

Discourse Analysis of Judges and Defendants in Iranian Criminal Courts Based on Halliday and Matthiessen's Systemic Functional Linguistics

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Abstract

This study investigates the discourse between judges and defendants in Iranian criminal courts using the theoretical framework of Halliday and Matthiessen's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Courtroom discourse, as one of the most critical types of legal discourse, plays a decisive role in uncovering the truth, determining guilt or innocence, and ensuring justice. Considering that no systematic research based on this model has been conducted on courtroom discourse in Iran, this study aims to offer a significant innovation in the field. Data were collected from official transcripts of criminal court proceedings and analyzed through the three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Within the ideational metafunction, various process types—including material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential—were identified. For the interpersonal metafunction, declarative, interrogative, and imperative clauses as well as power relations between judges and defendants were examined. Regarding the textual metafunction, thematic structures and marked/unmarked sequences were analyzed. The findings revealed that judge–defendant discourse in Iranian criminal courts is goal-oriented, with material processes and interrogative clauses playing a prominent role in courtroom interactions. Additionally, power relations are linguistically manifested, where judges employ imperative statements and guided questions to control the flow of conversation. These results align with similar international studies and emphasize the significance of language as a tool for exercising power and seeking truth in criminal proceedings. The present research contributes to the advancement of forensic and legal linguistics in Iran and highlights its potential applications in judicial, educational, and interdisciplinary contexts.

Keywords: discourse analysis; systemic functional linguistics; judge and defendant; forensic linguistics; Halliday and Matthiessen; criminal court

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1. Introduction

Discourse is one of the most fundamental concepts in the social sciences and humanities and has long attracted the attention of linguists, sociologists, and legal scholars (Fairclough, 1995; Foucault, 1972; Macdonell, 2001). Discourse is not merely a tool for transmitting information; it is a means of constructing meaning, exercising power, and representing social relations (Afshar, 2018; Rezvian & Jalili, 2019). From this perspective, courtroom discourse—particularly the dialogue between judges and defendants—represents a salient form of institutional discourse in which language truly functions as an instrument for achieving justice (Coulthard & Johnson, 2010; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). In the courtroom, legal truth is constructed and reproduced not solely through material evidence but significantly through language and the interactive exchanges among judges, defendants, and other courtroom actors (Momeni & Azizi, 2015). Consequently, the study of courtroom language and judicial discourse analysis has emerged in recent decades as an important domain within applied and forensic linguistics (Afshar, 2008; Coulthard & Johnson, 2010).

The central issue in the present study is how to analyze power relations, social roles, and meaning-making processes within judge–defendant discourse and thereby achieve a deeper understanding of the function of language in the judicial system (Momeni & Azizi, 2015; O’Barr, 1981). Courtroom discourse has distinctive features: on one hand, it is shaped by structural and institutional constraints; on the other, it flows dynamically through interpersonal interaction (Archer, 2005; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). The judge directs the proceedings by asking questions, issuing commands, and interpreting statements, while the defendant appears as a respondent or defender (Afshar, 2018). This linguistic interaction is filled with indicators of power, authority, and the social status of participants. Careful analysis of judge–defendant discourse can thus illuminate the linguistic mechanisms underlying adjudication and help improve the functioning of judicial justice (Momeni & Azizi, 2015; Rezvian & Jalili, 2019).

The need to study this subject in Iran is emphasized from two angles: first, the scarcity of linguistic studies on Iranian courtroom discourse, especially judge–defendant interaction; and second, the practical significance of such research for enhancing the quality of adjudication and legal education (Afshar, 2018; Rezvian & Jalili, 2019). To date, most domestic research in forensic linguistics has focused on written legal documents, police–suspect discourse, or general legal language rather than systematically examining courtroom dialogue between judges and defendants using the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework (Coulthard & Johnson, 2010; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

A brief review of previous studies highlights this research gap:

