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Exploring the linguistic features of legal discourse in Saudi legal texts: A focus on lexicalization, modality, and nominalization

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ABSTRACT

This study draws on legal discourse analysis to investigate the linguistic characteristics of the legal discourse in selected Saudi legal texts. The analytical focus is on three linguistic features: lexicalization, modality, and nominalization. The main objective is to decipher the role of the three linguistic features in constructing legal meanings, establishing legal authority and legitimizing legal institutions. In doing so, a qualitative legal discourse analysis of a number of Saudi legal texts is performed to identify the patterns characteristic of those texts and explore their role in legal communication. There are three findings in this study: first, Saudi legal texts abound in lexical choices used dexterously to maintain precision, coherence, and legal certainty; second, modality is used in the selected texts to communicate obligations, permissions, prohibitions, and rights; and third, nominalization is frequently used for enhancing the text formality, objectivity, and impersonality, thereby highlighting legal acts maintained in Saudi legal texts. The study highlights the role of language in shaping the meaning-making process in Saudi legal discourse.

KEYWORDS: legal discourse, lexicalization, modality, nominalization, Saudi legal texts

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1. Introduction

Legal discourse is one of the most specialized types of institutional communication where law systems create rights, obligations, prohibitions and procedures (Tessuto et al., 2020). While everyday language uses all of its natural characteristics including imprecision and instability, legal language is notable for its tendency towards precision, stability and interpretative coherence due to the necessity to reduce any possible ambiguity in the process of implementation of legal norms (Tiersma, 1999). It is well known for linguists that legal texts' efficiency is based not only on their contents but also on linguistic strategies used in the process of their creation and transmission (Shuman & Bohmer, 2020). Legal texts use a specific vocabulary, grammar and rhetoric necessary for lawmakers and law institutions to create regulations and control the behavior of people (Halimi, 2024). That is why investigating the linguistic features of legal discourse is an essential field of applied linguistics and discourse studies because it shows how language can be employed as a tool of institutional authority and legal power (Gibbons, 2003).

The structure of the discourse of law can be fully explained by means of the following three interdependent factors: lexicalization, modality, and nominalization (Leung & Durant, 2020). The use of lexicalization enables the creation of exact meaning of legal ideas, providing semantic stability and terminological consistency of the legal concepts irrespective of their context (Gee, 2014), while modality functions as a regulator that expresses legal obligations, permissions, prohibitions, and entitlements through the proper use of the modal items (Palmer, 2001). When it comes to nominalization, this factor transforms the verbs and processes into legal terms and makes the discourse style impersonal and procedural, shifting the focus from the individuals committing the act to the act itself (Fairclough, 2003). These linguistic elements are incorporated to form the authoritative character of legal language and are also crucial for establishing legal certainty and the institution's legitimacy (Gibbons, 2003; Tiersma, 1999).

The recent changes in the Saudi legal system, involving legislative reform and the creation of more codified rules, have made it even more necessary to study the language used for conveying the legal norms. The significance of studying the linguistics of legal texts is explained by the importance of those documents as a source of regulation and control in government and administration. Such observations highlight a significant gap in literature. Although many empirical linguistic analyses of legal discourse have been conducted within the context of Western legal systems, few studies have been carried out on Saudi legal discourse, even fewer still that consider lexical choices, modality, and nominalization at once as discourse features. Most available research addresses these dimensions independently or from a legal rather than a linguistic perspective (Solan & Tiersma, 2012). Consequently, there remains insufficient understanding of how these linguistic resources interact to produce the distinctive communicative style of Saudi legal discourse. The aim of this current study is precisely to fill that gap. The linguistic features of Saudi legal discourse are investigated with respect to their collective impact in terms of expressing legal authority, obligations, and institutional legitimacy.

The study raises three research questions: first, what are the main lexical items used in the Saudi legal texts and how do they help in constructing legal meaning? Second, how is modality used in the Saudi legal texts to express legal obligation, permission, prohibition, and right? Third, how does nominalization contribute to the formal and authoritative nature of the Saudi legal discourse? The answer to these research questions encompasses the main objectives of the current study: to investigate the main lexical items used in the Saudi legal texts and the purposes of using these items; to examine how the modal expressions are used in order to convey the legal norms and regulatory meanings; and to explore how nominalization contributes to the formation of the formal and authoritative legal discourse in Saudi Arabia.

2. Theoretical Preliminaries and Literature Review

2.1. Legal Discourse: Institutional Language and Meaning-Making Process

Institutional legal discourse has often been perceived in the context of the complex genre of institutional discourse, in which the production, interpretation, and enforcement of law occurs. The linguistic structuring of the institutionally legal discourse is defined by the necessity of creating texts that are stable, authoritative, and unambiguous. The uniqueness of the constitutive nature of the institutional legal discourse is that, in contrast to the language itself, it is not just a descriptive but constitutive practice; it creates law in language and does not describe it. The constitutive power of legal language has been considered for a long time by legal linguistics,

emphasizing the role of the latter in regulating the institutional behavior (Tiersma, 1999). Extending this idea, Gibbons (2003) explains that legal discourse takes place in an extremely restricted communicative context in which linguistic accuracy is given priority over style and accessibility. This has led to the development of a discourse system marked by formality and a strong degree of interpretive rigor. The interplay between law and the language user also tends to perpetuate a hierarchy of power in which law tends to be understood in terms of a specialized language only comprehensible to experts. Thus, the relationship between law and language is worthy of textual analysis and linguistic research.

