

A Linguistic Analysis of Legal English: Features, Complexity, Ambiguity, and the Movement toward Plain Legal Writing

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Abstract

Legal English is a very specialized zone of professional discourse which uses technical terms, archaic usage, complex sentence types, nominalization, passive forms, binomial phrases, and context-dependent meanings. Linguistic features have been historically evolved to ensure precision, authority, consistency, comprehensiveness in legislation; however, they often present problems for comprehension to non-specialist readers and second language users. The aim of this research project has been to present an overview of the most important linguistic features of legal English, explore how these features relate to precision, complexity, and ambiguity and consider the implications for the use of plain-English principles in legal communication. The research design used was qualitative documentary and linguistic discourse-analytic design. The lexical, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and discourse analysis were used in the analysis of purposively selected statutes, judicial decisions, contracts, legal notices, and scholarly studies on the issues. The six main themes emerging from the thematic analysis were specialized legal vocabulary, historical and formulaic language, syntactic density and complexity, agency, authority and responsibility, semantic precision and ambiguity, and plain language and accessibility. The results showed that technical terminology, modality, passive voice, nominalization and syntactic elaboration can indeed have a legal function. But superfluous nominalization, too many repetitions, vague passive agents, and awkward sentence constructions hamper the readability and, at the worst, detract from legal precision. Such difficulties are especially great in Pakistan where English is a second language, yet plays an important role in law and legal practice as well as legal education. The study concludes that plain legal writing must maintain the legal language needed to adequately communicate the meaning of the law, but not use unnecessary language for the purposes of legal communication. It suggests genre-sensitive drafting, multilingual communication, the consistent use of modals, better legal-English training, reader-testing and additional corpus-based research to make legal texts clearer, easier to read and more accessible.

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Introduction

Language is the key tool for making, interpreting, communicating and implementing law. It's through words that statutes create rights and obligations, through agreements that contracts are formed, through judgments, that courts expound their decisions, and through oral and written discourse that lawyers build their arguments (Zhang, & Wang, 2025). Language use and interpretation are, therefore, crucial to the exercise of legal power. Changes in the meaning of a provision due to a change in a single word, modal verb, punctuation mark or syntactic relationship can alter the legal effect of a provision (Xu, et al., 2026). For these reasons, legal language is one of the branches of interest in applied linguistics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, stylistics, forensic linguistics and English for Special Purposes (Dvořáková, 2025).

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Legal English is not simply “the English language with a few legal terms. Legal English isn’t simply “English with a few legal terms”. It is a professional register that is specialized due to institutional power, historical evolution, legal standards, and need for accuracy (Śleszyńska, 2025). Uses legal terms (j Jurisdiction; li Liability; inj Injunction; neg Negligence; con Consideration; dam Damages) that have legal definitions that may be different than their common usage. Long sentences, embedded clauses, complex noun phrases, nominalisations, passive constructions, (Quevedo, et al., 2023) formal vocabulary and formulaic expressions are also commonly used in legal documents. The linguistic elements that are advantageous in the expression of conditions, exceptions, qualifications, prohibitions, permissions and obligations can make the text difficult to read (Guarino, 2025).

The conservative nature of legal English has been helped by its history. Words in English are derived from Anglo-Saxon English, Norman French and Latin. The phrases *prima facie*, *bona fide*, *mens rea*, *habeas corpus* and *ultra vires* are still in use today. Words like *hereinafter*, *thereof*, *whereas* and *notwithstanding* are also still found in contracts and legislation. Some of these are already legal terms, and may not have an equivalent ordinary language equivalent. Some people survive due to drafting heritage and professional habit (Hashosh, & Hawel, 2025).

The clarity of law is in tension with precision, because of the complexity of the language of law. Detailed terminology and complex grammatical structures might be acceptable to lawyers to avoid ambiguity (Xu, & Casal, 2023). Citizens should, however, be subject to and aware of the laws and documents that impact their rights, property, work, family, and community (Guarino, 2025). Raised by challenges in understanding their rights and responsibilities, people might not be able to access their own rights or take action themselves without the help of a professional. This concern has led to the emergence of the Plain English movement and its ideals of clarity, conciseness, logical organization, familiarity of words, and direct sentence structure (Heller, & Zoyirova, 2022).

Accessible Legal Communication is a special need in Pakistan. English remains the language of the law and is still much used in legislation, judgments of the superior courts, legal training, contracts, official government correspondence and legal practice (Lin, et al., 2023). However, the second language of the majority of Pakistanis is English. Legal English in Pakistan is thus embedded in a multilingual context, in which there is Urdu, regional languages, English-language legal traditions, and there are professional practices in Pakistan that are developed locally. This study is therefore an analysis of legal English as a special professional register and as an issue in public communication (Khamkhien, 2026; Obst, 2025).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Legal English should convey a high level of accuracy on legal rights, responsibilities, prohibitions and procedures. Its specialized vocabulary, historical phrases, lengthy sentences, passive constructions, nominalizations, complex qualifications, and genre conventions, however, make it difficult to read for non-specialist readers. In multilingual societies, like Pakistan, in which English is widely adopted in law courts, this is more serious as most people in Pakistan speak English as their second language. Unnecessarily complicated legal jargon can make contracts, legal notices, court rulings, and legal requirements difficult to understand. Simultaneously, if the action of simplifying is not restricted, it may obscure important differences that are significant under the law, resulting in confusion. The key issue then is to identify those aspects of legal English that are actually required for legal precision, and those that are simply unnecessary linguistic complexity.

Legal language creates precision, complexity, ambiguity, and institutional authority, and these should be examined using a systematic qualitative linguistic analysis, without sacrificing meaning, using plain language principles.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The study has the following four objectives:

1. To identify and analyze the major lexical, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, and discourse features of legal English.
2. To examine how linguistic structures in legal texts contribute to legal precision, complexity, and ambiguity.
3. To explore the accessibility challenges created by traditional legal English for non-specialist and second-language users, particularly in Pakistan.
4. To evaluate how plain-English principles can improve legal communication without compromising legal accuracy, authority, and enforceability.

