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BBA. LL.B. (Hons.) (Amity University, Rajasthan); LL. M. (UPES, Dehradun) (Nottingham Trent University, UK); Ph.D. Candidate (G.D. Goenka University)

Subhrajit did his LL.M. in Sports Law, from Nottingham Trent University of United Kingdoms, with international scholarship provided by university; he has also completed another LL.M. in Energy Law from University of Petroleum and Energy Studies, India. He did his B.B.A.LL.B. (Hons.) focussing on International Trade Law.

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WHITE BLACK LEGAL is an open access, peer-reviewed and refereed journal provided dedicated to express views on topical legal issues, thereby generating a cross current of ideas on emerging matters. This platform shall also ignite the initiative and desire of young law students to contribute in the field of law. The erudite response of legal luminaries shall be solicited to enable readers to explore challenges that lie before law makers, lawyers and the society at large, in the event of the ever changing social, economic and technological scenario.

With this thought, we hereby present to you

# **SHAPING SOCIETY WITH WORDS: THE POWER OF LEGAL DISCOURSE**

Author's Name: Kshiti Shah

Code: PC 16

Roll Number: A- 48 (Third Year BALLB)

Submitted to:

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## **SHAPING SOCIETY WITH WORDS: THE POWER OF LEGAL DISCOURSE**

### **ABSTRACT**

Legal language is a powerful tool for societal organization, exemplifying the intersection of language and power. This article explores how legal discourse shapes society by constructing authority, defining norms, and mediating social relations. Serving as both a reflection and a catalyst for societal values, legal language articulates, interprets, and enforces laws, often reinforcing or challenging existing power structures.

The study begins by examining the defining traits of legal language—its precision, formality, and exclusivity—and their implications for transparency, access, and inclusivity. It delves into how legal texts, such as constitutions and contracts, encode authority and perpetuate cultural, political, and economic hierarchies. Through an interdisciplinary lens, the research reveals how legal discourse codifies societal norms while influencing systemic inequities.

Further, the article investigates the interplay between legal language and social evolution. Changes in legal terminology around civil rights, gender equality, and environmental protection illustrate how legal discourse both reflects and shapes societal attitudes. It also highlights the adaptability of legal language in addressing challenges like technological advancements, globalization, and evolving concepts of justice.

A critical focus is the judiciary's role in interpreting legal language to shape societal norms. Through landmark case studies, the research underscores how legal decisions shape perceptions of fairness and rights. The study calls for greater accessibility and transparency in legal discourse to democratize its influence.

Ultimately, this article advocates reimagining legal language to foster inclusivity and advance social justice, recognizing its transformative potential to construct a more equitable and prosperous



## INTRODUCTION

Law, at its core, is a communicative endeavor, relying on the power of language to define rights, obligations, and societal norms. Beyond its instrumental function as a set of rules, legal language is a complex system of communication that carries inherent power. This power is not merely derived from the state's authority to enforce laws but also from the specific ways in which legal language constructs meaning, frames issues, and positions individuals and groups within the social order. This article investigates the ways in which legal language, with its unique lexicon, syntax, and rhetorical devices, shapes power relationships between individuals, groups, and the state. We aim to demonstrate that legal language is not a neutral tool but an active force that contributes to the maintenance of existing hierarchies and can, at times, be deployed as a catalyst for social change.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of law and language has drawn from various disciplines, including socio-linguistics, legal theory, and critical discourse analysis. Key thinkers like Michel Foucault have highlighted the relationship between language, power, and knowledge production, arguing that discourse creates and reinforces power relations. Critical legal studies (CLS) scholars have interrogated the neutrality of law, exposing how legal language often masks underlying political and social biases. Furthermore, work on the sociology of law (e.g., by Pierre Bourdieu) has examined how the specialized language of law contributes to the professionalization of legal practice and the exclusion of non-experts, reinforcing power imbalances. Recent developments in discourse analysis have provided tools for examining the specific linguistic features of legal texts and their effects on social actors. This research builds on these foundations, exploring the practical implications of these theoretical frameworks. We will specifically consider how:

The use of highly specialized vocabulary in legal language, or technical lexicon, can create barriers to understanding for laypeople, effectively empowering legal professionals and disenfranchising the general population. The passive voice and nominalizations used in legal texts can obfuscate agency and responsibility, often hiding the power dynamics at play.