2.2. Saudi Legal Texts: Linguistic and Institutional Context

The legal texts of Saudi Arabia belong to an entirely different legal system that incorporates Sharia principles, royal orders, and regulations in the modern world (Vogel, 2000). In such a system, one can find layers of legal language in which traditional Arab laws overlap with modern-day legislative practices. Consequently, the legal texts of Saudi Arabia have been shaped by the principles of both religious and institutional legitimacy. Such an influence has been reflected in the legal texts of Saudi Arabia in terms of their language and argumentative structure. In recent years, legal codification has resulted in clearer and more standardized legal texts (Abdukhalilov et al., 2020). However, even in the light of these studies, the analysis of linguistic aspects of the Saudi legal discourse is still a rather underdeveloped area compared to studies dedicated to Western legal discourse. Previously conducted research (e.g., Alcaraz & Hughes, 2002) was mainly oriented towards the issue of legal translation and the equivalence of terminology used in Arabic and English languages while ignoring the analysis of linguistic structure of the Saudi legal discourse. Those few studies which actually analyze the legal Arabic treat this discourse as a homogenous system without taking into consideration the role of linguistic factors like lexicology, modality, and grammar in particular contexts of Saudi legal institutions (Alharbi & BinMasad, 2023; Elfarahaty, 2016).

2.3. Lexicalization, Modality, and Nominalization in Legal Discourse

Legal discourse lexicalization can be explained as an orderly process of choosing the appropriate vocabulary to denote legal notions in such a way that would provide for their utmost accuracy (Tiersma, 1999). The legal vocabulary usually comprises special terms, collocations, and set phrases which cannot be substituted or varied. Such rigidity is crucial for achieving consistency in all legal documents where similar lexical items should have the same meaning regardless of the context of interpretation (Fairclough, 2003). According to Bhatia (1993), genres in legal language are highly governed by conventions which do not allow lexical innovation. Apart from technical language, legal language tends to use archaic language forms, Latin-derived expressions, and other types of language that make the genre highly formal. These forms of language are not relics but rather important features that serve the function of providing legal certainty within the legal system. To Tiersma (1999), forms of language ensure that legal language is cohesive in statutes and regulations, thus creating consistency in the meanings used throughout the different levels of the legal system. Lexicalization can thus be seen as a form of control because it limits semantic ambiguity while legitimizing legal language.

Legal discourse is also characterized by deontic modality, which helps encode obligations, permissions, prohibitions, and necessities. Modality is an essential aspect when it comes to the nature of the legal proposition since it defines its obligatory nature and institutional power relationship (Palmer, 2001). Certain modal verbs, such as “shall”, “must”, and “may”, are regularly used for marking binding duties as opposed to powers, creating a specific normative context for legal documents (Sinsheimer, 2007). Proper choice of modal verbs is very important since minor changes in modality may affect the legal reading of a proposition. Functionally speaking, modality in legal discourse is indicative of institutional power but not of interactional negotiating activity. According to Halliday & Matthiessen (2014), modality in institutional registers realizes obligations that are asymmetrical by nature and serve to establish the authority of legal institutions rather than involve any kind of negotiations. As far as legal texts are concerned, modality is a resource of legal regulation that creates institutional hierarchy, power, and obligation. Frequent use of modal forms contributes to the assertive character of legal language and guarantees the obligatory nature of its provisions.

Nominalization is one of the characteristics of legal language. It refers to the process of changing actions, processes, and events into nominal units (Fairclough, 2003). Nominalization in legal discourse allows

for summarizing a wide range of legal processes in a concise and abstract way. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), it should be noted that nominalization in institutional language serves as an essential tool for the creation of abstraction and helps to direct attention to legal processes rather than particular participants. One of the most effective mechanisms of depersonalization in legal discourse is nominalization since it decreases the importance of human activity while drawing attention to institutional actions. Depersonalization of legal texts is beneficial for the objectivation of the latter since legal procedures take on the nature of impersonal and autonomous phenomena. Tiersma (1999) states that nominalization in legal discourse enhances its authority due to the elimination of the element of subjectivity. In this respect, Shemy (2024) claims that legal discourse displays the tendency to nominalization and the formation of compact nominal constructions, which helps make legal texts abstract, compact, and formal. Shemy's (2024) argument has been emphasized by Rodríguez-Puente (2024), who maintains that nominalization is the characteristic feature of legal discourse and leads to the growing nominal density of legal texts.

2.4. Previous and Related Studies

One of the most influential works in this field has been produced by Bhatia and Bhatia in 2011, in which the researchers analyzed legal discourses in the context of varying socio-cultural conditions. It was found that legal discourse analysis cannot be conducted only on the basis of language or content because it has to take into consideration other contextual elements including socio-political conditions under which legal discourse is created and/or perceived. This implies that context plays a very important role in shaping legal texts and thus the legal language cannot be understood without considering context. An equally significant contribution comes from Goźdź-Roszkowski (2021), whose research focused on exploring the uses of corpus linguistics in studying legal discourse. From this research, it became evident that corpus linguistics makes it possible to carry out an examination of phraseology, lexicalization, legal variety, translation strategies, and evaluation of legal language. Legal discourse also demonstrates certain repetitive linguistic patterns in line with the communicative intentions and specifics of the genre. In the same vein, Hasan and Alrashed (2024) examined the concept, patterns, and functions of legal discourse in legal contexts by offering a varied theoretical review on the characteristics of legal linguistics and the differences between legal, judicial, and criminal discourses. Legal discourse has been officially perceived as an acknowledged and practical communication style that shows advanced linguistic forms. Discourse analysis was viewed as a significant tool for understanding the mechanisms of creating legal meanings in legal institutions. These studies have proved the specialized character of legal discourse as an institution-based communication mode with unique linguistic patterns aimed at achieving clarity of interpretation (Bhatia, 2004; Coulthard & Johnson, 2010).

