

UC Merced

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

The socio-pragmatic function of linguistic complexity in the domain of law

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2c9784kt>

Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 48(0)

Authors

Brooks, Tilden

Hawkins, Robert

Publication Date

2026

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

The socio-pragmatic function of linguistic complexity in the domain of law

Tilden "Tilly" Brooks (teb44@stanford.edu)^{1, 2} & Robert D. Hawkins¹

¹Department of Linguistics, Stanford University

²Yale Law School

Abstract

Cognitive science research has long cited efficiency as an explanation of the linguistic behavior observed across the world's languages (*e.g.*, Gibson et al., 2019; Grice, 1975). However, recent work on law has challenged this view, as linguistic phenomena associated with processing difficulty have been found to occur frequently in legal texts. Some have argued that linguistic complexity is intentionally deployed to signal the law's performative effects (Martínez et al., 2024). We test this idea experimentally by examining the effect of linguistic complexity on perceived authoritativeness. In a task where participants are asked to rate variously complex legal provisions, we assess the effect of syntactic complexity, jargon density, and modal usage on perceived authority of statutory law. We find that high jargon density is positively correlated with increased perceptions of authority when syntactic complexity is low and other indices of the legal genre such as the modal *shall* are absent.

Keywords: semantics; pragmatics; performativity; speech acts; law; psycholinguistics; sociolinguistics

Introduction

Research across linguistics and cognitive science has revealed a general tendency in speakers to balance competing pressures arising out of cognitive limitations, social functions, and communicative needs. Although it is clear that each of these factors is important for a sufficient explanation of human linguistic behavior, the precise division of labor of each of these pressures remains underdetermined. On the one hand, it is clear that cognitive pressures must impose powerful limitations on language use. It is not possible to use natural language in ways that the human brain cannot handle. Beyond the constraints imposed by the brain, other pressures related to cognitive and communicative efficiency have been argued to shape language use (Gibson et al., 2019). Linguists and philosophers of language have long made similar arguments, observing that natural language users systematically balance communicative efficiency and economy (Grice, 1975; Horn, 1984).

As compelling as these accounts are, however, genre-specific study of natural language usage indicates that efficiency is only part of the story. While language use in many contexts balances content with efficiency, legal language ("legalese") systematically employs complex constructions even at a cost to comprehension. Recent experimental and corpus research on language usage in the legal domain has revealed a tendency to use complex linguistic structures, such

as jargon and other low-frequency items, center-embedded constructions, and unusual capitalizations (Martínez et al., 2022). A number of authors conducting research on the language of the law have argued that the genre is markedly complex (Brooks & Hawkins, 2026; Martínez et al., 2022, 2024; Tiersma, 2008). Importantly, this complexity appears to be motivated by the legal genre itself rather than communicative need.

Recent work on legalese has offered support for the position that the complexity of the law serves a function and is not merely the result of a need to convey complex concepts. In a corpus-based and experimental study of legal language, Martínez et al. (2022) find that linguistic properties known to cause processing difficulties for readers such as center-embedded syntactic constructions, low-frequency jargon, and passivization occur at significantly higher rates in contracts than in other genres of standardized U.S. English. This higher usage of complex linguistic properties in legal writing was observed to be accompanied by corresponding difficulty in processing legal texts, indicating that the notorious opacity of the law may be as much attributed to the linguistic form it takes as the intricate concepts it describes.

Building on their findings about processing difficulty in perception of legalese, Martínez et al. (2024) compare legal and non-legal language in a follow up production study. Across two experiments, the authors task participants without legal training with describing legal requirements across three genres (*i.e.*, legal, fictional, and tourism writing), in two writing processes (*i.e.*, from scratch and in an iterative writing process), and in two different orders (*i.e.*, describing the conditions for guilt first and describing penalties first). Taking complex syntax as an outcome variable, the authors find that genre has an effect on center-embedded syntax usage while writing process and order do not. Participants writing in the legal genre used center-embedded constructions at higher rates than those writing in the fictional writing and tour guide genres. In a replication study investigating the effect of genre and writing process on the usage of modals in legal and non-legal writing, Brooks and Hawkins (2026) find a similar effect of genre on the usage of the modal auxiliary *shall*. There, the authors report that participants tasked with writing conceptually equivalent descriptions of crimes in legal and non-legal contexts used *shall* significantly more often in legal writing.

