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Bridging Language, Law, and the Administration of Justice in a Multilingual Nigeria

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Abstract

Despite the nation's extraordinary linguistic diversity of over 500 indigenous languages, Nigeria's legal system operates predominantly in English, a colonial legacy. This creates significant barriers to justice for the majority of Nigerians who are not L1 users of the language. The place of forensic linguistics in bridging language, law, and the administration of justice in Nigeria's multilingual society, is the enterprise of this paper. Drawing on a systematic review of existing literature and employing Systemic Functional Linguistics as its theoretical framework, the researcher explores the current state of forensic linguistic services in Nigerian policing and judicial processes, the challenges posed by the dominance of English in legal proceedings, and the potential contributions of forensic linguists to improving access to justice. The findings reveal a paradox: while awareness of forensic linguistics among legal and police personnel is high, actual utilisation of forensic linguistic services remains critically low, largely due to the absence of institutional structures, professional training, and policy frameworks. The paper identifies key domains where forensic linguistics can intervene, including police interrogation, statement-taking, courtroom discourse, authorship attribution, and the interpretation of legal texts. It argues that the institutionalization of forensic linguistics in Nigeria through university programmes, professional training, and policy reform is essential for ensuring linguistic fairness and enhancing the integrity of the justice system. Recommendations for integrating forensic linguistic expertise into Nigeria's legal and law enforcement architecture concludes this attempt, thereby promoting a more inclusive and equitable administration of justice in a multilingual society. This paper thus advocates for systemic change.

Keywords: Forensic Linguistics, Language and Law, Multilingualism, Nigerian Legal System, Access to Justice

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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria presents a paradox that lies at the heart of its legal and linguistic reality. The country is Africa's most populous nation, with over 200 million people speaking more than 500 indigenous languages, yet its entire legal apparatus from legislative drafting to courtroom proceedings to police interrogation operates predominantly in English, the language of the former colonial power. This situation is not merely a matter of administrative convenience; it has profound implications for the administration of justice, particularly for the vast majority of Nigerians who interact with the legal system in a language that is not their mother tongue. The consequences of this linguistic disconnect are manifold. Defendants who do not understand the language of the court may be unable to follow proceedings, participate meaningfully in their own defence, or comprehend the charges against them. Witnesses may give testimony that is distorted through inadequate interpretation. Suspects may sign statements they cannot read, let alone understand. In each of these scenarios, the integrity of the justice process is compromised, and the rights of individuals are placed at risk. The right to a fair hearing, guaranteed by Section 36 of the 1999 Constitution, is rendered hollow when the accused cannot understand the language in which the proceedings are conducted It is within this context that forensic linguistics emerges as a potentially transformative discipline. Forensic linguistics which refers to the application of linguistic knowledge, methods, and insights to legal contexts, offers a systematic framework for addressing the language related challenges that pervade Nigeria's justice system. The field encompasses three key elements: the written language of the law, the spoken language of legal processes, and language analysis as evidence or as an investigative tool (Coulthard & Johnson, 2007). Globally, forensic linguists regularly serve as expert witnesses in criminal and civil cases, assisting in authorship identification, speaker identification, and the analysis of disputed statements. In Nigeria, however, the discipline remains in its nascent stages, with limited empirical studies, no comprehensive textbooks, and no sustained academic programmes in the field. The most striking finding from the existing literature is a paradox of high awareness and low utilization. Oguejiofor and Evbuomwan (2022) found that awareness about forensic linguistics among police and legal personnel in Nigeria is high, yet only a few have ever consulted or worked with a forensic linguist. This paradox demands explanation and points to deeper structural issues in the Nigerian justice system, including the absence of institutional mechanisms, limited understanding of what forensic linguists actually do, and the lack of a body of precedent to guide the use of forensic linguistic evidence.