1.3 Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What major lexical, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, and discourse features characterize legal English?
2. How do the linguistic features of legal texts contribute to precision, complexity, and ambiguity?
3. What comprehension and accessibility challenges does traditional legal English create for non-specialist and second-language users in Pakistan?
4. How can plain-English principles be used to improve the clarity of legal documents while preserving their legal precision and validity?

1.4 Significance of the Study

The language choices and their effects on the clarity and interpretation of legal documents are important for legal practitioners as they help to explain this study. Vocabulary, sentence structure, modality, qualification and text organization are common areas of decision making by lawyers, judges, legislative draftsmen, and legal advisers. Being aware of the linguistic implications of these decisions will enable them to create documents that are legally sound and easier to understand for their clients, litigants and the public.

This study will also be useful to legal English students and legal English teachers. It is common for students to learn legal rules and legal language without getting adequate training in the linguistic organization of the legal text. Providing students with an understanding of nominalization, passive voice, modality, lexical ambiguity, sentence embedding, and genre conventions can enhance students' legal reading and writing skills. The result might consequently help in designing Law English and Law Drafting programs in the Universities of Pakistan.

Citizens benefit from improved access to justice through improved legal writing. People often see legal terminology in their contracts, in their lease agreements, on their financial statements, on

notices from courts, on government regulations, and on websites' terms and conditions. Citizens may inadvertently waive rights and obligations and rely on intermediaries unduly when they can't read and comprehend such documents. Clear and honest legal communication can foster understanding and fairness in the legal process.

The study also adds to the research of Pakistani English and legal discourse. The legal English of Pakistan is a true amalgamation of the inherited British legal traditions as well as the local influences of language and institutions. Its analysis in terms of a genre sensitive qualitative approach can make sense of the operation of legal English in a multilingual postcolonial context. The study may serve as a basis for any further corpus-based, comparative and reader-response investigation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Legal English as a Specialized Professional Register

Legal English is usually regarded as a special professional register as its linguistic characteristics are determined by the goals and rules of legal institutions (Łuczak, 2026). It conveys legal principles, clarifies relationships, allocates accountability, documents evidence, sets authority, and settling disagreements. These functions are essential to comprehend its unique characteristics. In legal contexts, such as statutes, contracts and judgments, words and phrases that are seemingly formal in the natural use of speech can serve specific functions (Lan, & Zhang, 2026).

Legal English is a part of the larger genre of English for Special Purposes. It has its own specialized vocabulary and genre-specific ways of communicating like scientific, medical, and business English. As for legal language, that language is unique in that a legal statement not only describes reality, but can also have legal consequences (Waldon, et al., 2025). A court can find someone responsible, a legislature can ban a behavior and a contract can make agreements enforceable. In the legal context, the language serves, therefore, a descriptive, interpretive, regulatory, and a performative function (Haapio, 2025).

It is crucial not to consider legal English as a uniform language. Statutes, judicial judgments, contracts, legal opinion, witness statements, legal notices, and arguments in the courtroom are all for different purposes and have different audiences. A statute would typically contain general rules, and a judgment would interpret the laws and provide some explanation of rationale (Davenport, 2025). A contract documents agreements that are negotiated, while a legal notice conveys a claim, demand or warning. In Pakistan, The researchers observed significant differences between the various legal genres, which reinforce the need for studying legal English within the context of purpose, audience and context (Obiageri, & Innocent, 2025).

2.2 Historical Development of Legal Vocabulary

Legal English vocabulary is the expression of the history of the English legal system. Anglo-Saxon expressions, Norman French terms, and Latin phrases that had been created centuries of institutional development (Alhatlani, & ALghizzi, 2026). These linguistic traditions coexisted and resulted in a very technical and repetitive range of terms. Words like will and testament, null and void, and cease and desist were used historically to express the same idea, in part (Śleszyńska, 2025).

Latin remains a part of law school curriculum and legal practice. The term *bona fide*, *prima facie*, *mens rea*, *actus reus*, *habeas corpus* and *ultra vires* convey well known concepts with a high degree of professionalism (Hu, 2026). They may need to be completely removed, which could take additional time to explain or lead to doctrinal imprecision. However, uninterrupted Latin phrases can pose problems for non-lawyers and new law students (Fernández-Silva, et al., 2025).

There are also some archaic expressions that continue to be used. Hereby, hereinafter, thereof, therein, whereas, and heretofore are legal terms infrequently used in everyday speech (Haapio, 2025). They can give the impression of formality and authority if used continuously. When they have no unique legal function however, the use of more modern alternatives can aid understanding without changing meaning (Graziadei, 2025).

2.3 Lexical Characteristics of Legal English

The most obvious characteristic of legal English is its technical jargon. Certain words have specific meanings in a legal context, including tort, plaintiff, appellant, respondent, injunction, affidavit, jurisdiction, liability and consideration (Alowed, 2025). Some of these words are common to general English, but might have more specific or esoteric legal definitions. Carefulness, in contract law, is not just thoughtfulness, it's the exchange of something of value between contractual parties (García, et al., 2025).

When working within a legal context, legal terminology can help facilitate efficiency among legal professionals since a complex doctrine can be summarized in one word or phrase. Issues occur when this terminology is used when addressing the public without explanation. If the recipient of a document cannot comprehend the key words, it can be technically accurate, but not communicatively successful. It is important, then, in legal writing to separate out key terms of art and outmoded legal jargon (Leonardi, 2026).

The other lexical feature that stands out is binomials and multinomials. Two or more related terms are paired in phrases like null and void, terms and conditions, fit and proper, aid and abet, and full force and effect. Some combinations have become formalized in the law, and some are redundant. They should be assessed as such, rather than as being “essential” or “redundant” (Leonardi, & Giampieri, 2026).