A linguistic research on the use of deictics as meaning regulators in legal texts has been undertaken in the framework of Saudi Arabia by Alhoqbani (2024). The analysis was carried out through examining the decisions made in the Saudi Ministry of Justice. The role of referential elements as influencing the meaning of legal decisions was considered. The study revealed that deictic components are of great importance for maintaining text cohesiveness, managing reference relations in law, and emphasizing its obligatory character. It has thus been shown that linguistic means contribute to the authoritative nature of Saudi legal texts. A relatively recent contribution to the literature related to linguistic analysis of legal documents in Saudi Arabia is the study of Alharbi (2023). In his work, Alharbi (2023) paid special attention to linguistic regularity in legislative drafting in Saudi Arabia. Alharbi (2023) has described some recurring patterns of lexico-grammatical and syntactic features found in legislative documents of Saudi Arabia. In his study, Alharbi (2023) investigated modernization of legislative drafting in Saudi Arabia and the need for clearness, consistency and standardization in Saudi legislative documents.

A further contribution was made by Alshammari et al. (2025), who analyzed judicial texts in Saudi Arabia using a multimodal discourse approach to examine the way physical evidence is represented in criminal cases. It was found that judicial decisions employ linguistic resources, including nomalization, evidential, intertextuality, and classification of evidence, to construct meanings from physical evidence. In their conclusion, the authors indicated that meanings in law cannot be inherent in evidence but are rather constructed discursively, based on the interpretative practices carried out in the context of Saudi legal discourse. Studies based on Islamic legal interpretation have also contributed significantly to our understanding of the linguistic aspects of legal texts in

Saudi Arabia. For example, Alzahrani (2023) examined the interpretation of general lexical expressions in legal provisions in the context of Saudi legal discourse using linguistic notions from Islamic jurisprudence.

Based on previous and related literature, it appears that previous research has thoroughly considered the field of legal discourse using the theoretical framework of discourse analysis, sociopragmatics, and corpus linguistics to understand the impact of language on legal authority and institutionalism. In this respect, although there has been much attention paid to Saudi legal discourse, such research mostly tends to deal with various aspects of language, such as deixis, legislation draft conventions, evidential discourse, or legal interpretation, but little consideration has been given to the interrelated influence of lexicalization, modality, and nominalization within Saudi legal texts. In other words, there is a need for a thorough linguistic study considering all of the above dimensions to explore the construction of legal authority, obligation, and legitimacy within Saudi legal discourse.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

The data for this study were collected from a selected corpus of legal materials from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The corpus is comprised of legislative and regulatory acts that include laws, executive acts, ministerial decrees, and other legal documents issued by governmental bodies in Saudi Arabia. The corpus was selected to be comprised of texts that reflect the authoritative discourse on legal matters and provide an authentic sample of legal language. There is a wide variety of laws represented in the selected corpus; for example, the corpus includes administrative, commercial, labor, and civil laws, among others. The corpus was compiled from official Saudi legal repositories, including the Saudi Ministry of Justice Legal Portal, the Bureau of Experts at the Council of Ministers, and the National Platform for Rules and Regulations (see Appendix A). These sources were selected because they provide authentic and authoritative legal texts issued by governmental institutions. The use of official legal documents improved the reliability, validity, and institutional authenticity of the linguistic data investigated in this study.

3.2. Data Description and Rationale

The selected legal texts are considered to be representative of current legal discourse in Saudi Arabia. In order to obtain linguistic material, legislative and regulatory acts were selected because they contain examples of the official language that creates and describes legal rights, duties, prohibitions, and processes. Opposed to the language used in the judicial opinions that can differ depending on case context, legislation provides more linguistic uniformity; therefore, it is an appropriate source for studying repetitive patterns in discourse. The choice of the legal texts from Saudi Arabia is motivated by the growing importance of legal reforms and codification in the country and the lack of linguistic studies dealing with the language of Saudi law. Also, choosing legislative texts from different legal areas allows for building linguistic variety of the corpus and identifying linguistic phenomena that do not depend on particular legal areas. The corpus has been specially selected in order to study such phenomena as lexicalization, modality, and nominalization since these phenomena are usually connected with legal language.

3.3. Analytical Procedures

This study follows the qualitative discourse analytical method within the context of legal linguistics. The analysis was carried out in several stages. First, the selected legal documents were collected into a corpus, and their content was analyzed for identification of linguistic patterns pertinent to the objectives of the study. Lexicalization, modality, and nominalization were identified during the first stage of the analysis as linguistic patterns used in legal language. The second step comprised analysis of lexical units, which revealed special terms and formulaic expressions. Attention was paid to the context-specific application of words encoding legal institution's powers and legal obligations. Analysis of modality was performed during the third step of the investigation, which involved categorizing modal expressions according to communicative functions, such as obligation, permission, prohibition, entitlement, and necessity, wherein attention was given to the effect that modal forms have on making legal discourse regulated and authoritative. The fourth step entailed analysis of nominalization patterns in legal texts, such as conversion of process into nominal form and consequences it brings. Finally, the findings

of analysis in all three categories were used in a collective interpretation to demonstrate the complementary nature between the three strategies, i.e., lexicalization, modality, and nominalization, in producing the meaning in Saudi legal language. Examples from the corpus were selected to support the interpretation of the findings. Thus, through the adopted analytical procedures, the study offers an overview of the language mechanisms behind constructing authority and obligation in the Saudi legal discourse.

