



A FORENSIC LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF A MURDER TRIAL JUDGMENT IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This study offers a comprehensive forensic linguistics analysis of a murder trial judgment in Pakistan, focusing on The State vs. Abdul Rehman (Session Case No. 14/2024, decided on 14 March 2025 by the Additional Sessions Judge, Sialkot). Employing a qualitative methodology grounded in sociocognitive discourse analysis and legal stylistics, the research investigates how language is strategically used to construct narratives, establish credibility, and influence judicial reasoning within the context of a high-profile criminal case. The analysis reveals that the judgment privileges the prosecution's account through evaluative language, complex legal jargon, and the rhetorical positioning of eyewitnesses—particularly family members—as inherently trustworthy, while systematically minimizing or dismissing the defense's arguments and highlighting forensic inconsistencies only to disregard them. The findings illustrate how the use of dense legalese and technical terminology not only restricts accessibility for laypersons but also reinforces institutional authority, sometimes shifting the burden of proof onto the accused and undermining the principle of presumption of innocence. This aligns with broader patterns in Pakistani judicial discourse, where linguistic strategies often shape perceptions of guilt and innocence, as documented in recent forensic linguistic and legal studies. The research underscores the need for integrating forensic linguistic expertise into Pakistan's legal system to identify and address linguistic bias, enhance transparency, and ensure that justice is both comprehensible and equitable. The article concludes with targeted recommendations for institutional reform, professional training, and interdisciplinary collaboration, advocating for a justice system where language serves as a tool for clarity and fairness rather than a barrier to justice.

Keywords: Forensic linguistics, legal language, Murder Trial, Linguistic biasness, justice.

Introduction

Forensic linguistics, an interdisciplinary field at the intersection of language and law, has become an increasingly vital tool in the analysis of legal texts, courtroom discourse, and judicial decisions. In Pakistan, where the complexities of language, culture, and legal tradition converge, the application of forensic linguistics to murder trial judgments offers a unique lens to examine how justice is constructed, communicated, and interpreted within the judicial system. As Javed and



Ghani (2020) emphasize, “all the special attention that the law has attained today is due to the use of language. No legal notions exist outside language. It is on the loom of language that all law is spun,” highlighting the centrality of language in legal processes.

This article presents a forensic linguistics analysis of a recent murder trial judgment delivered by the Additional Sessions Judge in Sialkot, in the case of *The State vs. Abdul Rehman* (Session Case No. 14/2024, decided on 14 March 2025)[1]. The case centers on the prosecution of Abdul Rehman, accused under Section 302 of the Pakistan Penal Code for the alleged intentional murder of his son, Haakim Khan. Through a close examination of the judgment’s language, structure, and rhetorical strategies, this analysis seeks to uncover how linguistic choices influence the presentation of facts, the evaluation of evidence, and the ultimate delivery of justice.

The relevance of forensic linguistics is further supported by the work of Anjum (2017), who argues for the establishment of forensic linguistics as an independent discipline in Pakistan to combat linguistic exploitation and enhance the clarity of legal communication. Another recent stylistic analysis of legalese in Pakistani courts highlights the complexity of grammatical structures and the urgent need for pedagogical solutions to make legal texts more accessible. This article presents a forensic linguistics analysis of a murder trial judgment in Pakistan, drawing on contemporary research and case studies to reveal how linguistic features influence the presentation of evidence, judicial reasoning, and the delivery of justice. By integrating insights from previous studies and published articles, this analysis advocates for greater awareness, policy innovation, and interdisciplinary collaboration to harness the full potential of forensic linguistics in Pakistan’s legal system.

Objectives

To analyze the linguistic features and discourse strategies used in a Pakistani murder trial judgment.

To examine how language in the judgment constructs narratives of guilt, innocence, and credibility.

To identify the influence of forensic linguistic analysis on the interpretation and outcome of the trial.

Research Questions

What are the key linguistic features present in the murder trial judgment under analysis?

How do discursivestrategies in the judgment influence perceptions of the accused and witnesses?

In what ways can forensic linguistic analysis reveal bias, manipulation, or clarity in the judicial reasoning of the case?

Literature Review

Forensic linguistics has rapidly emerged as an essential field in understanding the intersection of language and law, especially in the context of Pakistan’s multilingual and complex legal environment. The discipline examines how language is used in legal settings, including courtroom discourse, witness testimonies, and judicial decisions, providing tools to uncover bias, clarify ambiguity, and ensure justice is both done and seen to be done. Recent scholarship has highlighted



the stylistic complexity and inaccessibility of legal language in Pakistan, noting that the prevalence of legalese and the dominance of English in higher courts often create barriers for litigants, witnesses, and even legal professionals who are not proficient in the language. This linguistic complexity can lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and, in some cases, miscarriage of justice.