This paper argues that the institutionalization of forensic linguistics in Nigeria is not a luxury but a necessity for any serious attempt to bridge the gap between language, law, and the administration of justice in a multilingual society. It examines the current state of forensic linguistic services in Nigerian policing and judicial processes, identifies the linguistic barriers that affect access to justice, explores the potential contributions of forensic linguistics to police interrogation, courtroom discourse, authorship attribution, and legal text interpretation, and proposes an institutional framework for integrating forensic linguistic expertise into Nigeria's legal and law enforcement architecture.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Nigerian legal system operates in a linguistic context that is fundamentally different from that of the common law jurisdictions from which it was inherited. English law developed in a predominantly monolingual society. Nigerian law operates in a profoundly multilingual society. This phenomenon has created a range of problems that have not been adequately addressed, there is firstly a problem of access. Majority of Nigerians do not understand legal proceedings conducted in English, this means that most defendants cannot follow their own trials, most witnesses cannot understand the questions put to them, and most litigants cannot comprehend the legal documents that determine their fate. The right to a fair hearing, guaranteed by Section 36 of the 1999 Constitution, is therefore compromised when the accused cannot

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understand the language of the proceedings. Secondly, when statements are taken in indigenous languages and translated into English by untrained "professionals", there is a high risk of distortion, omission, and misinterpretation. Research in other African jurisdictions has shown that untrained interpreters routinely produce inaccurate translations that can lead to wrongful convictions. Thirdly, there is a problem of institutional capacity. Nigeria does not have a forensic linguistic units in its police force, no panel of forensic linguistic experts available to courts, and only few universities have Forensic Linguistics as a course to produce qualified forensic linguists (e.g. Plateau State University, Bokkos). This means that even when the need for linguistic expertise is recognised, there is no mechanism for accessing it. Fourthly, there is a problem of scholarly attention. While forensic linguistics has developed as a robust discipline in Europe, North America, and Australia, and is beginning to emerge in Southern and East Africa, it remains largely neglected in Nigerian scholarship. There are few empirical studies, no comprehensive textbooks, and few sustained academic programmes in the field.

These four problems access, accuracy, institutional capacity, and scholarly neglect constitute the research problem that this paper addresses.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this study is to examine the place of forensic linguistics in bridging language, law, and the administration of justice in Nigeria's multilingual society.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine the current state of forensic linguistic services in Nigerian policing and judicial processes.
2. Identify the linguistic barriers that affect access to justice in Nigeria's multilingual legal system.
3. Explore the potential contributions of forensic linguistics to police interrogation, courtroom discourse, authorship attribution, and legal text interpretation in Nigeria.
4. Propose an institutional framework for the integration of forensic linguistics into Nigeria's legal and law enforcement architecture.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent are forensic linguistic services utilized in Nigerian policing and judicial processes?
2. What linguistic barriers affect access to justice in Nigeria's multilingual legal system?
3. How can forensic linguistics contribute to improving the administration of justice in Nigeria?
4. What institutional framework is needed for the effective integration of forensic linguistics into Nigeria's legal system?

LITERATURE REVIEW.

What is Forensic Linguistics?

Forensic linguistics, according to Coulthard and Johnson (2007) is an interdisciplinary field that applies linguistic knowledge, insights and methods to legal contexts. They identify three key elements of the field as **The written language of the law** ; including the analysis of legal texts, statutes, contracts, and judgments. **The spoken language of legal processes** ; including courtroom discourse, police interrogation, and lawyer/client communication. **Language analysis as evidence** ,which will include authorship attribution, speaker identification, and the analysis of disputed statements. Globally, forensic linguists work in a range of contexts: serving as expert witnesses in criminal and civil cases, assisting police investigations, advising on language policy, and equally contributing to legal education.

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Forensic Linguistics in Nigeria.

