

Linguistic features of Vietnamese legal language: a study of court documents (2020–2025)

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Abstract: This article examines the linguistic features of Vietnamese legal texts. The analysis draws on a corpus of 150 court documents issued between 2020 and 2025 (533,912 word tokens): criminal verdicts, civil judgments, administrative rulings, and decisions of the Supreme People’s Court’s Judicial Council. Previous Vietnamese studies focused mainly on lexical errors in court verdicts (2011) or on legal terminology in normative texts. This study instead treats court documents as an independent genre and analyzes them along three dimensions. The first is vocabulary: Sino-Vietnamese terminology, internal register-switching, and formulaic language. The second is genre structure: an eight-move obligatory schema, identified here for the first time in Vietnamese court documents through Swales and Bhatia’s genre theory. The third is pragmatics: performative speech acts, subject anonymization as a power strategy, gradience of epistemic modality, and a four-group system of legal euphemism serving distinct legal principles. Together, these features form what can be called the “legal tone” of Vietnamese court documents. The

findings contribute to Vietnamese legal linguistics and carry practical implications for legal education, public legal communication, and legal translation.

Keywords: legal language, court documents, genre analysis, legal euphemism, power in discourse, Vietnamese legal linguistics

1. Introduction

Legal language is the linguistic system used in legal texts, procedures, and institutions: statutes, decrees, contracts, court judgments, and other genres. It is a functional variety in its own right. It shares some features with administrative language, but it also has characteristics that no other style has. Every linguistic choice in a legal text carries legal effect, so these texts demand precision and normative obligatoriness above all.

Court documents hold a special place within this system, particularly judgments and decisions of the Supreme People's Court. They are not just the outcome of judicial proceedings. They also serve as a source of case law, and they directly affect the rights and obligations of the parties involved. This dual role creates a tension. The language of a court document has to be precise enough to carry legal validity. At the same time, it has to be clear enough for ordinary citizens to understand the judgments that concern them.

This article analyzes the language of Vietnamese court documents from 2020 to 2025 along three dimensions: legal vocabulary (Sino-Vietnamese terminology and internal register-switching), genre (the structure of judgments), and pragmatics (strategies of linguistic power and legal euphemism).

2. Literature Review

2.1. International research on legal language

Research on legal linguistics has a long theoretical and empirical tradition worldwide. Mellinkoff (1963) was the first to systematize the features of English legal language. He identified a tendency toward archaic vocabulary, foreign borrowings, long sentences, and deliberately vague expressions. Tiersma's (1999) *Legal Language* is still the most comprehensive treatment of Anglo-American legal language, covering the entire system of legal texts from vocabulary to pragmatics. Bhatia (1993) applied genre theory to English legal texts and laid the groundwork for treating judgments as an independent genre. Gibbons (2003) studied forensic linguistics, including courtroom discourse.

In Asia, studies of Chinese legal language (Liu, 2003; Li, 2016) share considerable common ground with the Vietnamese context. Both systems share a socialist civil-law foundation and a high proportion of Sino-derived terminology. A more recent study, Do et al. (2025), examines legal reasoning in Vietnamese judgments from a sociology-of-law perspective, but it does not analyze the language itself.

2.2. Research on legal language in Vietnam

Vietnamese legal-linguistics research is still young. It can be grouped into four strands. The first strand concerns general administrative-legal language. Đinh and Nguyễn (1993), Nguyễn V.K. (2014), Dương (2008), and Đỗ V.H. (2015) examine style and structure across statutes and decrees, without focusing on court documents specifically. The second strand concerns legal terminology. Lê (1999) and Nguyễn T.L.N. (2019) analyze Vietnamese legal terms mainly in statutory texts. The third strand concerns lexical errors in judgments. Nguyễn T.L. (2011) classifies three error types in judgments, a prescriptive approach that differs from the descriptive aim adopted here. The fourth strand concerns discourse and appraisal analysis. Nguyễn T.H. (2010)

examines administrative texts, while Phan (2024) applies Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005) to indictments rather than judgments.

No prior study has surveyed all four types of Vietnamese court document together, analyzed them from a genre and power-in-discourse perspective, and used 2020–2025 data, the period in which the case-law system has operated long enough to shape judicial language. These gaps motivate the present study.