The findings of these studies comparing legal and non-legal writing indicate that the usage of the linguistic properties

associated with legal language is motivated more by genre than communicative need. Participants writing about the requirements of the law outside of the legal genre were able to convey the relevant conceptual information without using low-frequency tokens or center-embedded syntax at the rate observed in legal language. In seeking to explain this genre effect, some have taken this finding as evidence that the pressure motivating the usage of complex linguistic properties in legal language is related to performativity rather than communicative content (Martínez et al., 2024, Brooks and Hawkins, 2026).

Austin (1962) famously demonstrated that language can be used to accomplish tasks other than communication such as making promises, threats, or orders. These linguistic utterances, called performatives, have been argued to be common in law (Kurzon, 1986). On this view, the law does not merely report the existence of obligations, rights, institutions, and other legal objects. Rather, legal texts (in combination with appropriate processes) effectuate the legal institutions they describe. Crucially, the linguistic contents of performative utterances are often closely tied to their performative effects (Searle, 1969). Under the view that the linguistic complexity of legalese is linked to performativity, the use of highly marked constructions in law can be understood to serve a signaling function. Linguistic phenomena like high use of the modal *shall*, legal jargon, or complex syntax may function to indicate that legal texts have the effect of creating obligations and rights under law. Similar patterns have been observed in other domains. For instance, Martínez et al. (2024) observed that performative utterances are often marked with distinguishing linguistic features (*e.g.*, rhyming in magic spells) and propose that the use of complex syntactic structures is simply another case of speech act marking.

While there does appear to be a reason to posit a link between linguistic style and socio-pragmatic function, the processing difficulties associated with the properties of legal language complicate this narrative. Where writers may be motivated to use complex linguistic properties to signal legal effect, the tendency toward efficiency in human communication creates a countervailing pressure to reduce complexity in legal language. Moreover, given the range of simpler linguistic expressions that can mark speech acts (Austin, 1962; Qi et al., 2022; Searle, 1969), it is unclear why legal language users opt to use cognitively costly linguistic traits to achieve the same goal. Further still, it is not clear which kinds of linguistic complexity facilitate performative usage nor how they do so.

The theoretical literature on performative utterances in semantics and sociolinguistics offers one possible explanation for the reliance on complex utterances when producing performative utterances: a link between complexity and perceived authority. Condoravdi and Lauer (2011) argue that, in directive speech acts like orders, the speaker issuing an order is presupposed to possess some authority over the addressee. Similarly, Bourdieu (1991) treats performative utterances as representations of authority. On both of these views, au-

thoritative speakers cultivate and maintain an appearance of authority in order to successfully complete certain directive speech acts. Indeed, Moldovan (2022) has argued that experts strategically deploy jargon when addressing lay audiences for the purpose of appearing authoritative. Although the link between perceived authority, performativity, and linguistic complexity has been discussed in theoretical research across subfields in linguistics, there is little experimental research investigating the topic. We therefore argue that further research into this domain is necessary, both for the purpose of refining our notion of the functional role of linguistic complexity and for better understanding the nature of legal language.

Further investigation of the division of labor between communicative and cognitive efficiency on the one hand and socio-pragmatic function on the other is thus motivated by the findings of recent research and theoretical claims in semantics, sociolinguistics, and psycholinguistics. The empirical findings about legal language indicate that the latter overrides the former, at least in some contexts. However, the precise nature of the connection between linguistic complexity and performativity remains unclear. In this paper we discuss empirical evidence related to linguistic complexity in the domain of law and discuss implications for performative utterances across areas of language usage.