1. Historical work such as Hiltunen’s (1996) analysis of question–answer sequences in 26 witchcraft trials revealed question types—negatively presupposed, neutral, and substitutive—that demonstrated a presumption of guilt differing from the modern presumption of innocence (Fairclough, 1995).
2. Archer (2005) analyzed historical English court trials (1640–1760) and showed that courtroom questions and answers hold significance not only at the syntactic and lexical levels but also in speech acts and discourse structure (Archer, 2005).
3. O’Barr (1981) demonstrated how powerful and powerless speech styles directly affect witness credibility and ultimately jury decision-making, emphasizing the interplay between language, power, and justice (O’Barr, 1981).
4. Abbaszadeh and Gorjian (2021) examined Iranian judge–defendant discourse using McNamara’s (2002) model, analyzing 24 video-recorded criminal court sessions. They found that power dynamics are traceable in courtroom discourse, with judges dominating interactions through guided questioning (Abbaszadeh & Gorjian, 2021).
5. Saberi and colleagues (2021), adopting Coulthard and Johnson’s (2007) model, studied police–suspect discourse in Iran and concluded that it is goal-oriented and linguistically designed to elicit confession or denial (Coulthard & Johnson, 2010).

This overview shows that both international and domestic studies emphasize the significance of courtroom discourse analysis and the role of power in legal communication (Fairclough, 1995; O’Barr, 1981). However, there remains a clear gap

in research applying Halliday and Matthiessen's Systemic Functional Linguistics to Iranian courtroom settings (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). The present study aims to fill this gap by applying an innovative approach that treats language as a system of socially embedded meanings and explores the three metafunctions—ideational, interpersonal, and textual—to enable deeper analysis of judge–defendant interaction (Coulthard & Johnson, 2010; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

The primary objective of this article is to map the linguistic mechanisms that govern Iranian criminal courtroom discourse and show how language operates as an instrument of power, truth-seeking, and justice (Afshar, 2018; Rezvian & Jalili, 2019). The central research question asks: What roles do different clause types and semantic processes in judge–defendant dialogue play in constructing power relations and shaping meaning? To answer this, the study draws on authentic courtroom data and employs Halliday and Matthiessen's theoretical framework to analyze clause types (declarative, interrogative, and imperative), process types (material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential), and textual structures (thematic patterns, marked and unmarked sequences).

2. Methodology

This research, aiming to analyze judge–defendant discourse in Iranian criminal courts based on Halliday and Matthiessen's Systemic Functional Linguistics, employs a qualitative, descriptive–analytical design and is grounded in the examination of authentic courtroom data.

The present research is qualitative and discourse-analytic in nature. In this approach, the researcher seeks to uncover patterns of meaning, power relations, and linguistic mechanisms within authentic texts or interactions. Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) theoretical framework, which conceptualizes language as a social system comprising three metafunctions—ideational, interpersonal, and textual—was adopted as the main analytical foundation. This framework enables the simultaneous examination of meaning, function, and the social role of language and is particularly effective for analyzing institutional discourse such as courtroom interaction.

The statistical population of the study consists of official dialogues between judges and defendants in Iranian criminal courts. Because access to courtroom data is subject to legal and ethical restrictions, the researcher obtained the necessary permissions to access a set of official transcripts from court sessions. These transcripts included written records of conversations from several criminal cases collected within a defined time frame.

A purposive sampling method was employed; that is, only cases in which direct interaction between judge and defendant occurred and the dialogue was relatively complete were selected. In total, several thousand lines of textual data were extracted and entered into the analysis process. This data volume was sufficient to identify linguistic patterns and address the study's research questions.

The primary data collection tools were the official court transcripts. These transcripts were prepared by court clerks and had legal validity. In addition, part of the data was obtained from recorded session minutes and written reports of proceedings. All collected data were reviewed and edited to ensure that possible typographical or transcription errors would not interfere with accurate analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework of Halliday and Matthiessen. First, the transcripts were segmented into discourse units (clauses or sentences). Each unit was then analyzed according to the three metafunctions:

- **Ideational metafunction:** identification and categorization of process types, including material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential. This stage determined the role of each process in representing courtroom experiences and events.
- **Interpersonal metafunction:** analysis of clause types (declarative, interrogative, and imperative) and examination of power relations and social roles between judge and defendant.
- **Textual metafunction:** examination of textual organization, including thematic structures and marked/unmarked sequences.

Data coding was performed manually and organized into classification tables. For each clause or sentence, the process type, clause type, and textual structure were identified, and the results were summarized in statistical tables.