3. Theoretical Framework, Corpus, and Methodology

3.1. Theoretical approach

This study combines three complementary frameworks. Genre analysis (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993, 2017) accounts for the obligatory-move structure of the judgment. Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 1997; Wodak & Meyer, 2016) accounts for the power relations expressed through anonymization strategies. Speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; Marmor, 2014) treats the judgment as a sequence of performative utterances, ones that create legal reality rather than simply describing it.

3.2. Corpus source and processing

The corpus was collected from the Supreme People's Court's system for publishing judgments and decisions (congbobanan.toaan.gov.vn), covering 2020–2025. Table 1 reports the composition of the four sub-corpora, along with the density of Sino-Vietnamese legal terminology in each.

Document type	No. of docs	Issuing authority	Tokens	Type s	Legal terms	Sino-Vietnamese terms	SV/legal terms (%)
Criminal judgments (first-instance, appellate, cassation)	50	District-level and provincial/city courts	120,419	2,357	565	425	75.22
Civil judgments (contract, land, marriage and family disputes)	50	District-level and provincial/city courts	247,000	2,179	566	432	76.33
Administrative judgments (complaints against administrative decisions/acts)	30	District-level and provincial/city courts	124,132	1,935	432	340	78.70
Cassation decisions, precedents	20	Supreme People's Court (Judicial Council)	42,361	1,382	309	251	81.23
Whole corpus	150	—	533,912	7,853	1,872	1,448	77.35

Table 1. Corpus of court documents surveyed (2020–2025) and density of Sino-Vietnamese legal terminology across document types.

Data processing followed four steps. First, collection and cleaning: PDF files were converted to plain UTF-8 text, with document numbers, seals, and watermarks removed. Second, word segmentation and part-of-speech tagging, to identify the boundaries of bi- and poly-

syllabic Sino-Vietnamese compounds that white space alone does not mark. Third, frequency extraction with the concordance tool AntConc (Anthony, 2022), which generated word lists and n-grams for each sub-corpus and for the whole corpus. Fourth, term matching against a legal-terminology list, to identify Sino-Vietnamese legal terms.

3.3 Analytic procedure

The study follows a corpus-based mixed-methods design in four phases. First, purposive stratified sampling selected 150 court documents, balanced across four genres, geographical locations, and adjudication levels (first-instance, appellate, and cassation), to reduce sampling bias. Second, a close reading of the corpus combined genre analysis, critical discourse analysis, and speech act theory. Third, the qualitative criteria that emerged from this reading were formalized into a structured coding scheme covering Sino-Vietnamese terminology, formulaic expressions, and euphemisms. Finally, descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations, computed in AntConc, extracted and compared the frequencies of these target features.

4. Lexical features

4.1. Sino-Vietnamese terminology as the foundational layer

Sino-Vietnamese terms make up 77.35% of legal terminology in court documents (Table 1). Court documents draw on the terminology of both substantive and procedural law at once, which pushes this proportion even higher. Relative to the whole corpus, though, Sino-Vietnamese terms account for only 18.4% of all word types (1,448 of 7,853; Table 1). The reason is that the “case facts” section, which makes up the bulk of any judgment, is written mainly in native Vietnamese. Sino-Vietnamese density is concentrated in the other sections. An example:

(1) “Defendant Nguyễn Văn A committed the offense of “Murder” under Article 123 of the 2015 Penal Code (as amended and supplemented in 2017).” (Criminal judgment, Hanoi People’s Court, 2022)

Figure 1 illustrates Sino-Vietnamese term density in a criminal judgment (boxed in red).

QUYẾT ĐỊNH:

Căn cứ vào điểm b khoản 1 Điều 355; điểm a, c khoản 2 Điều 357 của Bộ luật Tố tụng hình sự.

1. Chấp nhận kháng nghị của Viện kiểm sát nhân dân khu vực 3 – Cần Thơ đối với bị cáo **Phạm Trường Q.** Sửa bản án hình sự sơ thẩm số: 03/2025/HS-ST ngày 17 tháng 7 năm 2025 của Tòa án nhân dân khu vực 3 – Cần Thơ, thành phố Cần Thơ.

Tuyên bố: Bị cáo **Phạm Trường Q.** phạm tội “Cho vay lãi nặng trong giao dịch dân sự”.

Figure 1. Sino-Vietnamese term density in a civil judgment (illustrative excerpt).