Hypotheses

In this study, we test whether linguistic complexity enhances perceived authoritativeness in legal language, and if so, which mechanism better explains the effect. We compare three hypotheses:

1. **COSTLY SIGNALING HYPOTHESIS:** Processing difficulty itself signals authority, regardless of its source. Under this account, syntactic complexity and jargon density should independently increase perceived authoritativeness, since each imposes comprehension costs that index expertise or institutional standing. This hypothesis predicts main effects of both syntactic complexity and jargon density on authority ratings.
2. **CONVENTIONALIZATION HYPOTHESIS:** Only linguistic features specifically associated with legal register enhance perceived authority. Under this account, jargon and the modal *shall*, which are strongly marked as "legal-sounding", should increase authoritativeness, while syntactic complexity, which causes processing difficulty but is not uniquely associated with legal language, should not. This hypothesis predicts a main effect of jargon (and possibly *shall*) but no main effect of syntactic complexity.
3. **NULL HYPOTHESIS:** There is no systematic relationship between linguistic complexity and perceived authoritativeness. Legal provisions of varying complexity should receive similar authority ratings.

Both the costly signaling and conventionalization accounts allow for a processing threshold beyond which complexity undermines authority. If comprehension breaks down entirely,

the signal cannot be recovered. This predicts potential interactions between complexity dimensions, such that the presence of one complexity type may modulate the effect of another.

Methods

Participants We recruited 203 participants via Prolific from the United States. The experiment was implemented in jsPsych 7.3.0 and approved by the IRB.

Design The study used a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ within-subjects design crossing syntactic complexity (high vs. low), jargon density (high vs. low), and modal usage (*shall* present vs. absent) (Figure 1). Each participant saw two randomly sampled items from each of the eight conditions, for a total of 16 trials per participant. Trial order was randomized for each participant. No attention checks or exclusion criteria were applied.

Stimuli All stimuli consisted of statutory provisions drawn from the United States Code, the official publication of federal statutory law.¹ The statutes were parsed, divided into sentences, and chunked into clusters of three to four sentences. Each cluster was then assessed for syntactic complexity and jargon density. Syntactic complexity was operationalized as mean dependency length across the sentence cluster. Jargon density was calculated as the proportion of tokens in each cluster that appeared in a glossary of common legal terms compiled from references commonly used in legal practice.² To avoid conflating semantic and syntactic complexity, the jargon list consists primarily of lexical items rather than functional ones.

The sentence clusters were ranked by mean dependency length and jargon density. Items in the top and bottom quartiles for each dimension were identified and crossed, yielding four conditions representing different combinations of syntactic complexity and jargon usage. Clusters drawn from statutory amendment notes were excluded from the candidate pool. Additionally, each cluster was coded for modal usage: items containing *shall* were separated from those using only *may*. This third factor yielded a total of eight conditions with two items per cell (16 items total).

Procedure Participants were instructed to pretend they were consultants for legislators working on a series of bills. They were informed that the drafters were interested in creating laws that sound as authoritative as possible and were seeking feedback from constituents about their drafts. On each trial, participants first read a brief statutory provision at their own pace. After advancing, they answered a four-alternative forced-choice comprehension question about the provision (without the ability to return to the text), rated the perceived

authoritativeness of the provision on the 5-point Likert scale (1 = “not authoritative at all” to 5 = “very authoritative”), and wrote a brief explanation of their reasoning.

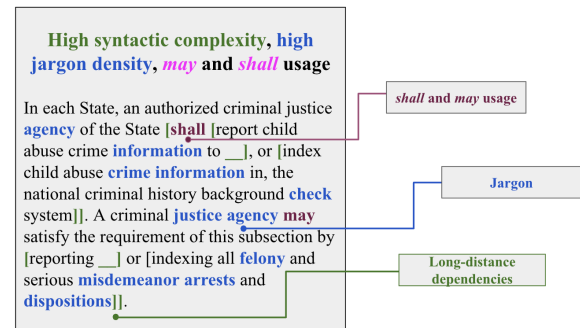


Figure 1: Example of an item with high syntactic complexity, high jargon density, and *may* & *shall*.