4. Analysis and Results

4.1. Lexicalization in Saudi Legal Texts

The use of lexicalization became apparent as one of the defining linguistic characteristics of the analyzed Saudi legal texts. In this regard, the analyzed corpus reflects an inclination towards the utilization of specialized legal terms and institutional terms. Such an approach ensures semantic accuracy and precision as well as legal certainty. Consider the following excerpts:

Excerpts 1:

((يقوم الحكم في المملكة العربية السعودية على أساس العدل والشورى والمساواة وفق الشريعة الإسلامية

1(a). Governance in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is based on justice, consultation, and equality in accordance with Islamic law (Sharia).

((يجب على صاحب العمل والعامل الالتزام بأحكام هذا النظام

1(b).The employer and the employee must comply with the provisions of this Law.

(تكتسب الشركة الشخصية الاعتبارية بمجرد قيدها في السجل التجاري

1(c). A company acquires legal personality upon its registration in the commercial register.

((تلتزم الجهات المختصة بمكافحة الفساد وتعزيز النزاهة والشفافية

1(d). The competent authorities shall combat corruption and promote integrity and transparency.

The above examples demonstrate how the vocabulary that has been institutionalized through law has been used in order to create the basis for governance constitutionally. In 1(a), it is clear that the selected lexical items "justice," "consultation," and "equality," together with the expression "in accordance with Islamic Law" are not only important for legal purposes but also carry significant political meaning and significance. This means that the choice of these lexical items is based on certain ideologies that have been adopted to build the legitimacy of the government in power. These lexical items have wide semantic ranges but are legally specific at the same time, thereby allowing them to anchor themselves constitutionally in the system of law. The lexical choices transform abstract values into constitutional principles that legitimize governmental authority.

Similarly, 1(b) is indicative of the usage of specialized legal lexicon terms that indicate who the legal actors are within a legally regulated relationship. Instead of addressing people through common social classification terms, the legislator uses legally acknowledged terminology in this case, including "employer" and "employee". This kind of language creates a legally regulated relationship defined by the rights and obligations created under law, which is also emphasized by the obligation in "must comply". Lexical usage helps in creating clarity about who the legal actors are within the context of the given provisions. Through this, ambiguity is removed and there will not be any problems in interpreting the same in the future in court proceedings.

In 1(c), the terminology used in "legal personality," "registration," and "commercial register" in relation to legal personhood describes a particular state of being in law that makes it possible for the corporation to have its own rights and obligations separate from the rights and obligations of its owners. The language cannot be used in its normal lexical sense, as it describes a legal theory. Legal language allows the complicated ideas that make up the law to be stated succinctly and thus allows greater effectiveness in communicating these laws linguistically.

Likewise, 1(d) demonstrates the use of institutional vocabulary associated with governance and accountability in "competent authorities," "combat corruption," and "promote integrity and transparency". The lexical items referring to corruption, integrity, and transparency function as legally recognized regulatory concepts rather than general ethical values. Their inclusion reflects the increasing role of governance-oriented terminology in contemporary Saudi legal discourse. The lexical structure contributes to the institutional framing of public accountability by transforming broad ethical concerns into enforceable legal objectives. Governance-

related terminology strengthens the institutional discourse of accountability and regulatory oversight. The above examples indicate that lexicalization plays an important role in terms of achieving legal certainty and authority. The usage of legal terms on a repetitive basis helps in ensuring semantic stability. Therefore, lexicalization can be seen both as a means of communication and one of maintaining legal consistency.

Table 1. Examples of lexicalization and their discourse function in Saudi legal texts

Lexical item	English equivalent	Discourse function	Lexical item	English equivalent	Discourse function
النظام	Law / regulation	Establishes legal authority and regulatory framework	المنشأة	Establishment / enterprise	Defines regulated business organizations
الحقوق	Rights	Defines legal entitlements and protections	العامل	Employee / worker	Identifies labor-related legal subjects
الالتزامات	Obligations	Specifies legal responsibilities and duties	صاحب العمل	Employer	Defines managerial and contractual authority
العقد	Contract	Formalizes legal relationships and agreements	السجل التجاري	Commercial register	Provides legal recognition of business entities
الشركة	Company	Identifies legally recognized business entities	الإجراءات	Procedures	Organizes legal and administrative processes
الفساد	Corruption	Categorizes unlawful and unethical conduct	اللائحة التنفيذية	Executive regulation	Clarifies the implementation of statutory provisions
النزاهة	Integrity	Supports governance and accountability discourse	القرار	Decision / resolution	Represents administrative or judicial determinations
الشخصية الاعتبارية	Legal personality	Grants juridical status to legal entities	الجهة المختصة	Competent authority	Identifies legally authorized institutions
المسؤولية	Liability / responsibility	Establishes legal accountability for actions and omissions	الأحكام	Provisions / rules	Establishes binding legal norms
التعويض	Compensation	Defines legal remedies for damages and losses	التسوية	Settlement	Facilitates dispute resolution mechanisms
المخالفة	Violation / offense	Classifies breaches of legal provisions	التحكيم	Arbitration	Provides alternative dispute resolution procedures
العقوبة	Penalty / punishment	Specifies legal sanctions for unlawful conduct	الامتثال	Compliance	Ensures adherence to legal requirements
الجريمة	Crime	Categorizes criminal acts subject to prosecution	الإفصاح	Disclosure	Promotes transparency and information accountability
الدعوى	Legal action / lawsuit	Represents judicial proceedings and claims	المنافسة	Competition	Regulates market practices and commercial conduct
الحكم	Judgment / ruling	Refers to judicial decisions and legal determinations	الاحتكار	Monopoly	Identifies anti-competitive economic behavior

The selection of vocabulary listed in Table 1 is an indication of the very specialized and institutionalized nature

of legal discourse in Saudi Arabia. The majority of identified vocabulary items fall under various connected semantic categories such as governance, litigation process, rights and duties, corporate legislation, power, and accountability. Their presence in legal documents is characterized by preference for terminological accuracy and semantic consistency, both of which are crucial factors that ensure a minimum level of ambiguity and clarity of legal interpretation. The predominance of specialized vocabulary in the legal lexicon indicates that the legal discourse creates its own communication context by means of codifying meanings rather than negotiating them. Moreover, the choice of vocabulary contributes to the institutionalized representation of legal institutions, social agents, and regulatory processes within the context of legal norms and procedures.