Sino-Vietnamese legal terminology in court documents can be classified into five functional groups:

(a) Nouns denoting procedural participants: *bị cáo* (defendant), *bị đơn* (defendant in a civil case), *nguyên đơn* (plaintiff), *bị hại* (victim), *Hội đồng xét xử* (Trial Panel), *Kiểm sát viên* (Procurator), *Hội thẩm nhân dân* (People’s Assessor), etc.

A key feature is that each term denotes one specific legal status tied to a particular stage of proceedings. *Bị can* (“the accused”, during investigation) differs from *bị cáo* (“the defendant”, during trial), for example. Nguyễn T.L. (2011) has shown that this distinction is often conflated in practice, which leads to serious errors of reference.

(b) Nouns denoting core legal concepts: *pháp nhân* (legal entity), *quyền* (right), *quyền lợi* (interest), *nghĩa vụ* (obligation), *nhân thân* (personal status), *thân nhân* (next of kin), *nghĩa vụ dân sự* (civil obligation), *bồi thường thiệt hại* (damages), *tình tiết* (circumstance), *kháng cáo* (appeal), *kháng nghị* (protest), *phúc thẩm* (appellate review), *giám đốc thẩm* (cassation review), *tái thẩm* (reopening/retrial), *thời hiệu* (statute of limitations), *thẩm quyền* (jurisdiction), *án phí* (court

fees), *hình sự* (criminal), *dân sự* (civil), *vụ án* (case), *bản án* (judgment), *cáo trạng* (indictment), etc.

(c) Performative legal verbs: *tuyên phạt* (to sentence), *truy tố* (to prosecute), *xét xử* (to try), *bác bỏ* (to reject), *chấp nhận* (to accept/uphold), *hủy bỏ* (to annul), *đình chỉ* (to suspend/discontinue), *áp dụng* (to apply), *viện dẫn* (to invoke), *luận tội* (to indict/argue guilt), *căn cứ* (to base [a decision] on), etc. This group matters most, because these verbs create legal reality the moment they are uttered in a courtroom.

(d) Constative legal verbs describing conduct: *phạm tội* (to commit an offense), *chủ mưu* (to instigate), *tòng phạm* (to be an accomplice), *hành hung* (to assault), *tiêu hủy [chứng cứ]* (to destroy [evidence]), *cố ý* (intentionally), *vô ý* (unintentionally), *khai nhận* (to confess/testify), *thừa nhận* (to admit), *biện minh* (to justify), *tố giác* (to denounce), *tố cáo* (to accuse/report), *xác nhận* (to confirm), etc.

(e) Legal adjectives forming binary oppositions: *hợp pháp/bất hợp pháp* (lawful/unlawful), *hiệu lực/vô hiệu lực* (valid/invalid), *cố ý/vô ý* (intentional/unintentional), *có căn cứ/vô căn cứ* (well-founded/unfounded), etc. This grammatical feature supports the binary logic of legal reasoning: guilty or not guilty, right or wrong. A similar system of legal adjectives exists in French and German legal language (Mattila, 2013), though the specific Sino-Vietnamese forms are of course particular to Vietnamese.

4.2. Internal register-switching

Internal register-switching is a syntactic-lexical feature specific to Vietnamese court documents, and one that no earlier study appears to have documented systematically. Within the same sentence or paragraph, the text shifts between Sino-Vietnamese terminology in the legal-technical portions and native Vietnamese vocabulary in the portions that describe factual events. This shift marks two different functions inside a single text. A few examples illustrate the pattern:

(2) Narrative portion: “The defendant confessed that at around 9 p.m. on 15 March 2022, he stabbed the victim Nguyễn Thị D multiple times with a sharp knife.” Reasoning portion: “The defendant’s conduct constitutes the offense

provided in clause 2, Article 134 of the PENAL CODE on “Intentional infliction of injury.”” (Criminal judgment, Hai Phong City Court, 2023)

4.3. Formulaic language

Nguyen Thi Le (2011) observed that judgments contain many recurrent phrases and treated this as a stylistic error. We read the same phenomenon differently: these recurrent phrases are “formulaic language”, a genre-defining feature (Tiersma, 1999; Goźdz-Roszkowski, 2011) through which formulaic expressions carry out specific legal functions. Three groups emerged from the corpus:

(a) Legal-reference formulae perform an empowerment function: “Pursuant to Article... of the Code...”, “Applying clause..., point... of the Code/Law...”, “In accordance with the foregoing provisions”, etc. Repetition here is obligatory, since every legal basis must be fully cited for the judgment to be valid.