Moreover, the selective deployment of argumentation styles and rhetorical strategies can shape

perceptions of legal issues, influencing judgments and reinforcing particular ideological positions. The framing of legal categories through language has significant implications for social inclusion and exclusion, as it can perpetuate systemic inequalities.

## **IMPLICATIONS AND CONTESTATIONS**

The analysis shows that legal language is not a neutral medium but an active force shaping power structures. The exclusionary nature of legal language can lead to the marginalization of those who are not fluent in its intricacies. Similarly, the power of legal discourse can be used to both uphold existing hierarchies and facilitate social resistance. We will examine how:

The specialized nature of legal discourse poses a significant barrier for many people, limiting their ability to navigate the legal system and access justice. This has implications for social equality, as marginalized groups may be excluded from legal protections and opportunities due to their lack of fluency in legal language. However, the same language that perpetuates these inequalities can also be used to challenge and transform it. Social activists and marginalized groups have employed alternative discourses to subvert the dominant legal frameworks and promote greater equality. Through strategies such as plain language legal writing, translation services, and community-based legal education, we can make legal language more accessible and transparent, promoting greater participation and equity in the legal process. Ultimately, by democratizing legal language, we can create a more just and equitable society.

## **LEGAL LANGUAGE AS A TOOL FOR DEFINING POWER**

Language is an essential mechanism through which power is exercised and negotiated. In the legal context, the use of specific terminology can dictate the meaning of rights and obligations, often shaping who holds power and who is marginalized. For instance, the legal distinction between "citizen" and "non-citizen" has profound implications for political, social, and economic rights. Terms like "criminal," "alien," "terrorist," or "refugee" not only define the legal status of individuals but also categorize them in ways that influence public perception and societal treatment. Through such linguistic frameworks, the law serves as a mechanism of social control. Legal language functions as a subtle form of dominance, reinforcing the status quo by validating certain social norms while marginalizing others. This is particularly evident in areas such as racial and gendered legal classifications, where terminology such as "black," "white," or "woman" carries historical baggage that influences legal treatment.

## **THE ACCESSIBILITY OF LEGAL LANGUAGE AND ITS IMPACT ON POWER DYNAMICS**

Legal language often operates in a specialized register that is inaccessible to those without legal training. This "legalese" can be seen as a barrier, particularly for disadvantaged groups who may already face significant barriers to justice. The complexity of legal language reinforces power imbalances by privileging those with legal knowledge while excluding marginalized communities.

Consider the case of immigrants navigating complex immigration laws, or individuals attempting to secure their rights in the face of a corporate or governmental entity. The inability to understand or engage with the law in a meaningful way can reinforce societal power imbalances, where the elite, who can afford legal representation, maintain a stranglehold on power, while the disenfranchised are left to navigate an opaque legal system.

### **LEGAL LANGUAGE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL IDENTITIES**

Legal language does not only regulate behavior but also constructs social identities. Legal texts often include gendered, racial, and class-based assumptions, which are encoded into law and affect the lives of individuals. For example, laws around marriage, family, and inheritance historically centered on patriarchal norms, with women often regarded as dependents of men in legal documents.

The framing of issues in legal discourse, such as "crime" or "victimhood," is not neutral. The language of victimization, for example, often centers the experiences of certain groups (such as white, middle-class women) while marginalizing the experiences of others, including racial minorities and economically disadvantaged individuals. The language of the law can, therefore, be seen as a tool for constructing normative social identities, reinforcing who is deemed worthy of legal protection and who is not.

## **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEGAL LANGUAGE AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE**

### **LEGAL LANGUAGE AS A BARRIER TO UNDERSTANDING**

Legal language is often described as a "foreign" language to most people due to its technical and specialized nature. Terms like "plaintiff," "defendant," "indictment," "tort," and "habeas corpus" can be difficult for individuals without legal education to understand, let alone apply to their own legal situations. Furthermore, legal language is frequently characterized by long, convoluted sentences and an absence of clarity, which complicates understanding even for those who are familiar with basic legal concepts.