4.2. Modality in Saudi Legal Texts

The use of modality is the most important means by which legal texts in Saudi Arabia manifest the presence of legal authority. Modality is used as a way to control actions through imposing obligations, allowing permissions, prohibiting, and setting duties (Palmer, 2001).

Excerpts 2:

((يجب على صاحب العمل توفير بيئة عمل آمنة وصحية

2(a). The employer must provide a safe and healthy work environment.

((يجوز للشركة إصدار أسهم ممتازة وفقًا لأحكام النظام

2(b). A company may issue preferred shares in accordance with the provisions of the Law.

((لا يجوز الإضرار بالغير عند استعمال الحق

2(c). No harm may be inflicted on others in the exercise of a right.

((يحظر على الموظف العام استغلال النفوذ لتحقيق منفعة شخصية

2(d). It is prohibited for a public official to exploit influence for personal gain.

((يلتزم المتعاقد بتنفيذ التزاماته وفقًا لأحكام العقد

2(e). The contracting party shall perform its obligations in accordance with the terms of the contract.

The above examples demonstrate the use of modality to express obligation on the part of recipients by placing a compulsory duty on a known entity. In Excerpt 2(a), the use of modality in the phrase "must provide" eliminates any room for exercising discretion since there is a legal obligation to comply. The strength of the obligation is brought about by the use of the modal verb "must," thus making the obligation legally binding. There is therefore clarity on who is obligated and what is required of the obligated person. Similarly, the use of modality in 2(b), which is manifested in "may issue," is that of permission and not that of necessity. Through this modal expression, the law permits an act to take place rather than necessitating it. This shows us how the language of law strikes a balance between the two by differentiating what is permissible from what is compulsory in the law. The permission modality, therefore, clarifies the extent to which the discursive function of such a type of modality gives a room for action in legal discourse.

In the same vein, 2(c) is an example of how prohibition modality can be used as a way of controlling the exercise of legal rights in Saudi legal texts. The modal expression in "no harm may be inflicted on others" creates a boundary in law by forbidding acts that could be dangerous to other people. The rule shows that there is always a limit to which legal rights should be exercised, as they are not unlimited. Linguistically, the prohibition modality operates as a preventive measure aimed at avoiding conflicts in the future, and the use of the negative quantifier "no" communicate a sense of collectivity. In deontic modality (Cann,1993), the phrase "no harm may be inflicted on others" indicates an obligation (a hard prohibition) rather than just a permission, as it leaves no opportunity for satisfactory exclusions, classifying all actions that encompass perpetrating harm as rigorously prohibited.

In 2(d), the expression "it is prohibited" is a high prohibitive indicator that conveys total restrictions. It represents a form of deontic modality that conveys legal prohibition and establishes binding restrictions on conduct. Its use contributes to the authoritative and prescriptive nature of legal discourse. There is little to no leeway left by the use of the modal verb that is indicative of the severity of the actions being forbidden. This provision helps with institutional accountability as it clearly defines prohibited behavior. In addition, this indicates the seriousness of the legal system in combating abuse of power and corruption. The modality

structure in 2(e) establishes a continuing and binding responsibility that extends throughout the predetermined relationship. Unlike a one-time directive, the expression "the contracting party shall perform its obligations" emphasizes ongoing compliance and accountability. The examples in excerpts 2 illustrate how legal discourse dexterously employs modality to secure predictability in predetermined communications by connecting performance directly to contractual relationship communicated by legal discourse. As such, modality functions to strengthen legal conviction and enforceability and emphasize ongoing legal responsibility. Significantly, modality is the key linguistic strategy used for communicating the various norms within the law. Modals create obligations, permissions, and prohibitions, and at the same time, determine the connection between legal power and legal subject.

Table 2. Examples of modal expressions and their grammatical and discourse functions in Saudi legal texts

Modal term	**English equivalent**	**Grammatical function**	**Discursive function**	**Modal term**	**English equivalent**	**Grammatical Function**	**Discursive function**
يجب	Must / Shall	Obligation	Imposes mandatory duties and legally binding responsibilities.	يُمنع	Is forbidden / is prevented from	Formal prohibition	Prevents conduct considered incompatible with legal provisions.
يلتزم	Shall comply / is obliged to	Binding commitment	Establishes continuing legal responsibility and contractual compliance.	يُحظر على	Is prohibited from	Absolute restriction	Prohibits actions deemed harmful to public or institutional interests.
يجوز	May	Permission	Grants regulated discretion within legally defined boundaries.	لا يجوز	May / is permitted to	Conditional permission	Authorizes conduct subject to legal conditions and procedural requirements.
لا يجوز	May Not / It Is Not Permissible To	Prohibition	Restricts unacceptable conduct and prevents legal violations.	يُقرّر	Decides / determines	Authoritative determination	Establishes legally binding decisions by competent authorities.
يحظر	Is prohibited / shall not	Strong prohibition	Enforces absolute restrictions and signals serious legal consequences.	يُعتمد	Approves / authorizes	Official authorization	Indicates formal approval by a competent legal or administrative body.