(b) Section-marking formulae create a recognizable generic structure: “Considering that...”, “The Trial Panel finds that...”, “Regarding the civil aspect...”, “Regarding the plaintiff’s claim...”, etc.

(c) Adjudicative formulae: these enable language to perform acts such as “Sentences...”, “Orders the defendant to...”, “Accepts all/part of the claim...”, “Rejects the appeal...”, etc. This is the group with the most legal weight, since the sentence itself creates legal reality.

A related convention, writing sums both in figures and in words (“VND 450,000,000 (four hundred fifty million *đồng*)”), works as intentional redundancy against alteration or error. No other Vietnamese functional style has this feature.

5. Genre Features

5.1. Genre-structure analysis of first-instance criminal judgments

This section applies the genre theory of Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993), an approach that, as far as we can tell, has not been applied to

Vietnamese court documents before. We identify eight obligatory moves that make up the invariant structure of first-instance criminal judgments in Vietnam, plus one optional move. Table 2 sets these out and also compares how each move is realized across the four document types.

Move	Linguistic function	Status / occurrence	Criminal	Civil	Administrative	Cassation
1. National title, motto, case identification	Establishing jurisdiction and identification	Obligatory, 100%	✓	✓	✓	✓
2. Composition of the Trial Panel	Establishing the lawful composition of the Trial Panel	Obligatory, 100%	✓	✓	✓	✓
3. Case narrative / defendant's background (+3b claim, 3c response in civil)	Narrating the facts and circumstances of the case	Obligatory, 100%	✓	✓ (+3b, 3c)	✓	✓
4. Courtroom proceedings / testimony and argument	Recording and confirming the proceedings	Obligatory, 100%	✓	✓	✓	✓
5. Trial Panel's findings / "Considering that..." (+5a oversight in administrative)	Legal reasoning, evaluation of evidence	Obligatory, 100%	✓	✓	✓ (+5a)	✓✓ (deeper; assessment of judgment under protest)

Move	Linguistic function	Status / occurrence	Criminal	Civil	Administrative	Cassation
6. Applicable legal grounds	Citing the law, establishing legality of the decision	Obligatory, 100%	✓	✓	✓	✓
7. DECISION – Judgment	Adjudication (performative speech act)	Obligatory, 100%	✓	✓	✓	✓
8. Instructions on appeal and enforcement	Post-trial guidance, safeguarding procedural rights	Obligatory, 100%	✓	✓	✓	✓
9*. Dissenting opinion of a minority judge	Reserving an opinion, developing legal reasoning	Optional, 2%	—	—	—	✓ (Judicial Council)

Table 2. Generic structure of Vietnamese court judgments (eight obligatory moves, one optional move) and its variation across the four document types.

This fixed sequence of eight moves is the defining generic feature of court documents. The order cannot be reversed, because each move stands in a logical and legal relationship to the next one. Breaking this sequence is not just a stylistic slip. It can result in the judgment being annulled for procedural violation.

Bhatia's (2017) more recent interdiscursive extension of genre analysis informs how we treat this move structure. Rather than a static template, we see it as a site where legal, procedural, and institutional discourses interact within one professional genre.

5.2. Comparative features across the four types of court documents

Across all four sub-corpora, the eight-move structure serves as a common framework (Table 2). Each document type, however, adjusts it to reflect its own procedural nature:

Civil judgments add Move 3b, “the plaintiff’s claim”, and Move 3c, “the defendant’s response or counterclaim”. This addition reflects the adversarial, equal-footing structure of civil proceedings. The language of these two moves relies heavily on reported speech, which positions the court as an intermediary.

Administrative judgments expand Move 5 into Move 5a, “reviewing the legality of the contested administrative decision”, a move absent from the other document types. The language here functions as oversight language. The court is assessing the legality of a state decision, not passing judgment on an individual.

Cassation decisions have the most complex structure of all. They add the moves “assessment of the judgment under protest” and “determination of legal violations in the trial”. Their language has to do two things at once: adjudicate the specific case and provide nationwide guidance for the uniform application of law.