Ensuring validity and reliability is a central concern in qualitative research. To enhance validity, triangulation was employed: the analyses were reviewed not only by the primary researcher but also by two additional linguists familiar with Halliday and Matthiessen's framework. The intercoder agreement was calculated and found to be high, indicating satisfactory reliability.

To increase validity further, diverse case samples were selected to ensure that the findings could be generalized more broadly to courtroom discourse in Iran. Moreover, all data were thoroughly documented to allow for review and reassessment by other researchers.

3. Findings

The findings are based on the analysis of criminal court transcripts using the Systemic Functional Linguistics approach. As stated in the research questions, the focus was on the three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The results for each question are reported separately below.

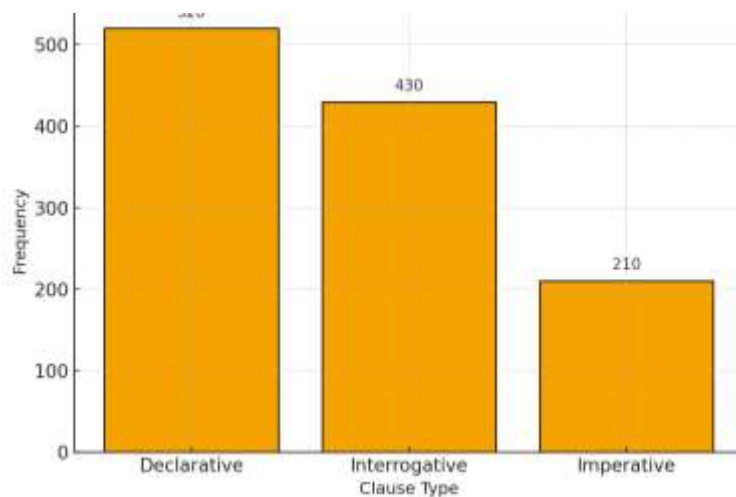
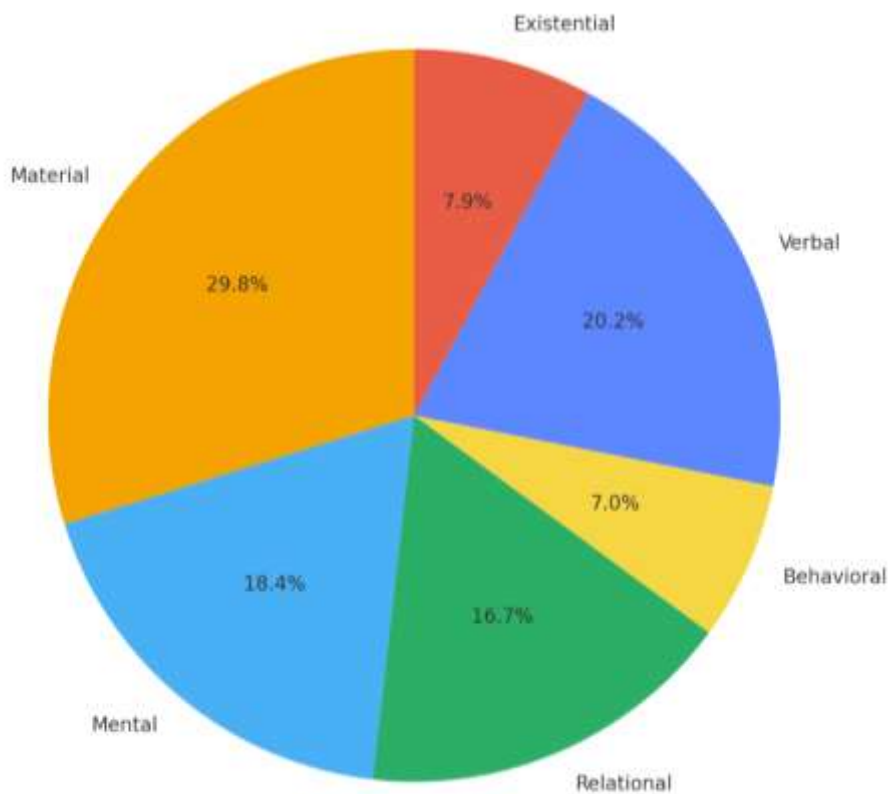
1. **Role of Declarative Clauses:** Analysis revealed that declarative clauses were the most frequent in judge–defendant discourse. These clauses were primarily used by defendants to provide explanations, justifications, or denials. Judges also employed declaratives to record case information and confirm or reject defendants' statements. Declaratives thus serve as the main vehicle for representing events.
2. **Role of Interrogative Clauses:** Judges' questions were predominantly framed as interrogatives. These questions fell into two main types: open-ended (seeking broad information) and closed (requiring yes/no or specific options). Findings showed a higher proportion of closed questions, indicating the judge's control over the discourse flow.
3. **Role of Imperative Clauses:** Imperative clauses were primarily issued by judges and served directive functions, such as "Answer," "Be quiet," or "Speak louder." These commands clearly signaled the power hierarchy and reinforced the judge's authoritative role.
4. **Role of Material Processes:** Within the ideational metafunction, material processes (verbs denoting actions such as do, go, take) were the most frequent. This reflects the emphasis on describing observable events and actions during proceedings.
5. **Role of Mental Processes:** Mental processes (feel, believe, perceive) appeared more frequently in defendants' utterances. Defendants often used them to express intentions, beliefs, or emotions, especially when presenting a defense.
6. **Role of Relational Processes:** Relational processes were used to express states or identities of persons and objects. Judges employed these processes to clarify the status of the defendant or details of the case, using verbs like "be" and "have."
7. **Role of Behavioral Processes:** Behavioral processes (laugh, look) were less frequent but appeared in specific instances to describe defendants' or witnesses' behaviors in court.
8. **Role of Verbal Processes:** Verbal processes (say, respond, confess) played a significant role in capturing and representing speech events and testimonies during the trial.
9. **Role of Existential Processes:** Existential processes were used to assert the presence or absence of phenomena (e.g., "there was," "there wasn't") and were often found in judges' questions probing evidence.
10. **Thematic Structures:** Analysis of textual organization showed that judges often used marked themes to emphasize critical discourse elements, while defendants predominantly used unmarked sequences, reflecting their defensive stance.
11. **Marked and Unmarked Sequences:** Marked sequences dominated judges' statements, employed to highlight key case information. Defendants, however, preferred unmarked sequences, aiming to simplify and defend their narrative.