يتعين	Must / it is required to	Necessity	Establishes mandatory requirements and procedural obligations.	طرتشيُ	It is required that / subject to	Conditional requirement	Imposes legal conditions that must be satisfied before action is permitted.
ينبغي	Should	Recommendation / normative expectation	Expresses desirable conduct aligned with legal objectives and principles.	مزتلي الطرفا	The party shall	Contractual Obligation	Defines the duties and responsibilities of contracting parties.
لـ ق حي	Has the right to	Legal entitlement	Confers legally recognized rights and privileges upon legal subjects.	يكون بـ أمزلم	Shall be obliged to / shall be bound by	Enforceable duty	Establishes obligations subject to legal enforcement mechanisms.
لـ ق حي	Is entitled to	Authorization	Establishes lawful entitlement to perform specific actions.	يجوتسي	Requires / necessitates	Legal necessity	Indicates actions or situations that require mandatory legal consequences.
مزتلي بـ	Shall adhere to / shall comply with	Duty and compliance	Reinforces adherence to statutory, contractual, or regulatory obligations.	لـ زوجي	May / is entitled to	Personal legal permission	Grants an individual or entity a legally recognized course of action.
يجب على	Shall / must	Direct obligation	Explicitly identifies the legal actor responsible for compliance.	بـ لخي ال	Without prejudice to	Reservation clause	Preserves existing rights or obligations while introducing new provisions.
لـ ق حي ال	Has no right to	Restriction of rights	Denies authorization to perform particular acts or claim specific privileges.	عم ارماعة	Subject to / taking into consideration	Conditional qualification	Limits legal provisions by reference to other statutory requirements.

The modal expressions used in Table 2 indicate the significance of modality in forming the normative nature of legal discourse in Saudi Arabia. Deontic modality constitute the vast majority of modal expressions because they are used to prescribe the behavior of an individual through imposition of duties, permissions, prohibitions, and procedures. Obligatory modals are used for indicating obligatory duties, whereas permissive modals are

used for granting permission with certain conditions. In addition, prohibitive modals are used as a means of controlling social behavior because they denote prohibited conduct according to the law. The table indicates that conditional and qualifying modal forms were used extensively as a way of indicating the conditions in which certain legal obligations, rights, or permissions could be fulfilled. Modal expressions make legal documents authoritative documents, which direct the behavior of individuals and allocate responsibilities.

4.3. Nominalization in Saudi Legal Texts

The extensive use of nominalization was observed in all texts of the corpus. The tendency for legal language to convert action or process into abstract nouns makes it possible to present legal notions in the form of institutionalized objects. This grammar technique helps increase the level of formality and lexical density while minimizing the importance of individual action (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Consider the following excerpts:

Excerpts 3:

((تعزيز الوحدة الوطنية واجب، وتمنع الدولة كل ما يؤدي إلى الفرقة والفتنة والانقسام))

3(a). Promoting national unity is a duty, and the State shall prevent everything that leads to division, discord, and fragmentation.

((يكون تنفيذ الأحكام القضائية وفق الإجراءات النظامية المقررة)

3(b). The execution of judicial rulings shall be carried out in accordance with the prescribed legal procedures.

(يترتب على الإخلال بالالتزام التعويض)

3(c). Compensation shall result from the breach of an obligation.

((تنظيم العلاقة بين العامل وصاحب العمل بما يحقق العدالة)

3(d). Regulating the relationship between the employee and the employer in a manner that achieves justice.

(تتم حماية الحقوق والحريات وفق أحكام الشريعة الإسلامية والأنظمة النافذة)

3(e). The protection of rights and freedoms shall be ensured in accordance with Islamic Sharia and applicable laws.

3(a) manifests the core nominalization results in changing a verb into an abstract noun in "division," "discord," and fragmentation," denote a goal of the law. Instead of emphasizing the performer of the act, it shifts emphasis to the notion as an institutional task performed collectively. This shift in grammar allows for stating the nation's unity not as a concrete activity but as a legal value, which is constant. It adds authority and stability to the provision through abstracting. Nominalization raises a social phenomenon to the level of a legal principle. Similarly, by using the noun form of "execution" in 3(b), the focus is taken off those who have to implement the procedure and focused on the legal process instead. The use of a noun in this case enhances the objective aspect and the procedural nature of legal language. By emphasizing the process and not the person carrying out the process, the emphasis is placed on procedure.

Likewise, in 3(c), the clause includes several nominalizations which transform actions into legal concepts such as "compensation" and "breach". Crucially, such organization makes it possible to describe the legal consequences briefly and logically. Since it refers to the legal concepts of breach and compensation, the clause demonstrates the relation between cause and consequence. Furthermore, in 3(d), the use of nominalization enables the presentation of regulation as a process conducted by institutions, rather than individuals. This abstraction helps create the sense that legal regulation is impersonal, systematic, and objective, not related to any particular people or organizations. At the same time, the nominalized form adds lexical density through the possibility of including several legal terms in one compact phrase. In this regard, one can notice that nominalization plays an important role in depersonalization because the emphasis here is not on the actors who perform the protection procedure, but on the protection procedure itself. This allows us to see rights and freedoms as continuous commitments of institutions established in the framework of law. In this regard, it becomes clear that the role of nomialization is to enhance the permanence of such commitments. The above findings have shown how important the process of nominalization is in defining the formal features of legal

discourse in Saudi Arabia. Nominalization leads to the formation of legal terms out of actions and results in increasing lexical density, shifting focus from personal agency and promoting objectivity. The latter functions help enhance the validity of the legal discourse.