2.4 Syntactic Complexity in Legal Texts

Long sentences with multiple conditions, exceptions, provisos, definitions and qualifications are typical in legal documents. This complexity is often caused when a provision is made to be as full as possible and is drafted so that it is unlikely to be interpreted differently (Dawes, 2025). A legislative sentence can name the person to whom the rule refers, can define the act the rule applies to, describe conditions under which the rule is in effect, include exceptions, and provide consequences, in a single structure (Leonardi, & Giampieri, 2025).

Two major sources of syntactic complexity are subordination and embedding. Relative clauses, conditional clauses, participial phrases, prepositional phrases, and parenthetical qualifications can be placed in between the main verb and the qualifying phrases of a sentence. This approach requires a significant amount of working memory. In order to make sense of the different clauses, readers need to retain certain other pieces of information (Felici, et al., 2025).

Long noun phrases also convey more information. The clause “the contractual obligations of the parties” to which the ownership of the property is being transferred is a phrase that makes several relationships fit into 1 grammatical structure (Xu, et al., 2026). They noted that there are many syntactically complex legal structures that can be expressed with clarity in other ways, and that occasionally legal content needs structural detail (Quevedo, et al., 2023).

2.5 Nominalization and Passive Voice

When an action or quality is expressed in the name of a noun instead of a verb, it is called nominalization. For instance, “the committee investigated” could be changed to “the committee conducted an investigation.” Nominalized structures are often preferred in legal writing because

they establish formality, can be used to refer to a proposition as an entity and make it easier to package information into dense paragraphs. But, when the nominalization is extensive, actions can become hidden and the sentences become longer (Waldon, et al., 2025).

The passive voice is also common in legal texts. “The application” is removed from the sentence, and it is no longer about the actor but about the application and the judicial action. If the actor is not known, is obvious, is not important, or is intentionally set in the background, passive construction might be appropriate. In the writing of legislation it can provide a focus on a controlled action or legal thing (Xu, & Casal, 2023).

However, passives without the agent can be deceptive in terms of responsibility. If such a statement is made, it is not clear who is responsible for the destruction of evidence or for not following the procedure. Passive voice and nominalization are not necessarily signs of poor legal writing as shown by Hartig and Lu (2014). They are all of them valuable in terms of their function as discourse. It is not a mechanical elimination but purposeful selection (Xu, et al., 2026).

2.6 Semantic Precision and Ambiguity

There is a high degree of semantic precision needed in legal language as words fix rights and obligations. The modal verbs can be used to mean obligation, permission, choice, chance, or advice. Errors in interpreting a modal expression may cause the reader to misjudge the obligation or option of an action (Zamboni, 2025).

Lexical, syntactic, and referential ambiguity are all possible. Lexical ambiguity occurs when a word is ambiguous. Syntactic ambiguity is the ambiguity that exists in a sentence where there are multiple ways of interpreting its meaning based on its structure. Referential ambiguity is when a pronoun or descriptive phrase does not refer unambiguously to its referent. For instance, if there are multiple parties involved in a sentence, the organization to which it refers might not be clearly stated (Zamboni, 2025).

There are situations where legal uncertainty does not stem from bad drafting. Legislatures can intentionally include reasonable care “,” public interest or “good faith” in a broad standard because things can’t be foreseen to the extent of defining them in detail. The sentence makes it possible for judges and administrative officials to interpret the law within context. Thus, the line between accidental ambiguity and purposeful flexibility that promotes adaptive legal capacity needs to be drawn (Zhang, & Wang, 2025).

2.7 Pragmatic and Performative Functions

Legal jargon has meaning which is influenced by grammar and the context of the institution. When the statement is made: “You are required to appear before the court”, it not only conveys information, it also gives rise to an obligation that is institutionally supported. Likewise, a judge’s ruling, the law forbidding, or a contract stipulation can establish or alter the lawful connections (Xu, et al., 2026).

In the legal context, there are multiple types of speech acts such as commands, permissions, prohibitions, declarations, warnings, accusations, authorizations and judgements. The effect of their legal authority relies on the authority of their speaker or writer, on the legal methods being followed, on the audience they are talking to, and on the institutional context (Zamboni, 2025). A statement that may be legally binding in an order or a statute might not be so in an informal dialogue with a friend, family member, or other individual (Obst, 2025).

Implied assumptions, context, or conventions are critical in determining legal meaning, for which pragmatic interpretation is crucial. A non-specialist reader can read a provision of a law

without knowing its procedural and institutional implications. Plain legal writing should therefore not only clarify complex words, it should also provide an understanding of the impact of the legal language on practice (Matusiak, 2024).

2.8 The Plain English Movement

The Plain English movement was born of a desire to make legal, governmental, financial and commercial documents unnecessarily hard to understand. Plain legal writing encourages familiar terminology, active voice (as appropriate), sentence length control, direct sentence structure, clear headings, logical structure, and the elimination of redundant expressions. It's not to make the law informal, so to speak, but rather to make it understandable to those it would impact (Matusiak, 2024).

The general rules are that "in the event that" may be replaced with the word "if," and "the parties hereto" can be changed to "the parties to this agreement." The same applies for "the undersigned hereby acknowledges" being changed to "I acknowledge" (Marcos, et al., 2026). The reform of the language should be done with caution, however, in plain language. Certain commonly used words should be retained as they have precise legal definitions. Further, simple expressions sometimes are not always simpler for second language readers. Liske (2023) points out that there are preferences that users may have that cause new issues to be understood by non-native users. These factors must therefore be taken into consideration for the effective use of simplification: the audience, the legal purpose, the genre, and the linguistic context (Lin, et al., 2023).

2.9 Pakistani Legal English and Multilingualism

The evolution of Pakistani legal English (PLE) has shaped by the colonial legal legacy, the constitution, the educational system and its ongoing use of English in formal institutions. English continues to play a role in the highest court decisions, laws, business correspondence, legal training and administration. Most day-to-day interaction, however, is in Urdu and regional languages. This results in a difference between the legal language and the language resources of many citizens (Hu, 2026).

The use of British legal language, institutional language, rhetorical style and Urdu influence are all possible in Pakistani legal texts. These texts are not to be considered as flawed versions of the British legal language, but as a locally produced form of legal language that is influenced by the legal culture and communication context of Pakistan (Łuczak, 2026).