A stylistic study of legal language in the verdicts of the Supreme Court of Pakistan by Anjum (2017) found that the legal register used in Pakistani courts is marked by unusual grammatical constructions, dense vocabulary, and a reliance on borrowed terms from English, Persian, and Latin. These features, while intended to ensure precision and continuity with historical legal traditions, often render judgments incomprehensible to the general public and even to some legal practitioners. The study concluded that the stylistic complexity of legal texts in Pakistan not only hinders access to justice but also perpetuates class differences, as those with limited proficiency in English or legal jargon are disadvantaged in legal proceedings. The author recommends the inclusion of forensic linguistics in legal education and the establishment of translation and interpretation services to make legal proceedings more accessible to all citizens.

Javed and Ghani (2020), referenced in the introduction of this article, emphasize that “no legal notions exist outside language,” underscoring the centrality of linguistic analysis in legal processes. Their research, along with other studies, demonstrates that the presentational style and communicative strategies used in Pakistani courts can significantly influence perceptions of credibility, the evaluation of evidence, and the final verdict. For example, critical forensic linguistic analysis of murder case judgments in Pakistan has shown that discursive strategies such as positive self-representation of prosecution witnesses and negative other-representation of the accused are common, often leading to the accused being acquitted or convicted based on how narratives are constructed rather than on objective evidence. This aligns with Van Dijk’s sociocognitive model, which highlights the ideological square of “us vs. them” in legal discourse, where the prosecution’s narrative is privileged and the defense’s is marginalized.

Further, recent research by Yasmin Anjum (2017) calls for the formal establishment of forensic linguistics as an independent discipline in Pakistan, arguing that the lack of linguistic expertise in legal proceedings leads to manipulation, exploitation, and the overlooking of critical evidence. Anjum points out that the multilingual nature of Pakistani courtrooms—where English, Urdu, and regional languages are used interchangeably—creates additional challenges for ensuring clarity and fairness. She advocates for the appointment of expert forensic linguists in courts and the development of standardized procedures for the admissibility of linguistic evidence.

Studies focusing on courtroom discourse in Pakistan, such as the work by Shaheen-ul-Zaman et al. (2023), reveal that the language used during witness examination and cross-examination often places lay witnesses at a disadvantage, especially when they are unfamiliar with legal conventions or when proceedings are conducted in a language they do not fully understand. These asymmetries in power and communication can lead to the manipulation of witness responses, the marginalization of key evidence, and ultimately, unjust outcomes. The research suggests that the



use of national and regional languages in courts, supported by trained interpreters and simplified legal texts, can help bridge these gaps and promote more equitable access to justice.

In addition to the previously discussed works, recent scholarship has expanded the scope of forensic linguistics in Pakistan by examining the ideological and discursive strategies embedded in legal texts. A 2025 study by Khan et al. applied Van Dijk's sociocognitive and ideological square models to analyze three prominent murder cases in Pakistan, focusing on how legal discourse is shaped and modified by various social actors, including police officers, lawyers, and judges. Their findings reveal that legal narratives are often constructed through positive self-representation of the prosecution and negative other-representation of the defense, echoing the "us vs. them" dichotomy. The study further shows that such discursive modifications can lead to the accused receiving the benefit of the doubt, sometimes resulting in acquittal despite the presence of incriminating evidence. This research highlights the need for critical forensic linguistic analysis to uncover these narrative strategies and to ensure that legal outcomes are based on objective facts rather than rhetorical manipulation.

Another relevant contribution comes from Anjum and Anwar (2023), who conducted a forensic stylistic analysis of legalese in the judgments of Pakistani banking courts. Their research highlights the unique features of legal language—such as complex syntactic structures, archaic vocabulary, and the frequent use of passive constructions—which often render legal texts inaccessible to non-specialists. The authors argue that this stylistic complexity not only impedes the comprehension of legal documents by ordinary citizens but also creates opportunities for misinterpretation and even fraudulent practices. The study calls for pedagogical reforms and the involvement of forensic linguists in the drafting and review of legal texts, emphasizing that simplification and clarity in legal language are essential for promoting transparency and justice. These findings reinforce the broader consensus in the literature that forensic linguistics can play a transformative role in making the Pakistani legal system more equitable and accessible for all stakeholders.