Table 3. Examples of nominalization and their discourse functions in in Saudi legal texts

Nominalization	**English equivalent**	**Discourse function**
تعزيز	Promotion	Establishes institutional objectives and policy goals.
تنفيذ	Implementation/ enforcement	Represents legal procedures and enforcement mechanisms.
حماية	Protection	Expresses institutional responsibility and legal protection.
تنظيم	Regulation	Structures legal relationships and administrative processes.
تعويض	Compensation	Encodes legal remedies and consequences.
التزام	Commitment / obligation	Represents legal duties and binding responsibilities.
مخالفة	Violation	Categorizes unlawful conduct and regulatory breaches.
استحواذ	Acquisition	Defines legal-economic and corporate processes.
اندماج	Merger	Represents corporate restructuring and business consolidation.
تسجيل	Registration	Formalizes legal recognition and institutional status.
ترخيص	Licensing / authorization	Establishes legal authorization and permission.
اعتماد	Approval / accreditation	Indicates official recognition and validation.
إفصاح	Disclosure	Promotes transparency and information accountability.
امتثال	Compliance	Represents adherence to legal and regulatory requirements.
مساءلة	Accountability	Reinforces institutional oversight and responsibility.
حوكمة	Governance	Establishes principles of organizational management and control.
تسوية	Settlement	Represents mechanisms for dispute resolution.
تحكيم	Arbitration	Encodes alternative dispute resolution procedures.
تحقيق	Investigation / achievement	Represents legal inquiry and attainment of legal objectives.
مراقبة	Monitoring	Establishes supervisory and regulatory functions.
إدارة	Administration / management	Represents institutional administration and governance.
رقابة	Supervision / oversight	Expresses regulatory oversight and compliance monitoring.
ملكية	Ownership	Defines legal ownership and proprietary rights.
تصفية	Liquidation	Represents dissolution and termination of legal entities.
ممارسة	Practice / conduct	Refers to the lawful exercise of professional activities.
إخلال	Breach	Represents failure to fulfill legal or contractual duties.
إبرام	Conclusion / formation	Refers to the formation and completion of legal agreements.
نقل	Transfer	Represents the legal transfer of rights, assets, or obligations.
تعديل	Amendment	Encodes legal change, revision, or reform of existing provisions.
إلغاء	Revocation / cancellation	Represents the termination of legal validity or legal effect.

As seen from Table 3, the nominalized terms demonstrate how often the grammatical process of abstraction is used in legal discourse in Saudi Arabia. It should be noted that most of the nominalizations are classified into regulations, administration, compliance, contract, dispute resolution, and corporation. The main purpose of nominalization is to underline the abstractness and impersonality of the language used in legal texts. Indeed,

the linguistic process of nominalization proves very effective when it comes to communicating formality and objectivity in the text. In addition, it becomes easier for writers to encode the rights, obligations and other important details in a more effective manner. The use of nominalization in legal language is caused by its basic function: creation of stable legal meanings.

5. Discussion

This study examines the linguistic features of Saudi legal texts through the analysis of lexicalization, modality, and nominalization. The findings reveal that Saudi legal discourse relies on a highly structured linguistic system characterized by specialized legal terminology, extensive use of deontic modality, and pervasive nominalized constructions. These features collectively contribute to the communicative objectives of legal discourse, namely precision, authority, consistency, and enforceability. The findings support the view that legal language constitutes a specialized institutional variety in which linguistic choices are shaped by the need to regulate social relations and communicate legal norms effectively (Bhatia, 1993; Gibbons, 2003; Tiersma, 1999). At the same time, the findings demonstrate how these universal characteristics of legal discourse are adapted to the Saudi legal context through the incorporation of governance-oriented terminology and references to institutional and regulatory authority.

The analysis of the selected data shows that Saudi legal discourse represents a specialized kind of institutional discourse where language plays a significant role in creating legal meaning and authority. Linguistic peculiarities of Saudi legal texts have been found to be characterized by certain patterns of language that make Saudi legislation precise, clear and unambiguous and thus enable efficient communication of norms and obligations. Specific vocabulary, modal expressions and nominalization suggest that legal language in Saudi legislation is carefully selected in order to exclude any ambiguity and provide for consistent interpretation of texts. These findings correlate with the existing studies devoted to legal discourse arguing that linguistic conventions used in legal texts are specifically selected to meet institutional needs and confirm the authority of law (e.g., Trosborg, 1997; Coulthard & Johnson, 2010; Bhatia, 2004; Leung & Durant, 2020). It should also be noted that this study shows that language of Saudi legal texts does not only perform the function of information transmission but also serves a constitutive function in the sense that it creates rights and duties, regulates social behavior and legitimizes legal institutions.

Concerning the use of lexicalization (first research question), findings suggest that Saudi legal texts depend largely on specialized legal lexicon as a means of guaranteeing semantic precision and minimizing interpretative vagueness. Lexemes associated with governance, accountability, contractual obligation, corporate regulation, procedural justice, and public interest were used quite extensively in the corpus. Such findings correspond to the research on the role of specialized legal vocabulary in achieving semantic clarity and preserving the consistency of legal interpretation (Tiersma, 1999; Coulthard & Johnson, 2010). Likewise, according to Bhatia (1993), conventionalized patterns of legal lexis are essential for efficient communication of intricate legal concepts. Moreover, the findings in this study are consistent with research findings regarding the Arabic legal genre that has been characterized by an evident propensity towards the use of standardized and institutional legal lexis (Abdukhalilov et al., 2020; Alharbi & BinMasad, S2023). However, in contrast to previous studies on legal discourse of common law legal systems that has stressed the persistence of old-fashioned legal vocabulary, the current study revealed that the legal discourse of Saudi Arabia has been dominated by modern regulatory and governance lexicons.