One variation in the genre is particularly relevant, the one that Asghar et al. (2018) have detected. Rather than expecting that judgments, statutes, contracts, and legal notices share the same linguistic features, these linguistic features can be different. It is, therefore, necessary for any policy in plain language that it be genre-sensitive in Pakistan. It is sometimes necessary to use a considerable amount of detail to clarify public notices and basic contracts, and sometimes it is appropriate to use more specialized terminology in appellate judgments to deal with more complex legal doctrine and professional audiences (Łuczak, 2026).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

A qualitative approach to research is used in this study because it has the aim of understanding how linguistic elements are used in a legal text, not just measuring them in terms of numbers. Qualitative inquiry is likely to be used when studying the meaning, communicative functions, institutional roles, and interpretative implications of legal language in their context. It allows the

researcher to differentiate between language features which function in a necessary way for the legal task and those which simply replicate the traditional modes of complexity.

3.2 Research Design

It is designed qualitatively and documented linguistically using the documentary and discourse analytical approach. Documentary analysis offers a methodology for analysing written legal and scholarly texts and discourse analysis a methodology for analysing the construction of authority, obligations, identities, relationships and meanings of institutions (Davenport, 2025). The design is descriptive, as it describes the features of legal language; analytical because it discusses how these features work; and interpretive because it takes into account the implications for different readers.

3.3 Sources of Data

The main text is selected examples from legislation, judicial judgments, contracts, legal notices and other public facing legal documents. The genres are chosen because they serve various communicative goals and are directed towards various audiences. Rules are created by legislation, interpretations of the law are found in judgements, obligations are given in contracts and claims, demands or procedural information communicated in legal notices (Faria, & Fikri, 2026).

Secondary sources include peer reviewed journal articles, books, linguistic studies of legal English, plain legal writing, syntactic complexity, legal terminology, second language legal writing, and Pakistani legal discourse. The corpus based studies are used to provide supporting evidence as they showed recurring patterns within larger sets of legal texts. There are examples for the qualitative interpretation as well as a scholarly basis for the analysis provided in the documentary sources (Faria, & Fikri, 2026).

3.4 Sampling Technique

Documents are purposively sampled to include the expected linguistic features and to sample the key legal genres. The selection is not statistically representative, but is informatively rich. Special emphasis is placed on documents that include technical terms, old-fashioned language, passive sentences, nominalization, multiple conditions, modals and vague structures (Dawes, 2025).

Selection is determined by maximum variation principles, with regard to the genres. This will limit the chances of interpreting the characteristics of one legal genre as the characteristics of legal English generally. Where available, Pakistani materials are used first and internationally available ones are included to situate Pakistani legal English in the general scholarship on legal discourse (Batool, et al., 2025).

3.5 Units of Analysis

The units of analysis are individual words, technical terms, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, and a whole part of legal documents. The lexical analysis is done at the lexical level, which includes the technical terminology, dated vocabulary, Latin phrases and binomial phrases. From a syntactic point of view it includes measures such as sentence length, subordination, and embedding, passive voice, nominalization and noun-phrase density (Araszkiewicz, & Florczak-Wątor, 2025).

The semantic analysis is on the focus of precision, vagueness, polysemy, modality and ambiguity. Obligation, prohibition, permission, and authority and other speech acts are explored in pragmatic analysis. The evaluation of the discourse level is based on the criteria of organization, coherence, audience orientation, genre conventions, and presentation of legal reasoning (Abas, et al., 2027).

3.6 Data-Collection Procedure

Legal documents and scholarly works are gathered and arranged by legal genres. A number of documents is read aloud several times to recognize significant linguistic patterns. Representative excerpts are gathered and written into document-analysis matrix. The type of document, linguistic feature, a text example, the likely legal function, likely comprehension problem, and potential plain-language alternative are included in the matrix.

The process is repeated until the selected materials offer enough illustrations of the main language categories. Repeated reading enables the researcher to make comparisons with the similar features of other genres. Negative or contrasting examples of the use of legal texts in which precision is achieved through comparatively clear language are also addressed.

3.7 Data-Analysis Procedure

Qualitative thematic analysis and linguistic discourse analysis are used in the study. Initial coding is used to highlight recurring elements of the code like technical terms, archaism, binomial terms, nominalization, and passive voice, embedding of sentences, modal verbs, lexical ambiguity and performative language. These codes are then aggregated in larger themes such as legal precision, linguistic complexity and interpretive ambiguity, institutional authority, reader accessibility, and plain-language reform (Lan, & Zhang, 2026).

The analysis is done at five levels – lexical, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and discourse. The selected feature is studied in its immediate literary context, the lawful purpose, target audience and potential impact on comprehension. Where an accurate alternative can be suggested, traditional and plain constructions are compared. The analysis is not all about the legal superiors of the shorter version; it looks at “whether the revision can preserve the original legal meaning (Leonardi, & Giampieri, 2025).

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The study is largely based on the open sources of data that are legal documents and published scholarship, thus not involving direct human participation. However, the researcher must present accurately legal texts and scholarly arguments. Extracts need to be read in the context of the passage and must be cited correctly. Where subsequent research includes unpublished or sensitive documents identifying information should be deleted and consent sought as appropriate.

4. Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify, organise, interpret and report on common themes within the legal texts selected. The study was conducted and analyzed with the aim of determining the contribution of the linguistic features on legal English precision, complexity, ambiguity and accessibility (Leonardi, 2026). Thematic analysis was suitable because the study involved the disclosure of meanings, functions and language patterns in various legal genres, such as statutes, judicial judgements, contracts, legal notices and legal correspondence. The analysis did not merely tally up linguistic features, but was an interpretation of how linguistic features were used in certain legal and institutional settings.