6. Pragmatic Features

6.1. Performative language

Court documents offer perhaps the clearest illustration of performative speech acts, following the speech act theory of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), and more recently Marmor’s (2014) philosophy-of-language account of legal speech. The sentence “Sentences defendant X to 10 years’ imprisonment” does not describe an event that has already happened. It brings that event into being. The moment the Trial Panel pronounces it, defendant X acquires a new legal status and new legal obligations. Language creates legal reality directly.

Three signals mark performative language in Vietnamese legal texts. First, legal verbs appear in the bare infinitive with no overt subject: “Sentences...”, “Orders...”, “Accepts...”. Second, the adjudicative portion is set in capitals or bold. Third, the ruling sits in a syntactically detached position after a colon. Compared with the language of indictments (Phan, 2024), the performative language of judgments is stronger and carries more legal weight. An indictment proposes; a judgment decides.

6.2. Anonymization and objectification

The most notable pragmatic strategy in court documents is subject anonymization: the human agent disappears behind legal procedures and institutions. Fairclough (1989) calls this the “naturalization of ideology”, the process by which decisions that are inherently political come to look like a natural, objective outcome. Three shifts illustrate it:

Institutionalizing the subject: “The judges decide...” → “The Trial Panel decides...”

Evidentializing the grounds: “We find that...” → “Based on the documents and evidence in the case file, it is found that...” (a subjectless clause)

Erasing the sentencing subject: “The court sentences the defendant to 10 years’ imprisonment” → “Sentences the defendant to 10 years’ imprisonment” (a subjectless clause). Example:

(3) “The Trial Panel finds: based on the documents and evidence in the case file and examined at trial, together with the parties’ testimony and the results of the courtroom debate, the Trial Panel has sufficient grounds to find that...” (Appellate civil judgment, Hanoi High Court, 2023)

This strategy makes a verdict look like the objective outcome of law rather than one judge’s will, which in turn reinforces the legitimacy of the decision.

6.3. Epistemic modality gradience

Court documents show a gradient of epistemic modality, and this gradient shifts with the function of each section:

In the testimony-narrating section: “the defendant testified that...”, “according to the testimony of...”, a low degree of certainty, with the court positioning itself as a mere recorder.

In the reasoning section: “considering that”, “there are sufficient grounds to determine”, “sufficient grounds to conclude”, a moderate degree of certainty, as the court begins to evaluate.

In the adjudicative section: no hedges are used; direct action verbs express absolute certainty, the final decision.

This shift marks the moment the court “receives” evidence and turns it into legal fact, a pragmatic turning point that functional linguistics calls “recontextualization” (Fairclough, 2003).

7. Legal euphemism

7.1. The concept

Traditional linguistic scholarship generally treats euphemism as a rhetorical strategy for softening vulgarity, avoiding sensitive topics, or attenuating the severity of a message in everyday communication (Allan & Burridge, 2006). Legal discourse is usually thought to run on precision, directness, and transparency, so euphemism there looks like it should just be ordinary politeness. It is not. In court documents, euphemism forms a distinct functional system, one that reflects the dual nature of these texts: they are technical documents that demand precision, and they are power documents that carry out the will of the state.

Drawing on Austin’s (1962) framework of performativity, we propose, as a working hypothesis rather than an established finding, that euphemism in court documents works less as concealment and more as a mechanism of recontextualization. Through this mechanism, violent or socially sensitive real-life events get translated into an emotionally

neutral legal vocabulary, which builds a new and controlled “legal reality”. Legal euphemism, on this view, does not just describe conduct. It normalizes that conduct in legal terms and turns everyday discourse into authoritative, coercive discourse.

In the surveyed corpus, the euphemism system is realized mainly through disyllabic Sino-Vietnamese compounds. This lends court documents a formal, objective tone, and it creates the psychological distance needed between the Trial Panel and the defendant. We keep this interpretive claim close to what the linguistic evidence supports, without extending it into socio-legal or economic explanations we have not verified. A binary classification of functional markers across the 150 documents in the corpus shows that these euphemisms move along two axes: maintaining the rigor of the law on one hand, and expressing humaneness or institutional authority on the other. Four functional groups of euphemism emerge from this classification; Table 3 summarizes their illustrative expressions and frequency distribution.

