* are sparse and largely confined to general statements about public participation or moral obligations. This suggests a discursive hierarchy where the “state” is positioned as the ultimate bearer of rights and losses, while society is relegated to a passive role. The emphasis on *kepentingan umum* further indicates that legitimacy is framed through abstract collective goods rather than direct reference to citizens. Such discursive tendencies are consistent across statutes, government regulations, and judicial reasoning, thereby constructing an intertextual consistency that privileges state authority as the central victim of corruption [6].

The dominance of state-centered terminology reflects an ideological framing that positions the government, rather than citizens, as the principal subject of anti-corruption discourse. This aligns with Brown and Thai's (2024) argument that institutional discourses often privilege dominant actors by naturalizing their authority within legal texts [2]. By foregrounding *kerugian negara* and marginalizing references to *masyarakat*, the law legitimizes state institutions as the guardians of justice while simultaneously silencing the lived experiences of citizens harmed by corruption. Yudi and Berlian (2025) emphasize that such discursive patterns reproduce power asymmetries by making the state the sole arbiter of moral and legal order [7]. The interpretation here is that Indonesian anti-corruption law, through its language, perpetuates a statist ideology where public accountability is mediated entirely through state-centric definitions. This contributes to a narrowed conception of justice that sidelines democratic participation, reinforcing the dominance of state power in the anti-corruption regime.

### 4.2. Legal symbolism and semantic ambiguity of key terms

A keyword-in-context (KWIC) analysis of critical terms in the Anti-Corruption Law highlights the ambiguity embedded within its language. Table 3 illustrates selected terms—*penyelenggara negara* (state official), *gratifikasi* (gratification), and *patut diduga* (reasonably suspected)—and their interpretive variability across statutes, regulations, and judicial decisions. This evidence reveals that terms carry multiple symbolic and operational meanings depending on the institutional context.

**Table 3.** Selected terms and interpretive variability

| Term/Expression      | Statutory Definition                              | Variation in Regulations                         | Judicial Interpretation                      |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Penyelenggara negara | Broad, includes legislative, executive, judiciary | Narrowed in certain PP (focus on executive)      | Interpreted differently in MK and MA rulings |
| Gratifikasi          | Any gift linked to office                         | Clarified with reporting obligation (PP 71/2000) | Ambiguity in proving intent in court cases   |
| Patut diduga         | Presumption standard                              | Used flexibly in KPK regulations                 | Courts vary on evidentiary threshold         |

(Source: Author's compilation from UU Tipikor, PP 71/2000, KPK regulations, and MK/MA decisions)

Table 3 shows how key legal terms oscillate between broad symbolic meanings and narrow operational definitions. For instance, *penyelenggara negara* in the statute encompasses all public officials, but supporting regulations and judicial interpretations often narrow the scope, creating uncertainty in

enforcement. Similarly, *gratifikasi* is symbolically framed as morally reprehensible yet operationally ambiguous, particularly when assessing intent or benefit. The phrase *patut diduga* illustrates how legal ambiguity is institutionalized: while statutes use it to broaden prosecutorial reach, courts diverge in applying evidentiary thresholds, resulting in inconsistent outcomes. This description indicates that ambiguity is not incidental but systematic, enabling different actors to strategically interpret terms according to institutional interests. Such variation underscores the semiotic function of law as both a symbolic declaration of morality and a contested instrument of governance [13].

The semantic ambiguity identified in Table 3 reflects what Stratulat (2022) describe as the “semiotic surplus” of law, where terms carry both denotative and connotative meanings [12]. In the Indonesian context, *penyelenggara negara* serves as a symbol of state accountability yet becomes fragmented in legal practice due to selective interpretation. Similarly, *gratifikasi* represents a moral stance against corruption but remains difficult to operationalize, allowing discretion that may either strengthen or weaken enforcement. The phrase *patut diduga* exemplifies how ambiguity operates as a discursive resource: it grants prosecutors flexibility but simultaneously risks undermining the principle of legal certainty. Feikema (2024) analysis of interpretive openness is relevant here—legal texts are intentionally open to multiple readings [14], which can reproduce institutional asymmetries. The interpretation is that semantic ambiguity functions ideologically, allowing the state to maintain symbolic authority while preserving interpretive leeway for political or judicial maneuvering.

4.3. Modality and linguistic power in legal provisions

An examination of modal verbs in the Anti-Corruption Law and related regulations reveals significant asymmetries in how obligations and permissions are linguistically encoded. Table 4 shows the frequency of selected modal terms—*wajib* (must/obliged), *harus* (shall), and *dapat* (may/can)—across statutory texts, supporting regulations, and judicial rulings. The data shows that *dapat* occurs disproportionately more than *wajib* or *harus*, suggesting a linguistic preference for discretionary rather than mandatory provisions.