4.1 Familiarization with the Data

The first step was to read and reread carefully each of the selected legal texts and relevant literature in the field. Each document was analyzed in terms of its legal purpose, the listener(s) addressed, linguistic structure, institutional context, and communication function(s). Specialized

terms, archaic expressions, sentence length, passive constructions, nominalization, and modal verbs were noted, as were the use of ambiguity and the organization of the discourse (Marcos, et al., 2026). The researcher used repeated reading to identify both repetitive patterns and meaningful differences between the legal genres.

4.2 Generation of Initial Codes

In the second stage meaningful words, phrases, clauses, sentences and text patterns were initially coded. The coding process was mainly inductive as codes were generated from the legal documents. But the analysis was also influenced by concepts from the legal-linguistic literature. Some of the initial codes included were “technical legal terminology,” “Latin expression,” “archaic vocabulary,” “binomial phrase,” “long sentence,” “embedded condition,” “passive construction,” “nominalised action,” “unclear agent,” “modal obligation,” “legal discretion,” “lexical ambiguity,” “syntactic ambiguity,” “institutional authority,” or “reader difficulty (Guarino, 2025).

The codes were each identified as a linguistic feature or communicative effect. For example, the phrase “the application was dismissed” was translated as “passive construction” and “action foregrounding”. The coding of the sentence “the documents were misplaced” was also categorized as “unclear responsibility” because the actor was not identified. This rational coding allowed the analysis to not consider all passive constructions as inherently problematic.

4.3 Development of Categories

The first codes were compared and categorized into more general analysis categories. The technical terms, Latin phrases, archaic words and binomial phrases were classified in the group of “lexical characteristics.” The syntactic complexity was categorized into long sentences, embedded clauses, passive voice, nominalization of verbs, and complex noun phrases. “Semantic precision and ambiguity” included the following: Modal verbs, polysemous terms, vague expressions and unclear references (Lin, et al., 2023).

The obligations, prohibitions, permissions, authorizations, warnings, and institutional authority codes were classified as “pragmatic and per formative.” Readability, second language understanding, audience awareness, document organization, and plain language alternatives were grouped under “accessibility and legal reform.” The classification allowed the researcher to establish the correlation between individual linguistic examples and the larger patterns in legal communication.

4.4 Reviewing and Refining the Themes

The initial themes were checked for consistency with coded extracts and whole documents. Some themes were overlapping and combined; some themes were so broad that they were broken down into themes that were more specific. For instance, because lexical complexity and syntactic complexity are different, the term “linguistic complexity” was analyzed separately. Likewise, ambiguity was categorized into lexical ambiguity, syntactic ambiguity, referential ambiguity and contextual ambiguity (Matusiak, 2024)..

Also, themes were compared within legal genres. In legislation a complex sentence may have a different role than a complex sentence in a legal notice or contract. The analysis took into account not only the feature of the language, but also its purpose, its audience and its context. By being genre-sensitive, this review minimized the likelihood of viewing all legal texts as being the same language (Leonardi, & Giampieri, 2026).

4.5 Defining and Naming the Themes

Following the review, six major themes were finalized. These themes represented the relationship among language, legal precision, institutional purpose, and reader accessibility.

Table No 1: Thematic Table

Theme	Principal focus	Illustrative codes
Specialized legal vocabulary	precision and professional meaning	technical terminology, Latin expressions, terms of art
Historical and formulaic language	tradition, formality, and redundancy	archaic words, binomials, conventional phrases
Syntactic density and complexity	Information packaging and processing difficulty	Long sentences, embedding, noun phrases, nominalization
Clarity, authority, and responsibility	Identification or concealment of legal actors	Active voice, unclear agent, institutional authority
Linguistic precision and ambiguity	Interpretation of rights and obligations	Modal verbs, polysemy, vague standards, unclear references
Plain language and accessibility	Clarity for non-specialist and second-language readers	Direct wording, audience awareness, bilingual explanation

4.6 Presentation and Interpretation of Themes

Theme 1: Specialized Legal Vocabulary and Precision

The first theme was related to the use of special legal terminology. Specific meanings were attributed to the words jurisdiction, liability, injunction, negligence, plaintiff, affidavit and consideration. Such terms enabled legal experts to convey complicated ideas effectively and uniformly. They are replaced in many instances with common synonyms, which would lessen the force or clarity of the language or obliterate a well-defined legal distinction (Heller, & Zoyirova, 2022).

The term was misused, however, with comprehension difficulties for people in the public and second language users. The term was not necessarily to blame; sometimes it was simply the usage of the term without definition or contextual explanation (Łuczak, 2026). The analysis revealed that public facing legal records might be able to maintain the required terminology and include a short definition, explanatory note, example or glossary. Thus, a special terminology arose, both as a means of legal precision and linguistic exclusion (Obiageri, & Innocent, 2025).

Theme 2: Historical and Formulaic Legal Language

The second theme related to archaic and formulaic expressions. The historical evolution of legal discourse and the conservative nature of it are captured by the use of words like hereinafter, thereof, hereto, whereas, and heretofore (Obst, 2025). The binomial and multinomial constructions continued to be used, as seen in expressions like null and void, terms and conditions, cease and desist, and full force and effect (Khamkhien, 2026).

The analysis revealed some conventional expressions had become officially recognized legal terms, and others had introduced words without meaning. If an expression did not serve any particular legal purpose (Quevedo, et al., 2023), then it made reading more difficult, and suggested that legal writing was only for specialists. The theme, however, clearly separated from ceremonial or redundant language, the formulas that would have legal effect (Khamkhien, 2026).

Theme 3: Syntactic Density and Processing Difficulty

The third theme was syntactic complexity. Many subordinate clauses, embedded conditions, exceptions, provisos, and qualifications were often included in legal sentences. These enabled legal writers to link related rules and encompass all legal facts (Hu, 2026). However, they typically placed the grammatical subject after the principal verb and left the reader to remember a lot of information before getting to the main point (Hashosh, & Hawel, 2025).

Linguistic density was further increased by long noun phrases and nominalizations. The determination of the application by the court, for instance, was more indirect than the court determined the application. The results indicated that sometimes the legal complexity can be significantly lowered by the use of direct verbs, breaking down rules and exceptions and by presenting conditions in a numbered clause or a list. Such restructuring enhanced the readability of text but did not alter the legal meaning (Hashosh, & Hawel, 2025).