Table 1. Frequency of Clause Types in Judge–Defendant Discourse

Clause Type	Frequency	Approximate Percentage
Declarative	520	45%
Interrogative	430	37%
Imperative	210	18%

Table 2. Frequency of Process Types in Judge–Defendant Discourse

Process Type	Frequency	Approximate Percentage
Material	340	30%
Mental	210	18%
Relational	190	17%
Behavioral	80	7%
Verbal	230	20%
Existential	90	8%

**Figure 1. Distribution of Clause Types (Declarative, Interrogative, Imperative)****Figure 2. Distribution of Process Types (Material, Mental, Relational, Behavioral, Verbal, Existential)**

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study was designed and conducted to analyze the discourse between judges and defendants in Iranian criminal courts using Halliday and Matthiessen's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The primary motivation behind this research was to gain a deeper understanding of the linguistic mechanisms within the judicial system and how truth and power are represented through language. The courtroom, as an official and legal institution, is a site where language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as an instrument of authority, truth-seeking, and judgment. Thus, examining courtroom language can open new perspectives in applied and forensic linguistics.

The findings revealed that judge–defendant discourse in Iranian criminal courts has distinctive features that set it apart from other types of social discourse. The first key feature is the predominance of declarative and interrogative clauses. Defendants mainly employ declaratives to explain or defend themselves, while judges frequently use closed or guided questions to direct the flow of discourse toward specific outcomes. This finding aligns with international studies showing that courtroom questioning often carries presuppositions and shapes discourse flow (Archer, 2005; O'Barr, 1981).

The second notable feature is the high frequency of material and verbal processes. This indicates that courtroom interaction is largely oriented toward representing observable events and documenting testimony. Simultaneously, mental processes hold an important place in defendants' speech, as they attempt to clarify intentions, beliefs, and emotions. This pattern is consistent with other discourse analyses of institutional settings, which emphasize the centrality of material and verbal acts for constructing legal narratives (Afshar, 2018; Coulthard & Johnson, 2010).