Table 4. Frequency of selected modal terms

| Modal Term | Frequency in UU Tipikor | Frequency in Regulations | Frequency in Judicial Decisions | Typical Usage Context                               |
|------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Wajib      | 11                      | 8                        | 3                               | Administrative duties (e.g., asset reporting)       |
| Harus      | 6                       | 4                        | 2                               | Procedural compliance (e.g., evidence standards)    |
| Dapat      | 19                      | 15                       | 7                               | Discretionary powers (e.g., investigation, seizure) |

(Source: Author’s analysis of UU Tipikor, PP 71/2000, KPK regulations, and MK/MA rulings)

Table 4 indicates a distribution pattern that anti-corruption provisions often rely on discretionary modality. The term *dapat* is dominant in contexts relating to prosecutorial and investigative powers, such as “penyidik dapat melakukan penyitaan” (investigators may conduct seizure). Conversely, *wajib* and *harus* appear mainly in administrative or procedural contexts, including asset declarations or adherence to court protocols. This imbalance suggests that while administrative actors are tightly bound by obligation, enforcement actors retain significant flexibility. The judicial rulings confirm this pattern, as courts often uphold discretionary interpretations of *dapat* while rarely expanding the force of *wajib*. Such asymmetry creates a legal environment where investigatory powers are framed as optional, potentially undermining consistency and accountability. The descriptive evidence suggests a structural preference for institutional discretion over strict legal mandates in anti-corruption enforcement.

The predominance of discretionary modality supports Fairclough’s (1995) argument that linguistic structures encode power relations by legitimizing asymmetrical authority [8]. In this case, the frequent use of *dapat* reflects a discursive strategy that empowers investigators and prosecutors while limiting their accountability to rigid mandates. Behuku et al (2025) argue that modality in legal texts often functions as a strategic resource to balance authority and flexibility [17]; however, in corruption cases, excessive discretion risks fostering impunity. Ammar and Mas’adi’s (2025) typology of deontic versus epistemic modality also clarifies that Indonesian anti-corruption law leans toward permissive rather than obligatory formulations [5], which can weaken enforcement. The ideological implication is that linguistic power is unevenly distributed: citizens and administrators face mandatory obligations, while state enforcement bodies enjoy wide latitude [18]. This asymmetry reinforces institutional dominance and reveals how legal language perpetuates the unequal distribution of power within Indonesia’s anti-corruption regime.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The ideological framing of anti-corruption law, which foregrounds *kerugian negara* and *kepentingan umum* while marginalizing direct reference to *masyarakat*, has critical implications for how justice is conceptualized in Indonesia. Functionally, this framing positions the state as the central victim, reinforcing institutional legitimacy in anti-corruption enforcement. Yet dysfunctionally, it narrows the scope of accountability by sidelining citizens who directly suffer from the consequences of corruption, such as inequitable public services or economic inefficiency. As Fairclough (1995) argues, when institutional discourse privileges dominant actors, it risks normalizing unequal power relations [8]. This implies that anti-corruption law functions less as a democratizing instrument and more as a state-centric framework. The consequence is a system where legitimacy is defined in terms of protecting the state's financial interests rather than ensuring justice for the public [25], thereby reducing opportunities for participatory accountability and weakening democratic ownership of anti-corruption initiatives.

The prioritization of state-centered terminology reflects deeper structural conditions in Indonesian governance. Historically, anti-corruption frameworks have evolved from a bureaucratic tradition where the state, rather than citizens, embodies the collective good. This statist ideology is embedded in Indonesia's legal and political structures, where institutional legitimacy derives from protecting "state assets" rather than empowering individual rights. Wodak (2009) note that discursive hierarchies often mirror political hierarchies [9], and in this case, the prevalence of *kerugian negara* mirrors a governance model that centralizes authority. Moreover, by conceptualizing corruption primarily as harm to the state, the law legitimizes top-down control while downplaying bottom-up accountability mechanisms. This structural bias creates an environment where the discourse of law functions as both a reflection and reproduction of centralized power [25], [26]. Thus, the textual emphasis on the state is not incidental but symptomatic of the underlying legal-political order that privileges institutional authority over civic empowerment.