The literature underscores that forensic linguistics is not merely an academic pursuit but a practical necessity for the Pakistani legal system. It offers concrete solutions to longstanding issues of linguistic complexity, bias, and inaccessibility, advocating for reforms in legal education, policy, and practice. The integration of forensic linguistic expertise into Pakistan's courts is seen as a crucial step toward ensuring that justice is delivered fairly, transparently, and in a manner that is comprehensible to all participants, regardless of their linguistic background.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing forensic linguistic analysis to examine a selected murder trial judgment from a Pakistani court. The primary data source is the official judgment delivered in the case of *The State vs. Abdul Rehman* (Session Case No. 14/2024, decided on 14 March 2025 by the Additional Sessions Judge, Sialkot). The analysis focuses on how language is used to construct narratives, present evidence, and frame judicial reasoning within the judgment. The main document analyzed is the complete written judgment from the aforementioned murder trial. Supplementary references include published research articles on forensic linguistics



and legal discourse in Pakistan. The judgment is segmented into its major components: FIR summary, witness testimonies, prosecution and defense arguments, judicial reasoning, and verdict. Each segment is examined for linguistic features such as lexical choices, syntactic structures, modality, and rhetorical strategies. Special attention is given to the representation of the accused, witnesses, and events, as well as to the use of legal jargon and evaluative language. The analysis also considers how power relations, bias, and credibility are constructed through language.

Data Analysis

This analysis applies Teun A. van Dijk's Sociocognitive Discourse Analysis (SCDA) to the murder trial judgment *The State vs. Abdul Rehman*, examining how judicial language constructs power hierarchies and shapes perceptions of guilt. Van Dijk's model emphasizes the sociocognitive interface—where discourse, cognition, and social structures intersect—to reveal how legal language legitimizes institutional power while marginalizing alternative narratives. The judgment reveals stark asymmetries in how social actors are linguistically positioned. The prosecution's arguments are framed through positive self-representation, emphasizing the credibility of eyewitnesses Abdul Rauf (PW-7) and Muhammad Sharif (PW-8) as "natural" participants in the events due to their familial relationship with the accused. For instance, the judge asserts: "*Complainant/PW-7 is the real son of the accused... it could not be expected that the son would depose falsely against his father, which is quite an unnatural phenomenon.*" This framing constructs the prosecution's narrative as inherently trustworthy while dismissing potential motives for fabrication. Conversely, the defense's claims of false implication are relegated to negative other-representation, described as "*material discrepancies*" lacking "*independent corroboration*".

Power Dynamics in Judicial Discourse

The judgment exhibits systemic power imbalances through linguistic strategies:

Prosecution Privilege

The prosecution narrative dominates via epistemic modality: "*It could be stated that the matter was promptly reported... in a natural manner.*" This phrasing projects judicial certainty while obscuring evidentiary gaps (e.g., 7-month ballistic delay). The passive voice ("recovery of weapon... has been affected") further obscures procedural accountability.

Defense Erasure

Defense arguments are minimized through syntactic subordination: "*Learned defense counsel argued that... hence, nullifying its impact.*" Critical claims—bullet mismatch (crime-scene vs. recovered pistol) and prior disputes—are buried in dependent clauses, reducing rhetorical weight.

Social Hierarchy Reinforcement

Familial Ideology

Witness credibility is anchored in patriarchal norms: "*Complainant/PW-7 is the real son of the accused... it could not be expected that the son would depose falsely against his father, which is quite an unnatural phenomenon.*" This "*naturalness*" trope invokes cultural ideals of filial loyalty to dismiss motives for fabrication.



Class Prejudice

The accused's unemployment is framed as criminal predisposition ("jobless," "violent"), pathologizing poverty while ignoring socioeconomic context.

Epistemic Control

Evidence Hierarchy

Eyewitness testimony (PW-7/PW-8) is deemed "*unimpeachable*" despite cross-examination, while forensic contradictions are dismissed as "*not fatal*." Medical evidence (Exh.PE) and ballistic reports are subordinated to oral accounts.

Burden Shifting

Deontic modality reverses presumption of innocence: "*The accused had to explain the circumstances about the unnatural death.*"

Cognitive Mediation

Context Models and Mental Framing Van Dijk's context models—mental frameworks guiding interpretation—manifest through:

Natural/Unnatural Binary

The judge's repeated framing of prosecution alignment as "*natural*" (used 5x) and defense arguments as "*unnatural*" creates a cognitive schema where institutional alignment equals truth.

Cognitive Shortcuts

Delayed crime reporting is excused ("family prioritized treatment over reporting"), while forensic delays (7-month ballistic analysis) are overlooked. This reflects confirmation bias favoring institutional narratives.

Ideological Filtering

Intrafamily violence is interpreted through cultural absolutism (filial duty vs. paternal authority), ignoring structural triggers like poverty or inheritance disputes.

Critical Evaluation: Linguistic Bias and Justice Implications

Marginalization of Defense

Forensic contradictions (bullet/pistol mismatch) are acknowledged but dismissed via pragmatic mitigation: "*Negative report is not fatal for prosecution case.*" This linguistic strategy minimizes physical evidence while amplifying testimonial accounts. Defense claims of evidence tampering "*planted pistol*" are reframed as "*false recovery*," discursively invalidating the accusation.