A third salient characteristic is the prevalence of imperative clauses and marked thematic structures in judges' speech. Through directives and emphasis on key textual elements, judges consolidate their dominant role and assert institutional authority. This corresponds with the notion of powerful speech styles influencing perceptions of credibility and authority in court (O'Barr, 1981) and supports findings from domestic Iranian research highlighting the linguistic construction of power in judge–defendant discourse (Abbaszadeh & Gorjian, 2021).

The fourth feature concerns the relatively low frequency of behavioral and existential processes. Although these processes appear less often, they are significant in specific contexts—such as denying presence at a crime scene or asserting the existence or absence of evidence.

Overall, the study shows that judge–defendant discourse is not merely informational exchange but an interactive process of reconstructing truth and exercising power. Comparing these findings with previous studies confirms that such characteristics are widely shared across legal systems, although their manifestations vary culturally and institutionally (Fairclough, 1995; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

From an academic standpoint, the results offer several important implications:

First, they reaffirm the analytical strength of Halliday and Matthiessen's SFL framework for studying institutional discourse. The model effectively explained the semantic and functional organization of courtroom language, revealing the interplay of ideational, interpersonal, and textual layers in judge–defendant interaction. This research thus provides a successful example of applying SFL to forensic and legal linguistics (Coulthard & Johnson, 2010; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

Second, the findings highlight that courtroom language functions as a space where power and social roles are reproduced. Judges rely on guided questions and imperative clauses to maintain authority, while defendants are positioned defensively. This supports theories of language and power that conceptualize discourse as a mechanism of control and domination (Fairclough, 1995; Foucault, 1972).

Third, the study contributes to the advancement of forensic linguistics in Iran. Domestic research in this area remains limited and mostly focused on written legal texts or police–suspect discourse. The systematic analysis of judge–defendant interaction through SFL opens new possibilities for future investigations and helps consolidate the field of legal linguistics nationally (Afshar, 2018; Rezvian & Jalili, 2019).

Fourth, these findings also have potential value for comparative research. Juxtaposing Iranian courtroom discourse with that of other jurisdictions may reveal cultural and legal differences in how power and truth are linguistically constructed, enriching international discourse and legal theory (Archer, 2005; O'Barr, 1981).

The results can inform several practical domains:

- **Judicial and legal training:** Judges and lawyers can benefit from awareness of how language influences power dynamics and truth construction. Judges may design their questions and directives more consciously to avoid unintended bias, while lawyers can refine their defense strategies by understanding courtroom linguistic patterns.
- **Reforming judicial procedures:** Excessive reliance on closed, guided questions may limit defendants' ability to speak freely. Encouraging a balance with open-ended questioning could lead to more comprehensive fact-finding.
- **Legal and linguistic education:** Including legal linguistics and discourse analysis in the curriculum of law and linguistics faculties can strengthen future professionals' analytical skills.
- **Interdisciplinary applications:** Insights into courtroom discourse can support forensic psychology in credibility assessments and sociology of law in understanding power reproduction.
- **Language-based technology development:** The study's dataset could contribute to building advanced discourse analysis tools and AI systems that assist in judicial review and case preparation.

This study faced certain limitations. Access to courtroom data was restricted due to legal and confidentiality constraints, limiting the breadth of available transcripts. Nonverbal elements such as body language, gaze, and prosody—which significantly influence interaction—could not be systematically captured. The dataset size, while sufficient for the study's aims, did not allow for even broader generalization.

Future research should consider:

- Comparative analysis of courtroom discourse across different legal cultures to reveal nuanced differences in power and truth construction.
- Integrating nonverbal communication such as gestures, intonation, and eye contact to gain a fuller understanding of courtroom dynamics.
- Extending analysis to other courtroom participants, including lawyers, prosecutors, and witnesses, to present a comprehensive interactional map.
- Employing mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) to strengthen validity and generalizability of findings.

Despite its limitations, this research provides an essential step toward understanding the linguistic construction of power and truth in Iranian criminal courts and offers a robust foundation for both scholarly development and practical application in legal contexts.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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