Results

Authoritativeness ratings across items were generally high, with a mean of 3.98 (SD = 1.09), a median of 4, and a mode of 5. The distribution was left-skewed: 40.5% of ratings were 5 (very authoritative), 31.9% were 4, 16.7% were 3, 7.3% were 2, and 3.6% were 1 (not authoritative). Comprehension accuracy was high overall (M = 89.6%), indicating that participants generally understood the statutory provisions.

Model specification We analyzed authoritativeness ratings using linear mixed-effects regression implemented in lme4 (Bates et al., 2015). Syntactic complexity, jargon density, and *shall* usage were included as sum-coded fixed effects, along with all two- and three-way interactions. Participant and item were included as random intercepts; the sparse within-cell observations (two items per condition per participant) precluded reliable estimation of random slopes.³ The random effects structure captured substantial between-participant variability (SD = 0.63) and modest between-item variability (SD = 0.12), with residual SD = 0.88.

The Type III ANOVA revealed no significant main effects of syntactic complexity ($F(1, 8) = 0.01, p = .91$) or *shall* usage ($F(1, 8) = 0.06, p = .81$). There was a significant main effect of jargon density ($F(1, 8) = 6.82, p = .03$), with high-jargon provisions rated as more authoritative than low-jargon provisions. However, this main effect was qualified by the significant three-way interaction reported below. None of the two-way interactions reached significance: syntax $\times$ jargon ($F(1, 8) = 3.19, p = .11$), syntax $\times$ modal ($F(1, 8) < 0.01, p = .95$), and jargon $\times$ modal ($F(1, 8) < 0.01, p = .93$).

¹The data used in this project are available at <https://uscode.house.gov/download/download.shtml>.

²This glossary may be found at <https://legal.thomsonreuters.com/blog/legal-glossary/> and in the project repository.

³All reported effects are robust under a cumulative-link mixed model treating ratings as ordinal (ordinal::clmm); main effect of jargon $\chi^2 = 3.12, p = .002$; three-way interaction $\chi^2 = -3.13, p = .002$.

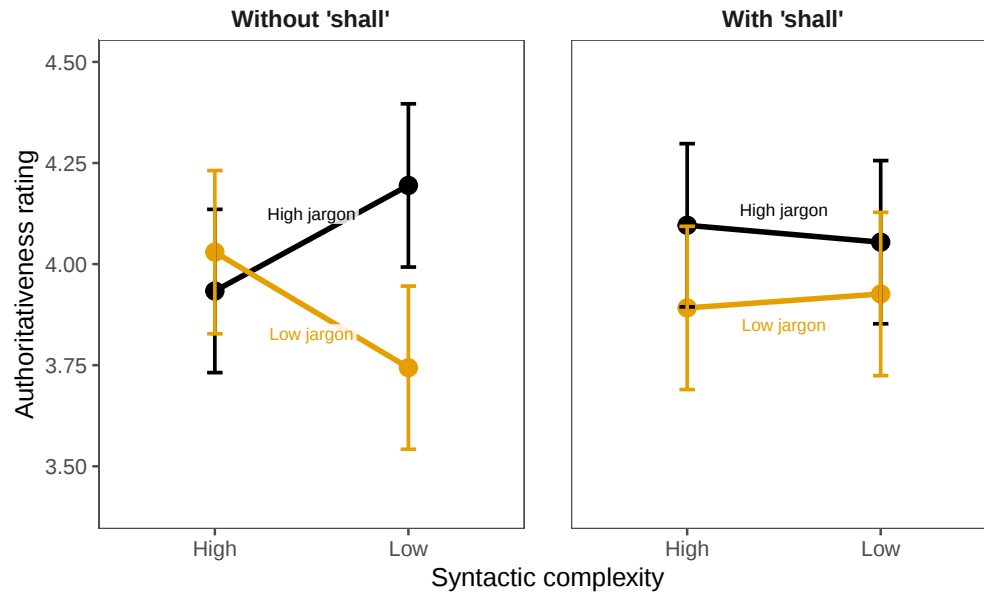


Figure 2: Estimated marginal means for authoritativeness ratings across the eight experimental conditions. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The jargon effect (difference between high and low jargon) is significant only in the low syntax, without-*shall* condition.