Theme 4: Agency, Authority, and Responsibility

Passive constructions were frequently employed to emphasize a legally relevant action, to keep the style impersonal, or to not repeat an obvious actor. For instance, if a court is mentioned, the legal result was highlighted as “the application was dismissed” (Fernández-Silva, et al., 2025).

Other times, the passive voice denied responsibility. “The evidence was removed” or “required procedure was not followed” did not specify who removed the evidence or failed to follow the required procedure (Śleszyńska, 2025). This was especially problematic, if the law was about responsibility. The theme illustrated that the passage from an active to a passive voice did not necessarily obscure the meaning of the sentence, but rather it was a function of the information about the passage’s actual subject, whether or not it was legally and communicatively relevant (Felici, et al., 2025).

Theme 5: Semantic Precision, Modality, and Ambiguity

The fifth theme was about the meanings of legal words and structures. Obligation, permission, discretion, possibility were particularly meaningful with shall, must and may, and were established by these modal verbs (Waldon, et al., 2025). It is possible that these verbs will be used inconsistently, which might lead to confusion as to whether a legal action is required or optional. The distinction between must and may/can was generally better when the latter words were used for permission or discretion (Graziadei, 2025).

Various types of ambiguity were also detected. Words could have more than one meaning; this is called lexical ambiguity. Syntactic ambiguity was caused by unclear grammatical relationships and referential ambiguity was caused by unclear identification of the referent of a pronoun or descriptive phrase (Haapio, 2025). For example, the word “reasonable” or “fair” and “public interest” were retained in some phrases to maintain legal flexibility. There was therefore a distinction between accidental ambiguity and intentional legal ambiguity, and the analysis made this distinction (Graziadei, 2025).

Theme 6: Plain Legal Writing and Reader Accessibility

The last theme was about the possible involvement of the principles of the plain language. For a number of obsolete and roundabout phrases there were more unambiguous alternatives. The following words may be changed: “In the event that” may be changed to “if”; and “the parties hereto” may be changed to “the parties to this agreement” (Batoool, et al., 2025). The accessibility was enhanced by clear presentation of conditions, consistent terminology, shorter functional units and informative headings (Chitra, et al., 2026).

The analysis also showed that all the technical terms and sophisticated legal concepts were not necessarily needed to be removed from the plain English. Too much simplifying may change the substance of what is said, or may raise new questions (Xu, et al., 2026). Multilingual communication also needed to be addressed in terms of legal accessibility in Pakistan. The use of clear English, translation in Urdu and other regional languages and legal explanations could all contribute to enhancing public understanding. Plain legal writing was then read as audience as well as legally correct communication and not just short and informal.

7.4 Cross-Theme Interpretation

This tension of precision vs. accessibility to public documents was evident in the themes. Legal precision and coherence were sometimes reinforced by specific terms, precise specifications, and by using the passive voice or nominalization. Excessive, inconsistent or inconsiderate use of the same features turned into problems. The analytical division was therefore between functional complexity and “unnecessary complexity (Chitra, et al., 2026).

Functional complexity was defined as linguistic complexity that was necessary to maintain a legal distinction, to express an exception, to establish a condition or to communicate an established doctrine. Unnecessary complexity was mentioned as language that made it harder to read without the promise of enhancing the legal accuracy. This involved unnecessary archaism, unnecessary paired expressions, unnecessary nominalization, poorly structured clauses, and unknown passive agents (Dvořáková, 2025).

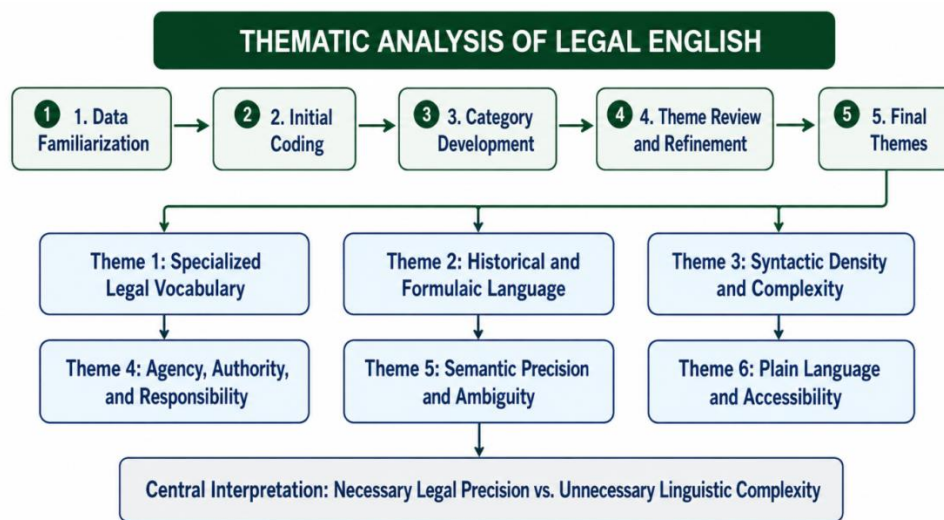


Figure 1

5. Findings and Analysis

5.1 Technical Vocabulary as a Source of Precision and Difficulty

The analysis shows that the use of specific terminology is essential in certain legal situations. Some of the legal concepts, e.g. jurisdiction, negligence, liability, injunction, consideration, are summarized in terms. Their replacement with common words may eliminate doctrinal differences. The term “the defendant is liable” is not just a general statement of defendant’s responsibility, but also implies that the defendant has a recognized liability, which could lead to a legally binding remedy.

The problem comes when technical terms are used in a document without definition/explanation for the ordinary reader. If a citizen is served with a legal notice, he may not know the meaning of a cause of action, limitation, indemnity or without prejudice. When audience members may not be experts, their needs may require the retention of needed terms and an explanation in the form of a glossary, parenthetical explanations, examples, or definitions.