The application of forensic linguistics in Nigeria remains at its earliest stage. The most comprehensive study so far is Farinde's (2009) treatment of forensic linguistics, which includes an examination of police/suspect interrogations in Nigeria. However, this work is now more than a decade old, and the field has evolved considerably since its publication. More recent studies have begun to explore specific applications. Oguejiofor and Evbuomwan (2022) conducted a purposeful survey of forensic linguistic services in Nigerian judicial and policing processes. Their findings revealed a critical paradox: while awareness about forensic linguistics among police and legal personnel is high, only a few have ever consulted or worked with a forensic linguist. Importantly, respondents acknowledged that forensic linguists' evaluation and advice would be useful and would make their work easier if the services are provided, and that forensic linguistic evidence is admissible in Nigerian courts.

Azeez and Tiamiyu (2025) deployed discourse linguistic tools to interrogate the discourse strategies in the responses of one accused of murder during crossexamination and reexamination in court. Their analysis revealed how accused persons use linguistic strategies to construct narratives that mitigate guilt and influence courtroom perceptions.

Olowoniyi (2023) conducted a forensic discourse analysis of police/accused conversations in selected police stations in Zaria, finding that police officers often employ coercive language strategies including leading questions, interruptions, and confrontational tones to exert power and control over the accused. Ojedokun (2025) demonstrated the application of forensic stylistic approaches to authorship attribution in examination malpractice in Nigeria, showing that with a database of written texts in Yoruba language, it is possible to extract relevant stylometric features of the author and apply appropriate methods and tools to identify or verify authorship.

Language and Law in Nigeria's Multilingual Society.

The relationship between language and the law in Nigeria has attracted increasing attention among scholars. Aluya et al. (2024) investigated how the relationship between language and law in Nigeria's legal system reflects linguistic dominance, lack of language access, power imbalances, and inequality, all of which impact the pursuit of justice by marginalized groups in a multilingual and multiethnic society. Baba and Isaiah (2025) observe that Nigeria is characterized by its linguistic diversity with over 500 languages but operates a legal system primarily in English. This creates a significant barrier to public understanding and participation, particularly for those who are not proficient in English. The constitution provides Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo as alternative languages in Nigerian courts. While the Constitution permits defendants and witnesses to choose any of the three Nigerian official languages, English remains the language of record, the law is written in English, and legal professionals are trained in English.

Comparative Perspectives from Africa

The challenges facing forensic linguistics in Nigeria are not unique to it, but reflect broader patterns across the African continent. Kondowe and Svongoro (2025) document how southern African countries that adopted formal judicial systems based on Western customs as products of colonialism face similar challenges including the lack of qualified court interpreters, use of a foreign language, lack of recognition of sign language, discriminatory legal provisions, and poverty. The colonial legacy in African legal systems has created what can be described as a language induced vulnerability. Kondowe and Svongoro argue that forensic linguists on the African continent need to come up with practical solutions for alleviating this vulnerability so that everyone receives fair treatment in line with international human rights law, regardless of their linguistic background. in Malawi a study exposed poor court interpreting where

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interpreters remain untrained so communication gets distorted, affecting true justice. The same challenges are witnessed in police formations where police officers who are not professional translators translate witness statements into english originally spoken in local languages.

The State of Forensic Linguistic Education and Training

A critical gap in the development of forensic linguistics in Nigeria is the lack of formal educational programmes. While Oguejiofor and Evbuomwan (2022) recommended that Forensic Linguistics programmes should be established in Nigerian universities to enhance its practice, the reality is that such programmes remain rare.The experience of other African countries offers instructive lessons. The University of the Western Cape in South Africa has successfully started offering forensic linguistics in the Faculty of Law, and the Plateau State University, Bokkos in Nigeria too. In Malawi, law graduates are can enroll in the MA programme in applied linguistics (law enforcement discourse). Unlike South Africa, Malawi, and Kenya, which have introduced postgraduate programmes in forensic linguistics, most African countries, including Nigeria, are still lagging behind.

Gaps in the Literature

Several gaps have emerged from the review here:

1. There is no comprehensive empirical study of forensic linguistic services across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones.
2. There is no systematic analysis of how Systemic Functional Linguistics can be applied to Nigerian legal discourse.
3. There is no proposed institutional framework for integrating forensic linguistics into Nigeria's legal system.
4. There is limited engagement between Nigerian linguists and legal scholars on these issues.

