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A Comparative Study of the Functions of Factual Statements and Legal Statements in English Courtroom Discourse

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Abstract

This study compares the functions of factual statements and legal statements in English courtroom discourse within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics. Using transcripts of proceedings in United States federal courts and selected state courts, the research analyzes how ideational, interpersonal, and textual resources are mobilized by two types of utterances to achieve truth-claims and normative judgments. The findings show that ideationally, factual statements construct dynamic events via material processes, while legal statements build static norms via relational processes; interpersonally, factual statements deploy modality to express the certainty of information, whereas legal statements express obligation and permission; textually, factual statements advance narrative logic, whereas legal statements advance argumentative logic. This study aims to offer a novel analytical framework and pathway for English courtroom discourse analysis.

Keywords

English Courtroom Discourse; Factual Statements; Legal Statements; Systemic Functional Linguistics

1. Introduction

Courtroom discourse heavily relies on language to realize narration, attribution of responsibility, and persuasion. It can be divided into two orientations: factual statements (reproducing past events, actions, and situational contexts) and legal statements (citing and interpreting legal categories). The interaction structure of courtroom speech centers on the basic unit of question—answer, and the inherent asymmetry in discourse constrains factual statements within the legal frame, making narration inseparable from legal evaluation (Liao, 2003). With the development of the field, the focus of courtroom discourse research has shifted from descriptive features to functional explanations, emphasizing the integration of linguistic and legal knowledge to address real-world problems (Liu, 2024). This study adopts the three metafunctions of Systemic Functional Linguistics as

analytical tools to compare factual statements and legal statements in English trials. The corpus comprises transcripts of courtroom proceedings from United States federal courts and selected state courts, focusing on the evidentiary phase and oral advocacy in appellate contexts. The study addresses two main questions: in terms of ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions, what differences exist between these two types of statements? How does each fulfill its distinct discursive tasks?

2. Current State of Research on Courtroom Discourse

Previous courtroom discourse studies can be organized along three main avenues: narrative, rhetoric, and linguistics. From a narrative perspective, research distinguishes narrative types and strategies to explore how information is structured in courtroom dialogue and how this organization influences the construction of facts (MacNeil M.H., 2007). From a rhetorical standpoint, attention focuses on the interaction between participants in court, analyzing the questioning and answering practices, lexical resources, and syntactic structures employed to present case experiences, generate specific narrative effects, and subsequently construct identities and power relations (Zhang, 2025). In the linguistic domain, research is largely distributed through pragmatics and Systemic Functional Linguistics(SFL): the pragmatics investigates illocutionary acts, conversational implicature, and politeness strategies in courtroom talk, while the SFL deploys resources such as transitivity, mood, and theme to examine conceptualization and interpersonal negotiation within courtroom language (Wang, 2024).

Overall, existing studies reveal at least two gaps requiring further exploration: First, there is a lack of clear delineation between factual statements and legal statements within courtroom discourse, as well as a lack of discourse-level analysis. Second, although some scholars have employed SFL to analyze transitivity or modality in courtroom language, these studies tend to focus on a single dimension. They seldom compare the functional differences between factual and legal statements using all three metafunctions of language to illuminate how each type fulfills its discursive tasks. This study aims to address these gaps by adopting a unified Systemic Functional Linguistics perspective to establish a functional contrast between factual statements and legal statements.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Core Conceptual Definitions

Courtroom discourse is a typical instance of institutional discourse, involving participants such as judges, lawyers, and litigants, who engage in linguistic interaction to realize information exchange, claim rights, and establish facts (Li, 2026).

Fact statements, verbal re-presentations of past events, actions, states, and environmental details, typically centered on the participants experience, with explicit

temporal and locational adjuncts, and predominantly past tense. The typical subject is witnesses, though lawyers may also present fact statements when recounting the case. Legal statements, the linguistic manifestation of legal norms, describing the semantic content of legal rules, the conditions under which those rules take effect, and also expressing normative meanings such as commands or permissions(Chen, 2019); they may also interpret legal norms or reflect judicial decisions. The typical subjects are lawyers and judges. It should be noted that not all utterances fit neatly into a single category, and some statements exhibit hybrid features.

3.2. Conceptualization of the Three Metafunctions

Ideational, expressed through the Transitivity system and the Voice to re-present experiences of the real world (including the inner world). The six process types are material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential (He, 2013). Interpersonal, constructed via the Mood system and the Modal system to establish relations and identities between speakers and listeners (Halliday, 2004). Textual, organized through information structure and cohesion system to reflect the relationships between information and the communicative context (Li, 2012). In courtroom discourse, a single clause can carry multiple metafunctions simultaneously, and analysis should consider the interaction of these functions within the relevant discourse situation.