5.2 Archaic and Formulaic Language

Archaic language was determined to be a way to make language more formal, but not necessarily clearer. You may be able to replace words like therefore, thereafter and heretofore with direct, contemporary alternatives. You can change the words “the parties hereto” to “the parties to this agreement” and “in the event that” to “if.”

Excessive repetition is also created by formulaic language. “Null and void” might be a legalistic catch-all phrase, but some documents have several near synonyms just for the sake of sounding authoritative. This type of language adds to processing costs, and can detract from the main duty. The definition of revision should be by legal function: if there is a known doctrinal function for a particular expression, it should be kept in; if the expression is ceremonial in nature and is no longer needed, it should be omitted.

5.3 Sentence Length and Embedded Conditions

There are a number of conditions, exceptions, rules and consequences in many legal sentences. This allows the drafter to group together connected pieces of law but can cause a problem in processing. A reader may be at the end of a sentence without recalling the verb of the sentence or the sentence’s main subject.

The analysis indicates the sentences be split on the basis of the legal function. There is one rule, which may be stated first, to be followed by each of a number of conditions and exceptions, numbered separately. Lists, headings, and subheadings can help to clarify relationships without altering content. The goal isn’t to set a cap on sentence length; it’s to help readers see who has to do what, when, and what the consequences are if they do.

5.4 Nominalization and Concealed Action

It was concluded that nominalization helps to make the text formal and abstract. Language like ‘make an application’ or ‘conduct an examination’ and ‘reach a determination’ can often be translated to ‘apply’, ‘examine’, and ‘determine’. Use of direct verbs makes the actor and action more explicit.

But sometimes, nominalization serves a helpful cohesive effect. If a legal process is introduced, a nominal form can enable the writer to refer to it efficiently once it has been introduced. The issue is that there is too much nominalization, and sometimes too many passive verbs, too many prepositional phrases, and too much of a combination of all of the above. A legal writer should use a direct verb if it is used for a legal verb that expresses the same legal meaning in a clearer way.

5.5 Passive Voice and Responsibility

There are valid uses of passive voice in legal writing. It may focus on the legally relevant action, be impersonal, or have a lack of repetition of an obvious actor. In other instances, such as where the court has been mentioned, “The application was dismissed” could be suitable.

However, agency can be hidden in passive constructions. The records were altered – not who altered the records. In cases where responsibility is essential, active voice should be used, generally. Based on the analysis, the following functional rule is proposed: Using passive voice is appropriate

if the agent is unknown, obvious, or irrelevant; however, passive voice should be avoided when the agent is not clear to readers so they can identify the person responsible.

5.6 Modality and Legal Force

It was found that modal expression played an important role in legal meaning. The words *must* and *may* have different meanings as they are normally used: *must* means that something is required to be done; *may* means something can be done, but is not required. Traditionally *shall* is used to express obligation, but can also mean future action, declaration or entitlement. This multiple use can lead to confusion.

For obligations, plain drafting favors the use of the word *must* and for permission/discretion, *may*. This distinction can help to create more consistency. But the interpretation of the modality *must* still be considered in the jurisdiction and legal context concerned. The decision to substitute should not be made lightly without taking into account what is known about the judiciary's interpretation of the law.

5.7 Ambiguity in Legal Documents

The term ambiguity became not only a linguistic fault but also a legal strategy in some situations. Poorly placed pronouns, modifiers, vague technical terms, varying terms for exceptions, or insufficient organization of exceptions can cause accidental ambiguity. This is a problem of ambiguity which should be eliminated to avoid disputes and unequal interpretations.

In contrast, the words 'reasonable', 'fair', and 'in the public interest' can be used intentionally to allow for multiple interpretations. General standards enable legal decision-makers to take account of context, as not all factual situations can be predicted by law. Plain legal writing, then, must minimize ambiguities of any kind—including legal ones—while still allowing the legal discretion that is needed.

5.8 Accessibility for Pakistani Second-Language Users

The analysis shows that in addition to the legal barrier, Pakistani readers might also encounter language barriers. They need to grasp specialist terminology in a language that isn't always their first. If the concepts are not explained or if the translated sentences retain their complicated structure, then literal translation into Urdu or a regional language might not be an appropriate solution.

Legal communication in Pakistan must be accessible, not just a mere translation of English into Urdu. Clear organization, shorter functional units, uniformity of terminology, explanatory notes, and bilingual presentation (where applicable) should be applied to public facing documents. Particular attention needs to be paid to the ability to communicate precisely with clients with varying English language skills in legal education.

6. Discussion

The results show that legal complexity is not a two-dimensional construct, but that it has a complex nature. Some complexity is useful as far as law must be very precise in relation to the relationships, exceptions, conditions, procedure, and consequences (Zamboni, 2025). Certain terms are specific to particular situations and may not need to be repeated in lengthy prose, while complex provisions may need to be used for the different factual circumstances. The passive voice and nominalisation may also serve suitable discourse functions (Faria, & Fikri, 2026).

Most, however, of the old complexities are ordinary and not essential. The use of archaic terms, unnecessary double wordings, too many nominalizations, unclear usage of Latin terms, too many passive constructions without an agent and too long sentences might make a text less

accessible without giving more protection under the law. This complexity can even result in the loss of precision, as different people or readers can read the unclear provisions differently (García, et al., 2025; Xu, et al., 2026).

The results are consistent with a moderate approach to the Plain English movement. Plain legal writing is defined as a clear and correct message to a reader. It doesn't take hold of all the technical jargon, or have to change legal documents into casual speech. Rather, linguistic complexity must be justified based on communicative and legal purpose by legal writers (Abas, et al., 2027).

The Pakistani situation illustrates the need for reform that is sensitive to the audience. Urdu and various regional languages are used alongside English language legal traditions (Zhang, & Wang, 2025). It is reasonable for a document to be drafted for judges and senior advocates to use more technical language than a notice sent to tenants, workers, consumers or accused persons. Thus, there is no single set of criteria for all legal genres (Akbar, 2026).