The analysis revealed a significant three-way interaction between syntactic complexity, jargon density, and *shall* usage ($F(1, 8) = 5.61, p = .045; \beta = 0.62, t(8) = 2.37$). To interpret this interaction, we examined simple effects of jargon density at each combination of syntactic complexity and modal presence using estimated marginal means (Figure 2). The simple effects analysis revealed that jargon density significantly predicted authoritativeness ratings in only one of the four syntax-by-modal conditions: when syntactic complexity was low and the provision did not contain *shall*, high-jargon provisions were rated as substantially more authoritative than low-jargon provisions ($\Delta = 0.45, z = 3.43, p < .001$). In the remaining three conditions, jargon density did not significantly affect authoritativeness ratings: high syntax without *shall* ($\Delta = -0.10, z = -0.73, p = .47$), high syntax with *shall* ($\Delta = 0.20, z = 1.55, p = .12$), and low syntax with *shall* ($\Delta = 0.13, z = 0.97, p = .33$).

This pattern suggests that jargon functions as an authority signal only under specific conditions. When the text is syntactically simple enough to parse and when the modal *shall*, itself a potential marker of legal authority, is absent. When either syntactic complexity is high or *shall* is present, jargon provides no additional boost to perceived authority.

Comprehension accuracy We examined whether comprehension accuracy differed across experimental conditions (Figure 3). Overall, provisions containing *shall* were understood better ($M = 92.0\%$) than those without ($M = 87.3\%$; $\chi^2 = 19.1, p < .001$). Neither syntactic complexity nor jargon density significantly affected comprehension as main

effects ($ps > .35$). However, the pattern of comprehension accuracy across conditions was complex, with apparent interactions between factors. In particular, high-jargon provisions showed higher comprehension than low-jargon provisions in the without-*shall* conditions, but this pattern reversed when *shall* was present (Figure 3).

At the participant level, overall comprehension accuracy was positively correlated with mean authority ratings ($r = .25, p < .001$). Participants who better understood the statutory provisions tended to rate them as more authoritative (Figure 4). A within-between decomposition revealed that this relationship was entirely between-person ($\beta_{\text{between}} = 1.29, p < .001$), with no significant within-person effect ($\beta_{\text{within}} = 0.09, p = .12$). That is, participants who performed well overall also gave higher ratings overall, but answering a particular comprehension question correctly did not predict higher ratings for that specific provision.

Free response data Exploratory analysis of participants' written explanations provides insight into the competing effects of *shall* on perceived authority. Of 3,248 total free responses, 253 (7.8%) explicitly mentioned *shall* or "modal" language. We used keyword matching to classify these responses by valence: whether the participant described *shall* as increasing authority (e.g., "authoritative," "official," "mandatory") or decreasing authority (e.g., "outdated," "wishy-washy," "awkward"). The majority of *shall*-mentioning responses framed the modal positively, as commanding or obligatory: "The use of 'shall' makes it clear this is a requirement, not a suggestion"; "Shall sounds very official and legal." A