4. Functional Analysis of Factual Statements in Courtroom Discourse

4.1. Ideational Function Analysis

Witness: “a car that was rapidly backing out of the driveway and immediately headed down in that direction towards Betton Road.”

This factual statement represents a prototypical material process, consisting of two continuous processes. Process One, “was backing out of the driveway” denotes the action of backing up, with the actor being “a car,” and an implicit goal of leaving the driveway or lane area. Process Two, “headed down in that direction towards Betton Road” denotes the action of driving forward, with the actor unchanged, highlighting the vehicle’s path and direction. These two material processes are tightly linked by the coordinating conjunction “and” and the temporal adverbial “immediately,” forming a witness scene of “leaving the scene and moving away,” thereby objectly reconstructing the suspect vehicle’s physical trace just after the incident and contributing to the court’s construction of the event as it occurred.

4.2. Interpersonal Function Analysis

Witness: “it could have been a gunshot, we weren’t sure.”

The modal auxiliary “could have been” expresses epistemic modality—an inference of possibility, showing a low level of certainty. The pronoun “we” integrates the

speaker into a collective cognition, while the negative stance "weren't sure" directly communicates cognitive limitation. At the interpersonal level, this sentence actively downplays the speaker's certainty about the source of the sound. In the court, the witness does not exaggerate their judgment (they do not claim "it was definitely a gunshot"). This candid epistemic stance does not undermine credibility; rather, it aligns with a typical human response at the scene of a crime and thus reinforces the witness's reliability, providing a plausible psychological motive for subsequent actions such as stepping outside to investigate "because of the uncertainty." This epistemic modality marks the utterance as a personal perceptual statement, offering information while leaving space for challenge.

4.3. Textual Function Analysis

Witness: "so I quickly dashed back to the house, got the phone and called 911."
The three verb phrases "dashed back," "got," and "called" share the same subject "I" arranged in a coordinated structure linked by the conjunction "and," forming a compact sequence of actions. The word order follows the temporal sequence of real events. Functionally, this rapid chain of coordinated actions not only reproduces the tense, tense-real atmosphere of the moment with precision but also ensures that the narrative proceeds without gaps in the main clause progression, making the timeline of events clearly discernible. This provides cohesive textual support for the subsequent testimony by maintaining a continuous and logically ordered narrative flow.

5. Functional Analysis of Legal Statements in Courtroom Discourse

5.1. Ideational Function Analysis

Counsel for the Petitioner: "That requirement conflicts with more than a half dozen Federal Rules of Civil Procedure."
This instance can be analyzed as a relational process. The verb "conflicts with" expresses an incompatible or adversarial relation between two legal norms. Functionally, this statement serves as the cornerstone of the argument. By using the verb "conflicts", it constructs a factual background in which state law and federal rules are at odds. Not merely describing an action, it paves the way for the conclusion that federal rules must take priority.

5.2. Interpersonal Function Analysis

Counsel for the Petitioner: "Given its unavoidable conflicts with multiple federal rules, Delaware's law cannot apply in federal court."
The lawyer uses the deontic modality "cannot", not to express a mere epistemic possibility, but to assert an incapacity or in-applicability with normative force. This choice sends a clear signal to the court that there is no room for negotiation on this

point. It demonstrates that the issue is a legal necessity rather than a subject of dispute. Through this strong expression, the lawyer aims to establish an attitude of professional and rational authority from the outset, delineating the legitimacy of the position and the applicability of the rules.

5.3. Textual Function Analysis

Counsel for the Respondents: "And if Cohen can allow states to regulate causes of action for shareholder derivative suits, which are wholly within the state power to regulate, Delaware ought to be able, like most states, regulate medical negligence claims, which the parties agree are entirely within the power of state legislatures to regulate."

This utterance comprises two parts: a coordinating conjunction "And" signaling continuation from prior discourse, and a conditional clause "if Cohen can allow...". The lawyer builds a chain of analogy by juxtaposing the prior case Cohen with the current case. The conditional frame positions the argument as "If X is permissible, and X has property P, then Y should also be permissible because Y shares the same property P." This syllogism (premise from precedent → property attribution → conclusion for the current case) strengthens the argumentative preciseness and persuasive coherence through a controlled analogical reasoning.

6. Conclusion

From a functional perspective, the task of factual statements is to provide a directly perceptible experiential basis, with their truthfulness grounded in the vividness of narration and the credibility of the narrator. The task of legal statements is to supply a normative framework for evaluation and attribution, with its authority deriving from the objectivity of the system and the rigor of its logic. The ultimate persuasiveness of the courtroom rests on the harmonious operation of these two functional systems.

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