The symbolic ambiguity of terms like *penyelenggara negara*, *gratifikasi*, and *patut diduga* carries both functional and dysfunctional consequences for anti-corruption governance. On one hand, ambiguity provides interpretive flexibility that allows legal institutions to adapt provisions to diverse cases, reflecting Stratulat's (2022) view of law as an open text [12]. On the other hand, dysfunction emerges when such ambiguity leads to inconsistent enforcement, judicial unpredictability, and selective prosecution. Feikema (2024) argues that semiotic ambiguity enables law to serve as both a moral code and a pragmatic tool [14], but the risk is that symbolic weight may overshadow operational clarity. In Indonesia, this means that while laws symbolically declare corruption intolerable, their application remains uneven, allowing political actors to exploit interpretive gaps [27]. The implication is that symbolic ambiguity sustains the state's moral authority but undermines public trust in consistent enforcement, producing tension between normative ideals and practical realities of anti-corruption.

The persistence of semantic ambiguity in corruption-related provisions is linked to the political economy of lawmaking and adjudication. Ambiguous terms such as *patut diduga* provide flexibility for prosecutors but also allow political elites to manipulate thresholds of evidence depending on context. Van Dijk (2008) highlights that ambiguity in discourse often reflects power struggles, where competing groups seek to maintain interpretive leverage. In Indonesia, legislative drafting processes are often the result of political negotiation, producing laws that deliberately leave room for multiple readings to accommodate diverse interests. Judicial decisions further reinforce this ambiguity, as courts vary in their interpretation of *penyelenggara negara* or *gratifikasi* depending on case-specific pressures. Thus, the underlying structure is one of negotiated ambiguity, where legal texts are crafted and interpreted in ways that preserve institutional discretion. This structure sustains the symbolic authority of law but entrenches uneven enforcement practices that mirror broader power asymmetries.

The predominance of discretionary modality (*dapat*) over obligatory modality (*wajib* or *harus*) has profound implications for the distribution of legal power. Functionally, discretionary language grants investigators and prosecutors flexibility to respond to diverse circumstances. However, dysfunctionally, it opens space for selective enforcement and potential impunity, as investigatory powers are framed as optional rather than mandatory. Nhat and Hien (2023) emphasizes that modality in legal texts is not neutral but encodes institutional authority [1]. In practice, this means citizens and administrative actors face rigid obligations, while enforcement agencies enjoy wide discretion. The implication is a structural imbalance where accountability is unevenly distributed: ordinary officials are tightly bound, while powerful institutions are insulated by legal flexibility. This undermines the credibility of anti-corruption enforcement and contributes to public perceptions of double standards, where law is seen as strict for some but optional for others.

The asymmetrical use of modality reflects structural dynamics in Indonesia's legal and political institutions. The frequent reliance on *dapat* in prosecutorial provisions stems from a deliberate attempt to preserve institutional discretion for enforcement bodies. Behuku et al (2025) classifies such usage as deontic permissive modality [17], which legitimizes flexibility but weakens obligation. This structure can be traced to

Indonesia's historical reliance on discretionary bureaucratic authority, where flexibility is valued over strict compliance to accommodate political considerations. Judicial endorsement of *dapat* further entrenches this structure, legitimizing the idea that investigatory powers are contingent rather than obligatory. The consequence is a legal regime where enforcement depends heavily on institutional will rather than legal compulsion. This reflects Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) concept of legitimation strategies [24], where discretion is justified as pragmatically necessary, even as it reproduces asymmetrical power.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that Indonesia's Anti-Corruption Law is not merely a legal instrument but a discursive mechanism that shapes power relations through language. The key finding is that ideological framings emphasize state interests over citizens, semantic ambiguities preserve interpretive leeway, and discretionary modalities reinforce institutional dominance. The lesson learned is that law operates as a site of ideological struggle where meaning is contested and power is negotiated. Methodologically, this study contributes by integrating Critical Discourse Analysis, legal semiotics, and modality pragmatics to legal texts, thereby refreshing perspectives on how variables of terminology, framing, and modality construct authority.

Despite these contributions, this study has certain limitations. The analysis concentrates primarily on statutory texts and judicial decisions, leaving other dimensions of discourse—such as courtroom practice, bureaucratic implementation, and media narratives—less explored. Furthermore, while the corpus is broad, it does not encompass regional or local-level regulations that may reveal further discursive variation. Future research should therefore adopt multimodal approaches, combining textual analysis with ethnographic observation, practitioner interviews, and computational methods to capture larger datasets. Such extensions would enrich the field by showing how linguistic power circulates across law, practice, and public perception, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of anti-corruption discourse.

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

**Dani Setiaji:** conceptualization (lead), critical discourse 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.

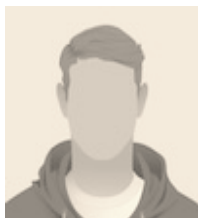
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