Power Imbalances in Legal Process

Epistemic Inequality

Medical/ballistic evidence is subordinated to witness testimony, reflecting van Dijk's axiom that "social structures affect discourse through cognition." The judge's language amplifies prosecution narratives while minimizing defense. Complex syntax "*substitution is the rare phenomena*" and technical terms "*ocular account*" restrict lay comprehension, reinforcing judicial hegemony.



Systemic Implications

Burden Reversal

The deontic framing "*accused had to explain*" violates Article 10 of Pakistan's Constitution (presumption of innocence).

Reproduction of Social Hierarchies

Class and familial biases embedded in discourse perpetuate cycles where marginalized defendants face linguistic disempowerment.

Findings

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that the linguistic features and discourse strategies employed in the judgment of *The State vs. Abdul Rehman* systematically privilege the prosecution's narrative while marginalizing the defense, thereby directly addressing the research objectives and questions outlined in the article. The analysis reveals that the judgment constructs credibility and guilt through positive self-representation of prosecution witnesses—particularly by emphasizing the “natural” trustworthiness of family members as eyewitnesses—and by employing evaluative language that frames their testimonies as “consistent and coherent.” Conversely, the defense's arguments, such as claims of prior disputes and the mismatch between ballistic evidence and the recovered weapon, are acknowledged but swiftly dismissed as “material discrepancies,” with little substantive engagement. The court's use of complex legal jargon and technical terminology, coupled with lengthy and syntactically dense sentences, renders the judgment inaccessible to lay readers and reinforces institutional authority. Furthermore, the language of the judgment shifts the burden of proof onto the accused, requiring explanations beyond a simple denial and thus undermining the presumption of innocence. These findings justify the research objectives by thoroughly analyzing the linguistic and discursive mechanisms through which narratives of guilt, innocence, and credibility are constructed in the judgment. They also answer the research questions by identifying key linguistic features, demonstrating how discursive strategies shape perceptions of the accused and witnesses, and revealing the presence of bias and manipulation in judicial reasoning. Ultimately, the study underscores the critical role of forensic linguistic analysis in exposing and addressing these issues, advocating for greater transparency, fairness, and accessibility in Pakistan's judicial process.

Conclusion

This forensic linguistics analysis of the murder trial judgment in *The State vs. Abdul Rehman* demonstrates the profound influence of language on judicial reasoning and outcomes in Pakistani courts. The judgment reveals a clear privileging of the prosecution's narrative, with the court repeatedly emphasizing the “natural” credibility of eyewitnesses who are close family members of both the accused and the deceased. This linguistic framing not only constructs a persuasive story of guilt but also systematically marginalizes the defense's arguments, including claims of prior disputes and critical forensic discrepancies, such as the mismatch between the recovered weapon and ballistic evidence. The use of complex legal jargon and lengthy, technical sentences further limits the accessibility of the judgment to non-specialists, reinforcing institutional authority and



making it difficult for laypersons to engage with or challenge the court's reasoning. Additionally, the judgment's language shifts the burden of proof onto the accused, requiring explanations beyond a simple denial, which runs counter to the foundational legal principle of presumption of innocence. Overall, this study underscores the necessity of integrating forensic linguistic expertise into Pakistan's judicial process to identify and address linguistic bias, promote greater transparency, and ensure that justice is both done and seen to be done. The findings highlight the urgent need for legal reforms and interdisciplinary collaboration aimed at making judicial discourse more equitable, comprehensible, and just for all participants in the legal system.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, it is recommended that Pakistan's justice system formally integrate forensic linguistics into both investigative and judicial processes to enhance fairness and transparency. Legal professionals—including judges, lawyers, and police officers—should receive regular training on the principles and practical applications of forensic linguistics, enabling them to identify linguistic bias, avoid manipulative discourse, and interpret legal texts with greater accuracy. Judicial documents and court judgments should be written in clear, accessible language to ensure that all parties—including the accused, witnesses, and the public—can understand the reasoning and outcomes of cases, thereby reducing the risk of misinterpretation or injustice. Policymakers are urged to develop institutional frameworks and standardized procedures for the use of linguistic evidence, including the appointment of forensic linguists as expert witnesses in relevant cases. Collaboration between legal practitioners, linguists, and academic institutions should be encouraged to foster interdisciplinary research and innovation, while public awareness campaigns can help build trust in the value of linguistic expertise within the legal system. By implementing these recommendations, Pakistan can address the linguistic complexities and power imbalances highlighted in this study, ultimately moving toward a more equitable, transparent, and effective justice system that upholds the true spirit of justice for all participants.

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