This should also be incorporated into legal education when it comes to plain language reform. The teaching of both traditional and nontraditional legal writing should include an understanding of the influence of the structure of language on the reader (Xu, & Casal, 2023). Clauses can be rewritten, hidden agents identified, obligations from discretionary and discretion from obligatory, technical terms explained and documents tested with a set of intended users. This would stimulate the formulation of purposes rather than mechanical production of traditional formulas (Araszkiewicz, & Florczak-Wątor, 2025).

7. Conclusion

Legal English is a special professional English style that is influenced by the legal history, institutional authority, communicative purpose, and the need for precision. Technical vocabulary, obsolete expressions, binomial phrases, nominalization, passive voices, complex noun phrases, long sentences, modal verbs and context dependency are all defining features. These features allow legal writers to convey complex doctrines and obligations, state exceptions and maintain consistency.

The analysis does show, however, that it is not always essential to have a complex law. Some buildings are just for legal purposes, others are left behind largely due to professional custom and historic usage. Legal texts can be difficult even if they are not more precise because of unnecessary archaism, redundancy, exorbitant nominalization, unknown passive agents, and poorly organized sentences.

The principles of the Plain English movement are important for legal communication, however, simplification must be sensitive to the genre of the legal communication, the audience, the jurisdiction and legal purpose. Legal writing should be plain, containing essential legal language, eliminating unnecessary obstacles, presenting information in an orderly manner, and conveying complicated information in an intelligible way. It should strive to be clear but not too simple to be inaccurate.

This is particularly vital in Pakistan where the legal English is used in a multilingual context. Accessibility in language must be linked to access to justice in legal reforms. Rights and duties can only be meaningfully exercised or discharged if the legal texts are comprehensible. Language, expertise, and sensitivity to genre and context can be used to maintain the precision of law while improving legal communication in Pakistan – and for the benefit of the public.

8. Recommendations

8.1 Retention and Explanation of Necessary Legal Terms

Technical terms should not be changed if they convey a legally or otherwise well-established meaning that is not subject to dispute, and cannot be rendered with an ordinary word. However, unknown words must be explained when creating a document for a client, a litigant or for a lay person. These should be introduced at the first mention and should be kept in a short, accessible and colloquial word-for-word definition. A few notes of explanation, an example, a dictionary or glossary, or a parenthetical definition are helpful in explaining difficult legal terms. This way it would be doctrinally accurate and legal communication would be clearer.

8.2 Elimination of Avoidable Archaism

Archaic phrases should be eliminated where they can be replaced with a more contemporary phrase that has the same meaning in legal terms. The words hereinafter, thereof, hereto, and heretofore can make legal documents seem needlessly technical and cumbersome. Such expressions should not be preserved just for the sake of tradition, and because they are used in legal writing. Court, legal firm, government and other organisations should be regularly checking templates of their documents. Legally the same, but the language would be easier to read if it were replaced by current language.

8.3 Improved Sentence and Document Organization

When such division does not affect the meaning of the provisions, they should be broken up into manageable pieces. Sentences that are too long with multiple conditions, exceptions and qualifications can make it difficult to determine the main legal rule. Clear headings, number clauses, lists, tables and definitions can help to outline relationships between rights, responsibilities, conditions, and consequences. The main duty of the position should be listed first rather than the exceptions and specific requirements. If the documents are organized, both professional and non-professional readers would be able to easily find and comprehend critical information.

8.4 Purposeful Use of Passive Voice and Nominalization

Passive voice should be used intentionally when the person who performs an action is not known or known but not relevant to the substance of the sentence. Where there is responsibility for an act, decision or failure, active voice should be preferred. Passive constructions may lead to too many “agencies” that can obscure or complicate the identification of who is subject to a legal action. Likewise, where unnecessary nominalizations can be changed to direct verbs, they should be. These structures should be considered on the basis of communicative functions rather than by mechanical criteria for legal writers.

8.5 Consistent Use of Modal Verbs

The consistency in the use of modal verbs should be applied by legal drafters since it affects the strength of legal rights, duties, permissions and recommendations. The meaning of the word should normally be mandatory obligation with must and permission, authorization, or discretion with may. The traditional use of shall can lead to ambiguity, as it may imply obligation, entitlement, declaration, and/or future action. Wherever shall appears ambiguous, it should be checked and changed as necessary. With consistent modal use, you would be able to minimize the chances of misunderstandings, and make it easy for readers to figure out what is required and what is optional.

8.6 Multilingual Legal Communication in Pakistan

Essential public documents, regulations and policies of legal nature should be accessible in English and if relevant, Urdu and other regional languages. It is important to convey the legal concept rather than word for word the original text. Create an up-to-date and stable set of bilingual or multilingual legal lexicography dictionaries of common legal terms. These resources would be

helpful to citizens, law students, lawyers, court officials and professional translators. Multilingual legal communication would help to enhance public understanding, the fairness of the legal process and access to justice.

8.7 Legal-English Education

Legal programmes in Pakistan should instill legal language, discourse analysis, plain language and audience sensitive communication into their curricula. Students should be taught the impact of these on the understanding of legal documents: vocabulary, syntax, modality, passive voice, nominalisation, and document organisation. Practical exercises should engage students in the analysis of contracts, pleadings, legal notices and statutes of various kinds. They should also structure unnecessarily complicated passages, without changing their substantive legal meanings. This training would equip future lawyers with the ability to communicate effectively with the courts, their clients, institutions and the general public.

8.8 Reader Testing and Further Research

Representative readers of the public should be used to test public legal documents before they are given general institutional use. Professional drafters may miss hard-to-understand words, vague sentences, confusing directions, and organizational issues on their own, but these issues will be discovered during reader testing. Future studies are needed that employ interviews, focus groups, think-aloud tests and comprehension tests with litigants, attorneys, students, and second-language users. The Pakistani statutes, judgments, contracts, notices and administrative documents should also be compared to the corpus based studies. This evidence would help in creating standards for good and effective legal communication in context.

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