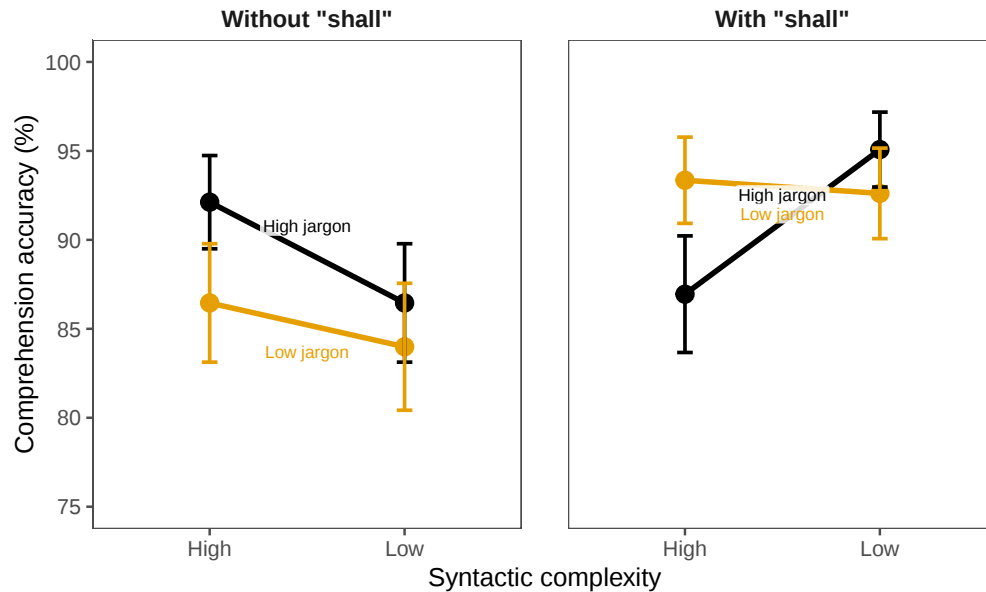


Figure 3: Comprehension accuracy across experimental conditions. Provisions containing *shall* were understood better overall than those without.

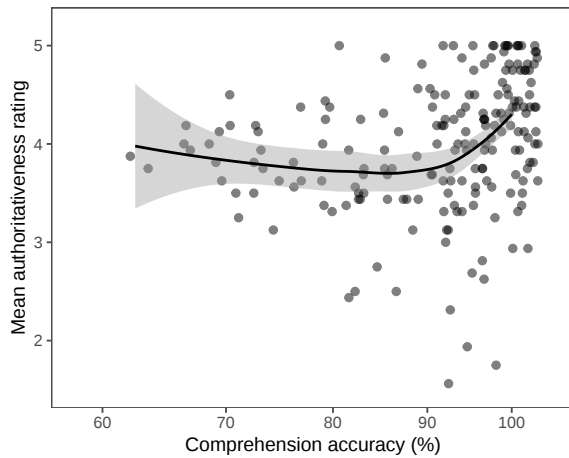


Figure 4: Relationship between participant-level comprehension accuracy and mean authoritativeness ratings. Each point represents one participant.

smaller proportion described *shall* as decreasing authoritativeness or sounding awkward: “The word ‘shall’ feels outdated and wishy-washy”; “It’s too wishy-washy: ‘shall not be...’ ‘may enforce...’” We examined whether *shall*-mentioning responses differed in their associated ratings based on valence. Trials where participants positively commented on *shall* had a mean authority rating of 4.42, while trials with negative *shall* comments had a mean of 3.11. This confirms that the qualitative responses reflect genuine variation in how *shall* influenced ratings, rather than post-hoc rationalization.

Discussion

The three-way interaction between syntactic complexity, jargon density, and *shall* usage reveals that the relationship between linguistic complexity and perceived authority is more nuanced than a simple main effect would suggest. Jargon functions as an authority signal only under specific conditions, namely when syntactic complexity is low and when the modal *shall* is absent. This pattern has implications for theories of both legal language and performative speech acts.

Why does jargon work only with simple syntax? One interpretation is that jargon serves as an indexical marker of legal expertise, but this signal can only be detected when readers are not overwhelmed by processing demands. When syntactic complexity is high, readers may be too occupied parsing the sentence structure to register the authority-signaling function of specialized terminology. This interpretation aligns with capacity-based accounts of language processing. Following these views, authority signaling may be a secondary, pragmatic inference that requires spare cognitive resources (Gibson et al., 2019). Alternatively, the interaction may reflect a ceiling effect on perceived complexity, where different complexity types are partially redundant signals of the same underlying construct. When syntax is already difficult, adding jargon provides no additional signal because the text is already maximally “legal-sounding.” Under this view, it is presupposed that syntactic complexity is at least partially conventionalized in law, a position advocated in prior work on legalese (Martínez et al., 2022, 2024; Tiersma, 2008). It may be the case that syntactic complexity is characteristic of legalese, but less diagnostic than jargon or *shall* usage. While

high use of the modal *shall* and legal jargon are specific to the language of the law (Brooks & Hawkins, 2026) and may alone be sufficient to signal legal-ness, complex syntax can be observed in a range of genres (Nádorníková et al., 2026). We leave the role that various kinds of syntactic complexity may play in law and other genres as an open question for future work.