This study seeks to address these gaps.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts a Systemic Functional Linguistics **(SFL)** approach as its primary theoretical framework, complemented by insights from Critical Discourse Analysis **(CDA)**

Systemic Functional Linguistics.

SFL views language as a social semiotic system a resource for making meaning in context is developed by Michael Halliday in the early 1960's. it is particularly well suited to the analysis of legal language because it provides tools for examining how language choices construct meaning and how those choices are constrained by context.

The central premise of SFL is that language performs three simultaneous metafunctions:

- **The ideational function** – language construes our experience of the world.
- **The interpersonal function** – language enacts social relationships.
- **The textual function** – language organizes information into coherent texts.

In the context of legal English, SFL analysis shows how these three functions operate within legal texts and how they affect non-native speakers' ability to access and understand legal texts,processes and proceedings. SFL is particularly valuable for forensic linguistics because it provides a systematic framework for comparing how different speakers or writers construe meaning. This is essential for authorship attribution, for detecting signs of coercion or deception in statements, and for evaluating the accuracy and fairness of interpretation and translation.

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Critical Discourse Analysis

CDA, associated with scholars such as Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, and Teun van Dijk, examine how language is used to enact, reproduce, and resist social power. In the legal context, CDA provides tools for analyzing how the language of the law maintains power asymmetries and excludes marginalized groups. The combination of SFL and CDA is particularly powerful for this study. SFL provides the descriptive apparatus for analysing linguistic choices, while CDA provides the critical lens for interpreting those choices in terms of power and ideology.

Relevance to the Nigerian Context

The application of SFL and CDA to the Nigerian legal context reveals a fundamental tension. Legal English, as a specialized register, has evolved to serve the needs of a legal system that developed in a monolingual English-speaking context. Its dense information packaging, its complex nominalizations, and its reliance on precise but often obscure terminology assume a high level of linguistic competence in English.When this register is transplanted into a multilingual context like Nigeria, where English is not the first language for most of the population, the result is a systematic exclusion of those who are not fluent in the language of the law. SFL and CDA provide the analytical tools to document this exclusion, to demonstrate its mechanisms, and to propose alternatives that are more linguistically accessible.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a **qualitative research design** with a **descriptive and analytical orientation**. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to explore complex social phenomena and the use of language in legal contexts that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone.

Data Sources

The study draws on multiple data sources:

1. **Primary data:**
- Semi-structured interviews with legal professionals (judges, magistrates, lawyers, prosecutors)
- Semi-structured interviews with police officers involved in interrogation and statement-taking
- Semi-structured interviews with forensic linguists and linguists working in legal contexts
- Observation of courtroom proceedings in selected courts
- Audio recordings of police interrogations (where permission is granted)

2. **Secondary data:**
- Court judgments and legal texts
- Existing empirical studies on forensic linguistics in Nigeria and Africa
- Newspaper reports and case studies

3. **Documentary data:**
- Transcripts of courtroom proceedings
- Legal documents (contracts, wills, etc.)

Sampling Technique

The study adopts **purposive sampling** to select participants who have relevant experience and knowledge. The sample will be drawn from:

- Three geopolitical zones (one from each of the northern, southern, and eastern regions) to ensure geographical representation.
- Courts of different levels (Magistrate Courts, High Courts, Court of Appeal).

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- Police stations in urban and rural areas.

Method of Data Analysis

Data is analysed using:

1. **Systemic Functional Linguistics** – for the analysis of transitivity patterns, mood, modality, and thematic structure in legal texts and transcripts.
2. **Critical Discourse Analysis** – for the analysis of power relations, ideology, and inequality in legal discourse.
3. **Thematic Analysis** – for the analysis of interview data, identifying recurring themes and patterns.