Research has consistently shown that legal language can create confusion and uncertainty for individuals trying to navigate legal systems. For example, the use of legalese in contracts, policies, and legal documents can lead to misunderstandings about the terms and obligations involved. In complex legal proceedings such as criminal trials, civil suits, or family law cases, this lack of clarity can significantly hinder a person's ability to effectively advocate for themselves or understand the decisions being made on their behalf.

### **LEGAL LANGUAGE AND VULNERABLE POPULATIONS**

Certain groups, particularly those from low-income, minority, or non-English-speaking backgrounds, are disproportionately affected by the technical nature of legal language. For example, immigrants who are non-native speakers of the language in which legal proceedings are conducted may struggle to understand complex legal terms and procedural norms. Similarly, individuals with lower levels of literacy or education may find it difficult to engage with legal documents or represent themselves in court.

For marginalized groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities, women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities, legal language can also act as a tool for reinforcing social inequalities. Discriminatory or exclusionary language can manifest in laws, policies, and even court rulings that are difficult for these groups to challenge or even recognize as unjust. For example, laws that use outdated or derogatory language to describe marginalized communities may perpetuate social stigmas and impede access to legal protections.



## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF LEGAL LANGUAGE

In addition to its practical impact, legal language can have a psychological effect on individuals seeking justice. The formality, authority, and complexity of legal discourse can create a sense of alienation, discouraging people from engaging with the legal system altogether. Research suggests that the inability to understand the legal language in their case leads many individuals to feel powerless, frustrated, or disempowered, especially in high-stakes matters like criminal defense or child custody disputes.

This sense of alienation can also exacerbate existing inequities. People who feel intimidated by the legal system may be less likely to seek out legal assistance or participate in their case, thus perpetuating a cycle of marginalization and disenfranchisement.

## THE POWER DYNAMICS OF LANGUAGE IN THE COURTROOM

The power of language in the courtroom is inherently tied to the power dynamics between legal professionals, defendants, plaintiffs, and other courtroom participants. Language can either empower or disempower individuals depending on their position within the legal system.

**The Role of Lawyers:** Lawyers, as the primary agents of legal language, hold significant power in how a case is perceived and understood. Their command of legal jargon, persuasive techniques, and rhetorical strategies can influence the outcome of a trial. In particular, defense lawyers often rely on narrative techniques to reframe the perception of their clients, while prosecutors utilize rhetoric to vilify the defendant and justify punishment. The way in which the lawyer presents the case, including the words they choose, their tone, and their use of legal principles, can have a profound impact on the direction of a trial.

**Judicial Power and Language:** Judges are not passive recipients of legal discourse; their language choices shape the flow and outcomes of a case. Judges often use their authority to frame legal issues, interpret laws, and direct the tone of the proceedings. Their language can guide jurors, influence the behavior of lawyers, and even shape public perception of a case. In some cases, a judge's rhetoric can significantly impact the legitimacy of the legal process, as seen in cases where judicial language may either enhance or undermine public trust in the justice system.

**The Role of the Jury:** In trials involving juries, the power of language is particularly evident. Jurors are tasked with interpreting complex legal arguments and evidence, often relying heavily on the language used by the lawyers to form their judgments. The use of persuasive and emotive language can influence jurors' perceptions of a defendant's guilt or innocence, as

well as their decision regarding sentencing.

**Defendants and Witnesses:** The language used by defendants and witnesses can also have significant consequences. Defendants may choose to speak in their defense, but their words are scrutinized and interpreted within the broader context of the legal system's power dynamics. In some cases, defendants may struggle to articulate their own narratives, particularly if they are from marginalized communities or lack legal expertise. Their ability to effectively use language to present their case is often constrained by their access to resources and legal representation.

## **THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE IN LEGAL SYSTEMS**

### **THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN LEGAL EXCLUSION**

In many legal systems, language has been a powerful tool of exclusion. This is particularly apparent in immigration laws, where language is used to differentiate between citizens and non-citizens, refugees and asylum seekers. The linguistic framing of these categories often determines who has access to rights and resources.