7.2. Group 1: Euphemisms humanizing punishment

This group softens the harsh realities of punishment with more positive language, in keeping with the “principle of socialist humanity” in criminal justice. Table 3 (Group 1 row) lists the core direct-expression and euphemism pairs found in the corpus. An example:

(4) “Considering that the defendant committed a less serious offense and has a good personal record, and that the conditions for applying a humane criminal measure are satisfied, the Trial Panel decides to grant the defendant a suspended sentence with a probationary period of 02 (two) years.” (Criminal judgment, Y District Court, 2022)

7.3. Group 2: Euphemisms in the classification of subjects

Before judgment is pronounced, a court document has to describe the parties without prejudging the outcome or labeling them too early. This constraint gives rise to euphemisms specific to how subjects are classified. For example:

“Persons with related rights and obligations” is a neutral euphemism that avoids labeling parties as winning or losing before the outcome is decided. It is an umbrella term for anyone with a stake in the case besides the plaintiff and defendant.

“The defendant’s conduct shows indicia of an offense”, used in the case-summary section before the reasoning begins, softens the court’s assessment compared with “the defendant has committed an offense”, used in the adjudicative section. This distinction follows the presumption of innocence: language of lower certainty applies until judgment is actually pronounced. Example:

(5) “According to the case file, the defendant’s conduct shows indicia of the offense provided in Article 173 of the Penal Code. The Trial Panel will review and assess all evidence before reaching a conclusion.” (Criminal judgment, Phu Nhuan District Court, 2021)

7.4. Group 3: Euphemisms in criticizing lower-court judgments

A cassation decision of the Judicial Council faces a particular euphemistic demand. It has to point out the lower court’s errors without discrediting the judicial system as a whole. The result is a system of “gentle criticism” euphemisms, listed in the Group 3 row of Table 3. Example:

(6) “The Judicial Council finds: the courts at both levels have not clarified the legal origin of the disputed land parcel and have not fully assessed the evidence submitted by the parties. The appellate judgment lacks solid legal grounds in finding that the land-use right belongs to the defendant.” (Cassation Decision 2023/DS-GĐT of the Judicial Council of the Supreme People’s Court)

7.5. Group 4: Euphemisms in determining charges – balancing precision and caution

Some offenses have unclear boundaries in positive law. This forces court documents to use euphemism to avoid drawing premature conclusions, which gives rise to a layer of “legalized doubt” euphemisms. An example:

(7) “The defendant’s conduct fully satisfies the elements of the offense provided in clause 2, Article 134 of the Penal Code.” (Criminal judgment)

These four groups, together, show that euphemism in court documents is not imprecision or vagueness. It is a deliberate linguistic strategy that serves specific legal principles: humaneness (Group 1), the presumption of innocence (Group 2), the judiciary’s credibility (Group 3), and legal caution (Group 4). Table 3 summarizes the illustrative expressions of all four groups, along with their frequency distribution across the corpus.

Group / legal principle	Direct expression	Euphemism used in the corpus	n	%
Group 1 – Humanizing punishment (socialist humanity)	not having to go to prison; imprisonment; dying in prison (execution); paying money; a humane measure	“granted a suspended sentence”; “sentenced to imprisonment / a fixed-term prison sentence”; “the highest penalty / the death penalty”; “performing a civil obligation / returning the sum”; “a humane criminal measure”	187	38.5
Group 2 – Classifying subjects (presumption of innocence)	the winning/losing party; the defendant has committed an offense	“person with related rights and obligations”; “the defendant’s conduct shows indicia of an offense”	166	34.2

Group / legal principle	Direct expression	Euphemism used in the corpus	n	%
Group 3 – Criticizing lower courts (protecting judicial credibility)	Court X ruled wrongly; the judgment is wrong; the reasoning is wrong; the court overlooked it; the judgment is wrongly decided	“the adjudicating levels did not fully assess the evidence”; “still contains errors in the application of law”; “lack solid legal grounds”; “has not clarified circumstances of significant import”; “no legal basis to uphold the judgment”	35	7.2
Group 4 – Determining charges (legal caution)	has committed the offense	“fully satisfies the elements of the offense”; “committed the offense under clause 1 rather than clause 2”	98	20.2
Total			486	100

Table 3. Legal euphemism in Vietnamese court documents: functional groups, direct expressions, illustrative euphemisms, and frequency distribution (n = 486).