In terms of the employment of modality (second research question), the analysis demonstrates that deontic modal forms are one of the main tools of linguistic encoding of the power of law. Expressions involving such modalities as obligations, prohibitions, permissions, and entitlements were found in abundance in the analyzed corpus. Such results provide strong support for previous studies, according to which modality is the key characteristic of the language of law that turns the textual statements into norms of law (Kurzon, 1986; Sinsheimer, 2007). The presence of obligation and prohibition markers supports the conclusion that the language of law is normative rather than descriptive. Moreover, the abundance of permission constructions implies that it not only prohibits certain acts but also allows them. The results presented above appear to be quite similar to those described by Trosborg (1997) in connection with the use of deontic modality being predominant in legislative and regulatory language irrespective of the legal system used. However, in the case of Saudi texts, the

dependence on modal forms seems to be especially evident. The reason for that can be connected to the fact that in some Anglo-American legal texts, the modal value can be spread over certain syntactic structures.

As for the use of nominalization (third research question), the findings prove its significance in the process of abstraction, objectivity, and authority construction. There have been plenty of occurrences of nominalizations in the corpus such as legal proceedings, obligations, regulations, and institutional activities It should be noted that this finding completely supports the statement made by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) about the assumption that nominalization is one of the features of bureaucratic discourse as the actions are conceptualized. This statement has also been supported in the previous contributions dedicated to legal discourses, including Gibbons (2003) and Bhatia (1993) stating that the nominalization is helpful in depersonalization and objectification of law through shifting focus from people to legal process. The findings are also similar to the previous studies devoted to the use of nominalization in Arabic administrative and legal language (Alzahrani, 2023). However, the difference between Saudi legal discourse in terms of nominalization is the use of nominalization not only for the purpose of abstraction but also for the organization of concepts.

To recap, the findings demonstrate the complementary nature of lexicalization, modality, and nominalization as linguistic tools for building the distinctiveness of Saudi legal discourse. While lexicalization ensures semantic precision by means of using standard legal terminology, modality creates the normative power of legal statements, which is ensured by obligations, permissions, and prohibitions stated in the legislation, while nominalization serves the purpose of abstraction and institutional objectivity as well as transformation of action into legal concept. Significantly, the findings of this study reconcile with other studies that investigated the connection between language and law from the linguistic perspective (e.g., Bhatia & Bhatia, 2011; Goźdź-Roszkowski, 2021; Alshammari et al., 2025). However, this study also indicates some specific features related to the legal context of Saudi Arabia, as it demonstrates that Saudi legal discourse represents an extremely institutionalized mode of communication that constitutes an intrinsic reciprocal relationship between linguistic structures and the meaning-making process in legal texts. The incorporation of specific lexis, deontic modalities, and nominalization indicates that legal language is not only a neutral vehicle of transmission of legal information but a productive tool of establishment of rights, obligations, prohibitions, and institutional powers. Moreover, the current study adds to the literature on legal discourse in general by providing empirical material about the linguistic construction of legal discourse in Saudi Arabia. By demonstrating how linguistic strategies operate in Saudi legal texts, constructing legal authority and regulating social behavior, this study emphasizes the potential of discourse analysis for research into the language of law.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the linguistic features of legal discourse in some selected Saudi legal texts. The analysis focused on three linguistic features, namely lexicalization, modality, and nominalization. It was analytically evidenced that these linguistic strategies were dexterously employed in Saudi legal texts to construct legal meanings, establish legal authority, and legitimize legal institutions. With regard to the first research question that sought to determine the most prominent lexical features of Saudi legal language, the analysis showed that the selected texts abound in technical terms that contribute to achieving legal precision and certitude. In relation to the second research question regarding the importance of modality in legal language, it was analytically clarified that that deontic modals play a major role in establishing legal authority through issuing legal permissions, obligations, and prohibitions. As for the third research question, it was found that the process of nominalization is commonly used to convert activities into abstract legal terminology in order to increase objectivity, formality, and institutional legitimacy. Significantly, all the linguistic strategies serve as complementary methods that ensure effective legal discourse and reduced ambiguity in conveying legal norms within the Saudi legal discourse, while at the same time increasing institutional legitimacy. The study, therefore, is anticipated to contribute to legal discourse studies and forensic linguistics.

For future research, further studies can build on the findings of this study by expanding the sample and including judicial decisions, administrative circulars, and specialized regulations to facilitate detailed analysis within the context of Saudi legal discourse. Furthermore, interdisciplinary studies may be adopted to incorporate both qualitative discourse analysis and corpus-assisted methods for quantifying patterns related to vocabulary, modality, and nominalization in other legal texts within different legal contexts. These studies might reveal findings similar to and/or different from those demonstrated in this study.

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Appendix (A)
Links to data selected for the analysis in this study:

1) Saudi Ministry of Justice – Legal Portal
https://laws.moj.gov.sa/ar?utm
https://laws.moj.gov.sa/en/legislations-regulations?pageNumber=1&pageSize=9&sortingBy=7
2) Bureau of Experts at the Council of Ministers
https://laws.boe.gov.sa/BoeLaws/Laws/Folders/2
3) National Platform (my.gov.sa) – Rules and Regulations
https://my.gov.sa/en/rules?utm
4) Saudi Judicial Decisions Repository
https://laws.moj.gov.sa/ar?utm
5) Oversight and Anti-Corruption Authority (Nazaha)
https://www.nazaha.gov.sa/
6) The Basic Law of Governance (1992)
https://laws.boe.gov.sa/BoeLaws/Laws/LawDetails/16b97fcb-4833-4f66-8531-a9a700f161b6/2?utm
7) The Civil Transactions Law (2023)
https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/legislation/details/22447?utm