Why does *shall* neutralize the jargon effect? The presence of *shall* eliminated the jargon effect entirely, regardless of syntactic complexity. At first glance, this suggests that *shall* serves as a sufficient marker of legal authority, rendering jargon redundant. On this view, the modal activates a “legal frame” that subsumes other register signals. Yet this interpretation sits uneasily with the null main effect of *shall* itself. If *shall* is such a potent authority marker, why did it not increase ratings overall? The qualitative data suggest an answer: the null main effect masks substantial individual variation. A substantial proportion of *shall*-mentioning responses described the modal negatively, and these responses were associated with markedly lower authority ratings. This pattern is consistent with *shall* being a register marker undergoing ideological contestation. The Plain Language movement in legal drafting has explicitly targeted *shall* for elimination (Garzone, 2013). Style guides from institutions including the Federal Register now discourage its use (Office of the Federal Register, n.d.; U.S. General Services Administration, plainlanguage.gov, n.d.). For participants exposed to these prescriptive norms—or who independently perceive *shall* as stuffy—the modal may index incompetence rather than authority. For others, *shall* retains its traditional association with binding legal force. When these opposing effects aggregate across participants, they cancel out, producing a null main effect. But critically, the presence of *shall* still neutralizes the jargon effect. One possibility is that *shall*, regardless of its valence for a given participant, draws explicit attention to register, making the implicit authority signal of jargon redundant or invisible. Whether participants view *shall* positively or negatively, its salience as a register marker may absorb the evaluative bandwidth that jargon would otherwise occupy. This interpretation complicates the conventionalization account in productive ways. Register markers are not static associations but are subject to ongoing sociolinguistic negotiation. What counts as “legal-sounding” is historically contingent and ideologically contested.

Implications for performativity These findings bear on the broader question motivating this research: why legal language employs costly linguistic strategies when simpler alternatives could convey the same propositional content. The link, we suggest, runs through felicity conditions on performative speech acts. Following Condoravdi and Lauer (2011), directive speech acts presuppose that the speaker possesses authority over the addressee (an order issued by someone without such standing is infelicitous). Legal texts face an

analogous requirement. A statute that fails to project legislative authority cannot felicitously create the obligations it describes. On this view, the function of legal register markers like jargon is not merely to seem authoritative but to satisfy a precondition on performative force. Jargon signals that the text belongs to the institutional context in which legal performatives are licensed. This explains why conventionalized register markers succeed where generic processing difficulty does not: comprehenders are not simply associating complexity with authority, but rather are recognizing the text as belonging to a register where performative speech acts are felicitous. The persistence of legalese, despite its processing costs, may thus reflect not irrationality or obfuscation but a pragmatic solution to the problem of indexing performative standing.

Implications for the Conventionalization hypothesis

These results provide partial support for the Conventionalization hypothesis. We find that complexity types interact: jargon usage enhances authority only when syntactic complexity is low and explicit legal markers are absent. This suggests that the relationship between complexity and authority is not monotonic but conditional on the specific combination of linguistic features present.

Limitations Several limitations warrant consideration. First, the stimuli were drawn from a single source (U.S. federal statutory law), limiting generalizability to other legal genres such as contracts or judicial opinions. Second, the binary manipulation of complexity levels (high vs. low quartiles) may obscure more fine-grained relationships. Third, the relatively high ceiling on authority ratings (mean = 3.98 on a 5-point scale) may have compressed the range of detectable effects.