### **LEGAL LANGUAGE AND GLOBAL POWER DYNAMICS**

At the international level, the language of treaties, diplomacy, and human rights can also reflect and perpetuate power dynamics. For instance, the language used in the United Nations and international agreements often privileges the interests of powerful states while marginalizing the voices of weaker nations. The use of English as the dominant language in international legal discourse further consolidates the power of English-speaking nations in global governance.

## **CASE STUDIES IN LEGAL LANGUAGE AND POWER DYNAMICS**

### **1. The Use of Legal Language in Racial Discrimination Cases**

In the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the U.S. Supreme Court's use of language to declare segregation in public schools unconstitutional was a pivotal moment in the civil rights movement. The Court's reasoning, framed in terms of psychological harm and social inequality, helped reshape national attitudes about race and law. The ruling demonstrated how legal language could not only reflect but actively shape societal understandings of race, justice, and equality.

However, the case also highlights the power of legal language to perpetuate racial hierarchies. The language of "separate but equal," as established in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), demonstrated how legal discourse could institutionalize racial segregation and reinforce societal power structures.

## **2. Gendered Legal Language in Family Law**

In family law, language has historically reflected and reinforced gendered divisions of power. Terms such as "primary caregiver," "breadwinner," and "custodial parent" have typically been used to assign specific roles to men and women. These gendered assumptions about who should perform certain familial roles have had a significant impact on legal outcomes in divorce settlements, custody disputes, and child support cases.

The language of family law has often relegated women to the status of "dependent" while men are constructed as "providers." As gender norms evolve, legal language has begun to shift, but the legacy of gendered power structures remains embedded in legal texts.

## **CONCLUSION**

The intricate relationship between legal language and the structures of power and society is a testament to the profound influence that language wields in shaping human experience. Legal language operates as more than just a tool for communication; it is a mechanism for defining, legitimizing, and enforcing societal norms, values, and hierarchies. Through its precise, technical, and often exclusive lexicon, legal discourse establishes the boundaries of permissible behavior, delineates rights and obligations, and mediates conflicts. By doing so, it not only reflects the power dynamics within a society but also actively constructs and reinforces them. The power of legal language lies in its ability to confer authority and legitimacy. Laws are not merely statements of societal expectations; they are imbued with the weight of state power, backed by the judiciary, enforcement agencies, and societal consent. Legal texts, from constitutions to contracts, become instruments through which power is institutionalized, centralized, and distributed. This process often privileges certain groups, ideologies, or cultural narratives, while marginalizing others. The formal, codified nature of legal language can create barriers to understanding and participation for those outside the legal profession, reinforcing hierarchies and perpetuating systemic inequities.

Moreover, legal language shapes society by influencing how individuals and groups perceive justice, fairness, and rights. The ways in which laws are framed and interpreted affect societal attitudes and behaviors, from fostering inclusivity and equality to entrenching discrimination and exclusion. For instance, the evolution of legal terminology around gender, race, and disability has been pivotal in reshaping societal perceptions and dismantling prejudices. However, the capacity for legal language to instigate social change is often limited by its dependence on existing power structures and the political will to implement progressive reforms.

At the intersection of law and society, legal language acts as both a mirror and a mold. It mirrors the prevailing values and power dynamics, capturing the complexities of cultural, economic, and political influences. Simultaneously, it molds societal structures by shaping the discourse around key issues and providing the framework for action and accountability. The adaptability of legal language, seen in its response to technological advancements, global challenges, and evolving social norms, underscores its dynamic role in constructing the realities of modern society.

As this research has demonstrated, the study of legal language is essential for understanding how societies are governed and how power operates within them. By scrutinizing the mechanisms through which legal language constructs power, researchers, policymakers, and activists can identify opportunities to challenge inequities and promote inclusivity. Future scholarship should focus on the ways legal language can be reimagined to foster greater transparency, accessibility, and justice, ensuring that the power it constructs serves the collective good rather than entrenched interests.

In conclusion, legal language is a cornerstone of societal organization, mediating the relationship between individuals and institutions, shaping societal evolution, and influencing perceptions of power and justice. Recognizing its dual role as both an instrument of authority and a potential vehicle for social transformation is crucial for addressing the challenges of an increasingly complex and interconnected world. Through a critical examination of its constructs, we can strive toward a legal system that not only governs but empowers, reflects diverse voices, and shapes a more equitable society.



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