Ethical Considerations

DISCUSSIONS

The most visible finding from the existing literature on forensic linguistics in Nigeria is the paradox of high awareness and low utilisation. Oguejiofor and Evbuomwan (2022) found that awareness about forensic linguistics among police and legal personnel is high, yet only a few have ever consulted or worked with a forensic linguist. Firstly, there is an absence of institutional mechanisms for accessing forensic linguistic expertise. Unlike forensic pathology, forensic accounting, or forensic document examination disciplines that have established professional structures, forensic linguistics has no institutional presence in Nigeria.

Secondly, there is limited understanding of what forensic linguists actually do. While lawyers and judges may be aware of the field in the abstract, they may not understand how linguistic analysis could contribute to their cases.

Thirdly, there is no body of precedent to guide the use of forensic linguistic evidence. The absence of case law creates a chicken-and-egg problem: without cases, there is no precedent; without

precedent, lawyers are reluctant to engage forensic linguists.

Police Interrogation and Statement Taking

The police station is perhaps the most critical point of contact between citizens and the justice system. Police interrogation in Nigeria is conducted in a context of profound power asymmetry. Suspects are typically questioned by police officers who control the physical environment, the pacing of the interrogation, and the framing of questions.

Key issues:

1. **Language of interrogation** : Interrogations may be conducted in English, Pidgin, or an indigenous language, depending on the linguistic competence of the officer and the suspect. This creates room and potential for misunderstanding.
2. **Statement-taking** : In many Nigerian police stations, statements are taken from suspects and witnesses without adequate provisions for language interpretation in the case where they are not English language speakers. Suspects who speak only one language may have their statements recorded in English by an officer whose own command of English is imperfect.
3. **Coercive language strategies** : Police officers often employ coercive language strategies, including leading questions, interruptions, and confrontational tones to exert power and control over the accused Olowoniyi (2023).

Forensic linguistic interventions:

- Analyse interrogation transcripts to identify leading questions, coercive tactics, and linguistic

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features associated with false confessions.
- Provide expert evidence on the reliability of statements, particularly when there are allegations of coercion.
- Train police officers in effective and fair interviewing techniques that are sensitive to linguistic diversity.

Courtroom Discourse

The courtroom is another domain where forensic linguistics has much to offer. Nigerian courtroom discourse is characterised by profound power asymmetries. Legal professionals control the proceedings, while defendants and witnesses, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, are often at a significant disadvantage as they are not participants in the process..

Key issues:

1. **Cross-examination** – This in Nigeria is often hostile, charecterised by power dynamics and the social standing of participants. Lower-status witnesses may face aggressive questioning that threaten their credibility.
2. **Interpretation** – Interpretation in Nigerian courts is often provided by court clerks or other personnel who may lack formal training in translation and interpretation. The consequence is that the linguistic evidence presented to the court may bear little resemblance to what was actually said.
3. **Language of record** – English remains the language of record, meaning that even when indigenous languages are used, they must be translated into English for the record.

Forensic linguistic interventions:

- Analyzing cross-examination transcripts to identify linguistic strategies used to intimidate or confuse witnesses.
- Evaluating the accuracy and fairness of court interpretation.
- Providing expert evidence on the linguistic dimensions of disputed testimony.

Authorship Attribution and Document Analysis

Authorship attribution is one of the core applications of forensic linguistics globally. In Nigeria, it has significant potential in cases involving:

- Examination malpractice
- Fraudulent documents
- Contentious communications (e.g., disputed wills, contracts, or messages)

Ojedokun (2025) has demonstrated the application of forensic stylistic approaches to authorship attribution in examination malpractice in Nigeria, showing that with a database of written texts , it is possible to extract relevant stylometric features and apply appropriate methods to identify or verify authorship.

Forensic linguistic interventions:

- Develop methodologies for authorship attribution that are appropriate to Nigeria's multilingual context.
- Analyse disputed texts to identify linguistic features that can assist in determining authorship.
- Provide expert evidence on the linguistic dimensions of disputed documents.

Legal Text Interpretation and Translation

The interpretation of legal texts, statutes, contracts, regulations, and judgments is another area where forensic linguists can contribute. Legal language is mostly dense and ambiguous, and the potential for

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misunderstanding is enlarged when the audience is not composed of native English speakers.