Conclusion

Although language usage is mediated by efficiency, competing pressures such as the desire to be maximally informative or clear can function as countervailing forces. In specialized domains like law, the balance between efficiency and economy observed in so many areas of language use can be markedly distinct. It is this markedness which makes legalese such a fruitful topic of inquiry, not only for applied research but also for understanding when linguistic inefficiency might serve a functional role in the communicative process. In this paper, we have offered empirical evidence that linguistic complexity in the form of jargon usage can serve the socio-pragmatic function of signaling authoritativeness. As in other areas of language usage, this function does not operate in a vacuum. The usefulness of complexity is counterbalanced by a competing pressure to keep legal utterances intelligible, as poorly understood bills are perceived as less authoritative than complex, but clear draft laws. The continued study of language in specialized domains of usage has the potential to shed further insight into the balance of efficiency with other communicative constraints.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the Stanford Linguistics department and Social Interaction Lab for their support and feedback related to this work. Generative AI assistance was used for the purpose of writing code to implement the experiment and managing data in the analysis process.

References

- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Harvard University Press.
- Bates, D., Mächler, M., Bolker, B., & Walker, S. (2015). Fitting linear mixed-effects models using lme4. *Journal of statistical software*, 67, 1–48.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Harvard university press.
- Brooks, T., & Hawkins, R. D. (2026). Shall usage in legal texts is motivated by genre, not writing process or content [to appear]. *Proceedings of the Linguistic Society of America*.
- Condoravdi, C., & Lauer, S. (2011). Performative Verbs and Performative Acts. *Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung*, 15, 149–164. <https://ojs.ub.uni-konstanz.de/sub/index.php/sub/article/view/369>
- Garzone, G. (2013). Variation in the use of modality in legislative texts: Focus on *shall*. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 57, 68–81. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2013.07.008>
- Gibson, E., Futrell, R., Piantadosi, S. P., Dautriche, I., Mahowald, K., Bergen, L., & Levy, R. (2019). How Efficiency Shapes Human Language. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 23(5), 389–407. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2019.02.003>
- Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics, volume 3: Speech acts*. Academic Press.
- Horn, R., Laurence. (1984). Toward a new taxonomy for pragmatic inference: Q-based and r-based implicature. In D. Schiffrin (Ed.), *Meaning, form, and use in context: Linguistic applications* (pp. 11–42). Georgetown University Press.
- Kurzon, D. (1986). *It is hereby performed...: Explorations in legal speech acts*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Martínez, E., Mollica, F., & Gibson, E. (2022). Poor writing, not specialized concepts, drives processing difficulty in legal language. *Cognition*, 224, 105070. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2022.105070>
- Martínez, E., Mollica, F., & Gibson, E. (2024). Even laypeople use legalese. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 121(35), e2405564121. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2405564121>
- Moldovan, A. (2022). Technical Language as Evidence of Expertise. *Languages*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages7010041>
- Nádorníková, O., Milička, J., & Rosen, A. (2026). Exploring crosslinguistic and genre variation in syntactic complexity: Insights from a multilingual parallel corpus. *Linguistics Vanguard*.
- Office of the Federal Register. (n.d.). Plain language tools. <https://www.archives.gov/federal-register/write/plain-language>
- Qi, D., Zhou, C., & Liu, H. (2022). Discourse Markers as the Classificatory Factors of Speech Acts. In M. Sun, Y. Liu, W. Che, Y. Feng, X. Qiu, G. Rao, & Y. Chen (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 21st Chinese National Conference on Computational Linguistics* (pp. 728–737). Chinese Information Processing Society of China. <https://aclanthology.org/2022.ccl-1.65/>
- Searle, J. (1969). *Speech acts*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tiersma, P. (2008). The nature of legal language. In J. Gibbons & T. M. Turell (Eds.), *Dimensions of forensic linguistics* (pp. 7–25). John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- U.S. General Services Administration, plainlanguage.gov. (n.d.). Writing for understanding. <https://digital.gov/guides/writing-understanding/familiar-terms>