8. Discussion: situating Vietnamese legal language

8.1. Vietnam compared with France and the US/UK

To place our findings in a broader theoretical context, we compare Vietnamese legal language with two systems that have shaped it historically. Table 4 draws on secondary literature about French and Anglo-American legal language (Mattila, 2013; Tiersma, 1999), not a parallel corpus of our own. The comparison should be read as a set of hypotheses or tendencies, not established facts, especially where it

claims that Vietnamese legal language differs from the European traditions.

Feature	Vietnam (socialist civil law)	France (civil law)	UK/US (common law)
Proportion of Sino-derived/Latin/archaic terms	Very high (Sino-Vietnamese)	Moderate (Latin, Old French)	High (Latin, Old English–Norman French)
Legal reasoning in judgments	Increasingly detailed (since 2016)	Brief, mainly stating the ruling	Very detailed, precedent-based analysis
Genre structure	8 obligatory moves, fixed order	5–6 moves, concise	6–10 moves, extended analysis
Role of precedent	Developing (case law since 2016)	Limited (not binding)	Foundational principle (<i>stare decisis</i>)
Legal euphemism	A systematic set of 4 groups	Concise, few euphemisms	Extensive euphemism and hedging
Distinctive feature	Internal Sino-Vietnamese/native code-switching; highly formulaic	Concise reference to the Civil Code	Long, detailed adversarial argumentation

Table 4. Comparison of legal-language features: Vietnam, France (civil law), and the UK/US (common law).

This comparison suggests, as a tendency rather than an established fact, that Vietnamese legal language holds a distinctive position among legal languages. Its legal-system structure follows the civil-law model of France and continental Europe. Its terminology, though, sits closer to Chinese than to any European legal language, a consequence of how deeply Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary has penetrated every specialized register of Vietnamese over time. Its developmental trajectory is shifting too: the 2016 case-law reform is pushing the system toward more detailed judicial reasoning. This trend could make Move 5 more complex in future court documents, and it may eventually alter the generic structure documented here.

The internal switching between Sino-Vietnamese terminology and native Vietnamese vocabulary has no close equivalent in any European legal-language system. Diglossia between high and low varieties in bilingual legal systems comes closest as a structural parallel. The Vietnamese case differs in one key respect: both varieties belong to the same language, and their functional split, rule-governed normative language against narrative description of the case, is systematic and built into the genre rather than tied to social class.

8.2. Applications

These findings have practical applications in three areas. In legal education, they can help law students recognize and master legal language, not only by studying substantive law but also through the linguistic analysis of court documents themselves. In public legal communication, understanding the linguistic barriers, especially internal Sino-Vietnamese and Vietnamese code-switching and formulaic expressions, can guide the selective simplification of texts, so that citizens can actually access the judgments that concern them. In legal translation, this descriptive framework of generic and lexical features can underpin the translation of Vietnamese judgments into foreign languages, a field still little studied in Vietnam.

9. Conclusion

This analysis of 150 Vietnamese court documents (2020–2025), approached through genre theory, critical discourse analysis, and speech act theory, points to four main conclusions. First, at the lexical level, Vietnamese legal language shows a high density of Sino-Vietnamese terms, internal register-switching that marks the boundary between narrative and normative text, a rich formulaic layer, and the double numeral convention as intentional redundancy. Second, at the genre level, the Vietnamese judgment follows an obligatory eight-move structure in a fixed order, and all four document types share this backbone with type-specific adaptations. This appears to be the first

systematic Swales/Bhatia-based description of Vietnamese court-document genre structure, and like the other qualitative findings here, it should be treated as preliminary until further quantitative work verifies it. Third, at the pragmatic level, the court judgment stands as the clearest site of performative language in Vietnamese. Subject anonymization, systematic epistemic-modality gradience, and euphemism work alongside it to produce a distinctive judicial voice. Fourth, against the common assumption that legal language avoids euphemism, Vietnamese court documents run on a systematic four-group euphemism system. Each group serves a distinct legal principle: humanity, presumption of innocence, institutional credibility, and legal caution. None of this represents imprecision.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest to disclose related to this manuscript. If any conflicts arise in the future, the Author will promptly inform the journal.

AI Use Statement

The author confirms that artificial intelligence (AI) tools were not used in any aspects of this research.

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