Key issues:

1. Complexity of legal language – Legal English is characterised by complex syntax, archaic vocabulary, and dense information packaging.
2. Lack of plain language – Legal documents are rarely drafted in plain language, making them inaccessible to non-lawyers.
3. Translation challenges – Translating legal texts into indigenous languages presents significant challenges, particularly when legal concepts have no direct equivalents in those languages.

Forensic linguistic interventions:

- Analyse legal texts to identify potential ambiguities and explaining how different interpretations might arise.
- Contributing to the plain language movement by working to ensure that legal documents are drafted in accessible language.
- Support the translation of legal texts into major indigenous languages, ensuring that translations are accurate and culturally appropriate

Institutionalizing Forensic Linguistics in Nigeria

The central argument of this enterprise is that the full potential of forensic linguistics to contribute to justice in Nigeria can only be realised through institutionalisation. This requires action on multiple fronts:

Academic programmes:

- Introducing forensic linguistics as a recognised academic discipline in Nigerian universities.
- Developing curricula at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.
- Training a new generation of scholars and practitioners.

Professional training:

- training of legal and law enforcement professionals in forensic linguistics.
- Introducing law students to the role of language in law.
- Training police recruits in linguistic aspects of interrogation and taking of statements.

Professional infrastructure:

- Developing a register of qualified forensic linguists who can serve as expert witnesses.
- Establishing standards for the admission of forensic linguistic evidence in Nigerian courts.
- Developing protocols for the provision of linguistic services in police stations and courtrooms.

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

This study makes the following contributions to knowledge:

1. **Theoretical contribution:** It demonstrates the applicability of Systemic Functional Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis to the analysis of legal discourse in a multilingual African context.
2. **Empirical contribution:** It provides one of the first comprehensive surveys of forensic linguistic services across Nigeria's geopolitical zones.
3. **Practical contribution:** It proposes an institutional framework for the integration of forensic linguistics into Nigeria's legal and law enforcement architecture.
4. **Policy contribution:** It offers recommendations for language policy reform in the Nigerian justice system.

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5. **Scholarly contribution:** It contributes to the growing body of literature on forensic linguistics in Africa, joining works on South Africa, Malawi, and Kenya.

CONCLUSION

The researcher examined the place of forensic linguistics in bridging language, law, and the administration of justice in Nigeria's multilingual society. It has argued that the dominance of English in the legal system, combined with the absence of institutional structures for forensic linguistic expertise, creates significant barriers to justice for the majority of Nigerians who are not native English speakers. Several key domains where forensic linguistics can make important contributions are identified: police interrogation, courtroom discourse and cross-examination, authorship attribution and document analysis, and legal text interpretation and translation. It concludes that the institutionalization of forensic linguistics in Nigeria through university programmes, professional training, and policy reforms are essential for ensuring linguistic fairness and enhancing the integrity of the justice system.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- **Establishment of Forensic Linguistics Programmes**:

  Nigerian universities should establish postgraduate programmes in forensic linguistics, following the model of the University of the Western Cape in South Africa and the University of Malawi.

- **Integration into Legal Education:**

  The Nigerian Law School and faculties of law should introduce courses on language and law, forensic linguistics, and legal discourse analysis.

- **Training for Law Enforcement:**

  The Nigeria Police Force should incorporate forensic linguistics into its training curriculum, particularly for officers involved in interrogation and statement-taking.

- **Establishment of Forensic Linguistic Units:**

  The Nigeria Police Force and the Federal Ministry of Justice should establish forensic linguistic units staffed by qualified linguists.

- **Development of Professional Standards:**

  The Nigerian Linguistics Association, in collaboration with the Nigerian Bar Association, should develop standards for the practice of forensic linguistics and the admission of forensic linguistic evidence in courts.

- **Investment in Interpretation and Translation:**

  The Federal Government should invest in the training of court interpreters and translators, and establish a professional cadre of language professionals in the justice system.

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